As President Carter’s ambassador to Nicaragua from 1977–1979, Mauricio Solaún witnessed a critical moment in Central American history. In *U.S. Intervention and Regime Change in Nicaragua*, Solaún outlines the role of U.S. foreign policy during the Carter administration and explains how this policy with respect to the Nicaraguan Revolution of 1979 not only failed but helped impede the institutionalization of democracy there.

Late in the 1970s, the United States took issue with the Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza. Moral suasion, economic sanctions, and other peaceful instruments from Washington led to violent revolution in Nicaragua and bolstered a new dictatorial government. A U.S.-supported counterrevolution formed, and Solaún argues that the United States attempts to this day to determine who rules Nicaragua.

Solaún explores the mechanisms that kept Somoza’s poorly legitimized regime in power for decades, making it the most enduring Latin American authoritarian regime of the twentieth century. Solaún argues that continual shifts in U.S. international policy have been made in response to previous policies that failed to produce U.S.-friendly international environments. His historical survey of these policy shifts provides a window on the working of U.S. diplomacy and lessons for future policy-making.

In this book, Mauricio Solaun, U.S. ambassador to Nicaragua during the Carter administration, recounts his experience, and seeks to explain why a large-scale popular revolution occurred in Nicaragua against the wishes of the U.S. government. Solaun’s argument is that the Somoza government was a U.S. client-state, which, because of limited domestic legitimacy, relied heavily on the United States to maintain its authority.
The Carter administration implemented its human rights policy to pressure Latin American dictatorships, including the Somoza regime, to respect human rights and make the transition to democracy. To the Nicaraguan opposition, this signaled an opening to begin mobilizing for greater democracy and human rights. Anastasio Somoza Debayle, however, retained the loyalty of his civilian and military cadres, who reinforced the dictator's stubborn predisposition and determination to stay in power. Consequently, Somoza refused to cooperate with the United States or to make genuine concessions to the opposition.

Facing this intransigence, the Carter administration nevertheless refused to take strong and direct action against the dictator because it adhered to the principle of nonintervention. As a result, U.S. policy failed to persuade Somoza to step down, get his cadres to sponsor a coup d'état, or sufficiently support the unarmed opposition; these failures led to the growth of the Sandinista Front for National Liberation (FSLN) and inevitably its ascension to power. To make this argument, Solaun provides a historical account of how the Somoza dynasty was enthroned and how it remained in power in earlier times. He then relies primarily on his own personal notes from his tenure as ambassador to explain why the regime collapsed.

The book has several strengths. It provides the audience with an extremely rich and detailed account of the relationship between the U.S. embassy and Nicaraguan political actors in the closing years of the dictatorship. This is a valuable contribution for Latin Americanists and potentially valuable for Latin American political actors as well, in that it provides a view we are not often privy to. For one thing, it reminds us that the U.S. government is not a monolithic entity. Instead, it is made up of multiple actors and agencies with often-competing interpretations, preferences, beliefs, and values. The finished product that we usually see, the official pronouncements from the president, the State Department, USAID, and ambassadors, which promote an image of unity and rational thought, are often mere façades that hide discrepancies and disagreements between actors and agencies.

Interspersed throughout the narrative are nuggets of insider observations, such as interesting quotations from Somoza that give clues to the dictator's personality, and interesting details about U.S. policy. For instance, Solaun lays out what he recounts as the major shifts in U.S. policy during his tenure. This provides a periodization of U.S. foreign policy that could be quite useful to scholars of the Nicaraguan revolution. He breaks down U.S. policy during this time into four periods and strategies: neutrality, mediation, partial withdrawal, and counterrevolutionary initiatives and mediation (failure of U.S. policy).

The book also does an excellent job of highlighting the author's frustration and impotence as a representative and functionary of the U.S. government. Solaun recounts how, for all his power as the head of the U.S. mission in Nicaragua, he was unable to get the administration to follow what he thought was the best course of action. At the same time, he effectively communicates how he had to implement policies he was uncomfortable with and promote them in public. This message comes across loud and clear throughout the text. In this sense, the book offers a good lesson for young, idealistic students who want to join the Foreign Service because they think that it offers them a way to change the world, or at least negative U.S. foreign policies. Solaun's experience offers a valuable cautionary tale that can help students begin the process of removing those rose-colored glasses and approach the decision more maturely and with realistic expectations.

Where the book is less effective, however, is in fully developing its social scientific analysis. It reads much more like a memoir than an academic monograph. There is very little theory and even less theoretical integration with the empirical parts of the book. Indeed, the theoretical parts are concentrated in the prologue, introduction, and epilogue. There, Solaun offers a few kernels of what could possibly have been more thoroughly expanded insights. Of particular note are his discussion of client-states as a useful analytical category for understanding foreign relations and his brief discussion in the epilogue of how some of the insights from Central America in the 1980s can apply to the current global context. I would have liked to see these discussed in more elaborated form. I was left with the impression, however, that these parts of the book had been more or less tacked on hastily to deal with reviewers' comments.

The book operates primarily at the level of agency, focusing its explanation almost exclusively on characteristics and behaviors of the actors involved to explain the outcome of the conflict. This occurs despite the early potential of the client-state description of the U.S.-Nicaraguan relationship in the introduction. Although this structural feature of the two societies' relationship keeps surfacing implicitly in the recurrent mention that (with the exception of the FSLN) all the Nicaraguan political actors suffered from a psychological dependence on the United States, it is never thoroughly explored, defined, or incorporated into the explanation.

A potentially more problematic issue for the book is that only three of the four main actors are mentioned in the explanatory analysis: the United States, the Somoza government, and the unarmed opposition. To explain why the Nicaraguan revolution occurred, it is essential to analyze the role played by the FSLN. Yet a thorough account of the FSLN's actions and strategies is generally missing from the book, though Solaun himself acknowledges that "History was being made by ordinary people, not only by elites" (p. 182). (He does briefly recount a conversation with Alan Riding, a New York Times reporter who noted that it was the Marxist-oriented activists who were organizing students, workers, and slum dwellers at the grassroots to rebel against the dictatorship (p. 1251).

A few other concerns arise. In trying to be as fair as possible to a much-maligned historical figure such as Somoza, Solaún errs on the side of being too generous, especially in the early parts of the book. While the following may just have been a matter of needing
to distinguish between Anastasio Somoza García (the founder of the dynasty) from Anastasio Somoza Debayle (his son, ousted by the Sandinistas), it struck me as odd that he would refer to Somoza Debayle as "my" General Somoza on several occasions (e.g., p. 39). He also refers to the Luis Somoza period of the dictatorship as the Golden Years. Again it struck me as inappropriate to describe any period of dictatorship as the golden years in a country's history. I am sure that many of the people whose family members were persecuted, tortured, or killed by the dictatorship during that time would oppose such a designation. In contrast, Solaun reserves his strongest pejorative treatment for the FSLN as "terrorists" (p. 158), "violent" (p. 125), "undemocratic" (p. 160), or "authoritarian" (p. 110). A few times, I had to put the book down before continuing to read what I considered unfair descriptions and contradictions in the treatment of the different actors in the conflict. Generally, however, the book tries to strike a balanced tone on a very polarized and polarizing subject.

The book's major contribution is the author's candid and revealing statements on the Carter administration's treatment of the FSLN. Of all the political actors in Nicaragua, the only group that the embassy was expressly prohibited from developing contacts with, or even speaking with, was the FSLN. The book makes clear that the most reasonable option the U.S. could and should have followed to avert the bloodshed that ensued was the only option that was a priori taken off the table. The U.S. should have supported, or at the very least, recognized and opened talks with the FSLN. This was not an unreasonable, unheard of, or unimagined option. As Solaun states, the option was put forward by U.S. political scientist Thomas Walker, whose letter to President Carter was reprinted in Nicaragua's La Prensa and gained broad support in the months before the Sandinista triumph (p. 259).

How hypocritical that the Carter administration, with its declared commitment to human rights, would continue speaking with, recognizing, and funding the dictator, but not do the same with the only representative political force in the country that was putting its life on the line to change the regime militarily. That the administration chose this course of action is unfortunate, because it led to the death of at least 30,000 Nicaraguans. Had the Carter administration been brave enough to take the "unpopular" stance of backing the Sandinistas, the 1980s in Nicaragua might have been quite different, the Reagan administration's hawkish desires notwithstanding. That, apparently, is the problem: as the book clearly illustrates, revolutionary nationalist governments in Latin America with genuinely independent foreign policies scare the U.S. ruling elites more than brutal dictatorships.

Solaún's insights also belie the subsequent claims of "we did everything in our power" not to alienate the Sandinistas, and the feigned surprise when the FSLN adopted a skeptical, distrusting, and defensive attitude toward the United States. Anything else on its part would have been foolish. Moreover, Solaun's recounting of the conflict vindicates progressive scholars' claims that it was U.S. policy that pushed the Sandinistas in this direction. In the end, the author's own conclusion, that Somoza would never have negotiated in good faith or instituted meaningful reforms unless compelled by violence to do so, also vindicates the FSLN's position of refusing to negotiate with the dictator (pp. 272, 278, 284).