

been doing for years is not only morally bankrupt but factually incorrect. Although the Army's operational records give ample evidence that throughout the Philippine War, far too many Filipinos were indiscriminately fired on or shot "attempting to escape," the premeditated execution of prisoners was neither a common nor an accepted practice among American soldiers in the archipelago. Even on Samar, where both a thirst for vengeance and a lack of supervision led to war crimes and unnecessary cruelty, soldiers were expected to follow the laws of war. Smith, who openly advocated illegal policies, was relieved, court-martialed, found guilty, and immediately retired in disgrace. Army officers on Samar suspected of atrocities were investigated, court-martialed, and, as in the case of Waller, either acquitted or given mild reprimands. Given the nature of their offenses and the lightness of their punishments, it is hard to view any of these men, soldiers or Marines, as scapegoats.<sup>40</sup>

A third result of the Marines' march and the tragic events that followed was that Waller's court-martial and the charges of American brutality overshadowed Lukban's capture in February and the surrender of the last prominent guerrilla leader on 28 April. Despite Smith's attempts to turn his men into mindless butchers, the victory was due to careful planning, detailed organization, and persistence. In order to combat the guerrillas in Samar's rugged interior, the army constructed a string of supply dumps from which long-ranging columns could sweep the countryside. Through a combination of large expeditions and hundreds of small patrols that operated from towns and field camps, the soldiers demonstrated to the population that the Americans intended to stay. By recruiting Filipino volunteers, promising local autonomy, and offering generous surrender terms, the Army began providing attractive alternatives to resistance. These methods, along with the destruction of most of the island's foodstuffs, eventually convinced all but the most intransigent rebels to accept American authority.

The brutality and excesses that characterized the conduct of soldiers and Marines on Samar represented a radical departure from the pacification methods employed elsewhere in the

Philippines. Too often lessons that had been painfully learned in the previous three years of warfare were disregarded, and only the most primitive elements were retained. Barring the first few months of American occupation, there was little attempt to found schools, build roads, or win over the population—methods that proved effective in other areas where the topography was only a little less daunting and the guerrillas better organized. Nor did the Americans on Samar later take advantage of their vastly expanded intelligence capabilities or seek to exploit the deep and bitter divisions among various sections and classes in Samar society. With some exceptions, pacification methods remained crude and undeveloped. In part, this was the result of Samar's isolation and topography, which cannot be overemphasized. Yet it should not be forgotten that Samar's topography was equally harsh to the guerrillas, who, despite having little more experience of the interior than the Americans and being led by a "foreigner" from another island and culture, learned to control an unruly populace and to fight effectively with small units and with limited supplies. The Marines, of course, fresh from China, could hardly be aware of this mass of tested lore; and in following their Army superiors down the path of directionless retaliation, they wrote one of the most painful chapters in the history of the corps.<sup>41</sup>

In assessing the Marines' performance in their first modern small war, it is essential to recognize that in the early 20th century, before most Marines had any experience with expeditionary warfare and interventions and before the emergence of a specific doctrine for fighting "small wars," the character of the commanding officer was all important. Certainly the physical stamina and rugged endurance that the Marines displayed on their disastrous attempt to march across the island may be sufficient justification for the old U.S. Marine Corps toast, "Stand Gentlemen. He served on Samar." Yet this glorification of suffering and tenacity should not obscure the fact that they did not display much expertise in their first modern guerrilla war. Inexperienced and, in the case of Waller, unwilling to learn, the Marines' tactics were as physi-

cally devastating to themselves as they were punishing to their opponents.

Whether this ambiguous performance led to institutional growth or lessons learned is beyond the scope of this work. The Marine Corps took no action against Waller, and there is no indication that he displayed any remorse for his actions. He went on to become the mentor of a generation of counterinsurgency experts who emerged within the corps to fight the small wars of the Caribbean. Perhaps much of Waller's physical courage and endurance, his charismatic leadership, and his love of combat found their way into the Marines' expeditionary forces. Yet it is important to note that his junior officers rejected Waller's headlong individual aggressiveness, choosing instead to discuss, disseminate, and eventually codify their experiences in the *Small Wars Manual* of the Marine Corps.

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pacification on Luzon, see Brian McAllister Linn, *The U.S. Army and Counterinsurgency in the Philippine War, 1899–1902* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1989).

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*Part III*

*Nicaragua, 1909–1933*



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## Airpower and Restraint in Small Wars: Marine Corps Aviation in the Second Nicaraguan Campaign, 1927-33

by Wray R. Johnson

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Air control, as exhibited by the Royal Air Force during the British occupation of Iraq, is often cited as the consummate example of the successful and effective use of airpower. However, the U.S. military need look no further than its own Marine Corps for an equally compelling example. As Dr. Johnson argues, unlike their European counterparts, Marine air leaders understood the need for restraint in using airpower for air control in Nicaragua during the first half of the 20th century.

IT IS ONE of the peculiarities of airpower history that proponents have often claimed airpower to be a more humane instrument of war, whereas many critics have claimed that bombs dropped from the air are somehow more immoral than an artillery barrage or economic sanctions—even if the latter results in a greater number of civilian deaths.<sup>1</sup> Yet, it is rare to find historical examples of airmen accused of war crimes, much less tried for the same. This has created a paradox of sorts. For example, following revelations that U.S. troops deliberately fired upon civilian refugees at No Gun Ri during the Korean War, James Webb, a Marine Corps combat veteran and former secretary of the Navy, wrote in *The Wall Street Journal*, “Perhaps the greatest anomaly of recent times is that death

delivered by a bomb earns one an air medal, while when it comes at the end of a gun it earns one a trip to jail.”<sup>2</sup> If we were to take this line of reasoning to its logical extreme, the tragedy at My Lai would have been regarded differently in history had a pair of F-4 fighter-bombers napalmed the village. Of course, the distinction appears to be that Lieutenant William Calley and his soldiers killed Vietnamese women and children face to face whereas the F-4 pilots would have been, to use popular jargon, simply “servicing a target.”

According to Colonel Phil Meilinger, former dean of the School of Advanced Airpower Studies at Maxwell Air Force Base (AFB), Alabama, “Whether women and children are blown to bits by artillery, starved to death as a result of blockade, or killed in a bombing attack is a distinction the victims would not trouble themselves to make.”<sup>3</sup> But airpower theorists and airmen themselves have over the years invariably pointed to the distinct psychological impact of airpower as being potentially far greater than the actual physical destruction wrought. If that is true, then civilians do in fact make a distinction between death by artillery fire and death by bombs. Giulio Douhet certainly believed in the efficacy of aerial terror to weaken, if not wholly undermine, the will of civilian populations, and as recently as 1997, the director of Defence Studies at the Royal Air Force Staff College averred that “airpower when used properly can be a devastatingly effective psychological weapon.”<sup>4</sup>

A basic premise of classical airpower theory, then, has always been that people targeted from the air—whether combatants or noncombatants—react with much greater fear to aerial bombardment than to surface attack.<sup>5</sup> Apparently, this is equally true among guerrillas and other irregulars. In his book *Viet Cong Memoir*, Truong Nhu Tang described B-52 strikes as “undiluted psychological terror.” Despite having been hunted by South Vietnamese and American ground forces and having endured all of the privations and hardships associated with the life of a guerrilla, Truong Tang noted that “nothing the guerrillas had to endure compared with the stark terrorization of the B-52 bombardments.”<sup>6</sup> Thus,

since the advent of the airplane, airpower enthusiasts have noted the psychological dimension of airpower and sought to exploit it. In that light, the use of the airplane by Great Britain to police its empire in the early part of the 20th century serves as a case in point.

As Dr. Jim Corum has noted in his article “The Myth of Air Control,” the British long relied upon terror in the form of punitive expeditions to bring rebellious native populations to heel.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Colonel C. E. Callwell, in his seminal work *Small Wars*, first published in 1896, considered what we today would think of as wanton acts of destruction perpetrated against civilians to be a sound military principle:

It is so often the case that the power which undertakes a small war desires to acquire the friendship of the people which its armies are chastising, that the system of what is called “military execution” is ill-adapted to the end in view. The most satisfactory way of bringing such foes to reason is by the rifle and the sword, for they understand this mode of warfare and respect it. Sometimes, however, the circumstances do not admit of it, and then their villages must be demolished and granaries destroyed.<sup>8</sup>

Although Colonel Callwell acknowledged “a limit to the amount of license in destruction” in small wars, he nevertheless acceded to a certain expediency in such “havoc” and noted that, despite the fact that burning crops and killing civilians was something “the laws of regular warfare do not sanction,” it was oftentimes a necessary, albeit unfortunate, characteristic of small wars.<sup>9</sup>

The Royal Air Force (RAF) advanced air control as a substitute for the traditional punitive expedition on the ground. In short, such expeditions by air were relatively cheap, could inflict serious casualties upon recalcitrant natives without exposing English soldiers to any harm, and capitalized on the fact that primitive people were quite often terrified by airplanes. Thus, when combined with surface operations conducted by native levies or other non-English imperial troops, these operations were quite successful,



and the RAF exploited the results to its own political ends. But in keeping with the nature of punitive expeditions in general, these aerial operations also tended to be quite brutal. For example, at the time, Wing Commander J. A. Chamier of the RAF insisted that airplanes were to be used relentlessly, carrying out attacks “on houses, inhabitants, crops, and cattle.”<sup>10</sup> Although repugnant to modern sensibilities, such an attitude was wholly in keeping with an imperial policy intended to crush native resistance to British authority as quickly and effectively as possible. Moreover, Great Britain was not alone in this matter, as the French displayed an equal disregard for the lives and property of native peoples.

French imperial policy was similar to that of the British, and the French use of airpower to police their own colonial possessions was no less brutal—perhaps greater. The French air force played a significant role in the colonial fighting in Morocco and Tunisia prior to, during, and after World War I. Aerial bombardment of civilians by the air force in policing the French Empire was the norm. In fact, at Nalhout, Tunisia, in the fall of 1916, the French used chemical weapons against civilian targets, including mosques. Apparently, the French made no distinction between combatants and noncombatants in punitive operations; therefore, the use of gas was not regarded as particularly unethical or immoral—or even counterproductive. French use of aircraft in colonial warfare increased during the 1920s, with 21 squadrons operating in Morocco alone. According to Dr. Bill Dean, a professor on the faculty at Air Command and Staff College at Maxwell AFB, “As had been the case a decade before, the French had no qualms about bombing villages that were strictly civilian targets.”<sup>11</sup> They even used American mercenary aviators at one point.<sup>12</sup>

Ironically, the British public was not especially outraged by their own soldiers or other soldiers in the employ of the empire torching villages in Iraq or Yemen, but they were moved to protest the use of airplanes for the same purpose. Early RAF reports on air-control operations stressed effectiveness and lethality, but later statements emphasized the use of airplanes in a

more humane and less lethal manner. The proximate cause of this shift in emphasis was the rising chorus of protest in the British press and in Parliament. It would appear, however, that no such compunction developed about matters on the ground because punitive expeditions continued as before, and British troops repeatedly shelled villages without warning. But the restraint claimed by the RAF was probably mostly fiction, especially in the more isolated outposts of the British Empire. Contrast this state of affairs with the operations of United States Marine Corps aviation elements in Nicaragua during roughly the same time frame.

In *Quijote on a Burro*, a privately published classic on American intervention in Nicaragua between 1912 and 1934, Lejeune Cummins wrote in 1958 that “perhaps the only subject regarding the American intervention . . . upon which all authorities are able to agree is the efficacy with which the Marines employed the air power at their disposal.”<sup>13</sup> Indeed, Secretary of the Navy Curtis Wilbur reported in 1929 that Marine Corps aviation was “of inestimable value” in Nicaragua.<sup>14</sup> Cummins was thus moved to observe that “it is probably not an exaggeration to say that the marine occupation . . . could not have been accomplished” without Marine Corps aviation.<sup>15</sup>

Beginning in 1919, the Marine Corps had employed airplanes against the *cacos* in Haiti and “bandits” in the Dominican Republic, but the accompanying air units were added to these expeditions mostly as an afterthought and, therefore, generally operated without a clear idea of their role in each undertaking.<sup>16</sup> Six Curtiss JN-4B “Jennies” of the 1st Air Squadron, commanded by Captain Walter McCaughtry, deployed in February 1919 to San Pedro de Macoris, the Dominican Republic, while another six Jennies and six Curtiss HS-2L flying boats of the 4th Squadron under Captain Harvey Mims began operations at Port-au-Prince, Haiti, on 31 March.<sup>17</sup> Although some of these aircraft took part in active combat operations—experimenting with improvised bombing tactics against the indigenous irregular forces—it was not until improved radios became available in 1921 that air-to-ground cooperation proved at all practica-

ble. Consequently, in both the Dominican Republic and Haiti, Marine Corps aviation proved its worth mostly in combat-support operations such as scouting, communications, mapping, transportation, and medical assistance. Nevertheless, as one Marine Corps aviator concluded afterwards, "We were there and they used us, and they used us to their advantage, and consequently we became a useful and integral part of the Marine Corps."<sup>18</sup> In fact, not unlike the British and the French, the Corps became increasingly aware of the facility of close air-ground counter guerrilla operations. And in Nicaragua, the Marine Corps began to perfect these techniques in a manner that ultimately laid the foundation for the highly effective system of close air support still in use by that service today.

United States interests in Nicaragua did not arise suddenly with the emergence of the revolutionary disturbances of the 1920s; this small country had been of strategic importance to the U.S. government since the war with Mexico, when, along with the Isthmus of Panama, Nicaragua became vital to transcontinental communications. Suffice it to say that as a result of the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, the United States took on the role of hemispheric gendarme in order to protect American commercial interests throughout Latin America. President William Howard Taft subsequently made "dollar diplomacy" the paramount strategic consideration in Latin America, and when American capital investment was threatened in Nicaragua in 1926, the United States sent in the Marines.<sup>19</sup>

In February 1927, Marine Observation Squadron 1, commanded by Major Ross "Rusty" Rowell, landed at Corinto, Nicaragua, with eight officers, 81 enlisted men, and six de Havilland DH-4B aircraft. In May, Marine Observation Squadron 4, with seven officers, 78 enlisted Marines, and six Boeing O2B-1s (a metal-fuselaged derivative of the venerable DH-4B) also arrived and were placed under Major Rowell's command. Combined, the two units were designated Aircraft Squadrons, 2d Brigade.<sup>20</sup> Major Rowell, an experienced pilot who had received instruction in dive-bombing during exercises conducted by U.S. Army fliers at Kelly Field in

San Antonio, Texas, was quick to appreciate the value of dive-bombing: "[It] seemed to me that it would be an excellent form of tactics for use in guerrilla warfare."<sup>21</sup> Thus, when he took command of the 1st Squadron in San Diego in 1924, Rowell had U.S. Army A-3 bomb racks installed on the squadron's DH-4Bs and set about training his pilots in the technique.

Dive-bombing—more accurately, what we would today describe as glide bombing—had earlier been employed in Haiti. During the intervention there in 1919, Lieutenant Lawson Sanderson of the 4th Squadron realized that the usual practice of horizontal release of bombs by the rear observer was inaccurate, to say the least. By trial and error, Lieutenant Sanderson settled upon the technique of dropping the nose of his aircraft in what was then considered a steep dive of 45 degrees. Flying directly at the target, Sanderson then released the bomb himself at an altitude of roughly 250 feet. The tactic proved considerably more accurate than horizontal bombing, and the other pilots in the squadron soon abandoned the old method in favor of the new one. Such accuracy would prove its worth to the Marine Corps in Nicaragua.<sup>22</sup>

Although much has been written about Marine Corps aviation in Nicaragua during what officially became known as the Second Nicaraguan Campaign, none of it is considered definitive. General Vernon McGee, a Marine Corps aviator, wrote one of the better essays on the topic in 1965. A veteran of the Second Nicaraguan Campaign, General McGee helped author his service's *Small Wars Manual*, perhaps the finest doctrine ever written regarding counterrevolutionary warfare. The general was convinced that concepts learned in Nicaragua were applicable to the ongoing counterinsurgency effort in Vietnam. His essay emphasized the technological aspect—specifically, the characteristics of airplanes useful in a counter guerrilla campaign—but his larger idea of looking to the Nicaraguan experience as a model for airpower in small wars bears consideration, particularly in contrast to the British air-control example.

Perhaps there is no better starting point than to examine what Major Rowell had to say regarding the lessons of Nicaragua. In an article pub-

lished in the *Marine Corps Gazette* in September 1929, he acknowledged the examples set by the British and French (as well as the Italians and Spanish) with respect to the use of aircraft in “bush, or guerrilla warfare” but went on to assert that “no broader experience has been gained, or greater success achieved through the employment of aircraft in minor warfare, than that which attended the operations of [the] Marines during the Nicaraguan campaign of 1927 and 1928.”<sup>23</sup> Major Rowell spent the bulk of his article detailing organization, tactics, and so forth, but, particularly, his remarks regarding the unique character of the conflict warrant our attention in the context of airpower and restraint.

The Marine Corps had been dispatched to Nicaragua to aid the Conservative government of Adolfo Diaz and to protect Americans and their property from Liberal opposition forces led by Dr. Juan Sacasa. The Liberal army had disintegrated as a unified force but was replaced by small bands of guerrillas, the most prominent of which was led by Augusto C. Sandino. Although in rebellion against the government, Sandino also set about to rid the country of the American presence that had dominated it since the Taft administration. Waging a ruthless guerrilla war, Sandino presented the Marine Corps with an unprecedented challenge. Whereas in earlier conflicts in Central America and the Caribbean, the Corps had faced nominally guerrilla formations ranging from organized criminals to politicized, disgruntled elements of society, in Nicaragua it faced a different kind of guerrilla opponent—one schooled and educated by Mexican Marxists and enjoying international support. The Marine Corps, therefore, was among the first regular forces in the 20th century to face the “revolutionary guerrilla.” Whereas in Haiti and the Dominican Republic the Corps functioned as an occupation force, invoking martial law and having a free hand in the conduct of military operations in the field, in Nicaragua it supported the extant government and was thus constrained by political limitations that its predecessors in the Caribbean as well as British and French counterparts would have regarded as unthinkable.

Major Rowell in particular was sensitive to the

limitations imposed on his operations, not the least of which was the impact of public opinion back home in the United States: “Public opinion, always to be respected, is sensitive to bloodshed and the newspapers are prone to publish rumors of scandals or abuses. . . . The practical effects . . . are numerous. For example: we may not bomb towns because it would not be consistent with a policy advocated at some international convention. . . . The safety of noncombatants becomes a matter of prime importance.”<sup>24</sup>

It is important to note that Major Rowell’s comments were offered in the context of a complaint: “We are required to conform to all of the rules of civilized warfare, while the enemy will torture prisoners, murder the wounded and mutilate the dead.” Nevertheless, Major Rowell was bound by the restraints imposed upon him and at least grudgingly conceded to their political necessity. In a subsequent essay, he recounted how, in the earliest stages of the Marine Corps intervention, “the American mission was to stop the war—not to become involved in it.”<sup>25</sup> This necessarily led to certain operational constraints. Major Rowell, therefore, “appealed to all pilots to avoid hostilities and to return fire only when necessary to save their own lives.”<sup>26</sup>

But neutrality soon gave way to active combat operations as Sandino deliberately attacked Marine Corps patrols and garrisons as well as other Americans and their property. As the American role in Nicaragua became wider and deeper, operational constraints on the Corps were loosened but never approximated the freedom its aviators enjoyed in the Caribbean—and certainly bore no similarity to the freedom of European air arms in their air-policing roles. For example, despite the fact that Major Rowell and other Marine Corps authors argued for the use of nonlethal chemicals such as tear gas (in contrast to the French use of lethal chemicals), U.S. policy forbade such usage.<sup>27</sup>

It became clear to diplomats and Marine Corps commanders in Nicaragua that direct and even indirect infliction of casualties on the civilian population was not only contrary to policy, but also carried negative value. Whereas British and French aviators routinely bombed villages and strafed collections of suspicious men—as



well as women, children, and animals—the Corps clearly understood that this was counter-productive and modified its tactics. Major Rowell, therefore, encouraged the service’s pilots to use their best judgment when attempting to tell guerrillas from civilians on the ground: “It is sometimes rather difficult to distinguish between the hostile groups and the noncombatants. No fixed rules can be laid down in such cases. The aviators must have an intimate knowledge of the characteristics of and habits of each group. . . . [However,] pilots will always bear in mind that innocent people will sometimes flee upon the approach of airplanes.”<sup>28</sup> Contrast this statement with that of an RAF pilot who stated that nine unidentifiable people in a group constituted an illegal assembly, so he dropped bombs on them.<sup>29</sup>

All of the above is not to say that innocent civilians did not die in Nicaragua as a result of air action. In his classic account of the Marine Corps fight with Sandino, Neill Macaulay described the service’s tactics as “aerial terrorism.”<sup>30</sup> Citing a particular mission led by Major Rowell, Macaulay noted that after observing several horses around a large house, Rowell and the pilot of another aircraft dropped bombs on the house and in the yard. Unknown persons were seen darting from the house into a nearby grove. Major Rowell strafed the grove but apparently to no effect. Macaulay, however, fails to mention the indicators that the Marine Corps recognized as pointing to probable guerrilla activity and the often extraordinary lengths to which its aviators would go to ensure that suspicious persons were indeed guerrillas.

Major Rowell instructed his pilots to fly no higher than 2,000 feet and generally 1,500 feet or lower—well within small-arms range—in order to distinguish between men and women, horses and cattle, and so forth.<sup>31</sup> He also stressed that pilots and their observers should become expert in the “organization, equipment, and habits of the enemy” through careful study. “Basically,” he wrote, “reconnaissance consists of distinguishing between the normal and the abnormal.”<sup>32</sup> When something on the ground seemed out of the ordinary, Marine pilots would swoop down to investigate. Towns that appeared to be aban-

doned were especially regarded as suspicious: “If the enemy is hiding there, some member of the party will probably decide to find a better place and make a dash for it. This may be induced by the patrol making a feint to attack. Under some circumstances, it will be possible to develop the situation by use of a few bursts from the front or rear guns. Occasionally a bomb may be expended for the same purpose.”<sup>33</sup>

Several points of this statement are noteworthy. Major Rowell insisted that his pilots be able to distinguish between guerrillas and civilians in order to avoid harming the latter. In circumstances in which all indications pointed to guerrilla activity, attempts to flush them out were graduated (feint, then use guns, then maybe a bomb or two) and employed when civilians were unlikely to be in the way.<sup>34</sup> If the town were abandoned by the civilian populace, the expenditure of bombs was certainly less problematic than if the area were bustling with activity. Such restraint certainly appears to refute any accusation of aerial terrorism and seems almost magnanimous compared to the British propensity to bomb any suspicious activity.

As alluded to earlier, the Marine Corps went to improbable lengths to determine the nature of suspicious activity in order to avoid unnecessary civilian casualties. In his annual report dated 20 June 1928, Major Rowell recounted how Marine aircraft would approach suspicious locales “from behind hills or mountains, the planes gliding in with throttled engines,” whereupon the pilots would fly low enough to the ground that the observer in the rear of the aircraft could “look into windows and doors.” As a counter to this extraordinary tactic, the guerrillas often included women and children among their parties, “secure in the knowledge that the women [would] not be attacked.”<sup>35</sup> This is not surprising, given that Major Rowell and his pilots were often (although not always) under standing orders not to attack towns and villages at all, even if the presence of guerrillas was indisputable. In February 1928, for example, Rowell discovered Sandino and his main column in the town of Rafael del Norte. His fully armed patrol flew within a few feet of the building in which Sandino was being interviewed by an American journalist, at a level

“where the pilots and observers looked into the muzzles of the enemy rifles.” But Major Rowell did not attack. He later wrote that “this rare opportunity was passed by because it was the policy of the Commanding General to avoid the possibility of injury to the lives and property of innocent persons by refraining from attacks on towns.”<sup>36</sup>

Unquestionably, Sandino and his guerrillas respected and feared the Marine Corps *lanzabombas*, as they were called by the Sandinistas.<sup>37</sup> Not only were Marine aircraft useful and lethal weapons in counterinsurgent warfare, but also they facilitated the political process crucial to counterrevolutionary warfare. To that end, these aircraft supported the national elections in 1928 at the height of the guerrilla war, especially in remote areas of the country:

It was necessary to ferry by plane most of the American personnel to outlying districts, to supply them there, to maintain communication with them, to patrol the towns and mesas on registration and election days, and, finally, to bring to Managua the ballots. In order to accomplish this work, flying time generally reached its peak during the weeks immediately before and after the election periods. . . . [In 1928] on election day 237 cantons were visited by airplanes.<sup>38</sup>

As the war wound down, leading to eventual withdrawal of the Marine Corps in 1933, aviation continued to play a significant role in the political process. Because of an earlier agreement with the government and the insurgents, the United States agreed to oversee national elections again in 1932. The assistance provided by Marine aviators was invaluable, constituting the most extensive use of aviation in a political-support role during the intervention in Nicaragua.<sup>39</sup>

With the close of this chapter in Marine Corps history, much of what the corps had learned in Nicaragua was synthesized and eventually codified in the *Small Wars Manual*, first published in 1935 and revised in 1940.<sup>40</sup> As noted earlier, General McGee and other Marine Corps aviators participated in this effort, and an entire chapter of the manual was devoted to aviation.<sup>41</sup>

Although the chapter was limited mostly to the composition of the aviation element, organization, types of missions, and so forth, the *Small Wars Manual* as a whole represented a major departure in the history of American military doctrine for small wars.

The 1935 edition was written by Major Harold Utley, who had commanded Marines in Eastern Nicaragua, as well as other Marines experienced in small wars. The work was informed by the research of U.S. Army officers and foreign experts in colonial warfare—including Colonel Callwell of the British army.<sup>42</sup> The 1940 edition was an encyclopedic work with over 400 pages of text comprising detailed treatments regarding organization, tactics, intelligence, propaganda, and a host of other topics, including the care and feeding of pack animals. But its treatment of revolutionary guerrilla warfare was groundbreaking and remarkably prescient regarding the nature of emerging revolutionary warfare: “After a study has been made of the people who will oppose the intervention, the strategical plan is evolved. . . . Strategy should attempt to gain psychological ascendancy over the outlaw or insurgent element prior to hostilities. [The] political mission . . . dictates the military strategy of small wars.”<sup>43</sup> This statement is quite remarkable in that this was the first time that U.S. military doctrine placed the political mission ahead of military requirements. It also illustrates the extent to which the Marine Corps recognized the “new” guerrilla threat, including the realization that “the motive in small wars is not material destruction; [it] is usually a project dealing with the social, economic, and political development of the people.”<sup>44</sup>

The authors of the *Small Wars Manual* gave special consideration to the underlying socioeconomic and political grievances that gave rise to insurgency and thus defined the theory of victory in such situations as relying upon an accurate assessment of the root causes of internal rebellion. For example, “the application of purely military measures may not, by itself restore peace and orderly government because the fundamental causes of the condition of unrest may be economic, political, or social.” Consequently, “the solution of such problems being basically a political adjustment, the military measures to be

applied must be of secondary importance and should be applied only to such an extent as to permit the continuation of peaceful corrective measures.”<sup>45</sup> Given the primacy of the nonmilitary dimension, it is not surprising that the Marine Corps would acquiesce to the need for restraint—including the application of airpower. If the operational objective is to detach popular support from the guerrillas and reattach it to the central government, deliberately bombing civilians from the air is counterproductive.

In contrast to the service’s recognition of the political dimension of small wars, the British, French, and other European powers of the same period continued to regard small wars as exclusively a military problem. Indigenous peoples were regarded as “inferior races” who understood only the sword and fire.<sup>46</sup> Resistance was to be smashed. European officers failed to discern and appreciate the manner in which ideologies borne out of Marxism, nationalism, Islam, and so forth, served to focus discontent and unify native peoples in a social, political, and military organization capable of resisting the regular armies of Europe. One must remember that the period encompassing the Marine Corps experience in Nicaragua (1910–33) and the British air-control experience between the world wars gave rise to such revolutionary figures as Mao Zedong, Ho Chi Minh, and Emiliano Zapata, among others. The Corps appears to have understood the emergent political nature of small wars in the 20th century, including the need for restraint in the application of airpower, better than their European counterparts.

But as Dr. Corum pointed out in his article, the United States Air Force retains a certain fascination with the British concept of air control. It goes without saying that Air Force officers pay less attention to the airpower experience of the Marine Corps in Nicaragua in the 1920s. This is unfortunate because in the context of the emerging challenge of small wars in the 21st century, the model provided by the Corps in the Second Nicaraguan Campaign is probably more appropriate. One must wonder, then, why the British concept is often stressed in the U.S. Air Force and the Marine experience is largely ignored.

One answer, perhaps the best one, is that

Marine Corps aviation in Nicaragua does not serve the interests of autonomous operations and institutional independence held sacrosanct by the U.S. Air Force. The RAF was one of the first major air forces to attain institutional independence, and air control served to solidify that independence as well as advance the timeless idea of achieving victory through airpower alone. Using the British example appears to validate theoretical and doctrinal propositions that the U.S. Air Force has long held dear. Marine Corps aviation, on the other hand, has always been subordinate, and the Nicaragua experience in fact laid the foundation for this relationship between the air element and the ground commander. As General McGee wrote, “Undeterred by any necessity for counterair operations, and untempted by any ‘wild blue yonder’ schemes of semi-independent strategical forays, the Marines buckled down to their primary mission of supporting Marine ground forces.”<sup>47</sup> The fact of the matter, however, is that airpower in a counterinsurgency environment is probably best suited to a supporting role, but this flies in the face of the airman’s conviction that airpower is decisive.

Ironically, during the post-World War II counterinsurgency era, the RAF generally found itself subordinate to a ground-force commander—a fact often overlooked by people who promote the idea of air control. For example, during the 10-year war against communist Dhofari guerrillas in Oman, the air element “defied a time-honoured Royal Air Force principle in that it came under the command of [an] Army brigadier.” But as the British commander of the Dhofar Brigade pointed out, “all its work was in close support of the Army . . . and few disapproved of the arrangement.”<sup>48</sup>

Compare this disposition with that of the Marine air element in Nicaragua. Based upon that experience, Major Rowell recommended the following:

The senior air officer should have the same dual staff and command status that is given the artillery commander in the infantry division. In other words, the senior air officer should actively command the air organization and at the same time serve as



the advisor to the [overall] commander on air matters. . . . The air squadrons will operate in support of ground organizations and also independently. In certain special situations, planes may be attached temporarily to ground units. As a general rule this practice should be discouraged. Better support can be given in most cases if the control is centralized.<sup>49</sup>

The similarity between this ordering of control and authority to the relationship between the joint force air component commander and the joint force commander today is so obvious as to require no further elaboration. In short, Major Rowell was advocating a structure not unlike what stands as current joint doctrine.<sup>50</sup> Nevertheless, the RAF concept of air control is generally held up as a model for “air constabulary” missions, and the Marine Corps example in Nicaragua is ignored.<sup>51</sup>

In closing, Air Force officers over the years have advanced various schemes by seeking to capitalize on the British air-control example, but much of the analysis regarding air control tended to ignore certain inconvenient facts—such as the presence of British ground forces and the apparent brutality of punitive expeditions conducted by British airmen. One must also note that these latter-day American studies tended to eschew any analysis of the political dimension—something also ignored by the British during the heyday of air control and something the U.S. military has struggled with since the end of World War II. A primary weakness of C. E. Callwell’s book as a useful guide for today has always been its emphasis on military operational solutions to political and social problems. In that sense, the Marine Corps *Small Wars Manual* is better doctrine. By the same token, the Marine airpower experience in Nicaragua is a better model for airpower in small wars.

## Notes

1. For an excellent discussion of ethics, morality, and aerial bombardment, see Louis Manzo, “Morality in War Fighting and Strategic Bombing in World War Two,” *Air Power History*, Fall 1992, 35–50. For a contrasting view, see Phillip Meilinger, “Winged Defense:

Airwar, the Law and Morality,” *Armed Forces and Society*, Fall 1993, 103–23. Another excellent discussion of the law of war and airpower can be found in W. Parks, “Air War and the Law at War,” *Air Force Law Review* 32, no. 1 (1990): 1–55.

2. James Webb, “Making Sense of No Gun Ri,” *Wall Street Journal*, 6 October 1999.

3. Col Phillip S. Meilinger, letter to the editor, *Air Power History*, Winter 1992, 58.

4. Group Captain Andrew P. N. Lambert, “Shattering Impact: The Psychology of Air Attack,” in *Air Power Confronts an Unstable World*, ed. Richard Hallion (London: Brassey’s, 1997), 105.

5. In fact Group Captain Lambert asserts, “The evidence suggests that the psychological responses of a civilian population to bombing mirror almost exactly the reactions of soldiers to enemy fire.” *Ibid.*, 94.

6. Truong Nhu Tang, *Viet Cong Memoir: An Inside Account of the Vietnam War and Its Aftermath*, with David Chanoff and Doan Van Toai (New York: Vintage Books, April 1986), 167. The B-52 was equally feared by Iraqi soldiers during the Gulf War. Consequently, one of the most successful psychological-operations (PSYOP) leaflets of the war displayed a photo of a B-52 unloading its deadly cargo, accompanied by text warning of continued B-52 strikes. Regrettably, many observers concluded that the “B-52 leaflet” was a universally applicable leaflet in PSYOP, forgetting that, although the Vietcong were terrified by B-52 strikes, they rarely surrendered as a result.

7. Dr. James S. Corum, “The Myth of Air Control: Reassessing the History,” *Aerospace Power Journal* 14, no. 4 (Winter 2000): 61–77.

8. Col C. E. Callwell, *Small Wars: Their Principles and Practice*, 3d ed. (London: Printed for Her Majesty’s Stationery Office by Harrison and Sons, 1906), 41.

9. *Ibid.*, 41–42.

10. Wing Comdr J. A. Chamier, “The Use of Air Power for Replacing Military Garrisons,” *Journal of the Royal United Services Institute*, February–November 1921, 210.

11. William Dean, “The Colonial Armies of the French Third Republic: Overseas Formation and Continental Deployment, 1871–1920” (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1999), 315–24.

12. *The Escadrille Cheriflenne* flew 470 missions—often attacking towns that had already submitted to French authority—before being disbanded. *Ibid.*, 324.

13. Lejeune Cummins, *Quijote on a Burro: Sandino and the Marines, A Study in the Formulation of Foreign Policy* (Mexico City: Distrito Federal: La Impresora Azteca, 1958), 54

14. *Annual Report of the Secretary of the Navy*, Fiscal

Year 1928 (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Navy, 1920), 50, cited in *ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*, 55.

16. By 1910, revolutions in Haiti followed a well-established pattern. A military strongman would form a caco army, consisting mostly of military adventurers and conscripts. The caco army would seize the capital city of Port-au-Prince, surround the legislature, and oversee the election of the insurgent leader as the new president. When the Marine Corps landed in July 1915, a number of caco armies supporting Rosalvo Bobo resisted. Suppressing these irregular forces became the primary military objective of the Marine Corps in Haiti. Likewise, when the United States intervened in the Dominican Republic in 1916, armed clashes between Marines and various irregulars erupted almost immediately. Generally lumped together as “bandits,” these irregular forces actually comprised professional highwaymen known as *gavilleros*, ordinary criminals, discontented politicians who used banditry to advance their own ambitions, unemployed laborers, and peasants, the latter generally impressed into service.

17. Lt Col Edward Johnson, *Marine Corps Aviation: The Early Years, 1912–1940* (Washington, D.C.: History and Museums Division, Headquarters U.S. Marine Corps, 1977), 49–51.

18. Major General Ford O. Rogers, USMC, retired, transcript of oral history interview, Oral History Collection (Washington, D.C.: History and Museums Division, Headquarters U.S. Marine Corps, 3 December 1970), 25, cited in *ibid.*, 49.

19. For a full treatment, see Ivan Musicant, *The Banana Wars: A History of United States Military Intervention in Latin America from the Spanish-American War to the Invasion of Panama* (New York: Macmillan, 1990).

20. Johnson, 55–56.

21. *Ibid.*, 53.

22. The use of aircraft to support Marines on the ground is an important yet much overlooked aspect of airpower history. It is beyond the scope of this article to address the topic in the detail it deserves, but every student of airpower history should spend time examining the tactics, techniques, and procedures developed by the Marine Corps in Nicaragua, as it laid the groundwork for our concept of close air support today.

23. Major Ross Rowell, “Aircraft in Bush Warfare,” *Marine Corps Gazette*, September 1929, 180.

24. *Ibid.*, 181.

25. Major Ross Rowell, “The Air Service In Minor Warfare,” *United States Naval Institute Proceedings*, October 1929, 872.

26. *Ibid.*

27. Rowell, “Aircraft in Bush Warfare,” 195. See also Captain H. Denny Campbell, “Aviation in Guerilla Warfare,” *Marine Corps Gazette*, pt. 3 (November 1931): 33. In both articles, the authors advocated the use of nonlethal chemicals (“a sneezing gas, a lachrymatory gas, a laughing gas, a choleric-producing gas or even a simple and harmless anaesthetic”) over lethal compounds. According to Captain Campbell, such use “humanizes bullet warfare” (33).

28. Rowell, “Aircraft in Bush Warfare,” 193–94.

29. Robin Cross, *The Bombers: The Illustrated Story of Offensive Strategy and Tactics in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 70.

30. Neill Macaulay, *The Sandino Affair* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1985), 116.

31. As a result, Marine aircraft were struck by ground fire on virtually every mission.

32. Rowell, “Aircraft in Bush Warfare,” 191–92.

33. *Ibid.*, 193.

34. Macaulay recounts one incident, however, in which Major Rowell machine-gunned purported guerrillas in a house in a town where women and children were present. Sarcastically, Macaulay wrote, “The women and children were presumably not endangered by the machine gun fire.” But one can argue persuasively that at such low altitude and speed and with the superior marksmanship prevalent among the Marine aviators at the time, Rowell took the women and children into account when he made his decision to open fire. Given the absence of reported civilian casualties associated with this incident, Major Rowell apparently took a calculated risk and succeeded. See Macaulay, 116.

35. Major Ross Rowell, “Annual Report of Aircraft Squadrons, Second Brigade, U.S. Marine Corps, July 1, 1927, to June 20, 1928,” *Marine Corps Gazette*, December 1928, 250–51.

36. *Ibid.*, 254.

37. Cummins, 54.

38. Captain Francis Mulcahy, “Marine Corps Aviation in the Second Nicaraguan Campaign,” *United States Naval Institute Proceedings*, August 1933, 1131.

39. Cummins, 45.

40. In addition to Major Rowell, who left Nicaragua in August 1928, three other Marine aviators commanded the air element in Nicaragua: Major Louis Bourne (August 1928 to December 1929), Major Ralph Mitchell (December 1929 to July 1931), and Captain Francis Mulcahy (July 1931 to January 1933). As a colonel, Rowell rose to become director of Marine Corps Aviation from 1 April 1936 to 10 March 1939 and as a major general was at one point the senior Marine

Corps aviator in the Pacific during World War II. But following a disagreement with the commandant of the Marine Corps and Adm Chester Nimitz regarding the use of Marine aircraft on escort carriers (as opposed to supporting Marines on the ground), he was relieved and sent to Lima, Peru, as chief of the Naval Air Mission. It was a sorry end to the career of an otherwise illustrious and dedicated Marine Corps aviator. See Mulcahy, 1122; *Marine Corps Aircraft, 1913–1965*, rev. ed. (Washington, D.C.: Historical Branch, G-3 Division, Headquarters U.S. Marine Corps, 1967), 49; and Peter Mersky, *U.S. Marine Corps Aviation: 1912 to the Present*, 3d ed. (Baltimore: Nautical & Aviation Publishing Company of America, 1997), 98.

41. See *Small Wars Manual* (1940; reprint, Washington, D.C.: Department of the Navy, 1987), 9-1-1 to 9-36-24.

42. Much of what the U.S. Army had learned in terms of “pacification” came from its own experience in the Philippines at the turn of the century. During the guerilla phase of that war, the official U.S. policy under President William McKinley was one of “benevolent assimilation,” emphasizing conciliation over military solutions. See Brian McAllister Linn, *The Philippine War, 1899–1902* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000), 30.

43. *Small Wars Manual*, 1-8-13.

44. *Ibid.*, 1-10-18

45. *Ibid.*, 1-9-15, 1-9-16.

46. In truth, the Marines of the time were no less racist than the British or French. In his article on the use of aircraft in small wars, Captain H. Denny Campbell regarded the use of propaganda to be an “effective weapon . . . against races of uneducated, uncivilized, indolent and superstitious peoples.” The distinction, however, is that Marines recognized that mistreatment and brutality—even directed at what they considered

to be inferior peoples—made success in counterrevolutionary war all the more difficult and perhaps impossible. (For the specific reference cited, see Campbell, pt. 3 [note 26], 33.)

47. General Vernon McGee, “The Evolution of Marine Aviation,” *Marine Corps Gazette*, pt. 1 (August 1965): 24.

48. John Akehurst, *We Won a War: Campaign in Oman, 1965–1975* (Wilton, Salisbury, Wiltshire, England: Michael Russell [Publishing], 1982), 38.

49. Rowell, “Aircraft in Bush Warfare,” 203.

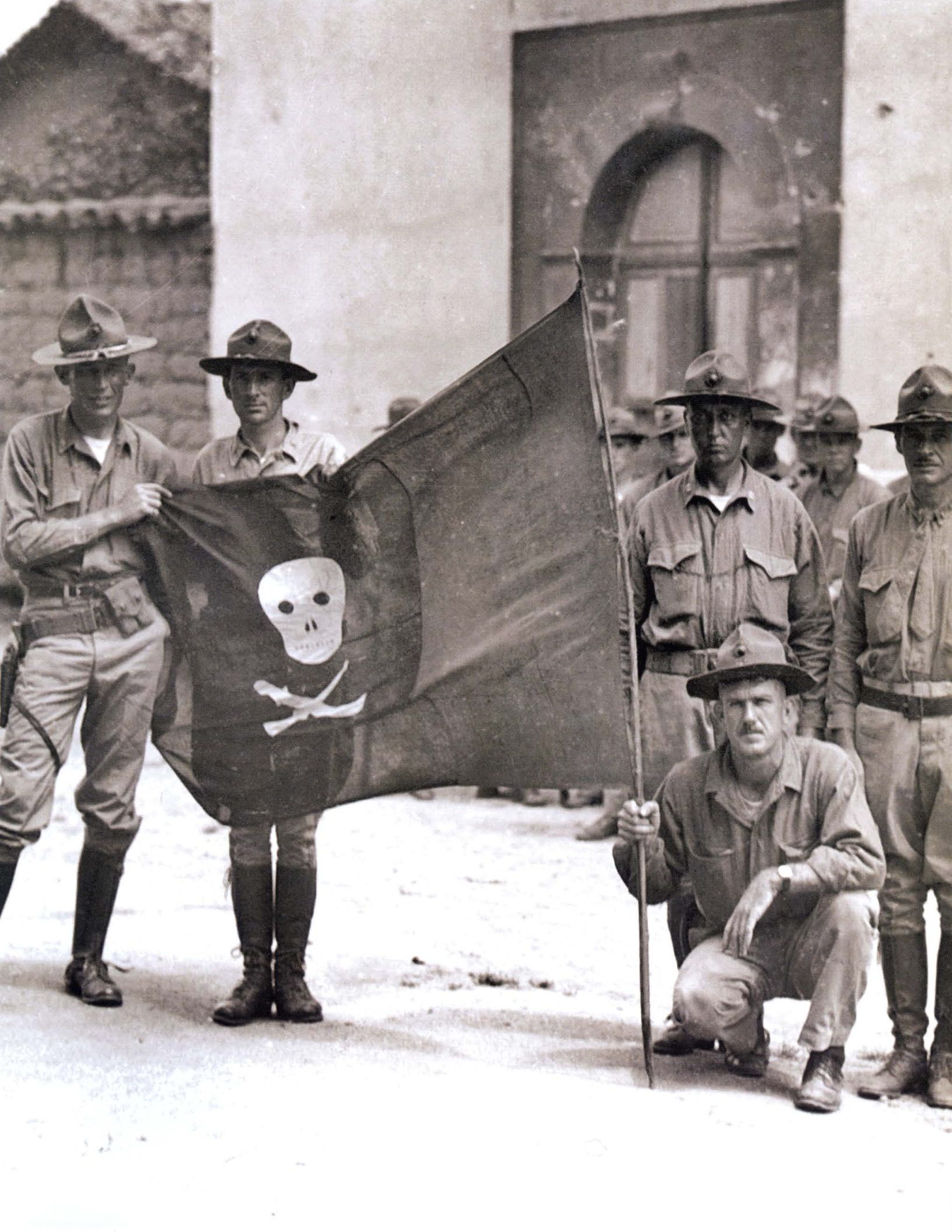
50. According to Joint Publication 1-02, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, 12 April 2001, “the joint force air component commander derives authority from the joint force commander who has the authority to exercise operational control, assign missions, direct coordination among subordinate commanders, redirect and organize forces to ensure unity of effort in the accomplishment of the overall mission” (222). Centralized control in support of the overall commander’s objectives is at the heart of the joint force air component commander concept and was the principal concern of Major Rowell and the Aircraft Squadrons, 2d Brigade.

51. See, for example, Carl H. Builder, “Doctrinal Frontiers,” *Airpower Journal* 9, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 6–13.

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## U.S. Marines and Miskito Indians: The Rio Coco Patrol of 1928

by David C. Brooks

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While most military histories of the Marine involvement in Nicaragua have focused on light infantry tactics, it's the political aspects of the Second Nicaragua Campaign that might provide the more relevant lessons.

When it comes to the history of the U.S. Marine Corps, few names stand out more than Major General Merritt A. “Red Mike” Edson’s. Famous for winning the Medal of Honor on Guadalcanal, Edson is also recognized for his leadership during the Rio Coco patrol during the Second Nicaragua Campaign (1926–33). Although several historians have treated the Rio Coco patrol, they mostly have emphasized Edson’s composure in the face of natural hazards and determined opposition from Sandinista guerrillas or his creativity in employing light infantry tactics.<sup>1</sup> Most of these accounts have not dealt with the unique political aspect of the mission. Yet this “other side” of the Rio Coco patrol is perhaps the more significant for today’s Marines. Edson’s story illustrates how the many campaigns of that era, together known by the trivializing term “Banana Wars,” may have much to say to the Marines of today.

Though the link between the 1920s and the 1990s may not be obvious, the two eras share a basic similarity: The collapse of the United States’ great power rival (in the earlier case imperial Germany, in the latter the Soviet empire) has led to a period of prolonged peace characterized by limited war and multiple forms of small-scale military engagement. Historically, the burden of these messy kinds of political-military missions has fallen heavily upon the U.S. Marines. Like

their Banana Wars' ancestors, today's Marines have to carry out a variety of complex tasks—peacekeeping, hostage rescue, refugee support, drug interdiction, counterinsurgency, and combinations thereof—on the shoestring budgets typical of these periods of military retrenchment. In its own way, Edson's Rio Coco patrol illustrates how Marines in the past successfully adapted to similar exigencies. The full story of the patrol, however, also shows some of the stickier and unanticipated difficulties that accompany any effort at foreign intervention, even a relatively successful one.

### ***Background to Intervention***

Before discussing Edson's mission, it is important to recall the circumstances that brought about the Second Nicaragua Campaign. In 1926, a vicious civil war broke out in Nicaragua between the country's two rival political parties, the Liberals and the Conservatives. Washington responded, as it so often had in the past, by sending Marines to Nicaragua to establish neutral zones and protect U.S. lives and property.

Along with the Marines came Special Presidential Envoy Henry Stimson in May 1927. Stimson put forward a plan to get the warring factions to move their struggle from the battlefield to the ballot box. U.S. Marines would both train a new, nonpartisan Nicaraguan army, the Guardia Nacional, and would supervise a free election. Under pressure from Stimson, Liberal and Conservative leaders agreed to the American representative's plan—all save one. In May of that year, Liberal General Augusto C. Sandino rejected the U.S. sponsored scheme as unwarranted Yankee interference in his country's affairs and retreated into the mountains of the Nicaraguan north with about 200 men to launch an early "war of national liberation" against what he called Nicaragua's *vendepatria* (country-selling) elites and the U.S. Marines.

Within a year, the conflict had become a stalemate, locking itself into a pattern familiar to students of counterinsurgency. The Marines easily controlled the cities and towns of western Nicaragua. Sandino and his men, however, were masters of the rugged hills of Nueva Segovia. In

addition, when pressed from Marine patrols, the Sandinistas could cross the mountains that divide Nicaragua and descend the Coco River, or Rio Coco as it is known in Spanish, which forms the border between Honduras and Nicaragua, and attack the country's Caribbean side—the site of many important U.S. and foreign investments. This region of Nicaragua, known locally as the Atlantic Coast, served as a kind of strategic rear for the insurgents.

The Marines recognized the military significance of the Atlantic Coast and moved into this zone in 1928, establishing the Eastern Area, under the command of Major Harold H. Utley. Working under Utley was an innovative young captain named "Red Mike" Edson. In the weeks before landing, Edson and his shipmates aboard the USS *Denver* eagerly followed the campaign in Nicaragua by studying a Christian Brothers map of the country that hung from the bulkhead of the ship's mess. At that time, Edson noted how the Rio Coco dominated the northern part of the country. A kind of Nicaraguan Mississippi, the Coco begins in Nueva Segovia, in the heart of what was then Sandinista territory, and runs more than 300 miles to empty into the Caribbean Sea at Cabo Gracias a Dios. Edson reasoned that the Marines might use the mighty Central American waterway to penetrate Nicaragua's difficult terrain and blindsides Sandino, hitting him from a previously secure flank.

### ***The Marines Land on the Atlantic Coast***

Utley, Edson, and about 150 other Marines came ashore in January 1928. Almost immediately, Edson and several of Utley's other officers began a series of riverine penetrations, an experience that gave Edson the chance to try out his ideas about navigating the Coco. These first efforts became a test that his Marines would fail decisively. Edson himself later recalled what happened when the "can-do" attitudes of his men clashed with the realities of Central America's most formidable river. As he wrote:

While here [at Livings Creek on the Rio Coco] two men of the patrol made their

first attempt at navigating a native dugout with a pole and paddle as they had seen the Indians do. [The two Marines] pushed out into the river, both paddling frantically, first on one side, then the other. The boat went round and round in circles until finally the current washed it ashore a mile or so down stream and the two men gave up the attempt and walked back. It was ludicrous enough but it was a fair example of what might be expected from men whose only experience with water craft had been as passengers in a ship's motor sailer.<sup>2</sup>

In contrast to the early and rather bumbling efforts of the Marines, the Indians were masters of the Rio Coco. As Edson described them:

[They] were taught to swim as soon as they were taught to walk, and once they could stand erect they found a pole and paddle thrust into their hands so that they could learn to navigate the native pitpan [dugout canoe].<sup>3</sup>

The natives that Edson referred to were Miskito Indians, members of an indigenous group that, along with their neighbors, the Sumu and the English-speaking black Creoles, made up the population of Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast. These different peoples constituted more than just a series of Nicaraguan ethnic groups. In fact, the Atlantic Coast was (and, some would argue, remains) a kind of submerged nation within Nicaragua that possessed distinct history, languages, and cultural rhythms from the rest of the country.

### ***A Nation within a Nation-State***

At the time of the intervention, the Miskito made up the largest and most important population group along the Rio Coco. As a people, they have a singular and proud history. Unlike other Central American Indian groups, the Miskito successfully resisted Spanish conquest in the 16th century. Later, in the 1600s they made common cause with British buccaneers who found them useful allies in raids against the Spanish for their canoeing and maritime skills. This de facto

Indian-English alliance would receive official expression in 1687 when British naval officers in Jamaica crowned the Miskitos' most prominent chief, Jeremy I. King of the Mosquito (the spelling commonly used by British of that time, as in Mosquito Coast).

For a little over two centuries, the Mosquitia, a separate kingdom with its own monarch, would remain independent from Nicaragua. Over time, the Indian society lost its military coloration as Moravian missionaries from Bethlehem, Pa., and American and British companies like Standard Fruit moved into the area. Along with the foreign companies and the missionaries came small businessmen—many of them Britons, Germans, and Americans—who settled in the interior of the Rio Coco. They settled into the region, married Indian women, and set up trading posts, ranches, boat yards, and lumber supply areas along the river. These people, called “bamboo whites” by the Marines, shipped raw wood from inside Nicaragua to sawmills located at Puerto Cabezas on the coast. Both politically and economically, they would prove critical in the war with Sandino.

As a result of all these developments—missionary activity, the development of foreign-owned “big businesses” along the coast, and the addition of a new strata of “bamboo businessmen” to the area's social structure—the Mosquitia remained more connected to the United States and the English-speaking Caribbean than to Hispanic Nicaragua. But if local history and economics pushed the coast in one direction, geopolitics moved it in another. Backed by pressure from the United States, Great Britain dropped the coast from protectorate status and officially ceded the area to Nicaragua in 1860. Since Nicaragua was too weak to exercise its claim, the coast remained in political limbo for decades until Nicaraguan President Jose Santos Zelaya sent troops into the area to capture Bluefields in 1894. Despite military occupation by Spanish-speaking troops, the Indians continued to resent the Nicaraguans. The inhabitants of the coast also kept looking to Great Britain for support. In the years following the 1894 takeover, Black Creoles and Miskito Indians would pepper the British Foreign Office with

petitions that asked the British to retake their territory, a tradition that would continue until the late 1950s.

### ***Competing for Contacts***

From the first, Edson worked hard to create a network of contacts that could help him win the cooperation of the local people. Fortunately, the area's social structure provided him with a natural "in" with the natives. Benny Muller, a bamboo businessman, was an American logger who had lived in the area since 1895. Through Muller, Edson:

met all of the influential people in this section and the chiefs of the larger settlements, and they in turn assisted in inculcating the ordinary Indian with the idea that we meant them no harm. . . .<sup>4</sup>

These same local notables also related to Edson the essentials of the Indians' history and culture, and he was quick to appreciate their implications for his own mission. As he wrote years later in the *Marine Corps Gazette*:

The Miskitos were inculcated from the time of their birth with a hatred of the Nicaraguans whom they called 'Spaniards' and so were potential allies if properly approached and handled. . . . By learning enough native words to make my wants known to them; by showing an interest in their mode of living; and by always treating them fairly, I believe that I succeeded in that part of my mission to establish cordial relations with the inhabitants.<sup>5</sup>

Despite his advantages, Edson's task would not be an easy one. Sandino, too, had recognized the Indians' importance and had taken steps to win their trust. In addition, the people of the coast had historically supported the Liberal Party, of which Sandino was a member, albeit a dissenting one. As Edson later recalled:

In his journey up the river in 1927, Sandino had treated the inhabitants of the river in a friendly and conciliatory manner so that the feeling, not anti-American, was

certainly not anti-Sandinista. Through his agents, Sandino exerted a distinct influence throughout the whole valley and he received tribute of both money and food from as far east as Bocay.<sup>6</sup>

Sandino, like the Marines, depended on Miskito help to move up and down the Rio Coco. One sign of the importance that the Nicaraguan guerrilla attached to the Indians' assistance was the able lieutenants whom he appointed to oversee his operations in this part of Nicaragua—Abraham Rivera and Adolfo Cockburn. Both were intimately familiar with the Rio Coco and performed services for Sandino that resembled those Muller carried out for Edson. Thus, the miniwar for the Rio Coco quickly became less a contest for territory and more a political one for the loyalty of people whose skills either side would need to control the region.

### ***When in the Mosquitia, Do as the Indians Do***

Soon after arriving on the Atlantic Coast, Edson suggested his idea for a long-range patrol up the Rio Coco, but this was at first rejected by the Marine command. In the meantime, he worked to extend his relations with the local people. Perhaps the most interesting facet of his efforts at this stage was his attempt to imitate the Indians and get other Marines to do the same. When he had the opportunity, Edson traveled with the Miskito in their canoes. In letters home, he recounted how he enjoyed shooting the Rio Coco's white-water rapids with the Miskito. As his correspondence shows, however, canoeing with the Indians constituted more than mere sport. By learning how to handle a fast-moving *pipante*, Edson and his men were later prepared when local help proved hard to find. As he wrote to his wife in early June 1928:

On the 2d . . . Linscott, eight enlisted and myself left Kalasanoki by boat and came down to Bocay. There is no trail down the river, so we came down to look it over. Due to the shortage of Indians, a corporal of my outfit and I paddled down in a small



boat. . . . You should have seen us shooting rapids—almost as good as Indians. It was a great trip and rather thrilling in spots.<sup>7</sup>

Patrols overland also benefited from the Miskito example. In a letter to his son, Austin, written in May 1928, Edson described how the Marines had adopted camping techniques from the Indians:

You are probably asking if these Indians live in tents, aren't you? They do not use tents, but lean-toos (sic) when stopping for only a few days. These lean-toos are made like this. Four bamboo poles are cut and tied together at the top. Then on the side towards the wind where the rain will come, they put up a roof or a wall of leaves something like this. [Illustrated in letter.] The floor is the sand, and their beds are made of big green banana leaves laid on the sand. Then they put down a blanket from the bark of a tree, and that is their sleeping plan. It is not a bad bed either, for your Daddy has slept several nights just like that.<sup>8</sup>

### ***The Rio Coco Patrol***

In July 1928, the Marine command decided to launch a patrol up the Rio Coco to take Poteca, Sandino's headquarters 350 miles into the interior of Nicaragua. This was a formidable task. First, the mission would take place at the height of the rainy season, when the Coco becomes a raging torrent that can rise as much as 20 feet, often tearing trees from its banks and hurtling them downstream with deadly force. All supply would be cut off except by air, and even that contact would be intermittent during stormy weather. In addition to natural obstacles, the Marines would also face the prospect of ambush by Sandinista guerrillas in the interior. On 26 July 1928, Edson set out with 46 other Marines and their Indian guides and oarsmen from Bocay to take Poteca.

Under these conditions, it became essential to win local cooperation if the mission was to succeed. Edson found that despite his successes with the Indians down the river, those who lived

closer to Poteca were more wary of the Marines. This often resulted in a shortage of willing Indian boatmen, and forced the Marines into a "stop and go" pattern in their advance.<sup>9</sup> Still, Edson instructed his men to approach the river people in a friendly way, even though some had aided Sandino in the past.<sup>10</sup>

Utley backed Edson's patient approach. Although this slowed the advance, he realized that the Marines had to consider the Miskitos' delicate political situation, sandwiched as the Indians were between the forces of the intervention and those of Sandino. In a letter to the Marine command in Managua written in August 1928, he justified Edson's slow pace in political terms:

It appears that we are approaching one of the delays due to lack of transportation which while I anticipated, are nevertheless heartbreaking. . . . We are . . . handicapped by two factors; the lack of boats and the disinclination of the indians (sic) to go into the zone of operations. We can get enough to operate all the boats we have as far up as Bocay but it is difficult to get them to go farther than that. Impressment only serves to kill the goose that laid the golden egg, as it means that in the future the approach of Marines is the signal for abandoning of the towns and houses. We have been at some pains to establish a feeling of confidence among the indians (sic) and hope that the situation will improve. The fact that Edson did not have any of his indians hurt was an important factor and I took pains to broadcast that information down the river as well as at Bocay.<sup>11</sup>

Delay was a small price to pay for good relations. Edson did resort to impressment on occasion, but his general treatment of the Indians appears to have been good. As he moved into the interior and captured Indians who had worked for Sandino, he had them disarmed, questioned, and then released in keeping with his attempts to win their favor.<sup>12</sup>

Edson and Utley's gradual and humane approach to the Indians of the Rio Coco contrasted markedly with the way that at least some

Marines treated Sandinista “collaborators” in Nueva Segovia on the other side of Nicaragua. There, the burning of the houses of guerrilla sympathizers and the loss of many prisoners “shot while attempting to escape” took place frequently enough that it compelled the Marine command to issue orders in 1928 and 1931 asking for restraint in dealing with the locals and prohibiting the destruction of homes.<sup>13</sup> In 1930, the Marines in this region also tried to resettle villagers by force into secured zones, an effort that was called off when Matagalpa and Jinotega became flooded with refugees.<sup>14</sup> In part, the Marines in Nueva Segovia resorted to harsher policies because they were engaged in a shooting war when Edson and Utley faced primarily a political situation. Nonetheless, the contrast between the Marine approaches to these two different regions of Nicaragua is noteworthy. Although the differences in Marine methods used is only one variable in a complex situation, it seems that Edson’s patience contributed importantly to his ultimate success along the Rio Coco and that the harsher measures used in Nueva Segovia probably aggravated an already bad situation in the Sandinistas’ home area.<sup>15</sup>

The patience of the Eastern Area Marines would pay off handsomely in strategic terms. After foiling an ambush by Sandinista guerrillas on 7 August, Edson and his men captured Sandino’s headquarters at Poteca 10 days later and sent the Nicaraguan guerrilla forces scattering into the interior of the country. This action not only threw the Sandinistas off balance, it also prevented them from massing to disrupt the U.S. supervised election in the fall of 1928.

Edson’s Rio Coco patrol would represent, in the words of Major Utley, the “elastic limit” of the Marines’ penetration of Nicaragua from its eastern shore.<sup>16</sup> Along the river, behind Edson’s base, Marines began to set up strong points that secured the area from further Sandinista attacks. Both the Miskito and the region’s bamboo whites benefited from the added security. The Marine presence and careful treatment of the locals had won the Indians’ trust. After an initial period of wariness, more Indians began to cooperate freely with the Marines and many returned to their villages from the woods where they had hidden.<sup>17</sup>

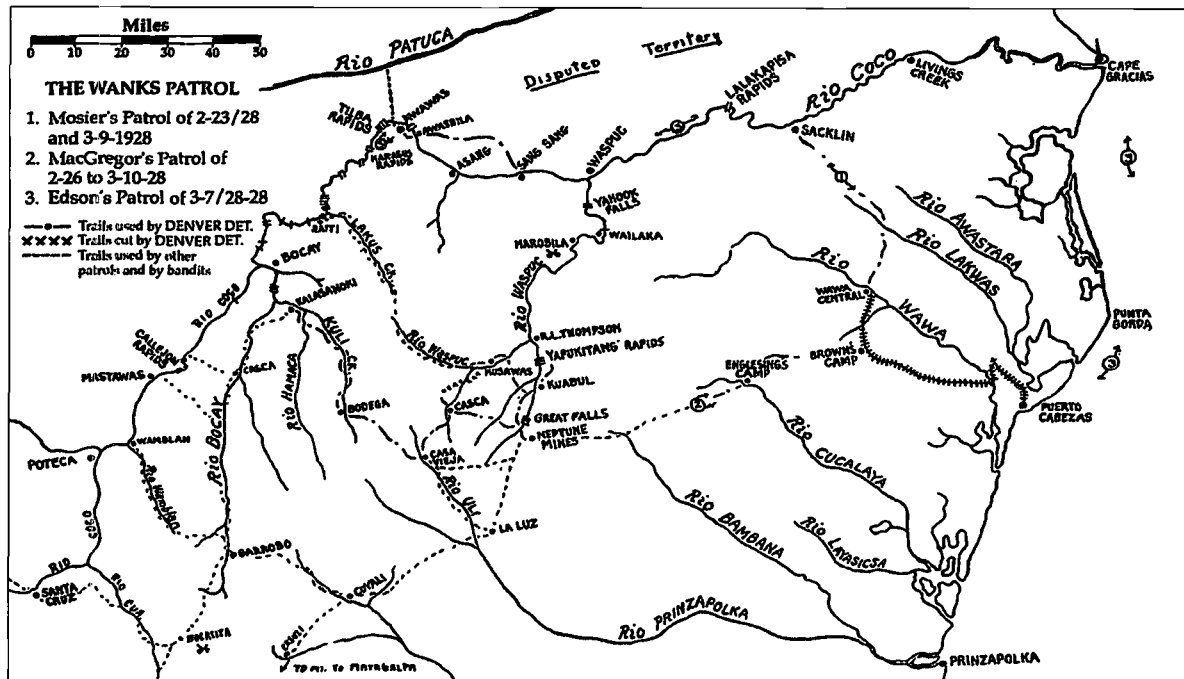
The stability achieved along the upper reaches of the Rio Coco did not endure, however. In March 1929, the Marine command in Managua ordered a pullback from the interior of the Rio Coco for later that year. Major Utley protested these orders in the name of a people whose friendliness he had cultivated. As he put it, the Indians of the interior:

... have gained confidence in our ability and willingness to afford them protection. To abandon Bocay will leave the entire north eastern (sic) part of the province of Jinotega open to any small band of marauders who—when organized bands are broken up—may be expected to continue their depredations.<sup>18</sup>

In fact, the Indians had gained more than just confidence in the Marines. Some decided to serve alongside the Marines by joining the Guardia Nacional. Although it has proven impossible to pin down exact numbers, one Marine report from 1930 that describes Guardia recruiting stated that, “On the Atlantic Coast a considerable number of Mosquito Indians are enlisted.”<sup>19</sup> Evidence also exists that Marine trainers appreciated the special abilities of their Indian recruits. As one Marine instructor working at Bluefields in 1929 commented:

I can conceive of no more valuable soldier than a property [sic] trained and disciplined Mosquito boy with his knowledge of woodcraft and tracking and at the same time an ability to read a simple map and perhaps make a simple sketch.<sup>20</sup>

While young Indians joined the Guardia Nacional, their community leaders looked at the Americans in new ways as well. In particular, they saw them as potential deliverers from the abuses and depredations of the “Spaniard” regimes in Managua, a development that added another wrinkle of complexity to the Marine-Miskito connection. Indians involved in land disputes with the Nicaraguan Government protested to Major Utley in 1929, and to a Marine Colonel Wynn in the Guardia Nacional in 1931.<sup>21</sup> The concluding words to the petition sent to Colonel Wynn show how at least some Miskito



had come to view the Marines and, by extension, the United States. It read:

We Miskito Indians are clamoring for the Americans to sever us from our bonds, from this Nicaraguan yoke, [to] give us as before our reservation, and hold the sole rights of protectorate, given by us.<sup>22</sup>

Washington, however, viewed the problem from a different perspective. The administration hoped to wrap up an unpopular intervention as soon as possible and so the planned withdrawal of the Marines took place. Soon after, the Sandinistas regained control of Bocay and used this as a staging area to rebuild their position along the upper reaches of the Rio Coco. In February 1931, Indian spies told Guardia Nacional Intelligence that the Sandinistas were once again gathering forces at their old headquarters. Driven from Jinotega and Matagalpa in the west by aggressive Marine patrols, they were preparing a strike downriver with the aid of agents located as far down as Puerto Cabezas. A critical part of the insurgents' preparations had involved successful political work among the Bocay Indians. As the report said:

A deliberate effort has been made to gain

favor with the Bocay Indians with a view to having their support, and has met with considerable success. The Indians in this reason professing (sic) themselves ready to take part in any attack on Guardia or expedition to Puerto Cabezas or Cabo Gracias [a Dios]. What means, exactly, has been used to gain the confidence of the Bocay Indians is not known, but their feelings and sympathies have been clearly brought over to the side of the bandits.<sup>23</sup>

The United States' precipitous pullback combined with the effects of the global economic depression set the stage for a devastating guerrilla retaliation. In April 1931, the Sandinistas launched an offensive against the Atlantic Coast. Striking down the Rio Coco, they captured Cabo Gracias a Dios and assaulted Puerto Cabezas, the headquarters of the Standard Fruit Company and the home of hundreds of its American employees. The Sandinista raids caused panic within the city and disrupted Indian communities all along the river.<sup>24</sup>

Despite these later reversals, Edson's and Uteley's careful work would not be completely undone. Miskito Indians, particularly those located on the lower Rio Coco and those along the

Caribbean coast, served in the Guardia Nacional alongside Marine officers and helped thwart these same attacks.<sup>25</sup> At least one reason for the Miskitos' continued loyalty to the Marine-led Guardia was a new-found fear of the Sandinistas. Although Sandino's lieutenants would still enjoy the help of some Indians from deep inside the Rio Coco region,<sup>26</sup> they abandoned the guerrilla general's earlier careful treatment of the inhabitants and resorted to terrorism in dealing with the Indians and bamboo whites. They beheaded a Moravian missionary for allegedly operating as a Guardia spy and burned his village because its inhabitants had helped Edson. In addition, Sandinista guerrillas roved the Rio Coco with hit lists of bamboo whites condemned to death for having aided the Marines. Finally, the insurgents captured and killed a number of employees of Standard Fruit, dismembering their bodies with machetes.

Despite their violence, these measures would do the guerrillas little good. Far from their logistical base, they became vulnerable to Marine counterattacks by aircraft and by ground patrols. After one of Sandino's top lieutenants, Pedro Blandon, was killed in the attack on Puerto Cabezas, the insurgents had to retreat back up the river. In the end, the depredations they carried out only turned the inhabitants against the insurgents and earned the earlier Sandinistas a reputation as "bandits" among the Indians, a perception that persists to this day and helps explain Miskito resistance to the Sandinista Government of the 1980s.<sup>27</sup>

### ***Lessons Learned***

Soldiers are inclined to view history in a very technical fashion. Frequently, they want to know what tactic or gambit can be borrowed from the past and used in the future. This view, however, better fits large, conventional battles than it does small wars, interventions, and counterinsurgency campaigns, which rarely turn on a single dazzling maneuver. Instead, such endeavors prove the truth of the old cliché about presidential campaigns in the United States that "all politics is local." Small wars most often turn on local factors, and they are consummately political contests.

On this score, both Edson and Sandino have to be given high marks. Each possessed an ability to "read" the local situation and put that knowledge to effective use. If, in the end, Sandino "lost" the Atlantic Coast, this would appear to have happened not through any blunder of his own, but rather because he failed to control his lieutenants—a problem not uncommon to armies fighting guerrilla wars, as the examples of Marine tactics in Nueva Segovia cited above indicate. As the conflict with the Americans dragged on and as their frustration mounted, Sandino's lieutenants seemed to view the complex bamboo white social structure of the Atlantic Coast through the lens of their own militant Hispanic nationalism. Thus, missionaries and bamboo whites friendly to the Marines, many of them American, appeared as foreigners or *vendepatrias*, deserving only death. These actions only alienated the Miskito who looked upon these foreigners as friends, employers, and even kinsmen.

But beyond Edson's (or Sandino's) effectiveness as a "soldier-diplomat," the Rio Coco case study also shows, in an overall sense, how interventions are shaped by the complex, many-sided politics of underdeveloped countries. Since Vietnam, it has become fashionable in some circles to interpret interventions as primarily conflicts between the resented forces of foreign powers and outraged nationalists, between "imperialists" and local patriots. From the perspective of post-World War I decolonization, such a view seemed natural. Yet in the case discussed here, the conflict was not a two-sided military one, but a three-sided relationship between Indians, Marines, and insurgents—an association that was shaped as much by the politics of adhesion as by some reflex on the part of the locals to reject the outsider.

As Edson and Utley understood, special factors make the Miskito "potential allies if properly approached and handled." Yet this added new complications to the Marines' task, for to have remained effective along the Rio Coco, the Americans would have had to stay in the area. Overall, the Indians preferred the Marines to the largely Spanish-speaking Guardia Nacional. Still, to have created a purely Miskito army would

have been locally logical but also would have undercut the U.S. “nation-building” agenda in Nicaragua, its plan to bolster the elected regime of friendly “Spaniards” in Managua. Yet to fail to do either of these things left the Indians open to the angry Sandinista backlash of 1931. Thus, the Indians were not just “potential allies,” but also potential victims, as Utley recognized, when Washington’s shifts undercut the actions of creative Marines in the field.

In this way, the Rio Coco case study speaks to what happens when U.S. forces encounter a frustrated national group of the type that appears to be emerging in a variety of areas today. The Miskito example discussed here brings to mind the Montagnards in Vietnam and, more recently, the Kurds of northern Iraq. Alliances with communities like these quickly become very tricky and are charged with ethical implications because such peoples frequently become dependent on the forces of an occupation for protection and support or, more importantly, because they may want to use the intervention as a springboard for further political action. When these considerations do not parallel Washington’s agenda, it is often up to the military to resolve the differences in the field, something that can be a difficult and messy task.

In conclusion, the Rio Coco patrol serves as more than just an apt illustration of how some members of an earlier generation of Marines modified their tactics to fit the politics of the areas in which they served. Ultimately, it also shows why counterinsurgency remains the most difficult of military tasks even when well executed under favorable circumstances. In the end, this may be the most important lesson that today’s Marines can learn from the story of Edson’s mission and the Marine-Sandinista struggle to control the Rio Coco from 1928–1931.

## Notes

1. For an insightful discussion of Edson’s use of light infantry tactics, see Major Jon T. Hoffman, “Edson’s ‘First Raiders,’” Vol. 5, No. 3, Fall 1991, 20–25.
2. Edson, “Coco Patrol,” *Marine Corps Gazette*, August 1936.
3. Edson, “Coco Patrol,” *Marine Corps Gazette*, August 1936, 41.

4. Edson, “Coco Patrol,” *Marine Corps Gazette*, August 1936, 40.
5. Edson, “Coco Patrol,” *Marine Corps Gazette*, August 1936, 41.
6. Edson, “Coco Patrol,” *Marine Corps Gazette*, August 1936, 40.
7. Letter to Ethel R. Edson, Bocay, Nicaragua, 4 June 1928. File: “Letters Nicaragua. MAE to ERE. 5 April 1928 to 8 July 1928,” Container 2, Edson Papers. Library of Congress (LC).
8. Letter to M. Austin Edson, Musawas, Nicaragua, 22 May 1928. File: “Letters Nicaragua. MAE to ERE. 5 April 1928 to 8 July 1928,” #16 Container 2, Edson Papers, LC
9. A telegram from “Commanding Officer, Puerto Cabezas,” (Utley) to “Brigade Commander,” (Managua), 4 June 1928 reports that as Marine patrols penetrated the Bocay-Poteca region deep in Nicaragua’s interior, “All reports indicate natives and Indians show fear of Marines.” NA, RG 127, Entry 221, File 923 (Information from Eastern Area 1928).
10. Headquarters, Eastern Area, Nicaragua, Marine Barracks, Puerto Cabezas, Nic., 17 June 1928. Special Intelligence Report-Wanks River-Waspuc River-Bocay Area. Signed, “M.A. Edson.” The report notes that most of the people in the area have aided Sandino at one time or another but that, “If properly handled, a great deal of assistance may be expect (sic) as boatmen, guides and laborers.” The key, Edson asserts, is, “to maintain a friendly attitude towards them.” Folder 20, Entry 204, RG 127, National Archives.
11. United States Marine Corps, Headquarters, Eastern Area, Puerto Cabezas, Nicaragua, 16 August 1928. Letter from Major Harold H. Utley to the Commanding General, NA, RG 127, Entry 221, File 922 (East Coast).
12. Headquarters, Second Brigade, Marine Corps, Managua, Nicaragua, 17 August 1928, “Dispatch-Outgoing-Code Underlined Words.”
13. Headquarters, Northern Area, Western: Nicaragua, U.S. Marines, Ocotal, Nicaragua, 23 Mayu 1928, Memorandum for all Officers and Men of the Marine Corps and Guardia Nacional in the Northern Area from Col R.H. Dunlap, USMC, Commanding Officer, RG 127, Entry 220, File 811.0(2), 11th Regiment Correspondence. Therein, Col Dunlap reminds Marines that rural inhabitants are the victims of bandit predations and so, “they hide out. act suspicious and . . . become hunted creatures by both bandits and Marines.” The Memorandum asks that Marines make sure that the houses they destroy belong to bandits. Two years later the commander of the Guardia Nacional, Col Julian C. Smith, would forbid all house burning and prohibit the Guardia from exercising arbi-



trary authority under martial law, although such was technically permitted in northern areas of the country at the time. See Headquarters Central Area, Guardia Nacional de Nicaragua, Jinotega, Nicaragua, 26 May 1931, Area Order from Col Julian C. Smith, Guardia Nacional de Nicaragua, Commanding Central Area, RG 127, Entry 202, File 32.0.

14. Telegram from the CO, GN Northern Area to Jefe Director GN Managua; All GN Northern Area, 9 June 1930. See also Telegram, Dept Comdr Matagalpa to D.C. McDougal, both located in RG 127, Entry 220, File 815: Commander of the Special Service Squadron.

15. For examples of the harder-edged approach that the Marines took toward pro-Sandinista peasants in Nueva Segovia, see Guardia Nacional, San Juan, 22 February 1931, Patrol Report [by 1st Lieutenant J.H. Satterfield, G.N.] which describes how a "bandit" was wounded and left where he fell, "Jaw broken, right arm broken also shot thru (sic) back" after attempts at interrogation. House burning is described in Headquarters, District of Palacaguina, Guardia Nacional, 9 March 1931, Patrol Report from J. Ogden Brauer, District Commander, which describes burning of houses. For an example of prisoner "shot while attempting to escape," see Guardia Nacional de Nicaragua, San Juan de Telpaneca, Nic., 13 March 1932. Patrol Report from 2dLt Donald G. Truesdale, Guardia Nacional. All of the above references are RG 127, Entry 202. The first two are from File: 52.0 and the last from File: 54.0. Further such information can be found in the same Entry (202) in File: 57.0 and among loose materials near File: 55 in the front of Box 13.

16. Headquarters, Eastern Area, Nicaragua, Marine Barracks, Puerto Cabezas, Nicaragua, 1 June 1928, Letter from Major Utley to the Commanding General. Utley's estimate of the situation attached, p.1 of Estimate.

17. On Indians returning to their homes, see Headquarters, Eastern Area, Nicaragua, Marine Barracks, Puerto Cabezas, Nicaragua, Intelligence Reports for 1 April 1928 and 3 June 1928, RG 127, Entry 204, Folder: 20.

18. Letter from the Commander Eastern Area to the Commanding General, Second Brigade, 26 March 1929, PC 127, Box IV, Utley Papers, Marine Corps Historical Center, Building 58, Washington Navy Yard, Washington, D.C.

19. "Estimate of the Situation in Nicaragua," Sec. Nav. General Corresp., 1925, "EF-49" Box 2009, Folder: EF 49/P9-2-(291112 to 30033).

20. Letter from H.D. Linscott, Department Commander, to The Area Commander, Area of the East, Guardia Nacional, Bluefields, Department of Northern blue-

fields, Guardia Nacional. Puerto Cabezas, Nicaragua, 6 September 1929, RG 127, Entry 202, File 92.0.

21. Letter from Major Harold H. Utley, Headquarters, Eastern Area, Nicaragua, Marine Barracks, Puerto Cabezas, Nicaragua, 18 February 1928, to H. Sanford London, Esquire, His British Majesty's Chargé D'Affaires, Managua, Nicaragua, Folder: Utley's Personal 3 Jan '28 to Jul '31, Box, 3, Utley Papers, Marine Corps Historical Center, Building 58, Washington Navy Yard.

22. Letter from the Miskito Indians of Bilwi to the Honorable Colonel Wynn, Commander, Guardia Nacional, Eastern Area, Bluefields, Nicaragua, 15 May 1931, File E. Bilwi, Entry 206, RG 127, National Archives.

23. Letter from H.N. Sent to The Department Commander, Department of Northern Bluefields, Guardia Nacional De Nicaragua, 20 February 1931, RG 127, Entry 43-A, File: 2d Brig B-3 Repts & Mess 1 Jan-24 Mar 31.

24. Months later, Marine Inspectors would report how previously secured areas remained in chaos as a result of the Sandinistas' resurgence. In describing the situation around Waspuc, one Marine author (unidentified) commented on how, as a result of Sandinista raids, "Several hundred Indians who previously lived in that region [the area around Waspuc, a town far behind the areas originally secured by Edson] have come into the town below Kisalaya, over crowding them (sic) and making living conditions almost impossible." Inspection Report (apparently a rough draft), Guardia Nacional de Nicaragua, 9th Company, Puerto Cabezas, 31 August 1932, located on back of last page of said report.

25. See "Estimate of the Situation in Nicaragua," Sec. Nav. General Corresp., 1925, "EF-49" Box 2009, Folder: EF 49/P9-2-(291112 to 30033); Letter from H.D. Linscott, Department Commander, to The Area Commander, Area of the East. Guardia Nacional, Bluefields, Department of Northern Bluefields, Guardia Nacional, Puerto Cabezas, Nicaragua, 6 September 1929, RG 127, Entry 202, File 92.0.

26. See Patrol Report from 2dLt E.J. Suprenant, G.N. to The Area Commander, Eastern Area, Bluefields, Nic., District of Kisalaya, Department of Northern Bluefields, Kisalaya, Nicaragua, 2 February 1932, NA, RG 127, Entry 202, File 58.0.

27. See Patrol Report by E.J. Suprenant, District Commander, to The Area Commander, Eastern Area, Bluefields, District of Kisalaya, Department of Northern Bluefields, Kisalaya, Nicaragua, 29 February 1932, RG 127, Entry 202, File: 54.0. Therein, Suprenant describes the enthusiastic participation of aggrieved

Miskitos in a Marine-led, Guardia Nacional patrol directed against Sandinistas who had recently raided several villages in the Kisalaya area. Suprenant conclusion relates his own frustration at not having enough men to “clean up” the area above Kisalaya and his inability to explain this deficiency to “the land owners [Miskito Indians, for land along the Rio Coco is plentiful] that (sic) have property above Kisalaya. . . .” On a similar sacking of Sacklin, a town with pro-Sandinista connections, for example, see patrol Report from Department Commander O.A. Inman to Area Commander, Area of the East, Guardia Nacional, Bluefields, Nicaragua, Department of Northern Bluefields, Guardia Nacional d Nicaragua, Puerto Cabezas, Nicaragua, 29 April 1931, RD 127, Entry 202, File: 57.0. In other areas, particularly along the Prinzapolka River, at least some Miskito sought more of a Marine presence to maintain order and protect them from elements they saw as lawless. For an exam-

ple, see Letter from Stephen Boudien (?), Head of Community Mosquitos (sic) Tungla to Commander in Chief of the USMC, Tungla (Nicaragua), 7 January 1929, RG 127, Entry 204. Folder 26.2. Numerous other reports document consistent Miskito cooperation with the Marines in terms of providing a rich flow of information about Sandinista or “bandit” movements. This contrasts with the often unreliable information Marines received in Nueva Segovia, Sandino’s major area of support.

#### **About the Author**

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## Lessons from Yesterday's Operations Short of War: Nicaragua and the *Small Wars* *Manual*

by *Richard J. Macak Jr.*

*Marine Corps Gazette*, November 1996

Those who forget the past . . . As the Defense Department struggles to keep pace with a changing world, this author suggests it may be time to look back at one of our previous experiences with low-intensity conflicts.

As the U.S. Armed Forces develop and refine their doctrine for the use of military resources in low-intensity conflicts and military operations other than war, they should carefully assess the "small wars"<sup>1</sup> experiences of Marine forces through the first three decades of this century. These earlier campaigns are important, not only for their doctrinal contributions, but also because of their resemblance to conflict today

wherein military force is combined with diplomatic pressure in the internal or external affairs of another state whose government is unstable, inadequate, or unsatisfactory for the preservation of life and of such interests as are determined by the foreign policy of our Nation.<sup>2</sup>

Probably the most significant small war experience in Marine Corps history was the lengthy conflict in Nicaragua. Fortunately, we still have extensive published and unpublished firsthand accounts of that campaign. More fortunately, we

have a complete manual of doctrinal statement and application—the *Small Wars Manual*—derived from that experience. Although the manual has remained unchanged since its second publication in 1940, it will nonetheless prove invaluable to U.S. planners. Let's look at the situation of the time, the Marine involvement, and the resulting publications.

During its 20-year military involvement in Nicaragua, which ended on 1 January 1933, the Marine Corps achieved State Department foreign policy objectives by stabilizing a country with a long history of political unrest and civil war. To do so, the Marines engaged in diverse and important missions promoting the internal stability of the Nicaraguan Government. For instance, they established neutral zones to protect American lives and property; they physically separated and disarmed warring political parties, thus ending the 1926–27 civil war; they successfully protected the election process ensuring free and impartial presidential elections in 1928 and 1932; and they organized and trained a nonpartisan national guard, known as the Guardia Nacional de Nicaragua, into an effective fighting force.<sup>3</sup> Just before withdrawal, the Marines completed a six-year counterinsurgency campaign against Augusto C. Sandino that was important for its intellectual contribution to counterinsurgency doctrine.

The involvement's contributions to counterinsurgency doctrine are the result of the cumulative efforts of many Marine officers who served in the lengthy campaign. Through their thoughtful articles in the *Marine Corps Gazette* and *Naval Institute Proceedings*, they provided a sizable reservoir of personal experience in counterinsurgency operations. As an institution, the Marine Corps focused these experiences at its Schools Command in Quantico, Va. Other Marine authors expanded the knowledge on counterinsurgency warfare by publishing the *Small Wars Manual* detailing the lessons learned from conflicts such as the Nicaraguan campaign.<sup>4</sup>

Before examining the military involvement in detail, let's review the historical highlights of U.S. regional interests and Nicaraguan political alignments. By the 1920s, U.S. economic, political, and military interests had grown considerably in

Central America, particularly in Nicaragua. For example, the American business community, searching for overseas markets, expanded into the region. Companies, such as the highly successful United Fruit Company, established branches throughout Central America, and these became lucrative investments for U.S. businessmen.

Also, the U.S. Government naturally considered the area vital to its national security, particularly because of the Panama Canal and its retention of construction rights to a future canal through Nicaragua. Likewise, the United States was concerned that Mexico, as a result of its recent revolution, would begin spreading its form of bolshevism or communism southward into the Central American countries.<sup>5</sup>

In Nicaragua, Americans through their investments and influences controlled the key elements of the economy. Internally, Nicaragua was politically divided between two powerful factions. The Conservative and Liberal Parties ruled through separate family alliances that constantly feuded over power. Always suspicious of each other's motives, they turned political unrest into a way of life in Nicaragua. The party occupying the Presidential Palace could expect unlawful attempts by the opposition to gain power. Thus, the United States faced a paradox in Nicaragua. On the one hand, U.S. national interests in the area required a stable political environment to survive, one conducive to growth and prosperity; on the other hand, the Nicaraguan Government was powerless to provide such an environment.<sup>6</sup>

With that historical and political context, let's turn to the campaign itself. In late 1922, the United States approached the problem from a diplomatic standpoint. From 4 December 1922 through 7 February 1923, the United States sponsored a conference in Washington on Central American affairs in which it proposed ways to stabilize the area. Representatives from all five Central American countries attended. The conference concluded with the General Treaty of Peace and Amity signed by all parties establishing several agreements.

First, no country would recognize a government that came to power through a coup d'etat



or revolution. Second, internal disputes would be submitted to an international board of arbitration. Third, no country would interfere in the internal affairs of another.<sup>7</sup> Finally, standing armies would be replaced by nonpartisan constabulary forces. Thus, the 1923 treaty provided a means to preserve law and order. It also granted a degree of legitimacy to constabularies already established, especially the ones constituted in Haiti and the Dominican Republic in 1916 and 1917, respectively, during actions by U.S. naval forces.<sup>8</sup>

The first opportunity to apply the General Treaty of Peace and Amity occurred in October 1925, when a Conservative Party coup in Managua deposed the Liberal president and vice president. Invoking the treaty, the United States refused to recognize the new Conservative government, instead proposing a diplomatic solution that promised U.S. recognition to the party winning the 1928 presidential election. But this diplomatic initiative fell apart when Mexico, throughout the autumn of 1926, covertly supported the Liberal cause by encouraging the ousted vice president to return to Nicaragua and claim power. A hotly contested civil war ensued.<sup>9</sup>

By now, the State Department realized that more aggressive policies were necessary to end the civil war.<sup>10</sup> As a result, beginning in December 1926, the State Department expanded the Marines' role and presence in Nicaragua. Thus, their involvement entered a new stage characterized by escalating intensity and diversity.

Since the State Department's initial concerns were with protecting American lives and property, the department directed the U.S. Navy to put landing parties ashore to safeguard these interests. Accordingly, on 23 December 1926 the USS *Denver* and USS *Cleveland* landed Marines and sailors at Puerto Cabezas on the east coast.<sup>11</sup> This naval contingent promptly established a neutral zone in a district containing American fruit, lumber, and mining companies. Generally, a neutral zone was an area in which combat would endanger American lives and property. The Marines established these zones where contending parties were incapable of guaranteeing the safety of

life and property and when conflict appeared imminent. Thereafter, neutral zones became a standard practice for the Marines, recognized by both Liberal and Conservative factions.<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, after initially landing in Corinto on the west coast, Marines and sailors from the USS *Galveston* arrived in Managua on 6 January 1927 and established themselves as the Legation Guard.<sup>13</sup> This force symbolized the U.S. commitment to stabilize Nicaragua. In fact, the Legation Guard was the vanguard for several other landing parties and the 1st and 3d Battalions of the 5th Marine Regiment. By 9 March 1927, when Brigadier General Logan M. Feland arrived in Managua with his 2d Marine Brigade staff to take command of all naval forces ashore in western Nicaragua, the Marines totaled 2,000 men and possessed six aircraft from Observation Squadron-1 (VO-1M) for aerial reconnaissance of the opposing armies.<sup>14</sup>

By mid-March 1927, the Marines had placed themselves in key positions to protect American lives and property and to guard critical communications lines between major cities. On 1 February 1927, one Marine battalion garrisoned in Managua and took over its defense. The Corps opened railroad lines between the major cities of Corinto, Managua, and Granada by 13 February 1927, and on 12 March 1927 occupied Matagalpa to keep lines of communications open with Managua. Also, all large ports on both coasts and the major cities in the interior contained Marine detachments and neutral zones.<sup>15</sup>

With the Marines in position, State Department officials thought the time was appropriate to initiate a diplomatic solution to the civil war. On 31 March 1927, President Calvin Coolidge appointed a former Secretary of War, Colonel Henry Stimson, as his personal representative to explore possible solutions to the political situation in Nicaragua. Meeting with both Nicaraguan parties on 4 May 1927 under a large blackthorn tree along the banks of the Tipitapa River, Colonel Stimson negotiated an end to the fighting. Realizing the unlikelihood of a military victory and obtaining assurances from the State Department that U.S. forces would remain in Nicaragua as a stabilizing force, each side agreed to a truce, disarmament, supervised elections,

and the establishment of a nonpartisan constabulary.<sup>16</sup>

More importantly, while the negotiators finalized the details of the Treaty of Tipitapa, Marine detachments occupied positions between the Conservative and Liberal armies along the Tipitapa River. The Marines thus prevented any incidents from spoiling the diplomatic efforts underway. On 13 May 1927, however, Sandino, a general in the Liberal army, refused to abide by the treaty's terms and abruptly left the area with a small band of followers. On three separate occasions in the next few days, Marine patrols were fired upon.<sup>17</sup> Despite these encounters with Sandino's rebels, the Marines maintained the peace between the contending parties.

According to Colonel Stimson's scenario, the next step for the Marines entailed disarming the warring factions. Over 800 Marines comprising elements of the 5th and 11th Marine Regiments arrived in Corinto on 19, 21, and 22 May 1927 to assist with this task.<sup>18</sup> With the 5th Marine Regiment now manning the neutral zone along the river, the factions were disarmed—the Liberal forces turned in over 3,700 rifles and machine-guns, the Conservatives over 11,000, and both sides left over 5.5 million rounds of ammunition.<sup>19</sup> Thus, the premature departure of Sandino's relatively small band became only a blemish on the disarmament process. Overall, the Marines had thus far successfully fulfilled State Department policy objectives.

With the civil war concluded and disarmament complete, the State Department focused on its pledge to supervise the forthcoming 1928 presidential election. Also looking ahead, the Marines realized that if they had any hope at all of effectively supervising this election they had to do two things. First, they had to transform the emerging Guardia Nacional into an effective force against the rising bandit threat. Second, they had to conduct an aggressive counterinsurgency campaign of their own to keep the bandits off balance until the election.

In accordance with the 1923 Treaty of General Peace and Amity and the Tipitapa Treaty, the United States and Nicaragua had agreed to establish a nonpartisan national constabulary. On 22 December 1927, both countries signed the

"Agreement Between the United States and Nicaragua Establishing the Guardia Nacional de Nicaragua." Marine officers and senior enlisted men were appointed by the President under an act of Congress to serve with the Guardia. Eventually these Marines would be replaced by Nicaraguans. Marine Colonel Elias R. Beadle was appointed as the chief of the guard. The Guardia now filled the void left by the disarmed political factions. And with the Marines as the Guardia's impartial leadership, both countries regarded this new force as the most effective guarantee of fair and free elections.<sup>20</sup>

Led by their Marine officers, Guardia detachments began a campaign against the rebels that totaled 510 engagements before the Marines withdrew.<sup>21</sup> Employing aggressive patrolling techniques, the Guardia forces constantly pursued Sandino, keeping his forces away from populated areas.

One of the most famous Guardia units during the Nicaraguan involvement was Company M (for Mobile), commanded by Captain Lewis B. Puller. A combat veteran with experience in counterinsurgency operations, Captain Puller became a continual thorn in Sandino's side. Recognizing the need for mobility and speed, Puller organized his patrols into two units rather than one larger unit in order to reduce the logistical load and number of pack mules per patrol.<sup>22</sup> In addition, by keeping one patrol at the base, he could respond quickly either to relieve the other patrol or to investigate other incidents in his area. Because of the stamina of the local mestizos he recruited into the Guardia, Puller could average 18 to 20 miles daily—stretching it some days to as many as 40 miles—to overtake rebel bands. He chose to travel on foot because horses not only drew fire but slowed progress since so little jungle forage was available for a fast-moving force. Mules, however, could feed on the foliage of felled trees after the company encamped.<sup>23</sup> The bandits used horses, thus had to rest them every third day, giving Puller an opportunity to close on them. In one instance, Puller chased a mounted rebel band of horse thieves for about a week before he overtook them near Malcate in the interior. For months after the capture, civilians came to

Puller's headquarters in Jinotega to claim previously stolen animals and saddles.<sup>24</sup>

As a result of these successes, the State Department and Marine Corps recognized the value of and need for Guardia units such as Company M. Plans were made to organize eight additional companies. However, severe budget cuts forced by the worldwide depression prevented implementing this good idea.<sup>25</sup> Nonetheless, the Guardia had shown it was an effective force in the field. One reason was that the Nicaraguan guardsmen were intensely proud and excellent fighters. The guardsmen transferred their Conservative and Liberal Party loyalties to their Guardia units. Once trained, they exhibited a devotion to their Marine officers unequalled in previous Marine Corps constabulary experience. Deeds of bravery by guardsmen protecting the Marine officers were not uncommon, and many earned the coveted wound chevron. In short, Guardia efficiency was directly attributable to the excellent rapport between Marine officers and Nicaraguan enlisted men.<sup>26</sup>

In addition to the Guardia, the 2d Marine Brigade conducted a similar counterinsurgency campaign, actively patrolling into the northern areas where the bandits crossed into Nicaragua. But while the Brigade's methods closely followed those of the Guardia, a whole new factor made possible by the Brigade's organic aircraft assets distinguished this campaign from any previous ones.<sup>27</sup>

Never before had combat and logistical air support been combined to augment a ground campaign. By mid-1928, Marine aircraft had conducted "84 attacks on bandit forces" and carried "more than 1,500 people (including casualties and sick) and 900,000 pounds. Accident rate zero."<sup>28</sup> Aviation also provided "aerial mapping, photography, meteorology, daily message and mail drops, and packages through the country."<sup>29</sup> Airpower continually came to the aid of Marine and Guardia ground forces. For instance, on 16 July 1927 in the town of Ocotal, a seemingly overwhelming bandit force of approximately 500 men threatened to overrun the detachment of 39 Marines and 47 Guardia. "In the first organized dive-bombing attack in history—long before the Nazi Luftwaffe was popularly credited

with the innovation,"<sup>30</sup> a five-plane detachment from Managua routed the bandits with machine-gun fire and bombs. The Marines and Guardia sustained only one killed and one wounded, respectively, while Sandino suffered his worst defeat of the rebellion, losing 300 of the estimated 400–500 bandits in the attack. From this disaster at Ocotal, rebel forces gained a healthy respect for Marine aircraft, often moving at night and avoiding open areas during the day.<sup>31</sup>

Another important aspect of the Brigade's campaign was the civic action program created to reduce bandit influence on the population. Both a road-building project and a local volunteer defense group whose members were called "civicos" constituted this innovative program.

On 24 May 1929, the American Minister in Nicaragua initially proposed to the State Department the idea of the construction project with a "two-fold purpose: military necessity and employment."<sup>32</sup> Building through the rugged bandit territory would let government forces respond more rapidly to all parts of the area. In addition, the construction would offer steady jobs to the inhabitants, thereby eliminating the manpower source for the bandits. And the roads would economically boost the country because they would serve to move products to the marketplace more efficiently. But, although the project began in August 1929, the same funding shortage that had prevented forming more mobile companies halted construction a little over a year later.<sup>33</sup> Conceptually, however, this project offered a real solution to the bandit problem. Had it continued, Sandino would have been faced with a shrinking manpower base and thus may have come to terms with the Nicaraguan government.

The other half of the program, the forming of the civicos, was a reaction to the financial realities of the day. With fewer funds available in 1930, the Nicaraguan government was forced to reduce the size of the Guardia. To supplement, the Marines proposed urban defense groups to work closely with the local Guardia commander. The civicos were citizens organized and trained as an emergency auxiliary.<sup>34</sup> The forming of the civicos indicates just how well the Marines understood counterinsurgency warfare.

With the counterinsurgency campaigns well underway, the State Department turned its attention to the upcoming 4 November 1928 presidential election. To supervise voter registration and balloting, Marines were detailed to each of the precincts throughout the country. The American Minister reported to the Secretary of State in an 11 October 1928 telegram that 35,000 more people registered to vote than in 1924 and that this was due to the Marines and Guardia. The Minister telegraphed:

[They were able to] protect citizens from intimidation. Detachments were stationed in key positions in towns and on patrol duty on roads leading to booths throughout registration period Sep23–Oct7 . . . No cases of intimidation, other disturbances [were] reported at any of 352 precincts in Republic [and] conduct of 352 Marine enlisted men who served as chairmen at precincts [was] . . . highly commended by both political parties.<sup>35</sup>

The Minister was equally enthusiastic on election day when he telegraphed in short bullet style:

Complete order, heavy early vote throughout Nicaragua . . . polls opened 7 this morning with crowds of 100 to 300 waiting precincts in Managua and elsewhere. Final air reconnaissance overflowed every precinct yesterday and reported large crowds moving over trails to precincts with as many as 200 to 300 arriving late afternoon to vote early today . . . Heavy vote indicated Jinotega, Esteli, Segovia is considered proof banditry has been practically ended by Marine pacification program which has given peaceable citizens complete confidence in measure taken by Marines to prevent intimidation of voters.<sup>36</sup>

The leading party newspapers appropriately summarized the Marines' efforts. The Conservative paper *La Prensa's* headlines read: "The American supervision has honorably observed its promise. The election Sunday was honest, tranquil, correct and honorable." The *El Comercio*, the leading Liberal paper, wrote: "The United

States is vindicated before the world."<sup>37</sup> Before their withdrawal in 1933, the Marines would also supervise the 1930 local elections and another presidential election in 1932. Sandino would remain at large, but he would not prevent the Marines from bringing stability and democratic processes to the country.

## ***Lessons Learned***

Back home, the involvement served as a catalyst for intellectual development within the Corps. Primarily, it motivated many Marine officers to regularly submit their combat experiences for publication in the *Gazette* and *Proceedings*. These articles offered valuable insights into the realities of "small wars." In a May 1931 article in the *Gazette* entitled "An Introduction to the Tactics and Techniques of Small Wars," Major Harold H. Utley noted that although the Marine Corps maintained many historical examples of small wars, "few real studies seem to have been made of them."<sup>38</sup> It would not be long, however, before the Marine Corps would be seriously analyzing all the evidence accumulated throughout the occupation.

By the mid-1920s, the Division of Operations and Training was frequently augmenting the pages of the *Gazette* with firsthand accounts of significant engagements, but the articles were merely compiled battlefield accounts rather than analysis and lessons learned. They dealt with subjects such as "Protection of American Interests" or "Combat Operations in Nicaragua." For instance, one article, presenting the after-action report of the Marine detachment's commanding officer at Ocotal, outlined Sandino's attack on the Marine and Guardia garrison there on 16 July 1927. The report also contained Sandino's attack order and a detailed map of the town. Even without discussion, by its detail and completeness the report gave the reader an insight into the tactics used by both sides.<sup>39</sup>

Even while articles continued regularly in the *Gazette* on subjects such as "Aircraft in Bush Warfare," "The Supply Service in Western Nicaragua," and "The Guardia Nacional de Nicaragua," the Marine Corps began evaluating its formal school curriculum at Quantico.<sup>40</sup> In the

*Gazette's* August 1934 issue, Major Charles J. Miller highlighted the need to analyze the wealth of material collected thus far. He indicated that

this work would seem to devolve upon the schools to digest and place the material in presentable form for the guidance and instruction of all the officers of the Corps.<sup>41</sup>

He concluded by noting that “the subject as a whole has only received a cursory examination” and much more needed to be done to

furnish the students with a clear and complete picture of all the tasks, obligations, and responsibilities that may devolve on a Marine Corps expeditionary force when intervening as an occupation force.<sup>42</sup>

Quantico had increased its small wars instruction from nine hours in 1924–25 to 19 hours by 1932. Possibly in response to Major Miller’s call to establish a systematic education in small wars techniques, the 1934–35 academic year featured 94 hours of instruction.<sup>43</sup>

Beyond this educational improvement, the Marine Corps continued its efforts to produce a manual distilling the Caribbean experience into established principles. Based upon the efforts of Major Utley, a Nicaraguan veteran, and other small wars instructors at Quantico, the Marine Corps produced the first edition of the *Small Wars Manual* in 1935 and the final revision in 1940. They drew their material from published articles, small wars lesson plans, and Colonel C. E. Callwell’s 1906 book entitled *Small Wars—Their Principles and Practice*, which contained guerrilla warfare experiences from such places as Indochina, Cuba, Rhodesia, the Punjab frontier, the Sudan, the Philippines, and sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>44</sup>

Not surprisingly, the manual’s blueprint for future counterinsurgency operations closely corresponded to past events in Nicaragua. In 428 pages, the authors provided

instruction for feeding and supplying troops, gathering intelligence, running a military government, patrolling in jungles, attacking houses, bombing and strafing villages, conducting river operations, and a

variety of other specific activities.<sup>45</sup>

The manual addressed other facets of counterinsurgency warfare as well, such as the underlying causes of revolution, how to handle the host country’s population, and rules of engagement.

Furthermore, the manual divided the process of military intervention into five phases. First, the Marines should begin a gradual buildup of forces ashore. Second, they should commence combat operations using neutral zones or patrolling techniques. Third, they should develop a nonpartisan constabulary force to assist the civic affairs projects and internal defense. The constabulary should take on an active role in counterinsurgency patrols. As the bandits are subdued, the Marines should withdraw to garrison the large cities. Fourth, the Marines should begin preparations for the supervision of free elections. Fifth, once elections are complete, the constabulary should take control as the Marines withdraw.<sup>46</sup> From this review of the manual’s process of intervention, one can see how much of an impact the Nicaraguan campaign had on counterinsurgency doctrine. In short, the manual was a comprehensive and successful attempt to deduce the lessons learned from this vast amount of counterinsurgency experience.

Unfortunately, after 1940 the Marine Corps’ firsthand experience with and schooled knowledge of small wars declined significantly, due in part to the large-scale amphibious nature of World War II in the Pacific and the preoccupation with nuclear warfare in the 1950s. In fact, by as early as the 1946–47 academic year, the Marines deleted all small wars instruction from the curriculum at Quantico, although counterinsurgency classes were reintroduced two years later. In April 1950, Lieutenant Colonel Robert D. Heinl, Jr., bemoaned the loss of small-unit operations expertise in a *Gazette* article entitled “Small Wars—Vanishing Art?”<sup>47</sup> In another instance, a Marine officer preparing a 1960 study on counterinsurgency operations was not even familiar with the *Small Wars Manual's* existence.<sup>48</sup>

Despite this decline in small wars emphasis, the Corps still retained a strong tie to its counterinsurgency heritage. This link to its institution-



al past was apparent in the Marines' approach to combat operations in Vietnam. According to Sir Robert Thompson, the noted British expert on counterinsurgency warfare:

Of all the United States forces the Marine Corps alone made a serious attempt to achieve permanent and lasting results in their tactical area of responsibility by seeking to protect the rural populations.<sup>49</sup>

By 1965, the Marines opted to use combined action platoons (CAPs) that operated within established hamlets (neutral zones) to protect the inhabitants from Viet Cong intimidation. A notional CAP consisted of 14 Marines, one Navy corpsman, and 34 paramilitary Popular Forces (PFs, i.e., constabularies). By rigorous day and night patrolling, the CAPs sought to destroy the insurgent infrastructure, protect the local populace, organize intelligence nets, and train the constabulary. Unfortunately, the Marine Corps Combined Action Program was not a high priority effort with Army leadership, which emphasized search-and-destroy operations. Ultimately, this lack of priority combined with personnel shortages restricted the use of CAPs despite their promising accomplishments.<sup>50</sup>

A more complete analysis of the concepts employed by the Army and Marine Corps in Vietnam lies beyond the scope of this study. However, the important point remains that although the *Small Wars Manual* is now almost 50 years old, it holds much to discover, thanks to its notable depth and range. And at a time of increasing likelihood of U.S. military involvement in operations much like the aging campaign in Nicaragua, the manual takes on even greater importance.

## Notes

1. *Small Wars Manual*, United States Marine Corps, 1940 (Government Printing Office, Washington, DC), 1. The *Manual* recognized the wide variety of military operations the term "small wars" implied by indicating that "small wars vary in degrees from simple demonstration operations to military intervention in the fullest sense, short of war."
2. *Ibid.*
3. Allan R. Millett, *Semper Fidelis: The History of the*

*United States Marine Corps* (New York: MacMillan, 1980), 243–261.

4. *Ibid.*, 263; Major H.H. Utley, "An Introduction to the Tactics and Techniques of Small Wars," *Marine Corps Gazette*, May 1931, 50–53.

5. Millett, 236; Lieutenant Colonel Clyde H. Metcalf, *A History of the United States Marine Corps* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1939), 408; Neil Macaulay, *The Sandino Affair* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1967), 161–185.

6. Captain Evans F. Carlson, "The Guardia Nacional De Nicaragua," *Marine Corps Gazette*, August 1937, 7; Millett, 239.

7. Department of State, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, 1927* (Washington, 1942), 288–289 (hereinafter cited as *Foreign Relations*).

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*Part IV*  
*Haiti, 1915–1934*







## The American Occupation of Haiti: Problems and Programs, 1920-1928

by Robert Debs Heintl Jr. and Nancy Gordon Heintl

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By 1920, Haiti had been pacified. The Marines had stamped out banditry (known as Cacoism) in the north and the Artibonite Valley and had put down a major revolt, the Caco Rebellion, originating in the same regions with closet support from elite politicians in the national capital and abroad in exile. Now with the U.S. occupation of Haiti established, important questions as to its direction, destiny, and ultimate success remained to be answered.

A central paradox was that the specter of the “*Maitre blanc*” (the white master), whom Haitians had so spectacularly slaughtered in 1803, never seriously frightened the peasant *noirs* (blacks) but scared and angered the educated, mostly lighter-colored (*mulatre*) elite.

As early as 1917, the French minister in Port-au-Prince, reporting to Paris on “*la question de race qui prime ici toutes les autres*” (the racial question which, here, takes precedence over all others), said that the elite oligarchy that had so long exploited the country now feared possible reestablishment of a white society. Such fears were understandable in light of racial conditions then prevailing in the United States.

In supporting the Caco Rebellion of 1918-1920, the elite, characteristically at odds among themselves, had been playing with fire. President Dartiguenave’s enemies hoped to upset him, but at the same time had everything to lose from the defeat and expulsion of the Americans and a return to the bad old days and ways of Caco-dominated politics.

Thus, until the revolt was snuffed out, Dartiguenave, the elite *mulatre*, was happy enough to collaborate with the occupation. But in mid-1920, he felt secure enough to take on the Americans who had put him in office. In the December 1920 view of Colonel John H. Russell, Marine brigade commander in Port-au-Prince:

[Dartiguenave] threw off the mask, stepped into the arena, fought fiercely as the so called champion of the Haitian People and with the intention of posing as a martyr. The political situation at once became complex . . . Where formerly the scene of trouble had been in Central Haiti it quickly shifted to Port-au-Prince which became the one sore spot in Haiti.

Russell did not exaggerate. The terrain of resistance had shifted to the capital.

In early 1920, an American socialist, journalist, and associate of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Herbert J. Seligman, had briefly visited Haiti. On return, he wrote for the *Nation* a purported expose, "The Conquest of Haiti," which was the opening gun of a sustained American-Haitian campaign to undermine the U.S. occupation.

The tone of Seligman's article (which precipitated a sensation in July 1920 and typified the *Nation's* future style in dealing with the Haitian question) may be judged quickly:

Five years of American Occupation, from 1915 to 1920, have served as a commentary on the white civilization which still burns black men and women at the stake. For Haitian men, women, and children, to a number estimated at 3,000, innocent of any offense, have been shot down by American machine gun and rifle bullets; black men have been put to torture to make them give information; theft, arson, and murder have been committed with impunity by white men wearing the uniform of the United States. . . .

Seligman's sole source was a Haitian propaganda group formed in 1915 and called the Union Patriotique. Five years later, the Union had expanded to include every elite politician and

intellectual who opposed President Dartiguenave or the occupation, and claimed membership of 30,000, a figure hard to substantiate. In what surely must represent an apogee of self-deception, Ernest Gruening of the *Nation* (later a U.S. senator) claimed that the Union's leaders—every one a presidential hopeful—were without ambition and that the Union was "apolitical."

More realistically, British minister R. F. S. Edwards called the Union a set of "disgruntled politicians who would do anything to obtain a government position," a judgment amply confirmed by past, and in some cases future records of leading members of the Union.<sup>1</sup>

Obviously the Union also contained high-minded men: to name one, Haiti's most eminent lawyer, Maitre Georges Leger, who worked so singlemindedly to end the occupation. But to protest the Union's political chastity is to be blind to the realities and personalities of Haitian politics. In the sardonic phrase of a fellow countryman, the men of the Union Patriotique now became "*les Cacos de Plume*" (Cacos of the pen), who in 1920 took up the cause against the Americans.

The American connection that gave the Union voice and support came through an interlocking relationship among the NAACP, the *Nation*, and an American front group, the Haiti-Santo Domingo Independence Society, which, by Gruening's admission, "we at the *Nation* organized." Very soon, the society's letterhead would include such prestigious names as Eugene O'Neill, Walter Lippmann, Felix Frankfurter, and even H. L. Mencken. For the voices at the heart of all this—NAACP president James Weldon Johnson, Seligman and Gruening—the *Nation* was to afford a strident, unbridled, antimilitary, and unashamedly partisan pulpit during the decade to come.

Despite his burning advocacy of the Haitian resistance, Gruening only belatedly came to the country. After his one interview with Colonel Russell, in November 1921, the Marine recorded, "Mr. Gruening, I am afraid, has come to Haiti with the idea of not seeing anything good, but only looking for something sensational to write up."

If the *Nation* and other foreign critics of the occupation stooped to irresponsibility and untruth, the flow of invective and invention from the Union Patriotique never faltered. In the sad

verdict of Dantes Bellegarde, Haiti's greatest 20th century historian: "Telling the truth is not a quality the majority of Haitians possess."

Rear Admiral Caperton, who had carried out the original occupation of Haiti, was charged, if one can believe it, with having simply sailed away the Haitian Navy to New York and sold it to ship-breakers for his personal account at \$500,000 profit. Russell was accused on every side of various embezzlements. When Colonel R. S. Hooker went home in 1921, *Le Courrier Haitien* wrote of "the fortune he had amassed" and said he had come to Haiti "for the sole purpose of enriching himself."

In August 1921, Stenio Vincent, later president of Haiti, assured a U.S. Senate investigating committee that 4,000 people were killed in the Cap Haitien jail from 1918 to 1920; that from the same prison, 78 bodies a day were "thrown into the pits" throughout 1918 (a total that would have amounted in one year to 28,470 deaths on an average prison population of 400); and that mortalities "just as high" occurred in prisons at Port-au-Prince and Gonaives.

B. Danache, an intimate of Dartiguenave, later wrote that when fires swept a downtown shopping district in Port-au-Prince in 1921, American officers' wives pillaged shops and houses. Haitian and French journals elaborated this story by accusing the Americans of setting this and other fires in the first place.<sup>2</sup>

Citing 1921 charges by the Union Patriotique, Britain's famed *Manchester Guardian* credulously reported the killing of entire families by Marines; wanton burning of houses and villages; burning, hanging and torturing of prisoners; and "outrages on pregnant women."

For all his devotion to veracity, historian Bellegarde stated as fact the propaganda rumor that Caco chief Charlemagne Peralte had been crucified by the Marines and charged the latter with "butchery of women, and children, massacre of prisoners, use of man-eating dogs, tortures of water and fire. . . ."

Pursuing the same line, French journalists told readers that Haiti's cities and villages had been sacked and burned by the Marines, and their inhabitants "devoured by war dogs imported from the Philippines."

Such vilification, carried on without cease by the *Cacos de Plume* and given a gloss of truth when filtered through the *Nation*, the *New York Times*, and foreign publications (notably the *Manchester Guardian*), would continue for a decade. In the long run, save for one or two serious falsehoods imbedded in history, this propaganda, however galling to Americans in Haiti, can be dismissed as the only resort of a group neither willing nor capable of pursuing resistance beyond the salon, or print shops whose freedom to operate was guaranteed by U.S. Marines.

The 1920 U.S. elections, combined with the *Nation's* continuing campaign, served, however, to light a fire under Congress, which typically reacted with an investigation. Commencing in August 1921, a Senate committee held 11 months of exhaustive hearings (1,842 pages of printed testimony) on U.S. activities in Haiti and Santo Domingo.

Chaired by Senator Joseph Medill McCormick, a cultivated Chicagoan who spoke fluent French, the hearings included every leading figure of the occupation as well as its main opponents, Haitian and American. To ensure fair play, the American lawyer representing both the NAACP and Union Patriotique was accorded adversary status, including cross-examination and summing-up. Despite this latitude, unheard of in congressional proceedings, and despite admitted stage-management by Dr. Gruening both at home and in hearings conducted in Haiti, the Union, while protesting "numberless abominable crimes" by Marines, made only a weak case with testimony the senators (including Haiti's partisans) frequently found to be gossip where not obviously coached or suborned.

The committee found that Haiti needed better administration, not U.S. withdrawal. To implement this, Senator McCormick called the administration to create a new post, an American high commissioner who would supervise treaty officials, Gendarmerie, Marines, and the American legation. And that on 11 February 1922 was what President Harding did.

To the surprise of many, not least the appointee, the lot fell to Colonel John H. Russell.

Important events that had done much to precipitate the Senate investigation and thus return newly promoted General Russell to Haiti dated



back three years to 1919 and to the region of Hinche in central Haiti.

Hinche lies far from Port-au-Prince. Remote, forbidding, wild, the place bore from ancient times a sinister title: "Hinche the Accursed." In January 1919, rumors came to Port-au-Prince that all was not well in Hinche. The *corvee* (forced roadgang labor), though officially abolished, still continued and Caco prisoners taken by Marines and Gendarmes were openly shot or simply disappeared.

When Brigadier General A. W. Catlin (then senior Marine in Haiti) heard these things, he directed Colonel A. S. Williams and the local commander, Major C. H. Wells, to investigate. He also sent a trusted subordinate, Lieutenant Colonel R. S. Hooker, to Hinche. On Wells' say-so, Williams told Catlin the charges were baseless. When Colonel Hooker got back, he told a different story: ". . . *corvee* going on at both Maissade and Hinche, and the Gendarmes had used the natives so brutally that many had left their gardens and either joined the Cacos or had come into town for safety."

Catlin went to see for himself. Visiting the region, talking to the priests, the *magistrats*, and to trembling peasants, the general satisfied himself where the truth lay. With sanction of Wells and local Haitian officials, the *corvee* was in full force, prisoners had been shot (escaping was always the excuse), and Major Wells (falsely reporting that his district was quiet when in fact Caco banditry was mounting) had made clear to subordinates he didn't want to see or hear of prisoners.

Catlin forthwith relieved Wells and shipped him home, transferred every Gendarmerie officer (each a Marine NCO) out of the district and out of Haiti, replaced the local Gendarmerie units with others, and put U.S. Marine garrisons under U.S. commissioned officers in each town. Believing, however, that the evidence, however damaging, would not sustain courts-martial, he ordered no trials. On this decision, later charges of whitewash mainly rest. But for an accident, the business, bad as it was, might never have been heard of again.

At Headquarters, Marine Corps, in September 1919, while reviewing a general court-martial from Haiti, Major General Commandant George Barnett was jolted by a passing assertion by counsel that "practically indiscriminate killing of natives has

gone on for some time."

Catlin, still suffering from his war wound at Belleau Wood at the head of the 6th Marines, had been invalidated home. Russell was back. In September 1919, General Barnett wrote a stern letter headed "Personal and Confidential," which, accepting at face value and stating in his own words the "indiscriminate killing" charge, told Colonel Russell, "I was shocked beyond expression to hear of such things . . . I know you will take up most seriously . . . I want every case sifted thoroughly and guilty parties brought to justice."

Then began a rigorous and extensive series of investigations. Russell put the case into the capable hands of Lieutenant Colonel Hooker, backstopped by one of the sternest and most probing disciplinarians in the Corps, the aviation pioneer Major Thomas C. Turner. The Hooker-Turner findings verified Hooker's initial conclusions. The Navy Department then ordered Major General John A. Lejeune and Brigadier General Smedley D. Butler to Haiti for a further, more formal, and broader investigation. The Lejeune-Butler report, filed 12 October 1920, unmistakably confirmed what Hooker had reported 18 months earlier.

Two days later, the *New York Times* reprinted on page one General Barnett's leaked private correspondence with Russell, including heavy play of the phrase "indiscriminate killing." With the 1920 elections at climax, the "indiscriminate killing" issue was ready-made for Republican foes of Woodrow Wilson and, of course, for the antioccupation constituency that had been gathering in the United States.

Typical of public and media reaction was the *Times*' wide-eyed interview (15 October 1920) with Harry Franck, a travel writer, shilling a just-published book about the West Indies. Wrote the *Times*:

American Marines, largely made up of and officered by Southerners, opened fire with machine-guns from airplanes on defenseless Haitian villages, killing men, women and children in open marketplaces; natives were slain for "sport" by a hoodlum element among these same Southerners; and the ancient *corvee* system of forced labor was

revived and ruthlessly executed. . . .

Another rapid reaction was that of James Weldon Johnson, well known black adviser of Republican Presidential candidate Warren G. Harding and secretary of the NAACP. Johnson counseled Harding to take immediate advantage of Haitian “atrocities” charges. Harding beat Johnson to the punch. He had already told election crowds, “Thousands of Haitians have been killed by American Marines.”

President Wilson’s response was one final full-dress court of inquiry under Admiral Henry T. Mayo, including among its members Lejeune and the former naval governor of the Virgin Islands. Even more exhaustive than its predecessors, the Mayo inquiry (dismissed in the *Nation* as “white-wash” before the court even heard its first witness) arrived at similar conclusions but added in its opinion, “Considering the conditions of service in Haiti, it is remarkable that the offenses were so few. . . .”

Sorting out all the investigations as well as antecedent events, several observations seem in order.

◆ Behind the smoke lay fire. Illegal executions did take place, and so did acts of violence against Haitians. The *corvée* was continued in violation of orders and was flagrantly misused as a form of peonage. Major Wells and a handful of U.S. subordinates condoned and tried to cover up these misdeeds.

◆ All abuses were localized in the Hinche-Maïssade area and to a six-month period (December 1918 to May 1919). They were neither typical nor nationwide. The 1922 Senate investigation, energetically pressed at home and in Haiti, established only ten illegal executions.

◆ A major guerrilla war (the Caco Rebellion) was in progress. In the words of historian Ludwell Montague:

Operations were carried on by small detached patrols, generally led by enlisted men, remote from control or succor, alone in a wild country and momentarily expecting ambush. No mark distinguished hostile Caco from peaceful peasant, and, with one’s life at stake, there was a strong temptation to give oneself the benefit of the doubt. Had

the Marines not shown remarkable restraint, the havoc must have been greater.

◆ General Catlin’s decision not to press charges when evidence was fresh and all parties still in the service and in Haiti foreclosed further prosecution. Later, when General Barnett reopened the matter, the trail was cold and the guilty beyond reach.

◆ Although inevitably seen as “official white-wash,” if only because they tended to vindicate American military conduct in Haiti, the successive investigations, pursued in every instance by officers of high standing, come through 50 years later as fair and rigorous. That they failed to produce disciplinary results beyond actions taken at first instance by Catlin resulted from unavailability to military courts—as in the exponentially worse My Lai scandals in Vietnam—of persons clearly guilty (Marines dead or discharged) and the wildly unreliable and conflicting testimony of Haitian complainants.

◆ Behind all else lies the evident fact that Haitian peasants simply did not regard the Marines as the sadistic bullies and savage oppressors depicted in elite antioccupation literature.

Months later in 1921, after the uproar had begun to quiet, Colonel L. McC. Little, the Marine chief of staff in Haiti, wrote a thoughtful letter to Edwin Denby, the former Marine Secretary of the Navy in the new administration:

We have committed errors. . . . It is for this reason that our punishment of offenses by Marines and Gendarmes against Haitians has had to be prompt and severe. . . . We may have had to kill in our engagements but it was to prevent the slaughter or ill treatment of many thousands more. . . .

It remained for the British Foreign Office in London to extract a final lesson. Reading the reports from Port-au-Prince, and no doubt mindful of similar painful episodes of one’s own, such as the Amritsar massacre of 1919,<sup>3</sup> the permanent undersecretary jotted down: “It is useful to remember cases of this kind when the U.S.A. take it upon themselves to preach to us about Mesopotamia or Persia.”

On the tropical night of 10 March 1922, while

the old battleship *North Dakota* plowed across the Gulf of Gonaives toward Port-au-Prince, General Russell, aft in the flag cabin, removed his whites then turned in as the land breeze brought Haiti's pungent presence—charcoal fires, dung, *frangipani*s, overripe mangoes, and the distant throb of drums—in through the open ports. Perhaps his mind dropped back to 1893 when, on a midshipmen's cruise, he had first seen and smelled Port-au-Prince.

Next morning when Russell came on the quarterdeck, bugles were already sounding officers' call, the barge's crew was standing by to hoist out, sailors were going to quarters, and the ship's guard, rifle stocks gleaming like fine mahogany, were paraded to honor the new high commissioner, still a bit awkward in the civilian clothes he had decided he would henceforth wear.

When Russell stepped ashore over the Port-au-Prince wharf, he was greeted by the *magistrat communal* (mayor), by a smart honor guard of Gendarmes, and the Port-au-Prince crowd that had cheered many another new ruler of Haiti. Behind a mounted Gendarmerie escort, the burnished Model T touring car clattered officiously up past the Cathedral where the priests, French to a man, watched impassively, and thence to his new headquarters in the American legation. Out in the bay, following her gun salute for the high commissioner (19 guns, six more than he would have rated as a brigadier), *North Dakota* hoisted in boats and gangways, hove short, and got underway. Ashore, Russell got down to work.

"The history of our intervention in Haitian affairs," Secretary of State Charles Evans Hughes had written in Russell's instructions, "is not viewed with satisfaction by this Government." It was with these words before him that the new proconsul issued his first directive.

As previously worked out in Washington, the U.S. treaty services were reorganized. All correspondence to or from the Haitian government or Washington would pass over the high commissioner's desk. No policy statement, project of law, or budget item would issue save by Russell's writ. Not surprisingly, the organization and the way it functioned would resemble a military staff.

Prestigious as their offices and perquisites might appear—especially in the setting of the

gleaming new National Palace completed in 1918—the president, his ministers, and the council of state would not enjoy much power, or, if Russell and the financial adviser had anything to say, any pelf at all. Behind official pomp, invariably and tactfully sustained by the high commissioner, stood American officials from Russell down who, from reverse-slope positions, would direct the affairs of Haiti.

Yet there was another dimension. Back in 1920, with Caco leaders Benoit Batraville and Charlemagne barely cold in their graves, then Colonel Russell had issued an order he was to reaffirm as high commissioner, which in abridgement reads as follows:

Where the duty of officers and enlisted men brings them in contact with the Haitian People, such duty will be performed with a minimum of harshness . . . and a regard for decency and human kindness.

No people with any spirit can view the presence of troops of another *nation* in any light than as a heavy blow to their pride. Considerate treatment may soften the blow, but harshness is bound to harden into resentment that goes to defeat the larger interests of the intervening *nation*.

The Haitians are naturally courteous people and resent, and properly resent, rudeness and discourtesy. One rude act of any individual may undo much good work on the part of many others in the cause for which we are here.

/s/ John H. Russell

President Dartiguenave, whose term expired in May 1922, wanted to succeed himself, but his presidency was at a dead end. Never truly popular with the country, let alone the elite, he had alienated the Americans by maneuver, untrustworthiness, and obstruction. Yet hope died hard. After vainly seeking endorsement from Russell (who rightly said he intended to "preserve an absolute neutrality"), Dartiguenave declared for the presidency in early April.

Public reaction showed rare unanimity. The press, Union Patriotique, and virtually every organization in Port-au-Prince leveled its guns on Dartiguenave (even holding a mass in the

Cathedral for deliverance from his regime). As Dartiguenave's support crumbled, there began a period of jockeying (and of private visits, in vain hope, to lobby Russell). Louis Borno, former foreign minister—with financial propulsion from the wealthy Jamaican-German entrepreneur, O. J. Brandt—pulled ahead. On the evening of 10 April, after Dartiguenave failed to muster support in the electoral Council of State, Joseph Louis Borno was elected president.<sup>4</sup>

On 15 May 1922, for only the second time in Haiti's history since 1804, a constitutional transfer of power took place. With full honors, Dartiguenave surrendered office and Louis Borno was inaugurated. The outgoing president's seven-year term equaled the combined incumbencies of his seven immediate predecessors.

Onetime editor of *La Patrie*, poet of distinction, keen botanist, fluent in English and Spanish, lawyer and legal scholar, ardent Catholic, diplomat, and thrice foreign minister, Borno at 56 was a man of the world and of culture. In previous cabinets under Dartiguenave, he had opposed the Americans.

Borno had, therefore, amply demonstrated that he was his own man. Then, in the frank collaboration he extended to the occupation, he was to evince a pragmatism that would anger his fellow elite and in the end, linked with Russell, result in what has been called a two-headed dictatorship. On the day of his inauguration, Borno said he was "confident that earnest efforts and sincere cooperation with the Americans will secure to my people a large measure, if not all, the benefits contemplated in the spirit of the treaty."

It was with this common objective that president and high commissioner set to work.

Russell, to be sure, held the high cards. Every Haitian knew that the high commissioner's views were backed by more than pure reason. Behind him stood the Marine brigade. Yet Borno was not and would never be a figurehead. In the words of one U.S. treaty official, Arthur Millspaugh, who knew him well, "There was understanding, friendship, and cooperation between Borno and Russell; each was ready to yield at times; and each needed the other."

Seven years later, in 1929, R. F. S. Edwards, British minister in Port-au-Prince, assessed the

occupation: "What has America done for Haiti in the 14 years since the intervention? Primarily, maintained peace and allowed the peasant to work in safety."

To Edwards, an Englishman inclined to condescend toward lesser breeds, little else save overelaborate public buildings and a few roads had been the result. Viewing Haiti four decades after the end of the occupation, one might suppose Edwards had been right.

The facts, however, are otherwise. Financed entirely from efficiently managed Haitian revenue—foreign aid was then unknown, and dependencies were expected to pay their own way—the material achievements of the Borno-Russell years bely the British minister and can be summarized before we come to the politics, the problems and the shortcomings that occupy the other side of the ledger.

◆ In 1929, the year of Edward's assessment, Public Works (directed by a few U.S. Navy civil engineer officers, forebears of the Seabees) had built and were maintaining over a thousand miles of all-weather roads suitable for the 3,000 motor vehicles that had come to Haiti since the first touring car arrived in 1913. There were 210 major bridges, airfields at ten towns, and auxiliary landing fields in many remote places. Many of these are still in service today.

◆ In 1920, the lighthouses of Haiti amounted to three kerosene-burning relics at Port-au-Prince and one at the Cap. Nine years later, the republic boasted 15 automatic acetylene lighthouses, 54 buoys, 10 harbor lights, and extensive aids to navigation in the modernized smaller ports. At the Cap, Gonaives, St. Marc, Jeremie, and Les Cayes, harbors had been dredged. Modern concrete docks had replaced aged, tumbledown timbered wharves, thus enabling tramp freighters to ply these ports. Weekly first-class service for Port-au-Prince on the Panama Line's New York-to-Colon run had been arranged by Russell. In 1929, Pan American clippers from Miami commenced Haiti's first commercial aviation service to seaplane ramps at the foot of downtown Port-au-Prince.

◆ About 1912, the old French telephone system and telegraph had sputtered into silence. Ten years later, Port-au-Prince could take pride in the first automatic telephone exchange in any city in

Latin America, soon followed by a second such system at the Cap. By 1929, there were 1,250 miles of telephone long lines connecting 26 local exchanges. The telegraph had been completely rehabilitated, and national communications were paying for themselves and showing a profit. (On one sample day that year, Port-au-Prince logged 27,574 local calls.) There were working street lights in Port-au-Prince and three other cities. In 1927, Haiti's first radio station (HHK) went on the air at Port-au-Prince.

◆ Ten towns enjoyed potable running water and 64 villages had clean wells or springs. Port-au-Prince also had pressurized fire mains. Eighty-two miles of new irrigation canals had been dug in the Artibonite Valley. Among a wide range of agricultural reforms were national forests, mahogany and pine reforestation, and soil conservation. Sisal was introduced into Haiti, and for the first time in decades, sugar and cotton again became significant exports.

◆ "The U.S. Naval Medical Service stands alone and far ahead of all American services." Thusly in a rare moment of approbation, British Minister Edwards wrote in May 1929. Fourteen years earlier, Haiti had been rotten with hookworm, tuberculosis, filariasis, leprosy, malignant malaria, enteric diseases, yaws, syphilis, smallpox, and typhoid. "The whole country," wrote Captain Kent C. Melhorn, the able naval Director of Public Health, "teemed with filth and disease. . . ."

The Navy doctors responded by building and operating 11 modern hospitals and 17 rural or traveling clinics. In addition, there was the U.S. Naval Hospital, Port-au-Prince (later the famous Oloffson hotel and setting for Graham Greene's *The Comedians*). In 1929, 1,341,596 treatments were conducted, and nearly half the country's 159 physicians worked for Public Health. In 1926, the government allowed the occupation to take over and reorganize the National Medical School, which, with a hospital corps and dispensers' school, for the first time enabled Haiti to produce doctors and technicians with modern professional qualifications.<sup>5</sup>

◆ None of these achievements could have been accomplished without the public order that the Gendarmerie, backed by the Marines, had brought about by 1920. With Marines entirely

withdrawn to Port-au-Prince (except for a detachment at the Cap), the Gendarmerie (in 1928 renamed "Garde d'Haiti") efficiently pursued its nation-building tasks: police, fire, prisons, customs and immigration, emergency communications, lighthouse service, rural medicine, and communal advisership. Military marksmanship, a joke in pre-occupation times, was raised to professional standards—an achievement dramatically underscored, to great national pride, when a Haitian rifle team competing in the Olympics for the first time in 1924 tied France for second place, outclassed only by an American team composed largely of Marines.<sup>6</sup>

◆ The most far-reaching and controversial U.S. program was that of the Agricultural Extension and Teaching Service (usually referred to as the "Service Technique"). Its functions, as stated in General Russell's 1924 report, were:

. . . higher agricultural education for the training of experts, teachers, and advisers; rural farm schools . . . advice to adult farmers . . . direct aid through clinics and demonstrations . . . experiments in all phases of agricultural activity . . . and vocational; industrial education.

In more general terms, the goal the Service Technique set itself was creation among the peasants of a class of black yeomanry, obviously a matter of extreme social sensitivity for the largely *mulatre* elite. Leaving, however, the resulting controversy for later, it is enough to recite undeniable achievements: agricultural experimental stations, a cattle-breeding station at Hinche, the school of agriculture at Damien, demonstration farms and extension services, Plantation Dauphin at Ft. Liberte (eventually the world's largest sisal acreage), reintroduction of tobacco as a money crop, nationwide soil and resource surveys, and veterinary clinics which healed more than 100,000 sick beasts. That so many good intentions and, for that matter, good works should have ignited such hostility, so deepened divisions, and, in the end, left so little behind was not least among the tragedies of intervention—and of Haiti.

The Borno-Russell regime had accomplished much since 1922, but progress had been uneven. New problems had arisen, old ones went



unsolved, and original promises (and premises) of occupation remained unfulfilled.

Many hopes had stemmed from the belief that Haiti held hidden resources that U.S. capital might quickly exploit. The truth, as disclosed by geological surveys, was that Haiti had little or nothing save bauxite at Miragoane and marginal copper deposits near Port-a-Piment. As it was in the beginning, agriculture was the country's only resource. Yet plantation agriculture, based on large-scale foreign land acquisition, would outrage national feelings. Peasants, for example, forcibly resisted occupation projects to conduct a land-ownership survey bound to threaten tiny freeholds. In 1926, after Marine aviators completed air-photo coverage for such a survey, the building housing the negatives was burned down.

While U.S. investment in Haiti waxed almost fourfold, from \$4 million in 1913 to over \$14 million in 1930, it nonetheless mounted far faster in neighboring unoccupied countries during the same time, which in cause or effect refutes dollar-diplomacy theories as to American intervention.

Borno and Russell experienced common and continuing difficulties with the press. Edited in the polemic tradition of France, Haitian journals had only secondary regard for dissemination of news and none at all for truth. Enjoying freedom and security unknown before the Marines arrived, they delighted in attacking the U.S. occupation with irresponsibility and scurrility licensed by Haitian courts that refused to convict an editor. In December 1923, the State Department's astute Dana Munroe (later to be U.S. minister to Haiti) commented:

The fundamental difficulty is that Haitians cannot enjoy freedom of speech and of the press without outrageous abuse, and any attempt to punish editors or politicians . . . gives rise to the charge that the American occupation is throttling the press in Haiti.<sup>7</sup>

One of the occupation's most serious mistakes—mistake of ignorance—was to permit the Garde (and thus by implication the American authorities) to be used in ill-advised attempts to stamp out Voodoo. Yet who could blame newly arrived foreigners for enforcing a penal code written by elite Haitians, which proscribed sorcery as

a crime and recognized *zombi-ism* as a phenomenon.

President Borno was deeply anti-Voodoo. The elite, with whom U.S. officials and senior Marines had most contact, further confused the Americans with traditional condescending attitudes, giving the impression (whatever their inward beliefs) that Voodoo was superstitious rubbish capable of causing trouble among the peasants. It is a measure of the occupation's lost opportunities that no evidence can be found that senior U.S. officials ever seriously comprehended Voodoo in its impressive totality as Haiti's national religion.

Thus we find the Garde arresting and prosecuting Haitians for such "crimes" as preparing consecrated meals to win the good will of Voodoo *loa* (gods) or conducting various Voodoo services. To American officers of the Garde, it seemed only that they were enforcing anti-Voodoo provisions of the penal code. Among the Garde's Haitian officers, there was comprehension and tolerance, as indeed there was on the part of individual Americans such as the widely publicized Lieutenant Faustin Wirkus of La Gonave.

In social relations with Haiti, the occupation mirrored colonial attitudes of the day: paternal toward the masses and aloof and condescending toward the elite, who cordially reciprocated. As if Haiti were West Africa or British India, the Americans had their club, which no Haitian entered except as a servant. On the other hand, from 1918 on (as a direct consequence of Smedley Butler's tactlessness), no U.S. officer was admitted to the elite Cercle Bellevue.<sup>8</sup> Some of this distance has been blamed, no doubt correctly, on U.S. racial attitudes, and particularly those of the wives of the lower-ranking among the 250 civilian treaty officials and less numerous NCOs who served as junior officers in the Garde.

British Minister Edwards, never at a loss where American failings were concerned, mused in 1929: "I do hate to see one's own colour and race behaving in a way that brings discredit to the whole white race. What respect can an educated Haitian have for a race that allows its women to get so drunk that they have to be taken home in the bottom of the car? And all that before native servants. . . ."

Only six months later, Edwards rendered his

final verdict: "The American in Hayti [sic] has shown himself quite unqualified to colonize."

A recurring theme in Minister Edwards's reports was typically stated in April 1927: "The U.S. Government has sent about 75 percent Southerners to Hayti [sic] as they are supposed to know how to handle coloured people."

The charge was not new. It seems to have appeared, not in Haiti, but in the October 1920 *New York Times* piece about Harry Franck who had laced his book, as we have seen, with sensational charges against the Marines. How Franck substantiated this assertion, or where he found it, is unknown. Unlike other charges, it does not seem to have sprung from the fertile imagination of the "*Cacos de Plume*" because it never appears in the 1921 Union Patriotique memorials to the U.S. Senate, where every possible stop was pulled out. Nor was it ever raised throughout the year-long McCormick Committee investigation.

Regardless of origin, this accusation eventually caught on. Because it was repeated widely by foreign and later by Haitian writers, it should be squarely addressed.

Following first enunciation by Franck, the charge that the Marines deliberately exported American racial prejudices to Haiti was echoed in 1927 by sociologist Emily Balch and future Marine Paul Douglas. In 1941, the sociologist Leyburn (who later admitted he could not substantiate the assertion) repeated the accusation as fact in his authoritative *Haitian People*. Only to cite further examples, historian Selden Rodman reinforced Leyburn. Two years later, in still another book, Edmund Wilson did the same. In 1954, *Time* repeated the charge as fact.

Curiously, however, no Haitian source throughout the entire range of antioccupation literature ever raised the issue. In fact, it was not until 1950, long years after the Marines departed, that Danache, one of the most anti-American Haitian writers, briefly alluded to the charge. Six years later, a second Haitian historian, Hogar Nicolas, gave it as fact.

How can we assess these unpleasant charges?

Originated and propagated by non-Haitian civilians otherwise critical of the occupation and unfriendly to the American military, the accusation was never raised by any Haitian during the occu-

pation or, for that matter, until long after American writers accepted and repeated it. Most significantly, no instance can be found early or late in which any person advancing this thesis substantiated it, or even tried to do so.

Now what were the facts?

This was the question raised in 1964 by a skeptical history student at Wellesley, Ann Hurst, who in a term paper, asked and answered the question: "Southerners to Handle Haitians?"<sup>9</sup>

Analyzing by name against U.S. Census data the record of every Marine officer on duty in Haiti from 1916 to 1932, Hurst found (1) that the proportion of southern-born officers in the Corps as a whole was lower than the percentage of southerners in the national population, and (2) that in 13 of the 19 years of occupation, the percentage of southern Marine officers in Haiti was below the percentage of southern officers in the Corps. Interestingly, according to Hurst, 1927, when the accusations seemed to peak, was one of six random years in which southern officers in Haiti did exceed the Corps-wide percentage, which, however, still fell below that in the U.S. population.

Critics have demurred that Hurst covered officers only and did not consider Marine NCOs breveted to junior ranks in the Garde. But partial data on such cases confirm Hurst. In 1930, for example—one year when complete statistics covering the Garde were compiled—only 24 of 116 officers (including ex-NCOs), or 20.6 percent, were southern at a time when 23.4 percent of all Americans were southern-born.

To nail down Hurst's findings, no other student (including the authors during a lifetime in the Corps) has found any trace in record or recollection that any such policy ever existed.

By 1927, the occupation seemed well established. Haiti was pacified. Its financial and economic affairs were, on the whole, doing well. General modernization was afoot. In social matters—education, incorrigibly corrupt courts and judiciary, and continued elite resentment and resistance toward the Americans—progress had been poor. It was ironic that the very interests, aspirations, and injuries which sparked the adamant resistance of the elite to the modernization of their country were, at the same time, wholly adverse to, and bound to estrange them—as if

they cared—from the mass of their downtrodden peasant countrymen. This contradiction has never been resolved.

As for the Marines, after 1920 they had settled into routine garrisons at Port-au-Prince and the Cap, keeping a low profile and leaving the tasks of public order and nation-building to a Marine-directed Garde and treaty administration. This had been General Russell's policy from the outset, a course encouraged by a perennially nervous Washington. Of the Marines, the American chargé d'affaires, Christian Gross, aptly remarked in 1927, "So long as they are here, there is no need for their being here."

## Notes

1. Joseph Jolibois, a leader of the Union and one of Haiti's most vociferous journalists (and post-occupation president of the Chamber of Deputies), had, for example, a long police pedigree richly spiced with civil and criminal charges, including assaults and the attempted murder of his sister-in-law. Exiled to Argentina in 1928, he was detained in an asylum, and after return to Haiti, died mad at Pont Beudet, Haiti's national lunatic asylum. The year before he died, he asserted in print that the sun was composed of geometric blocks of ice shining by reflected light and was inhabited by a species of beings resembling Laplanders.

2. The Port-au-Prince *pompier*s (firemen), with their 12 buglers, leaky two-mule Belgian Steamers, and members who went home to shift into uniform before responding to a fire, originally stayed out of control of the occupation's Haitian Gendarmerie. In the wake of serious fires beginning in September 1918 (and coinciding closely with the fortunes of the Caco Rebellion), an experienced U.S. fireman was brought down as an adviser, but the *pompier*s would have none of him. The 1921 conflagrations persuaded President Dartiguenave to assign fire service to the *Gendarmes*, and eventually the *pompier*s ended up with two gasoline pumpers, four motorized steamers, two hose companies, and a chemical rig. Characteristically, when the first working fire to occur under the new regime was knocked down in minutes, the press said the American fire chief had set it in order to show off.

3. On 13 April 1919, British troops opened fire with rifles and machine guns on political demonstrators in a park in Amritsar, killing at least 400 and wounding some 1,200 more. This tragedy, exactly contemporane-

ous with the alleged "indiscriminate killing" at Hincemaissade, did not inhibit members of Parliament from running on about U.S. actions in Haiti in 1920.

4. It has been frequently charged that the Americans simply replaced Dartiguenave with Borno. Other than unsupported statements to this effect, no evidence has been found to justify the conclusion. On the known record, the forces that put Borno in office were not American, but rather Borno's political astuteness and O. J. Brandt's purse.

5. One product of this program, a 27-year-old Port-au-Prince student, graduated in the last American-supervised class in 1934. His name was Francois Duvalier.

6. When for four years, a Marine military mission returned to Haiti in 1959, one of its first steps was to reintroduce national rifle matches and international competition. In the Inter-American Rifle Matches of 1959 and 1960 held at Panama, Haitian teams each time defeated every country in Latin America, being only narrowly outpointed by U.S. teams sent down from the Army's advanced marksmanship unit at Fort Benning. After the Haitian team's triumphant second win, President Duvalier characteristically responded by withdrawing Haiti from international competition and disbanded the team, never to shoot again.

7. Visiting reporters to Haiti were told (and naively believed)—an outcry the U.S. and British press quickly took up—that Haitian editors "were being denied the right of *habeas corpus*," a process, of course, unknown to the Code Napoleon and thus unheard of in Haiti.

8. Not until 1960 was a U.S. Marine officer (one of the authors) elected to membership in this most exclusive Haitian club.

9. Ann Hurst will be recognized by many *Gazette* readers as the daughter of Brigadier General E. H. Hurst, USMC (Ret.) and now wife of Lieutenant Colonel Myron Harrington.

## About the Authors

Robert Debs Heintz Jr. and Nancy Gordon Heintz lived in Haiti from 1959 to 1963, where Robert was Chief of the U.S. Naval Mission to Haiti until he was declared *persona non grata* by François Duvalier. He retired from the Marines as a colonel in 1964. Robert Heintz had already published several works of history before he retired, including World War II battle studies for the USMC History Division and *Soldiers of the Sea: The United States Marine Corps, 1775-1962* (1962). Upon retirement, he became a syndicated newspaper columnist and worked with his wife Nancy, an independent writer and journalist, on their major work, *Written in Blood: The Story of the Haitian People, 1492-1971* (1978), from which the article presented here was excerpted and condensed. Their son Michael has subsequently published revised and updated editions of *Written in Blood* in 1996 and 2005.



