Nicaragua's Sandinistas first took up arms in 1961, invoking the name of Augusto César Sandino, a general turned foe of U.S. intervention in 1927–33. Sandino—here (center) seeking arms in Mexico in 1929 with a Salvadoran Communist ally, Augustín Farabundo Martí (right)—led a hit-and-run war against U.S. Marines. Nearly 1,000 of his men died, but their elusive chief was never caught.

Nicaragua

Perhaps not since the Spanish Civil War have Americans taken such clearly opposed sides in a conflict in a foreign country. Church organizations and pacifists send volunteers to Nicaragua and lobby against U.S. contra aid; with White House encouragement, conservative outfits have raised money for the "freedom fighters," in some cases possibly violating U.S. laws against supplying arms abroad.

Even after nearly eight years, views of the Sandinista regime's fundamental nature vary widely. Some scholars regard it as far more Marxist-Leninist in rhetoric than in practice. *Foreign Policy* editor Charles William Maynes argues that Managua's Soviet-backed rulers can be "tamed and contained" via the Central American peace plan drafted by Costa Rica's President Oscar Arias Sánchez.

Not likely, says Edward N. Luttwak of Washington, D.C.'s Center for Strategic and International Studies. Expectations that Daniel Ortega and Co., hard pressed as they are, "might actually allow the democratization required" by the Arias plan defy the history of Marxist-Leninist regimes. Such governments, says Luttwak, make "tactical accommodations," but feel they must "retain an unchallenged monopoly of power." An opposition victory would be "a Class A political defeat" for Moscow. The debate continues.

As scholars point out, the U.S. *economic* stake in Nicaragua is small. Indeed, in all of poverty-ridden Central America outside Panama, *Yanqui* direct business investment is under $800 million—about 2.5 percent of the U.S. stake in Latin America as a whole. But the troubled region, along with the Caribbean, is part of the United States' oft-neglected "backyard." And that, since Fidel Castro's Cuban revolution (1959), has been the locale of several Eastern Bloc targets of opportunity—notably El Salvador, still torn by civil war, and Grenada, invaded by U.S. forces in 1983, as well as Nicaragua.

Here, Richard L. Millett traces Nicaragua's history, into which Americans were first drawn more than a century ago. Clifford Krauss reviews the sinuous path of the Sandinistas in power. Henry A. Kissinger reflects on what the contest between the White House and Congress over Nicaragua policy tells us about *American* governance.

'PATRIA LIBRE'

by Richard L. Millett

When President Calvin Coolidge sent U.S. Marines to Nicaragua in 1926, most Americans had little idea of where they were going or why.

The place names—Managua, Corinto, Wiwilí, Bluefields—seemed out of O. Henry's *Cabbages and Kings*. So did the Marines' mission. Nicaragua's government sought help in quelling a revolt led by opposition generals backing a would-be president in exile in Mexico.

Polls showed that many Americans thought Nicaragua was in Africa or the West Indies. They wondered, as Will Rogers put it, "Why are we in Nicaragua, and what the hell are we doing there?"

By 1928 discontent ran high in Congress where, 10 years after the slaughter of World War I, isolationist sentiment was strong. Senator George W. Norris (R.-Neb.) charged that Coolidge's "unauthorized and indefensible" intervention set a perilous "precedent." If a president can wage war in Nicaragua without congressional consent, said the senator, "he can do the same thing with many other countries."

Yet, just as George Norris was not the last U.S. senator to invoke the specter of undeclared war in Nicaragua, Coolidge's was not the first intervention. During the 19th century, U.S. Navy ships often called at Central America's ramshackle ports to see to the safety of *Yanqui* residents and property. In 1854, after a U.S. envoy was roughed up by a political mob in Greytown, a British-controlled port on Nicaragua's Caribbean coast, the sloop *Cyane* shelled the town. (The British, entering the Crimean War, let it pass.) U.S. troops first went ashore in Nicaragua in force in 1909, when President William Howard Taft sent 400 Marines to Bluefields, another Caribbean port, to back a revolt against a dictatorship. The Marines landed again in 1912, to *quell* a revolt.

Indeed, except for a few months in 1925–26, at least a few Marines were maintained in Nicaragua until 1933—a long 21 years.

I
'A TRADITION OF REBELLION'

All in all, Nicaragua's history is largely a history of disruptions—by foreigners, by its own leaders (or would-be leaders), and even by the forces of nature: earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, hurricanes. An archeological dig uncovered footprints made by Indians caught fleeing a volcanic blast more than 2,000 years ago. Nicaraguans have been surviving

Early industry: campesinos *and coffee shrubs. Coffee beans brought Nicaragua into the world economy; by World War I, coffee accounted for 63 percent of exports. German, French, and U.S. investors helped develop the trade.*

disasters, natural or manmade, ever since.

Theirs is both the largest and among the least densely populated of the Central American republics. About the size of Michigan, Nicaragua averages only 68 people per square mile. Visitors have long noted its beauty. Archeologist Ephraim George Squier, U.S. chargé d'affaires in Central America in 1849–50, rhapsodized about Nicaragua's "high and regular volcanic cones, its wooded plains, broad lakes, bright rivers, and emerald verdure." The people, too, were beguiling—"the *mozo* [young lad] and his *machete*, the red-belted cavalier . . . pricking his champing horse through the streets, the languid Señora puffing the smoke of her cigaretta in lazy jets through her nostrils . . . ."

The hot western lowlands embrace two large lakes—on whose shores lived Nicarao, an Indian chief—a chain of volcanoes, and rich soil that supports crops of cotton, sugar cane, and rice, as well as cattle. The cool highlands produce coffee and tobacco. In the thinly-populated Atlantic coastal plain, heavy rainfall (often above 200 inches a year) nurtures lush forests. Nicaragua's location once seemed blessed: As an ideal site for a canal linking the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, it was, said Louis-Napoléon in 1846, fated for "prosperity and grandeur."

As Squier saw it, Nicaragua's "genial earth waits only for the touch

of industry to reward the husbandman a hundredfold."

Yet today, the 3,373,000 Nicaraguans (average income: $790) rank with their neighbors in Honduras and war-torn El Salvador as the poorest Central Americans. Their modest "touch of industry" came late.

Central America's first railroads opened in Costa Rica in 1854 and Panama in 1855; Nicaragua's first line was begun 23 years later. Europeans brought the coffee bean from Cuba to Costa Rica, still the heart of the Central American coffee industry, a half century before it reached Nicaragua. The country was an early banana producer, but when the big Banana Boom arrived in 1900–30, The United Fruit Company and other *Yanqui* firms got most of their crop from Honduras and Guatemala.

As late as World War II, Nicaragua was tied with Honduras as the region's least developed country. Foreign investors were wary. As William H. Seward, Abraham Lincoln's secretary of state, wrote to a U.S. envoy to Nicaragua during the 1860s, "everybody loses patience with them for not being wiser, more constant, and more stable."

British Intruders, Mexican Emperor

How that fateful instability developed is a complex tale.

The first Spanish conquistadors arrived from Panama in 1522, midway in Spain's era of Latin American conquest, between Hernán Cortés's seizure of the Aztec Empire in Mexico and Francisco Pizarro's plundering of Peru. As elsewhere in Central America, the Spanish settled mainly in the west (still home to nearly 90 percent of the population). They subjugated, baptized, and enslaved most of the natives. But Nicaragua's gold and silver deposits soon ran out. In two decades, 200,000 Indians—at least one-third of the population—were shipped off to toil in Panama and the mines of Peru. (A 1548 census counted just 11,137 Indians.) The province, part of Spain's kingdom of Guatemala, became a neglected colonial backwater.

The Spanish built churches and monasteries, but few roads or schools. They exploited rather than developed. What they gave, besides their Mediterranean-style architecture, their language, plantation farming, and Catholicism, to *all* of Central America was a rivalry between two groups: Conservatives, mostly aristocratic landowners with close ties to Spain and the church; and Liberals, generally native-born Creoles, anticlerical and restive about Spanish rule.

In Nicaragua, the rivalry centered around old families—Chamorro and Sacasa were big names—and two cities: Granada, the Conservative agricultural hub, and León, the Liberal commercial center.

The Spanish never really ruled all of Nicaragua. British adventurers

Richard L. Millett, 49, is professor of history at Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville. Born in Providence, Rhode Island, he received an A.B. from Harvard University (1960), and an M.A. (1962) and a Ph.D. (1966) from the University of New Mexico. His books include Guardians of the Dynasty *(1977).*

roamed the Mosquito Coast, a strip along the Atlantic named for its Miskito Indians. In time, they saw that a river entering the sea at San Juan del Norte could be part of a route to the Pacific. The first of many inland forays by British buccaneers (against weak Spanish resistance) culminated in the sacking of Granada in 1665.

The Spanish Empire finally collapsed in Central America in 1821, when Agustín de Iturbide, a Mexican military chieftain, declared himself emperor of an independent "New Spain"—Mexico and Central America. By 1824, Nicaragua's Liberals and Conservatives agreed to join their four neighbors—Costa Rica, Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala—in forming the United Provinces of Central America.

Republican *Jefes*

Led by a president in Guatemala City, the federation was eminently sensible in theory. Its government investigated an isthmian canal. Central America, said historian Alejandro Marure, will be the "happiest nation on the globe." But chronic tensions (e.g., each state remained "sovereign") broke up the union during the 1830s.

Nicaragua declared itself "free, sovereign and independent" in 1838. The idea of citizenship remained vague throughout Central America, however, and Nicaragua was particularly fragmented. The Spanish and Creoles, concentrated in the populous, prosperous west, dominated politics and the agricultural economy. The majority mestizos (people of mixed Spanish and Indian blood) scratched out a living growing rice, corn, and beans (still staples of Central American diets). The remote east was populated by the Miskitos and other indigenous Indians and by blacks, originally brought from Jamaica and the Cayman Islands by the British to work in logging.*

Unlike the predominantly Catholic west, the east coast was heavily Protestant. During the 19th century, German missionaries of the Moravian Church settled among the Indians, built schools, and devised a Miskito alphabet so they could teach the Bible (and the Moravian distaste for socialism). Other Protestant missionaries followed.

What Nicaragua's ruling Spanish elites developed, as the late Carlos Fonseca Amador, a founder in 1961 of the *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* (FSLN), noted, was "a rich tradition of rebellion."

Early on, as Conservatives and Liberals fought for supremacy, Nicaragua came to epitomize the banana republic. Between 1824 and 1842, it endured 18 changes of power and 17 armed conflicts—typically fought by a few hundred ragged, ill-trained troops on either side, hungry for loot and armed with muskets, cannon, and swords. So often were León and

*Nicaragua's approximate racial mix: 70 percent mestizo, 17 percent white, nine percent black, four percent Indian. The Miskitos and blacks distrust "the Spanish," the whites and mestizos in the west; "the Spanish" in turn regard their east coast compatriots as inferior. Numbering about 75,000 in 1980, the Miskitos are Nicaragua's largest indigenous ethnic group.

Granada sacked that in 1857 Managua, a town midway between them, was made the capital.

By then, Americans had become involved, willy-nilly, in Nicaragua's highly contentious domestic politics.

II
ENTER UNCLE SAM

President James Monroe had declared Latin America off-limits to the European powers in 1823. But for years the weak and distracted United States did little to enforce the Monroe Doctrine (which Otto von Bismarck dismissed as "a species of arrogance"). Then, in 1848, during James Polk's administration, the U.S. won the Mexican War and acquired California. The Gold Rush spurred U.S. interest in a canal, in Panama or Nicaragua. Soon, President Zachary Taylor, the "Old Rough and Ready" Mexican War hero, moved to curb the British, who had created "Mosquitia," a protectorate with a puppet Miskito king and putative control of San Juan del Norte, renamed Greytown, which was sure to be the eastern terminus of any Nicaraguan canal. The Clayton-Bulwer Treaty (1850) provided that neither country would seek exclusive control of any trans-isthmian route, or "occupy or fortify or colonize" any part of Central America. The United States' role as the chief foreign actor in Nicaragua had begun.

The *Yanqui* transportation tycoon Cornelius Vanderbilt developed a Nicaraguan route to the California gold fields. Soon, nearly as many Forty-Niners would be crossing Nicaragua by stagecoach and lake steamer as by the trans-Panama route (on which the risk of yellow fever and malaria was greater). The possibility that Nicaragua might really prosper intensified the Liberal-Conservative contests for local supremacy. Indeed, in 1855, the Liberals wearied of trying to unseat the Conservative president, Fruto Chamorro, who had Guatemalan aid.

Fatefully, they sought help from *outside* Central America. Thus entered one of many figures who would, in varying ways, illustrate Nicaragua's chronic difficulties in mastering its own fate.

William Walker, a Tennessee-born "filibuster" (soldier of fortune) who had once tried to rule part of Mexico, was hired by the Liberals to fight the Conservatives. But within 13 months of landing at the Pacific port now named Corinto with 58 armed "immortals," Walker assembled an army, captured Granada, and became Nicaragua's president.*

Walker mesmerized Americans. (*Harper's Weekly* called him "a

*As far as is known, Walker was the second U.S.-born leader of a foreign country. Joseph Jenkins Roberts, a black freedman from Virginia, was elected to head the new African republic of Liberia in 1847.

hero.") But his erratic rule lasted only 10 months. His grandiose plans to "regenerate" Nicaragua under Anglo-Saxon leadership—to make English its language, to adopt slavery (abolished by the United Provinces in 1824), and to expand—alarmed Central Americans. With backing from Peru (which contributed $100,000), Cornelius Vanderbilt (whose transit rights Walker annulled), and the British, the Costa Ricans led Nicaragua's three other neighbors in an invasion known as the National War. U.S. Marines finally escorted Walker out of the country in 1857. (Later, caught attempting a comeback, he was executed in Honduras.)

Among other things, the episode showed how U.S. policy toward faraway Nicaragua could be shaped by domestic issues, in this case slavery. President James Buchanan refused to recognize the pro-slavery Walker regime, so as not to worsen tensions between America's Northern and Southern states. Even so, Nicaraguans saw Walker's intrusion as proof of a U.S. desire to dominate them. And a pattern emerged: Nicaragua's political factions would repeatedly seek foreign intervention rather than accept defeat at the hands of their local opponents.

That habit was the undoing of Nicaragua's first truly nationalist leader, General José Santos Zelaya.

A member of León's rising middle class, Zelaya was one of the Central American strongmen to emerge in the "Liberal Revolution" that swept the region during the late 19th century—inspired by progress-minded *jefes* (chiefs) like Mexico's president Porfirio Díaz and European thinkers such as France's Auguste Comte. They gave economic growth priority over democracy, and felt that what Comte called "republican dictatorships" could best achieve it.

The Rough Rider's Award

No democrat, Zelaya held the presidency for 16 years (1893–1909) by beating down Conservative revolts and rewriting the Constitution to permit his re-election. (In one race, semi-literate rural voters were given a choice of three candidates, "José," "Santos," and "Zelaya.") He brought stability and some economic progress, and managed to ease the British out of the Mosquito Coast while borrowing from London bankers to build schools and a rudimentary network of roads and rail lines. (Foreign capital was important to the Liberal formula for progress.)

While saluting Washington as the "natural protector" of small republics like his, Zelaya built Central America's strongest army. (His new military academy employed a German captain and several Chileans.) Zelaya aimed to expand Nicaragua's influence. Indeed, he aided a force of Honduran Liberals in mounting a conquest of their weak homeland, a perennial focus of Central America's wars.

But Nicaragua—not for the last time—was to become embroiled in larger countries' affairs.

A far-off event—the 1898 Spanish-American War—brought U.S.