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Book Review: The War in Nicaragua

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When the word *filibuster* did not refer to a parliamentary tactic to delay or impede legislation, the famous and flamboyant General William Walker—at best, an adventurer and, at worst, a pirate—was a well-known and widely hailed representative of this group.

The term *filibuster* in this context descends from the Spanish *filibuster*, borrowed from the Dutch *freebooter*, literally “pirate,” and described someone engaging in a non-state, privately organized military expedition into a foreign country or territory. In the mid-nineteenth century, various filibusters (most of them Americans) attempted to control Caribbean, Canadian, Central American, and Mexican territories by force. Among these characters, Walker stands out as the most famous and successful.

Walker was executed at 36, but in his short lifetime, he conquered and ruled two countries. Shortly before his death, his book, *The War in Nicaragua*, was published. In it, Walker describes how he became ruler of Nicaragua and how he later lost his presidency. After completing this account, he stood up a new filibuster and tried to invade Honduras. He failed, however, when he was captured and held by the British and handed over to the Hondurans, ultimately ending up in Trujillo in front of a firing squad.
Walker’s Early Life

Walker was born on May 8, 1824, in Nashville. His family ancestry is closely tied to the history of the European settlement of North America, the struggle for independence from Great Britain, and the early years of the United States. Originally from Scotland, his family can be traced back to Williamsburg, Virginia, where they settled before 1650, and his forebears were involved in the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812.

Walker was many things: by 25, he had already tried three professions—medicine, law, and journalism—had spent time in Europe, and had moved to New Orleans. When “the Big Easy” was hit by a cholera pandemic, stealing his beloved bride, he followed the stream of venturers infected by gold fever and arrived in San Francisco. After initially continuing his career as a journalist, he began his final profession: filibustering.

As a columnist, he promoted Manifest Destiny, the idea that it was America’s God-given fate to stretch from “sea to shining sea.” This ideology, especially after the Mexican-American War, was not limited to the West coast but was applied to the South and, to a lesser extent, north, to Canada. While the US government was unwilling to conquer the whole continent, filibusters like Walker were willing to try. Many of these men were from the American South, additionally motivated by the potential to create new slave states, which could then be given to the Union and thereby provide Southern states an advantage.

First Ventures in Filibustering

After unsuccessful negotiations with Mexican authorities over creating a colony in exchange for protection against hostile Native Americans in Lower California (present-day Baja), Walker began his military adventure, hoping instead to conquer the regions of Lower California and Sonora. After US authorities took possession of the ship meant to transport Walker and his 45-man strong army southward, Walker found another boat and left San Francisco to conquer a territory of 124,000 square miles. He captured La Paz, the capital of Lower California, occupied the peninsula, established the Republic of Sonora, and named himself president. He installed Louisiana’s constitution and legal norms (since he had practiced law in Louisiana), meaning the Republic of Sonora’s legal framework included slavery.

Walker’s reign did not last long. He faced unexpected Mexican resistance, which he and his men provoked by alienating the locals, stealing from them, and looting their farms. Later, the captain of his ship decided to leave the Mexican shore, leaving Walker and his men in a hostile environment alone and without supplies. They went north, and after a final stand-off, they surrendered to American soldiers in San Diego. (Incidentally, Frederick Townsend Ward, one of his followers, would later become the commander of the Shanghai Foreign Arms Corps and the Ever Victorious Army of Imperial China during the Taiping Rebellion—but that is another nearly forgotten story.)

Walker went to trial for his raid in Mexico and for violating the Neutrality Act of 1818, which threatened perpetrators with a fine, imprisonment for not more than three years, or both. Although Walker led a military expedition into the territory of Mexico, with whom the United States was at peace, the jury took only eight minutes to acquit him. The failed mission had no legal consequences, but Walker mostly won in the court of public opinion and became famous in the United States. It took Walker just one more year to launch another filibuster campaign; this time, Nicaragua was his objective.
Nicaragua and the United States

Nicaragua is the largest of the seven countries forming Central America and gained independence from Spain in 1821 and from the Federal Republic of Central America in 1838. Its geography, especially after the California Gold Rush began in 1848, made it a vital chokepoint providing a route from America’s eastern ports via the San Juan River, Lake Nicaragua, and a short but exhausting land journey from the lake’s western shores to the Pacific Ocean.

In 1849, a US consortium under American tycoon Cornelius Vanderbilt negotiated a monopoly for Nicaraguan transit and sailing its interior waters with steamships. The contract also gave Vanderbilt’s company exclusive permission to build a canal there within 12 years. This canal would reduce the travel time and costs for prospectors to go to California for the Gold Rush and would be a lucrative shortcut from the Caribbean Sea to the Pacific Ocean, linking the eastern US ports more closely to the Asian market. There had been plans to build a canal in Nicaragua ever since the Spanish conquered Central America. During Walker’s lifetime, Vanderbilt’s consortium, the Federal Republic of Central America, and the British Empire studied ways to connect Lake Nicaragua directly to the Pacific. American and British plans that were financially and technologically feasible were especially frustrated by Walker’s actions in 1855. Furthermore, various foreign mining and agricultural businesses were operating in Central America.

Walker’s Invasion of Nicaragua

There are four contemporaneous accounts of Walker’s war in Nicaragua—two from US consular agents in Central America, another by one of Walker’s followers, and one written and published by Walker himself. Walker wrote The War in Nicaragua in just five months, from 1859–60, partly to finance his last expedition to Central America. Assessing his personal description of his own war in Nicaragua can be tricky, as it is arguably biased, though his contemporaries assess it as objective. Walker writes about himself in the third person in a style that differs greatly from his earlier editorials. He only writes with emotion when describing the Nicaraguan geography, flora, and fauna and describes political and military actions in a matter-of-fact, prosaic way.

Nicaragua’s birth as a nation was accompanied by a bloody power struggle, and the conflict that erupted in 1854 between the conservative Granada-based Legitimist Party and the liberal Democratic Party, whose stronghold was in Léon, was not unusual. As they became locked in a stalemate, both sides began recruiting foreigners, mainly from neighboring Central American countries, to strengthen their power. While the Legitimists had some success in recruiting French fighters, the liberals had some foreign officers and contacted Walker via an intermediary. Their request for help fell on fruitful soil, but the contract was subject to negotiations. It had to circumvent the neutrality laws and offer sufficient inducements for the risky undertaking. Finally, the contract fulfilled these two functions, and Walker hired the brig Vesta.

After some problems with US law enforcement (namely, the Sheriff), Walker’s party set sail from San Francisco to the western Nicaraguan town Realejo on May 4, 1855. Arriving with his 57 “Immortals” at this town—once described as the best natural harbor in the Spanish monarchy—Walker became the second US actor to operate in Nicaragua. (Vanderbilt was already running the Accessory Transit Company, and in August 1955, Henry Kinney, another filibuster, joined them, trying to establish a colony at the eastern so-called Mosquito Coast.)
With an additional 200 native liberal troops supplementing his forces, Walker marched to the conservative stronghold of Rivas (also an important hub for Vanderbilt’s transport business). Walker displayed very little operational art or tactical skills. He basically marched into the town, and the garrison trapped him in an ambush. His Nicaraguan liberal forces fled, and his core troops were vastly outnumbered and severely decimated in intensive urban fights. This defeat could have ended the expedition, but Walker was not a man to give up. The conservative party was convinced they had overwhelmed the Liberals and their ally, and Walker’s next move hit them totally unprepared.

After the defeat at Rivas, Walker wasted no time changing his strategy. He commandeered Vanderbilt’s steamships, sailed northward on Lake Nicaragua, and invaded the conservative capital Granada from the waterfront. Surprised and overwhelmed by the attack, the conservatives surrendered, and Walker dictated his conditions. He installed a coalition government, a new president, and a United Army of the Republic of Nicaragua, which he then led as General. Walker’s force was composed of the survivors of his initial party and Nicaraguans but became multinational, with British, French, and German officers and mercenaries on the pay roll. At home, Walker became a famous folk hero, and in 1856, even US President Franklin Pierce recognized Walker’s regime.

Everything seemed perfect for Walker—but a perfect storm was brewing. Great Britain saw its interests in the region being endangered, and the other Central American states believed Walker was just the prelude to a larger US annexation. Walker was a powerful adversary. He caused instability, commandeered assets of the Accessory Transport Company, and even gave transportation licenses to competitors—infuriating Vanderbilt. As Great Britain sent weapons, supplies, and even mercenaries down to Central America, the tycoon and neighboring states declared war on Walker.

Walker’s Presidency—and His Swift Defeat

A preemptive strike against Costa Rica led to the battle of Santa Rosa, where Walker’s army was defeated within minutes. The Costa Ricans then marched toward Rivas and defeated Walker again—but luck was on his side, as a cholera outbreak struck his adversaries and forced them to retreat. A few months later, a combined force from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras invaded and took the liberal center Léon. As the Costa Ricans again entered the war, the coalition government in Nicaragua collapsed, and its president fled. The filibuster used this flight to hold elections and become president.

After his inauguration, he legalized slavery, made English the official language, and invited more colonists from the United States. His presidency did not last long. Nicaraguan power brokers turned against him and asked other Central American countries for help. Although he received help and supplies from one of Vanderbilt’s competitors, he lost battles and had to retreat to Granada, where a cholera breakout severely affected his troops. Faced with this health threat, Walker turned to Rivas and burned down Granada. One of his officers threw a lance into the ground, and the sign on it read: “Aquí fue Granada” (“Here was Granada”). Rivas was a strategically good choice for a force under pressure: strongly fortified and easy to defend, in control of the Nicaraguan transit route, full of incoming recruits, and located among a population tired of war. Vanderbilt, or better yet, his mercenaries, should have delivered the decisive strike. They captured the majority of the steamboats and cut Walker off from all supplies. Meanwhile, the US government sent the sloop of war St. Mary to negotiate Walker’s surrender, and he boarded this ship on May 1, 1857, and sailed home.
His landing in New Orleans had the character of a folk festival, with the crowd admiring him. He was received with enormous enthusiasm wherever he appeared, and in New York, he led a parade on a scale unparalleled until Admiral George Dewey’s victory parade in 1899. Half a year later, Walker attempted to return to Nicaragua, but US President James Buchanan ordered him not to. When he was brought back to the United States, Walker began writing his book, not least to fund a project he never got out of his mind: to make his comeback as president of Nicaragua. Unrest in Honduras and the British settlers asking for his help seemed to present the opportunity he had been waiting for. He landed in Trujillo, stormed the fort, and seemed, at first glance, to have defeated the Honduran defenders, but he came under severe pressure. The captain of the *Icarus*, an aptly named British warship, demanded Walker’s surrender. The Brits handed him over to the Hondurans, and six days later, he was executed in front of the very fort he had stormed just days before. Filibustering was buried with him. Shortly after, in the years to come, that surplus of adventurous energy in the United States would be absorbed by the American Civil War.

Considering his successful journalism career, *The War in Nicaragua* is heavy reading. It is a mixture of a chronicle of events as he remembers them and propaganda on the question of slavery, and only when he writes about the beauty of Nicaragua does his writing become emotional.

**Modern Adaptations and Reception**

To understand his personality, his time, and even events to come, the 1987 movie *Walker* is highly informative. Alex Cox directed the film as a very unrealistic story about the very real Walker. The movie begins with the claim that it will tell a true story but ends with a bizarre, nearly grotesque, slapstick depiction of events: soldiers with modern weaponry, people reading magazines, Coca-Cola, cars passing buggies, and a helicopter to evacuate all Americans. Through all this near nonsense, we may still get an accurate picture of Walker, whom his contemporaries called “the grey-eyed man of destiny.” Ed Harris, the actor playing the filibuster, dressed in a priest-like outfit, addresses his men persuasively and walks firmly into battle while his soldiers are hit left and right, giving an idea of the true Walker, who is also breathing between the lines in the book. In the movie, President Ronald Reagan also appears on TV, and Walker addresses his followers, saying: “You all might think that there will be a day when America will leave Nicaragua alone. But I am here to tell you that day will never happen.”

In fact, Walker’s infamous invasion by invitation was neither the first nor the last instance of US military activity in Nicaragua. In 1852, US Marines landed in Nicaragua to protect the interests of a mining company, and a US warship bombarded San Juan del Norte in 1853 as retaliation for an action against American citizens. After a short intervention in 1909 on the Caribbean coast, a contingent of nearly 3,000 Marines landed in Nicaragua and secured a kind of US protectorate, which President Franklin D. Roosevelt ended in 1933. Beginning in 1981, the United States supported opponents against the Sandinista regime, known as the Contra Wars, which had an especially interesting detail—the United States and Iran cooperated to fund anti-Communist Nicaraguan rebels.

Are Walker and his book worth digging up from the “ash heap of history”? He was a strategic blunderer (at best) and a mediocre leader, and he undertook his operations haphazardly. He and his life provide a window into an epoch when many Americans believed it was their country’s God-given responsibility to expand and spread the idea of democracy and capitalism and the power of this ideology. The few written commentaries remembering the “king of the filibusters” heavily criticize Walker’s approach to slavery. Is it true that he implemented slavery in the Republic of Sonora and
in Nicaragua, and his book praises the advantages of slavery in tropical areas. Walker himself never owned slaves, however, and his writing must also be seen as an attempt to raise funds for another expedition. His mighty rival, Vanderbilt, ensured that not much funding was available in New York and the entire North, requiring Walker to focus on the Southern states.

A closer look at Walker and his actions shows that Central America, with its instabilities and turmoil, had and still has significant geopolitical relevance for the US government. Walker may have been largely forgotten at home, but in Central America where he was defeated, his memory still is alive. There is some truth that the combined fight against the filibusters is the cradle of Central American nationalism. The National Monument of Costa Rica depicts five female figures representing Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua, armed and driving away a male figure—Walker.

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