

Confronting the American Dream: Nicaragua under U.S. Imperial Rule. By Michel Gobat. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005. xiii + 373 pp. Illustrations, maps, tables, bibliography, notes, index. Paper, \$23.95. ISBN: 0-822-33647-2.

Reviewed by Ralph Lee Woodward Jr.

Although several twentieth-century works have treated, from various perspectives, the U.S. interventions in Nicaragua, there has been no comprehensive study of the topic, especially of the consequences for this Central American state. In *Confronting the American Dream*, Michel Gobat combines political, economic, cultural, and diplomatic aspects of Nicaragua's history into a compelling analysis of the effects of the interventions that took place between 1912 and 1933. Richly illustrated with photographs, Gobat's fresh account of the U.S. occupation of Nicaragua illuminates that period. Unlike the frequent descriptions of U.S. influence abroad that emphasize the adoption of U.S. consumption and leisure patterns, Gobat argues that Nicaraguans who sought to imitate the U.S. experience were more interested in establishing the liberal institutions and practices that they believed had allowed the United States to become so prosperous. This ambition was a result of the diverse U.S. interventions and their uneven effects on distinct social groups. Gobat focuses on the interplay, often among the same people, between imitation of American ways and recurrent anti-Americanism. He demonstrates that "anti-Americanism is not always directed against the United States. At times, it can also be an attack against fellow citizens who have embraced U.S. ways" (p. 7).

Gobat concentrates on the fragmented elites, especially the Granada-based Conservatives who dominated the country following the invasion by William Walker (1855–57). While he stresses that both Liberals and Conservatives belonged to a relatively small, elite upper class, he also takes great pains to point out the differences among factions of the Conservatives. He particularly notes a fundamental schism between the old Granada families and the parvenus. In the process, he stresses the strong U.S. influence on both parties and the recurrence of anti-American feelings. Gobat spends two lengthy chapters describing the evolution of the Conservative Party in the

nineteenth century before turning to the subject of the U.S. interventions between 1912 and 1933. His treatment of the nineteenth century is sometimes less than convincing, as he often fails to supply adequate evidence to support his contentions, but upon arriving in the twentieth century, the work becomes more plausible and is better documented. Gobat at times portrays the Conservatives as being little different than the Liberals, and he fails to give the Conservatives due credit for the long period of constitutional government over which they presided between 1857 and 1893. In his principal arguments, however, Gobat makes a strong case for Nicaragua's coming under U.S. influence, as he "seeks to elucidate the deeper, more ambiguous effects of U.S. intervention by examining elite Nicaraguans' embrace of particular U.S. ways, on the one hand, and their anti-Americanism, on the other" (p. 5).

Conservative caution in attracting U.S. capital following the Walker episode meant that Nicaragua received less foreign investment than any other Central American state in the late nineteenth century. U.S. businesses invested considerably less in Nicaragua than in the other Central American states in the twentieth century as well, yet the country became the model for dollar diplomacy after 1912. In contrast to its interventions in other Caribbean states, the United States did not establish a military government in Nicaragua. After securing the country, it withdrew all but a small garrison and allowed a few U.S. bankers to manage Nicaragua's public finances. In other countries, dollar diplomacy entailed U.S. supervision of state finances in exchange for an unprecedented influx of U.S. loans and investment, but Nicaragua "received less U.S. investment than nearly any other nation in Latin America during the Wall Street-fueled loan frenzy of the 1920s" (p. 125). In Nicaragua the United States shifted imperial control to the private sector while attempting to ensure the country's stability by instilling in native elites the technocratic, apolitical ideals that characterized the U.S. ideology of Progressivism. The U.S. planners and enforcers of dollar diplomacy believed they could apply its principles anywhere. In Nicaragua, however, "it not only promoted a U.S. vision of 'progress' but was a means to imperial control and thus inherently disruptive" (p. 126). Gobat effectively describes how Nicaraguan novels reflected the deep cultural impression this policy left on the country.

The tendency of the bankers to favor small farmers over the large Conservative landholders had the effect of retarding the kind of large-scale production of agricultural exports that was happening in the rest of Central America in the early twentieth century. Instead, favorable loans to small farmers allowed them to become foodstuff suppliers to the rest of Central America, where more and more land was being converted to large-scale agricultural exports (especially coffee and bananas). This meant that dollar diplomacy increased the political leverage of nonelite sectors, as it created a financial environment that, unexpectedly, better served the interests of peasant producers than those of the elite. Gobat thus argues that “dollar diplomacy’s ‘democratizing’ socioeconomic impact so greatly unnerved Nicaraguan landlords that it helped trigger the anti-American turn of the country’s most pro-U.S. elites” (p. 174), leading them to offer support to Augusto Sandino’s revolt against U.S. imperialism between 1927 and 1933.

Closing with an epilogue that reassesses two legacies of the U.S. interventions in Nicaragua—the Somoza dictatorship (1936–79) and elite support for the Sandinista revolution (1979–90)—this work is a stinging denunciation of U.S. interventions in the Caribbean region. “U.S. imperial rule in the Caribbean Basin did not just fail to make things better,” Gobat declares. “It made things worse” (p. 279). And he extends this condemnation to more recent U.S. policy as he scores “the tendency of the United States to equate all forms of foreign resistance to the spread of its influence with rejection of ‘freedom,’” adding that “the nearly two-hundred year history of U.S. intervention in its ‘backyard’ highlights the powerful anti-democratic effects of, to quote President George W. Bush’s 2005 inaugural address, ‘the great liberating tradition’ of the United States. No public debate about the wisdom of a contemporary U.S. ‘Empire of liberty’ will be very meaningful if it ignores Latin America’s extensive experience with U.S. intervention” (p. 280).

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