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## BACKGROUND BOOKS

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### NICARAGUA

Why is Central America so troubled?

Tulane historian Ralph Lee Woodward, Jr., rounds up the usual suspects—old Spanish rivalries, the tropical climate, “Indian lethargy,” “European or North American imperialism.” But “single-cause analyses,” he argues in **Central America: A Nation Divided** (Oxford, 1976), are inadequate.

Among other ills, Indian wars began a “tradition of disunion” continued by the Spanish. Moreover, the mountains limited trade, and slash-and-burn farming ruined “millions of acres of arable land.”

Woodward’s is the most lucid all-round history of the region in English. Useful surveys include Robert C. West and John P. Augelli’s **Middle America: Its Lands and Peoples** (Prentice-Hall, 1976) and Franklin D. Parker’s **Central American Republics** (Oxford, 1964). Cornell’s Walter LaFeber, in **Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America** (Norton, 1984), approaches his subject from the Left, but acknowledges that early on, the Central American leaders themselves sought a U.S. presence. They thought “the Yankees could be played off against Mexico, Britain, or even Guatemala,” which long dreamed of ruling its neighbors.

The region pops up in many U.S. histories, such as Samuel Flagg Bemis’s **Latin American Policy of the United States: An Historical Interpretation** (Harcourt, 1943), Charles Morrow Wilson’s **Empire in Green and Gold** (Holt, 1947), Allan R. Millett’s **Semper Fidelis: The History of the U.S. Marine Corps** (Free Press, 1982), and Lester D. Langley’s **Banana Wars: An Inner History of American Empire, 1900–1934** (Univ. of Kentucky, 1983).

There is no *general* history of Nicaragua in English. **Nicaragua: A Country Study** (U.S. Govt., Dept. of the Army,

1982), prepared by American University’s Foreign Areas Studies program, helps fill the gap. So do David I. Folkman, Jr.’s **Nicaragua Route** (Univ. of Utah, 1972), concerning the canal issue; **Filibusters and Financiers** (Macmillan, 1916; Russell, 1969), William O. Scroggs’ portrait of William Walker; Harold Norman Denny’s **Dollars for Bullets: The Story of America’s Rule in Nicaragua** (Dial, 1929); Neill Macaulay’s **Sandino Affair** (Quadrangle, 1967); Richard L. Millett’s **Guardians of the Dynasty** (Orbis, 1977), a history of the National Guard and the Somoza family; and Bernard Diederich’s **Somoza** (Dutton, 1981).

Nicaragua’s latest rulers are scrutinized by Princeton’s Forrest D. Colburn, who argues that the bloom was off the Sandinistas even before the contra war began. Very early, he notes in **Post-Revolutionary Nicaragua: State, Class and the Dilemma of Agrarian Policy** (Univ. of Calif., 1986), the rural poor became “sharply critical” of failures to raise living standards and “the continuing call for sacrifices.” The peasant view of the new regime: “A different bone, the same dog.”

In **Condemned to Repetition: The United States and Nicaragua** (Princeton, 1987), Robert A. Pastor, director of Latin American and Caribbean affairs in Jimmy Carter’s National Security Council, concedes that U.S. fumbles helped the Sandinistas. In December 1978, Somoza sounded out the State Department on his chances of being granted U.S. exile; that news never reached White House officials, who thus missed the “best moment” to ease Somoza out of power when a moderate successor regime in Managua was possible. Carter, says Pastor, was also ill-served by U.S. intelligence: The flow of arms to the Sandinistas via Cuba and

other nations in 1979 was not detected.

Shirley Christian notes the cost of such errors in **Nicaragua: Revolution in the Family** (Random, 1985). To realize the *democratic* goals of the anti-Somoza revolt now "implies more intervention than the United States has been willing to tackle" since Vietnam.

Intervention has become a pejorative word, she says. "The basic tenets of international relations since World War II have been nonintervention and self-determination, though most Third World governments have been more concerned with advocating nonintervention . . . than with practicing self-determination." Cuba and the Soviet Union avoid "intervention" by using another term, "internationalism."

And that, as John Norton Moore's **Secret War in Central America** (Univ. Publications of America, 1987) details, is on the rise in the Latin American region. There, mostly in Cuba and Nicaragua, the Soviets had 50 times more military advisers in 1981 than did the United States (which then fielded 70 advisers, versus 516 at the start of the 1970s).

White House interest in the region has fluctuated wildly, as Abraham F. Lowenthal observes in **Partners in Conflict: The United States and Latin America** (Johns Hopkins, 1987). John F. Kennedy, president when Fidel Castro was trying to stir up Venezuela, Bolivia, Peru, and Colombia, saw Christian Democratic regimes as the answer to "violent revolution." Later U.S. presidents (e.g., Richard Nixon, with his "Mature Partnership" policy) saw less need for urgency.

Indeed, as Lowenthal notes, Communist Cuba, a "highly personal autocracy," is now "not as appealing a model in any country of South America as it was in

1960." Since Castro's debut, the Left's "main revolutionary triumph" has been Nicaragua—and the Sandinistas have not (yet) emulated Cuba to the extent of all but outlawing the private economy.

After World War II the old conservative triumvirate of Oligarchy, Church, and Army began eroding in Latin America. But what would fill the vacuum?

Outside Cuba and Nicaragua, Lowenthal observes, ventures on the "socialist path" have been few and ill-fated: Chile under Salvador Allende (elected 1970, toppled 1973), Grenada under the New Jewel Movement (1979–83) and, to a degree, St. Lucia, Jamaica, Guyana, and Surinam. As for the military "bureaucratic authoritarian" path, the generals have bowed out in Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay. Nor has leftist "military populism" (Peru, Bolivia) survived.

That leaves "reformist democracy," in Lowenthal's analysis "the most successful Latin American experience." Colombia, Venezuela, and Costa Rica are the familiar examples. But another is the Dominican Republic.

During the 1960s, it epitomized the "politics of chaos." In 1965 Lyndon B. Johnson dispatched more than 22,000 Marines and Army paratroopers there—the first such episode since Franklin D. Roosevelt's 1934 pledge to end unilateral U.S. armed intervention in Latin America—to forestall what he perceived as a possible Communist coup.

The Dominican Republic, says Lowenthal, has since had "six consecutive, regularly scheduled, contested presidential elections. At no previous time in [its] history had even two such elections been held without a coup intervening."

Perhaps *that*, rather than Cuba, is the model that Nicaraguans may one day try to emulate.