Confronting the American dream: Nicaragua under U.S. imperial rule

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This book is an ambitious attempt to revise the history of Nicaragua under American rule. Rather than describing a simple story of resistance culminating with Augusto Cesar Sandino's celebrated rebellion, Michel Cobat analyzes the complex political and economic patterns of resistance and accommodation to United States' imperial designs. Utilizing a dialectical approach, Cobat also incorporates culture into his study, demonstrating that Nicaraguans alternately embraced and rejected values associated with the United States. Cobat, an associate professor of history at the University of Iowa, challenges common myths and assumptions about a number of historical figures and events, beginning with the William Walker episode and ending with Sandino's rebellion. He argues: "U.S. imperial rule in Nicaragua, unlike elsewhere in the Caribbean Basin, helped 'democratize' rural society by weakening landlord hegemony over the peasantry" (p. 5). He maintains that "this peculiar impact of U.S. imperial rule was unintended and resulted from the fact that poorer Nicaraguans managed to cope more effectively with U.S. political and economic impositions that was possible for elite Nicaraguans" (ibid).

At first glance one might deduce that Cobat has produced evidence that supports Washington's democratic mission abroad. However, Cobat walks the reader through a thoughtful and sophisticated examination of Nicaragua's encounters with American imperialism. He focuses without apology on the Conservative oligarchy based in Cranada. Cobat sees a dynamic relationship between the Conservatives' quest for modernization and the imperial objectives of the United States.

Much of his argument hinges on the notion that dollar diplomacy weakened elite control over the rural economy. A thorough examination of credit transactions in Cranada between 1910 and 1925 reveals that the allocation of credit became more democratic under American occupation, thanks in large part to the 890 The Journal of American History December 2006 restrictive lending policies of the American-owned Banco Nacional. Although large estate owners complained about the bank's lending policies, Cobat finds that there was a significant increase in lending to small and medium borrowers, demonstrating that the dollar diplomats made credit more available to peasants and the rural middle class. Cobat therefore concludes that the financial statistics demonstrate "just how significantly elite control over agricultural production weakened under dollar diplomacy" (p. 162).

Further, Cobat argues that dollar diplomacy contributed to the democratization of rural class structures, citing evidence that a number of Conservative oligarchs lost their estates during dollar diplomacy. Leaving aside the question of causality, Cobat fails to provide statistics on land tenure patterns, wages, and distribution of income to demonstrate that rural society became more egalitarian. Yet Cobat maintains that the unintended consequences of dollar diplomacy contributed to a turn by Conservatives against the United States, manifested most prominently by the elitist efforts to forge a political alliance with Sandino.

Cobat occasionally stretches his argument beyond what his evidence will sustain, particularly in his efforts to link Conservative support for the Sandinista revolution to the Conservative response to dollar diplomacy earlier in the twentieth century. Nevertheless, this book represents an original, thoughtful, and serious analysis of Nicaragua's engagement with United States imperialism. PaulJ. Dosal

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