

170 Years of U.S. Aggression Against Nicaragua

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When the Monroe Doctrine was declared, in 1823, it was aimed at European colonial powers. It told them to butt out: the US "sphere of influence" included all of Latin America and the Caribbean. During the past two centuries, virtually every Latin American and Caribbean country has had to endure US intervention and interference in their internal affairs. The coups, political manipulation and aggression directed by Washington have been relentless.

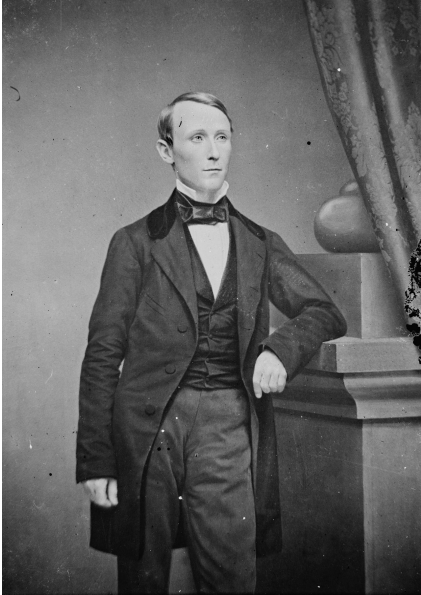
One of the most victimized countries has been Nicaragua. In this article, I will review the different types of aggression used by Washington against Nicaragua. This is not ancient history; the interference continues to today. The methods change but the purpose remains the same: to subjugate nominally independent countries and use them in the interests of US corporations, elites and government. When nations resist domination and insist on independence, the US goal becomes to prevent them from succeeding.

July 19, 2024

On July 19 Nicaragua will celebrate the 45th anniversary of the Sandinista revolution. On that day, Nicaraguans overthrew the US backed Somoza dictatorship. In Managua, Nicaraguans will honor the day and re-assert their sovereignty and independence. Nicaraguan leaders will likely denounce US interference and their right to have friendly relations with any country they choose to. At the same time, we will surely see negative comments about Nicaragua from Washington and US media.

There have been eight distinct types of US interference and aggression against Nicaragua:

1. Conquest 1855-56



In 1855, with a small army of US and European soldiers, **William Walker** (image on the right; from the Public Domain) arrived in Nicaragua. The country was in the midst of a civil war and the foreign military turned the tide. When Walker's forces seized control of the Nicaraguan city of Granada, he declared himself President of Nicaragua. Walker's presidency was quickly recognized by US President Franklin Pierce. Supported by southern slave holding US states, one of Walker's early actions as Nicaraguan president was to re-legalize slavery which had been outlawed in 1832. Nicaraguans did not accept this. Within a couple years, Walker's forces were defeated, and in 1857 he was executed in neighboring Honduras.

2. Military Occupation 1909-1933

Beginning in 1909, US Marines invaded and occupied Nicaragua when US financial interests were not being considered paramount. Nicaraguans were considering borrowing money from European countries to finance a canal running across the isthmus. For the next three decades, the US Marines were ever present to insure Washington and Wall Street controlled major decisions. USMC **Major General Smedly Butler** later reflected on his role:

"I spent 33 years and four months in active military service and during that period I spent most of my time as a high class muscle man for Big Business, for Wall Street and the bankers. In short, I was a racketeer, a gangster for capitalism.... I helped in the raping of half a dozen Central American republics for the benefit of Wall Street. I helped purify Nicaragua for the International Banking House of Brown Brothers."

Beginning in 1927, US foreign military dominance was increasingly challenged by a peasant army led by **Augusto Cesar Sandino**. Sandino's July 1, 1927 [manifesto](#) denounces the collaborators and commits to "defend the national honor and redeem the oppressed." By 1930, Sandino's army was 5,000 strong and inflicting serious blows. In 1933 the last US Marines left Nicaragua following the election of **Juan Batista Sacasa**.

3. US-backed Dictatorship 1934-1969

Image: Anastasio Somoza García (From the Public Domain)



The US Marines departed but left behind trained surrogates. In 1934, the “National Guard” reneged on a peace agreement with Sandino and murdered him, his brother and two generals. They proceeded to destroy Sandino’s army and then overthrew the elected government. With US support, the Somoza family dominated the country for the next 45 years. Poverty and illiteracy were widespread while corruption was rampant. In 1961, armed opposition to the Somoza dictatorship was formed under the banner of the Sandinista Front for the Liberation of Nicaragua (FSLN). After 50,000 deaths, the Somoza dictatorship was overthrown on 19 July 1979.

4. Terrorism 1969-1980

Under the FSLN, Nicaragua made huge improvements with land reform and a very successful literacy campaign. For the first time, medical help was made available in remote communities and schools were open to all children. But in Washington, the Reagan administration could not accept an independent Nicaragua. US President Reagan was obsessed with overthrowing the Sandinista government. They tried to do this by creating a “Contra” army which attacked community clinics, bombed gas pipelines and infrastructure and killed healthcare and rural cooperative members. They even killed foreign aid workers such as young US engineer **Ben Linder** who was constructing a small hydroelectric dam to provide electricity to a remote village.

In the face of such obvious crimes, Nicaragua filed charges against the United States before the International Court of Justice (ICJ). They won their case and the US was ordered to pay compensation for the damages caused. Flaunting the ruling of the highest court in the world, the Reagan administration refused to pay damages to Nicaragua and continued to support the terrorist army. Under popular pressure, Congress passed the Boland amendment outlawing US assistance to the terrorist Contras. The Reagan administration ignored this as well, funding the Contras through a [scheme](#) where weapons were sent to the Contras in small private airplanes. The same planes were used to bring Colombian cocaine into the US. The profits went to the Contras while crack cocaine flooded poor and largely Black communities. A [recent book](#) from a CIA “Black Ops” agent documents the creation, training and financing of the terrorist Contras.

5. Economic Warfare 1985 to 1990

In 1985, an [economic embargo](#) was applied by the US against Nicaragua. US products could

no longer be exported to Nicaragua and Nicaraguan products were barred from entering the US. The goal was clearly to hurt the Nicaraguan economy and pressure the Nicaraguan people to turn against the government. The justification stated:

“I, Ronald Reagan, President of the United States of America, find that the policies and actions of the Government of Nicaragua constitute **an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States** and hereby declare a national emergency to deal with that threat.” (emphasis added)

The truth was the exact opposite: the policies of aggression by the United States was an extreme threat to Nicaragua.

6. Election Interference 1984 to Today

The first democratic election in Nicaragua’s history took place in 1984. The FSLN won against a very divided opposition. Chuck Kaufman [analyzed](#) what happened then and afterward:

“Already in 1984, we saw the United States place itself as the final judge and jury as to whether or not an election was legitimate... Delegitimizing elections is one of the primary overt tools used by the United States to subvert democracy around the world... The 1990 election is where the US game plan for election intervention was written, perfected and victorious.... Through the use of money and pressure, the US took advantage of Nicaragua’s lack of laws controlling foreign money in its elections to create a unified 14 party anti-Sandinista coalition ... The US then spent more money per Nicaraguan voter than George H W Bush and Michael Dukakis combined spent per US voter in our 1988 presidential election. At the same time the US warned Nicaraguan voters that the Contra War, which had cost them 40,000 sons and daughters, would continue if Daniel Ortega won reelection.”

US intervention was “successful” in bringing the US-supported team into power in Managua. A slim majority of Nicaraguans cried uncle in the face of US aggression and threats. The US and western media was surprised when **Daniel Ortega** and the FSLN peacefully left office and passed on the leadership.

Image: Daniel Ortega



Neoliberal policies reigned for the next 16 years. While they were good for the wealthy and elites, they were a disaster for the majority of Nicaraguans. Health care and education was again privatized. Land reform measures and the literacy campaign were ended. Illiteracy again became widespread. State controlled infrastructure including roads, water and electricity was not improved, it was in disrepair and decline.

In the elections of 2006, Daniel Ortega and the FSLN won a plurality. There were multiple reasons: first, the economy and deteriorating infrastructure was a disaster. Second, the US failed to unite the right. Third, US election interference was publicly revealed after the US ambassador unwisely told some visiting activists how many millions were allotted for interfering in the election.

7. Subversion Through NGOs and “Color Revolution”

After 16 years in opposition, the FSLN came back to power in 2007 under the leadership of Ortega. With ever increasing electoral support, they have governed since then. The reasons for their popularity are practical. Healthcare and education are provided free. Roads and highways have been greatly improved and now extend across the country to the Caribbean. Electricity and running water have been continuously expanded and are now available throughout 98% of the country. Nicaragua is in the world top 10% in gender equality and renewable energy. Nicaragua actively assists small farmers and is 90% food sovereign.

Washington has not rushed to congratulate Nicaragua on their successes. On the contrary, this success has been noted with displeasure and Nicaragua has returned to the list of countries targeted for destabilization.

Over the past decades, the US has developed a softer approach to undermining governments which are deemed to be “adversary”. A key component of this is funding “non-governmental organizations” (NGOs). These organizations may have innocuous or even progressive sounding purposes but inevitably serve US goals. The NGOs receive much of their funding from US government related organizations such as USAID and the National Endowment for Democracy. As [documented](#) by Max Blumenthal in June 2018, the NGOs proudly boasted of their role in “laying the groundwork for insurrection” and “nurturing the current uprisings”.

With salaries which are high in comparison to local standards, the NGOs attract and influence ambitious students and youth. The directors of the NGOs learn which youth are promising to their objectives and what issues motivate them. In Nicaragua there were dozens of NGOs with a mission of “democracy promotion”. In essence these were training sessions in anti-government activism. Other focal points were journalism and the use of social media. There was little or no monitoring of these foreign funded activities.



Masked protesters backed by the CIA who were part of 2018 coup plot against Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega. [Source: idcommunism.com]

In the spring of 2018, there was an attempt to overthrow the elected Sandinista government. The coup attempt was driven by youth influenced by US-funded NGOs with muscle provided by mercenary thugs and gangs. The coup attempt, from beginning to end, is described in a [series of articles](#) by Nicaraguan resident and journalist John Perry and author Dan Kovalik. This was similar to “color revolutions” carried out in numerous other countries on US target list. The common characteristics are: youth mobilized by US-funded NGOs, heavy use of social media, false or exaggerated accusations of government violence, false claims that the protests are strictly “peaceful” when there are actually widespread provocations and violence.

Nicaragua passed through this stage from April to July 2018. The insurrection died when it became clear the violence was instigated by the protesters and the average Nicaraguan was being deeply hurt by the continued disruption and roadblocks. Dozens of police and hundreds of civilians were killed in the confrontations. Hundreds of government buildings, police stations and schools were attacked and the economy severely disrupted.

Ultimately, the insurrection and coup attempt collapsed. With police ordered to stay in their barracks, it was clear who was responsible for the violence. The public became increasingly angry at the protesters because their roadblocks and violence were ruining lives and the economy. The silver lining is that it sparked a realization in the FSLN that they needed to be more vigilant about education of youth and monitoring foreign funded organizations.

8. Information Warfare and Extreme Sanctions

Beginning with the 2018 coup attempt in Nicaragua, the US information war on Nicaragua escalated dramatically. In 2020, Nicaragua started [regulating](#) foreign-backed organizations. Given that foreign supported organizations played a big role in the

insurrection resulting in hundreds of deaths and billions in economic damage, the need to do this was clear. The new regulations require foreign-backed organizations to document where their funding comes from and how it is spent. The US has the same requirement known as the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA), but that does not stop western media from claiming that these laws are [“dismantling civil society”](#). On the contrary, many NGOs registered and continued as before. Those who refused to register were denied a permit, just as they would be in the United States.

US government influence extends to many “human rights” groups and some branches of the United Nations. For example the UN’s Human Rights Council established a [“Group of Human Rights Experts on Nicaragua”](#) to investigate alleged Nicaraguan human rights violations and abuses since April 2018. Their mandate was extended until February 2025 but they have issued two preliminary reports that claim Nicaragua is committing crimes, violations and abuses including “persecution of any dissenting voice”, torture and the “deprivation of Nicaraguan nationality.”

The reports by three “experts”, none of whom is Nicaraguan, are extremely biased. They have been rebutted in a detailed [article](#) co-written by international legal scholar **Alfred de Zayas**. It is endorsed by 85 different organizations and over 450 individuals including Nicaraguan citizens and residents. The article reveals that the “experts” failed to comply with their own mandate to gather information from all sides. The report of the Group of Human Rights Experts on Nicaragua (GHREN) is solely based on the opinions and accusations of the dissidents and is a mockery of what should be an objective report based on evidence from all sides.

Along with the drumbeat of negative accusations based on subjective or no evidence, the US keeps adding more and more sanctions on Nicaragua. Unknown to most Americans, sanctions (called ‘unilateral coercive measures’) have been repeatedly condemned by the United Nations General Assembly. They are considered to be in violation of international law and the UN Charter. Ignoring the opinions of 75% of the world, the US Treasury Department has recently issued a [slew of sanctions](#) on Nicaraguan officials, state corporations, judges, mayors and attorney general.

While trying to hurt the Nicaraguan economy, the US has started offering [easy immigration](#) to the US for Nicaraguans. They are even using Facebook and social media to [lure Nicaragua youth](#). The goal seems to be to undermine the economy and encourage “brain drain” where youth with skills and ambition will be tempted to leave the country. After all, despite the positive gains and accomplishments, including free health care and education, most Nicaraguans are still poor. This phenomenon has been well documented in articles such as [“New US Immigration Policies Effect on Nicaragua: Brain Drain and Deportation”](#) and [“US government exploits animosity toward migrants to demonize socialist countries”](#).

Summary

In late 2021, three years after the coup attempt, Nicaragua held its national election. Western criticisms of the election were refuted in [this article](#). International observers were [impressed](#) with organization, large turnout and enthusiasm. The US administration and media falsely claimed the main opposition candidates had been imprisoned. In fact, the few imprisoned individuals represented no parties or significant base of support. They claimed to be “precandidates” not because they were viable contenders but because they sought to avoid prosecution while slandering the Nicaraguan government.

On the contrary, there were five opposition candidates representing genuine parties and movements. The voters had a real choice. With 66% of the electorate voting, 75% voted for Daniel Ortega and the FSLN over the competitors. The theme of the election was [“Soberania”](#), beautifully sung by a young Nicaraguan patriot at the house where Cesar Augusto Sandino grew up.

Nicaragua continues to assert its sovereignty and pursue its own foreign policy. In September 2021, Nicaragua cut ties with Taiwan and established diplomatic relations with China. In October 2022, Nicaragua refused to condemn Russia for its intervention in Ukraine, blaming the US and NATO for having provoked the conflict. On Oct 24 2023, Nicaragua called for an emergency session of the UN General Assembly to consider “protection of the Palestinian civilian population.” Later, Nicaragua’s **Foreign Minister Denis Moncada** said the Palestinian cause is one of the most just causes of our times. In January 2024, Nicaragua filed charges at the International Court of Justice against Germany for being an accomplice to genocide in Gaza.

In June the results of an extensive [poll](#) conducted by the independent and well regarded M&R Consultants were released. They indicate high satisfaction with the direction and leadership of the country. Confidence in the “stability, security, and economic progress” of the country has risen from 36.8% in 2018 to 74.8% today.

Nicaragua has good reason to be wary of the United States. In the eight different ways described above, the US has interfered with Nicaragua’s independence for 170 years. The vast majority of Nicaraguans continue to resist, calmly insisting on their independence and sovereignty. As the song “Soberania” says, “Respect my flag or go away.”

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