

This daring filibuster's odyssey
as liberator and President of Nicaragua was brief—and bloody.
His legacy is with us still.

El Presidente Gringo

William Walker and the Conquest of Nicaragua

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HIS EYES—there was something about his eyes. They were gray, languid yet penetrating, the color seeming to spill out from a cavernous depth. William Walker had heard the ancient legend told by Central American Indians of a "Gray-eyed Man of Destiny," a savior who would bring peace and plenty, a liberator whose coming they would hail and before whom they would lay offerings of fruit. Walker believed that he was that messiah, that man of destiny. "I am not ashamed to say," he declared, "that I am favored by the gods."

This preordination, Walker believed, was inextricably linked to America's destiny, its "manifest destiny," the inevitable hemispheric triumph of the "pure American race." The world's history, he said, was replete with examples of superior races overwhelming the inferior, of the drumbeat of human progress toward perfection, of the natural struggle between barbarism and civilization, of the clash of ancient, moldering cultures against the fresh breezes of enlightenment. That conviction would drive Walker south to Mexico, later to Central America. He saw himself as conqueror and prophet, an American Caesar.

Walker. To his enemies, the name conjured up no images of American destiny, no notions of progress and enlighten-

ment. Rather it spoke of terrorism and invasion, of marauding bandits burning and killing, of towns overrun, of peoples humiliated and conquered.

In the small town of San Jacinto, Nicaragua stands a statue of a boy soldier who had slain one of Walker's invaders with a stone. The boy is still revered in Nicaragua, where he remains a symbol of resistance to foreign aggression. For Nicaragua, Walker is the devil never exorcised. His legacy lives on.

HE LOOKED an unlikely adventurer, an improbable conqueror. Barely more than 120 pounds, five-foot-five, with wispy blond hair, Walker was unimposing in stature, had a shrill, quavering voice, and often wore odd, ludicrously ill-matched clothing. But his innocuous appearance masked an intense, almost pathologically restless nature. Walker was seemingly always on a quest for excitement, violence, action. A driven romantic, hopelessly eccentric, he above all craved fame and recognition.

The usual image, the one that has grown with the legend, depicts a stern, rifle-carrying figure dressed in an over-large black parson's cape and broad, flat-brimmed black hat: a humorless, self-absorbed, puritanical, almost prudish zealot, impervious to danger, with a mind leaping and vaulting from apparent madness to brilliance.

He was born in 1824, the eldest son of a Scotch-born Nashville dry-goods merchant who had made a fortune in the insurance business. Walker's devout parents, members of the Disciples of Christ, a fundamentalist sect, encouraged William to prepare for the ministry,

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but he decided instead to study medicine. An academic prodigy, Walker graduated from the University of Nashville at age fourteen, then went north to the University of Pennsylvania where, at age nineteen, he obtained a medical degree.

Walker traveled to Europe for postgraduate work, becoming a proponent of the pain-relieving powers of hypnotic surgery. But disgusted by the wretched, ill-equipped hospitals of the early nineteenth century, and troubled by his inability to cure his mother's acute rheumatism, he gradually drifted away from medicine to the study of law. His penetrating, rapacious intellect mastered this new field as swiftly as it had the first. He was admitted to the bar in New Orleans and practiced briefly.

But Walker's restlessness soon drove him to yet another profession—journalism. In 1848 he became an editorial writer for the *New Orleans Crescent*. While working there, he fell in love with a deaf and mute woman named Ellen Martin.

When Martin contracted cholera and suddenly died, Walker was devastated. He escaped to San Francisco, taking a job with one of the city's newest papers, the *Daily Herald*.

Journalism ignited Walker's intellectual fires. He was stirred by the contentious debate over slavery then raging across the country; mesmerized by tales of gold; by stories of adventurers and pioneers; of Indians and Mexican banditos; of duels and shoot-outs. The seemingly gentle, courteous, and chivalrous young writer stood ready to break the chains of convention. The path of destiny beckoned.

The call came from the south.

DURING the United States' war with Mexico in 1847, Commodore Matthew C. Perry had written to Secretary of the Navy John Mason: "Destiny has doubtless decided that the vast continent of North America . . . shall in the course of time fall under the influence of Laws and institutions of the United States."

Perry's belief was hardly new. The idea that the United States would eventually annex the entire western hemisphere—from the Arctic snows to Cape Horn—had for years excited Americans, especially politicians and speculators. They shared an unbridled nationalism, the conviction that the moral and cultural superiority of the United States would gain for the country increasing dominance.

In this fever of expansionism, many Americans were drawn south to Latin America, with its rich lands and uncertain future. Torn by incessant wars, riddled by political intrigue and corruption, coveted by European colonial powers, the countries of Latin America tottered in confusion and instability. For reckless men on the run, for daring entrepreneurs, for adventurers of all types, the region was alluring. It was especially so for those imaginative if presumptuous freebooters known as "filibusters"—men who by force of arms sought to seize countries and establish themselves as rulers.

The idea was simple enough. Gather together the best available soldiers of fortune, equip them with weapons and supplies, rent a ship or two, sail to a Latin American country, usurp power, and become a dictator, president, king, or whatever title of government or royalty one chose. Fame and riches awaited the man bold enough, ingenious enough, to succeed.

Walker had heard of several such expeditions—and of the ignominious embarrassment and defeat of most. But these forays, Walker thought, had not been led by men of his caliber. Driven by wanderlust, embittered by his beloved's death, Walker was about to enter a world of club and iron, a world of short odds. It would become his obsession.

WALKER THE FILIBUSTER. In 1853 he recruited a force of about forty-five men, set sail for Lower California, and launched his career as a conqueror. His mission, he announced, was humanitarian: to protect American women and children living along the Mexican border from attacks by Apache Indians. He was acting, he said, to overcome oppression and bring the blessings of American civilization to these benighted Mexican provinces, to introduce democracy and stability to a troubled land.

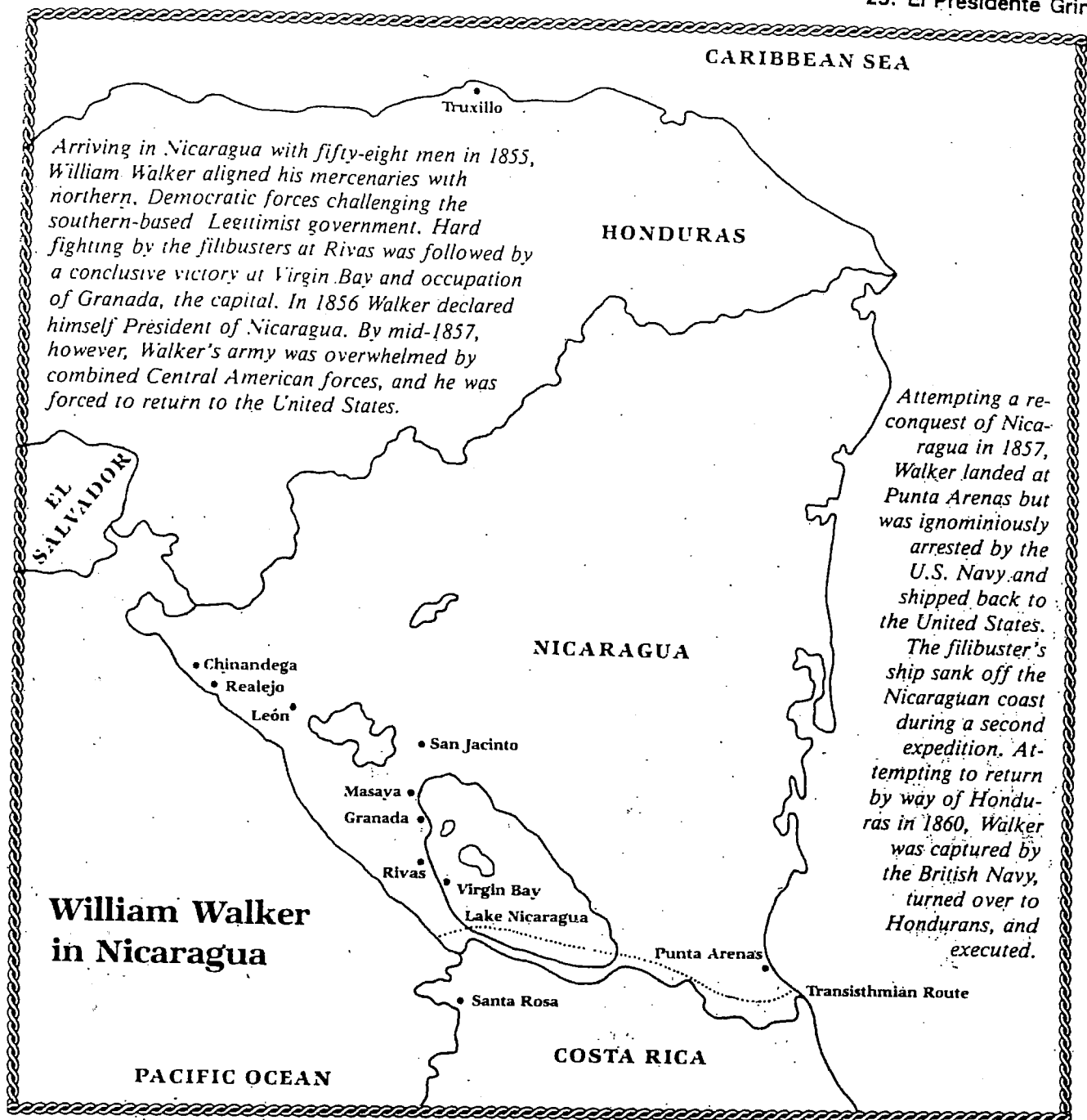
From the early days of the excursion, Walker displayed the grandiloquent, pompous air that would mark his entire career. After his troops managed to capture La Paz, the small, sleepy capital of Baja California, Walker boldly issued a proclamation establishing the "Republic of Lower California." The new government came equipped with a flag designed by Walker, a constitution written by Walker, and a cabinet chosen by Walker from the ranks of his army of adventurers. Walker, of course, was President.

Word of his initial success attracted new recruits from California. Next, Walker's army moved eastward over rugged mountains and across the Colorado River to Sonora. When Walker announced the addition of this neighboring state to his paper nation, a San Francisco editor noted that "It would have been just as cheap and easy to have annexed the whole of Mexico at once, and would have saved the trouble of making future proclamations."

As President, Walker adopted an aloof, burdened posture. Here was a head of state with weighty problems crushing down on him, a man totally absorbed by the affairs of government, carrying on admirably in the face of insurmountable odds.

But although he issued a stream of orders and demands, the rigorous discipline Walker had sought to instill in his men began to slip out of his grasp. In a brazen effort to control his forces, he ordered the execution of two of his troops who had tried to flee the foundering enterprise. Nevertheless, as conditions continued to deteriorate, desertions became rampant.

The adventure came to an abrupt end. Chased out of Lower California, Walker managed to lead a few surviving members of his party back across the United States



Arriving in Nicaragua with fifty-eight men in 1855, William Walker aligned his mercenaries with northern, Democratic forces challenging the southern-based Legitimist government. Hard fighting by the filibusters at Rivas was followed by a conclusive victory at Virgin Bay and occupation of Granada, the capital. In 1856 Walker declared himself President of Nicaragua. By mid-1857, however, Walker's army was overwhelmed by combined Central American forces, and he was forced to return to the United States.

Attempting a reconquest of Nicaragua in 1857, Walker landed at Punta Arenas but was ignominiously arrested by the U.S. Navy and shipped back to the United States. The filibuster's ship sank off the Nicaraguan coast during a second expedition. Attempting to return by way of Honduras in 1860, Walker was captured by the British Navy, turned over to Hondurans, and executed.

border near San Diego on May 8, 1854—his thirtieth birthday.

Most of Walker's troops had perished in Mexico from fever, starvation, or enemy bullets. The survivors had run out of provisions en route and barely escaped eradication by Mexican soldiers and Indians. They had marched nearly barefoot for hundreds of miles, leaving a trail of blood on the sun-baked desert sand. Walker himself limped across the border wearing one boot and one makeshift sandal. Only the pen of Cervantes, some could have done the scene justice.

Although the expedition had been, indeed, a quixoticiasco, one from which Walker was fortunate to have escaped with his life, he seemed charged by the experience. Filibustering, he now realized, was his true calling.

On his return to San Francisco, Walker was hailed by some Americans as a hero. He was, in their eyes, a prime example of rugged individualism, a private, patriotic freedom-fighter exemplifying courage and fortitude. When he stood trial in November 1854 for violating neutrality laws, the patriot was acquitted by a jury that took only eight minutes to reach its verdict.

Filibustering, Walker saw, brought the adulation and recognition he craved. The Mexican venture had been only a warm-up for the real game. Next he targeted Nicaragua.

NICARAGUA: poor but fertile, a land of tropical fruit fields, clear lakes, and active volcanoes. For generations, explorers and sailors from many lands had

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roamed its forests and walked its shores. Spanish, French, English, Belgians, Dutch all valued Nicaragua's resources and recognized the vital significance of its location, nestled as it was between two oceans. The narrow isthmus, Napoleon III once wrote, "can become . . . the necessary route of the great commerce of the world and is destined to attain an extraordinary degree of prosperity and grandeur."

Nicaragua had endured a shaky independence since 1823. A succession of political chieftains jockeyed for power and control, leaving the population vulnerable and unstable.

Diplomats and politicians from England, France, and the United States tiptoed through endless negotiations, plotting, conniving, each warily watching the moves of his counterparts, each fearing that an enemy would gain control over this strategically important republic.

For the United States, Nicaragua had special significance; through it ran the favored transisthmian route for travelers between the U.S. Atlantic coast and California. By treaty Nicaragua had granted Americans the right to establish transit. Now, by river boat, lake steamer, and carriage, travelers were able to cross from one ocean to the other without a long and dangerous passage around South America.

The transit route was the brainchild of one of America's wealthiest men: Cornelius Vanderbilt, the "Commodore," who had made a fortune running steamboats on the Hudson River. Vanderbilt's sagacious business instincts had been whetted by the prospective profits from Nicaraguan investment. Promising to fill Nicaraguan leaders' pockets with gold, he had negotiated a contract for his Accessory Transit Company in 1849. Two years later he opened his isthmian route and began to run steamers from both U.S. coasts to Nicaraguan ports. The Accessory Transit Company enlarged the Vanderbilt fortune.

But soon the "Commodore" had competition. Two slick businessmen united to challenge Vanderbilt's control of Nicaraguan transit and began to earn substantial profits of their own. The "Commodore" would later get his revenge.

Meanwhile, in 1854 Byron Cole, a California business associate of Walker, traveled to Nicaragua to assess the economic and political opportunities there. He found two factions warring for power. The Democrats, a "people's party" headquartered in the north Nicaraguan town of León, were challenging the rule of the Legitimists, a Southern, aristocratic party based in Granada. Cole soon began to negotiate a deal with General Francisco de Castellón, leader of the Democrats. Cole promised to supply Castellón with American "colonists liable to military duty." In return, Castellón offered substantial payment and grants of land for each of the "colonists."

Cole returned to California to consult with Walker, and, after subsequent negotiations in which language suggesting military service was removed from the proposed accord, a deal was struck. The resulting agreement was a "colonization grant" that, according to civil

and military officials in San Francisco, did not violate United States neutrality laws forbidding unauthorized military intervention in the affairs of friendly nations.

Walker began recruiting "colonists"—the most battle-hardened, tough, skillful mercenaries he could find—men who thrived in battle, who lived for the kill, for the bottle, and for women. In May 1855, a year after his humiliating return from Mexico, he was ready to strike again.

WHEN WALKER and fifty-eight men arrived in Nicaragua in June 1855, landing at the northwest coast town of Realejo, the Democrats under General Castellón were supported in their bid for power by Nicaragua's northern neighbor, Honduras. They were, nevertheless, losing. A large force of Legitimists, led by General Ponciano Corral and aided by Guatemala, was preparing to march on the Democrats' stronghold at León.

Walker's arrogance soon became a mighty force in the Nicaraguan war. To *El Filibustero*, the Democrats and General Castellón were hopeless as military tacticians—confused, bewildered, totally unable to carry on the war effort effectively. He began to ignore them. When one of the generals became offended by Walker's presumptuousness, the American threatened to leave Nicaragua. Castellón quickly promised to reinforce Walker's troops with two hundred native conscripts.

Viewing the situation, Walker quickly decided that waiting in the Democratic capital of León for the expected onslaught by the Legitimist troops would be a foolhardy, probably suicidal strategy. He decided, instead, to take the offensive.

"La Falange Americana" (the American Phalanx), as the Democrats called Walker's force, sailed south to the Pacific end of Vanderbilt's transit route and prepared to attack Rivas, a town near Lake Nicaragua supposedly held by a small Legitimist force. If the Americans could control the transit route, Walker reasoned, then supplies, money, and weapons could be procured from the United States and recruits mustered from among the Transit Company's passengers.

On June 29, 1855 Walker slammed his forces into Rivas. He had his own fifty-eight soldiers of fortune and about 150 native Nicaraguans supplied by the Democrats. The conscripts soon began to disappear, however, either through treachery or cowardice. The American invaders were left to face a force about ten times their number.

But the odds were not as one-sided as they appeared. The American mercenaries carried Mississippi rifles and V.C. Colt revolvers, and they were all crack shots. The native Nicaraguans carried muskets that were notoriously inaccurate, even at close range.

After a bold attack, "La Falange" found itself surrounded in a building on the town's outskirts. There, Walker's troops exchanged gunfire with the enemy for several hours. Finally, running out of ammunition and seemingly doomed, Walker played his usual hand: he charged. His men rushed into the streets, rifles blazing,

and soon more than one hundred dead and wounded Nicaraguans littered the area. "La Falange" escaped, leaving behind six dead. Walker, later musing on the success of his brash tactics, wrote that "the Legitimists were not much in the humor of pursuing those who had taught them a first lesson in the use of a rifle."

José de Marcoleta, the Legitimist government's minister to the United States, complained bitterly to Secretary of State William Marcy of the devastation at Rivas: "The remains of buildings are still burning, and the ruins and ashes produced by the torch and hand of Walker are still smoking; the blood that has been shed is still warm; and years will elapse before the bitter tears will be dried which that brigand has caused to be shed by numberless families in both sections of the continent of America."

WALKER WITHDREW his force to Chinandega, a small town in northern Nicaragua, where he established his base of operations. Although his Democratic sponsors now wanted Walker to disperse his American troops throughout the Democratic army, *El Filibustero* refused. His cadre of about fifty men would better serve, he reasoned, as the terrifying nucleus of an army that could overrun all of Nicaragua.

He drilled his small army hard, and soon it was again ready to take the offensive. The filibusters sailed south again in August, landing on the coast west of Virgin Bay, another town on the transit route. Walker now commanded about forty-five mercenaries and 120 Nicaraguans. They soon confronted the enemy. Six hundred Legitimist troops bore down, testing the flanks of the small Democratic force. The Americans fired methodically and with deadly accuracy. Of the Legitimists, Walker wrote: "When they got within thirty or forty yards of the Americans their hearts seemed to fail them . . . either the quantity of liquor was insufficient, or it may have been too great, or it began to die out before the soldiers got close to their adversaries."

At battle's end, sixty dead Legitimists carpeted the outskirts of Virgin Bay. Two Nicaraguan Democrats had been killed, and several Americans wounded. A ball struck Walker, but he survived relatively unscathed. No wonder the press in the United States now began to call Walker and his fighters the "Immortals."

Walker did not wreak a conqueror's wrath upon the vanquished; instead, he instructed his men to bind the enemy's wounds. To captives who had fully expected to be bayoneted, Walker's orders seemed godlike. But this was a man on a divine mission. Cruel retribution, he believed, would have been unseemly. Walker was above that kind of barbarism. With this victory at Virgin Bay, he had tasted glory. Nothing, he was convinced, now stood between his band and ultimate triumph.

At dawn on October 13, a transit steamer carrying Walker and his warriors anchored near the Legitimist capital of Granada. Soon the "Immortals" stormed the town, taking it with barely a shot fired. To many Nicaraguans, Walker now appeared invincible.

The victor issued a "Manifesto Addressed to Nicara-

guans." To those who had expected rape and pillage from invading marauders, Walker offered order and tranquility. There would be no "unutterable immoralities" under a Walker regime, he promised, but protection to laboring men; a fostering of the arts, science, and agriculture; a government liberal in principle, committed to preserving peace and the vital interests of the nation. "Here it is," he declared, "a democratic Government in its true sense."

Although Walker had convincingly taken power in Granada, his victory still left a large number of Legitimist troops under General Corral holding much of Nicaragua. Walker's solution was a call for a coalition government composed of leaders from both parties.

Walker's willingness to seek a peaceful reconciliation astonished both sides. Impressed at such open compromise, many of Walker's bitterest enemies were grudgingly beginning to respect the *gringo* leader with the floppy hat. And when some Nicaraguans attempted to persuade Walker to accept the presidency of the country, he declined the offer—an act that so impressed U.S. Minister to Nicaragua John Wheeler that he began to work in Walker's behalf without even asking for the U.S. State Department's consent.

Working long hours, Walker started a state newspaper called *El Nicaraguense*, designed a state seal, created a flag, and began organizing a new government. He was not yet *El Presidente*, but it seemed that anything in Nicaragua was his for the taking.

WALKER'S JUDICIOUS MANEUVERING took one perilous turn during these months. Vanderbilt's transit company, Walker perceived, was accruing large profits without turning any of it to the benefit of Nicaragua. Aligning himself with Vanderbilt's business rivals because of their association with his long-time friend Edmund Randolph, Walker revoked the charter of the Accessory Transit Company, a move both bold and ominous. Responding to this audacious move, the "Commodore" made plans to send guns and money to oust from Nicaragua the impudent invader.

As leaders of neighboring Central American countries became increasingly alarmed at Walker's success, U.S. Secretary of State William Marcy assured diplomats that his country had not officially recognized the Walker government. But Marcy's disclaimer did not ring true with leaders in Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. They suspected the U.S. government of engineering a covert operation, of launching a subversive move to take over Central America.

By December 1855, two months after the fall of Granada, Central American opposition to filibuster control began to coalesce. Walker's success in Nicaragua had, ironically, promoted Central American nationalism. Leaders of the various countries began to work together toward one common goal—to crush the *gringo* usurper.

Costa Rica was the first to act. On March 1, 1856, Costa Rican President Juan Rafael Mora declared war on the Yankees. When word reached Walker, he decided on a pre-emptive raid into Costa Rica. But the force of

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about two hundred men he sent across the border to the town of Santa Rosa was quickly routed.

Although Walker was sick with fever, he rallied his demoralized forces and attacked the town of Rivas, where the advancing Costa Rican forces had taken temporary residence. The "Immortals" fought a long, house-to-house brawl and then were forced to withdraw with more than one hundred casualties.

But again Walker survived. Cholera and antiwar sentiment on the home front forced the Costa Ricans to withdraw, and a feared invasion from Honduras never materialized. For his humane treatment of Costa Rican sick left behind, Walker was lionized by some American newspaper editors.

ENCOURAGED by the enthusiasm for his cause in the United States, Walker decided to dispense with the charade of a puppet government and become Nicaragua's *Presidente*. On June 29, 1856, Walker's paper, *El Nicaragüense*, announced that an enormous election turnout had given him the presidency. Although the origin of the votes he claimed begged explanation, the American took office. He ignored the fact that the Nicaraguan constitution expressly excluded from office all who were not native-born.

Back in the United States, Walker had become something of a folk hero—an intrepid American adventurer defying the odds and taking on all foreign enemies in the name of liberty, democracy, justice, and American values. Crowds of sympathizers cheered his exploits at public meetings; newspaper headlines applauded his victories and lamented his defeats. He was toasted at banquets. In New York, a musical entitled *Nicaragua or General Walker's Victories* opened at Purdy's National Theater in July 1856. With a cast of characters that included "General Walker, the Hope of Freedom" and "Ivory Black, superior nigger," the musical featured the "Filibuster Overture" as well as patriotic favorites such as "Columbia, the Pride of the Ocean," "Yankee Doodle," and, of course, "The Star Spangled Banner."

On assuming the presidency, Walker presented his Inaugural Address. Sleepless vigilance, untiring devotion to liberty, an ardent resolve, and dedication to peace and progress—the message of *El Presidente* struck familiar patriotic notes. The victory of the "Immortals" would, he declared, usher in a new era; it was the culmination of Nicaraguan revolution against Spanish monarchy finally achieved after many years. Other Central American countries, driven by jealousy and the political enmity of a host of "imbecile rulers," would be unable to impede Nicaragua's noble experiment in democracy. The new epoch would inaugurate freedom of speech (with the new additional official language of English as well as Spanish), social order, an increase in commerce, a maturation of the arts, a sweeping away of crusty institutions by the strong winds of intellectual and moral advancement. "And for carrying out these intentions with success, I humbly invoke the aid of Him, without whose assistance all Human exertions are but a bubble on a stormy sea."

Although he now held power, Walker nested on a precarious perch. Groping for allies, money, guns, and troops—and opposed by Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Costa Rica, much of Nicaragua, and Cornelius Vanderbilt—Walker, on September 22, 1856, made a bold, calculated move. He issued a decree annulling legislation that had abolished slavery in Nicaragua several decades earlier.

Walker was making an overt appeal to the American South. Here in Nicaragua, Walker said, was a new outpost for the expansion of slavery. Here was the answer to Southern political leaders who sought a way to tip the balance of power between North and South. "Is it not time," he asked, "for the South to cease the contest for abstractions and to fight for realities? . . . How else can she strengthen slavery than by seeking its extension beyond the Union?"

To John Wheeler, the U.S. ambassador to Nicaragua, Walker's decree was sweet music. Wheeler was from North Carolina and a slave holder. He now saw Nicaragua breaking forth into a veritable Nirvana. He enthused over the arrival of eager white settlers, the sweet hum of new machinery, the cheerful roll of American carts through the streets. Only through slave labor, he saw, could the rich soil of Nicaragua be adapted to the culture of cotton, sugar, rice, and other staples. Wheeler and other Walker followers dashed off letters to friends in the Southern states seeking support for this new slave land.

The *Richmond Enquirer* declared, "This [is a] magnificent country General Walker has taken possession of in the name of the white race. . . . Here is a new state soon to be added to the South, in or out of the Union." Walker had succeeded in placing himself and Nicaragua deeply in the slavery debate. He hoped it would bolster his own government.

But his army was now meeting determined and sometimes fierce resistance. At San Jacinto Hill near Tipitapa, three hundred of Walker's fighters were routed. Their leader, Byron Cole, who had originally brought Walker to Nicaragua, was hanged by a group of peasants. And at San Jacinto a Nicaraguan named Andrés Castro became a future national hero when he killed a filibuster with a rock.

At the town of Masaya, the "Immortals," numbering about eight hundred, fought a combined Central American force of about 2,300. Both sides suffered severe losses. Walker retreated to Granada.

With the Central American combined offensive gathering strength, Walker's position rapidly deteriorated. He had now lost many men in the field, while others were ravaged by cholera. Although the Puritan martinet continued to preach morality, many of his men succumbed to the bottle and other vices. Demoralized, many of the "Immortals" saw their chances for survival rapidly fading. But Walker seemed oblivious, his grip on reality ebbing as the situation grew more critical. He waited for reinforcements.

Walker's business friends in the United States—Vanderbilt's rivals—responded with Charles Frederick Hen-

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ningsen, one of Europe's most skilled soldiers of fortune. Arriving in Granada, he brought men, rifles, howitzers, mortars, and years of fighting experience in Spain, Russia, and Hungary.

The Henningsen-trained "Immortals" attacked Virgin Bay with artillery support and, although outnumbered four-to-one, beat back the Costa Ricans. But following another engagement at Masaya, more than fifty American bodies lay scattered among those of hundreds of Guatemalans. The highly-skilled mercenary force, even with its reinforcements, began to crumble.

In mid-November 1856, Walker finally decided to abandon Granada. He informed Henningsen that the Americans would retreat to the volcanic island of Ometepe in Lake Nicaragua. He ordered Henningsen to stay behind with three hundred men and burn the 332-year-old city of Granada.

In a drunken haze, the smoke-blackened filibusters looted and torched the town they had supposedly come to civilize. For two days and nights flames and black clouds engulfed the ancient city. At the height of this orgy of destruction, the combined armies of Central America attacked Granada. Henningsen soon found himself trapped in the town's Guadalupe Cathedral.

Despite the added burdens of death and disease, Henningsen's men were able to blunt the enemy's attacks for two weeks. Finally, on December 12, just as the beleaguered force was running low on food and ammunition, its survivors, aided by a rescue party Walker led, broke out of the cathedral and fled Granada. They left behind more than two hundred dead. In the smoking rubble Henningsen left a sign that read "Aquí Fué Granada" ("Here was Granada").

Walker later tried to justify his burning of the city. Its inhabitants, he insisted, had turned on the Americans, their leaders and protectors. They had become spies and had abetted the enemy. "By the laws of war," Walker wrote, "the town had forfeited its existence; and the policy of destroying it was as manifest as the justice of the measure."

With his battered forces strangling in confusion and disarray, Walker now held only a small area at the western end of the transit route. In several skirmishes in early 1857, the Central American forces, aided by money, men, and supplies from Vanderbilt, inflicted heavy casualties on Walker's remaining troops.

For the first time, desertions by the "Immortals" became a serious problem. A series of cleverly timed raids planned by Vanderbilt's agents enabled the Costa Ricans to seize all the transit steamers and the ports on the San Juan River, cutting off Walker's supply lines from the east. To survive, his men were forced to eat their horses and mules. Walker nevertheless exhorted his dying army to fight on, declaring that "The destiny of this region and the interests of humanity are confided to your care."

Although fighting continued sporadically through April 1857, it was clear that the filibuster force had been decimated. Now the only question was whether or not Walker would escape the country alive.

On May 1, 1857, Commander Charles E. Davis of the U.S. sloop-of-war *St. Mary's* negotiated safe passage out of Nicaragua for *El Filibustero*, his troops, and other Americans. Four hundred and sixty-three men returned to the United States.

Walker's losses had been staggering—according to some estimates, as high as five thousand dead and missing. Hundreds of survivors were left behind in Nicaragua, many of them wounded and sick, wandering the alien forests and fields.

WALKER RETURNED to the United States embittered, sulking, convinced that he had been betrayed. The regime of *El Presidente* Walker, it seemed, was at an end.

But in New Orleans, thousands of supporters gathered to cheer their hero. Invigorated by the public support, *El Filibustero* was soon planning a reconquest. He traveled to Mobile and then to New York, speaking to throngs of admirers, most of whom generously opened their pocketbooks.

His humiliating losses in Nicaragua now seemed only minor impediments to the cause, mere irritants. Thousands of new soldiers, Walker knew, could be found; more ships awaited outfitting. The unvanquished crusader would forge on.

For American politicians, the Walker factor continued to wedge stubbornly in the middle of the national debate over the extension of slavery. Many Southerners still hoped that the annexation of Nicaragua and other Central American nations could turn the balance of power squarely on the side of proslavery interests.

A U.S. Navy lieutenant wrote in 1857 that public sentiment in the South was strongly in favor of the filibuster expeditions. They were, he wrote, "a frequent theme of conversation . . . in the streets, and at the hotels; and further, that there seemed to be an idea pervading . . . that Washington rather winked at the fitting out and departure of these expeditions."

President James Buchanan and his advisors seemed perplexed by Walker. As the "Conqueror" traveled the country preparing for another assault on Central America, the Administration issued warnings, made public declarations, sent vague, often conflicting instructions to its diplomats and military commanders. Filibusterism was a violation of the neutrality laws, the Administration noted. Any individuals discovered to be engaged in preparing a military expedition against a foreign nation must be detained. The rhetoric, though lacking explicit instructions on how to stop Walker, sounded genuine, even tough.

And yet Walker went about his work with apparent impunity. Considering the popular appeal enjoyed by the "Conqueror" and the support he drew from many Southern Democratic politicians, Buchanan was reluctant to take vigorous action against him. Indeed, Walker himself met privately with the President in Washington in June 1857 and later claimed that Buchanan had encouraged him to return to Nicaragua.

3. NATIONAL CONSOLIDATION AND EXPANSION

ON NOVEMBER 14, 1857, aboard the steamer *Fashion*, Walker, with more than 150 men and a supply of arms, left Mobile for Central America. Additional ships and men prepared to leave from other ports. Eleven days later the "Immortals" landed at Punta Arenas, near San Juan del Norte. Walker had returned; the reconquest of Nicaragua had begun.

But before the campaign could get seriously underway, the invaders' plans were ignominiously squelched. Commodore Hiram Paulding, flag officer commanding the U.S. Home Squadron, took President Buchanan's instructions to heart. On December 8, 1857 a detachment of three hundred Marines and sailors arrested Walker and his officers and put them aboard the USS *Saratoga*. Paulding sent them back to the United States.

Many Southerners erupted in fury over the arrest. Georgia Senator Alexander Stephens urged that Paulding be court-martialed. The commodore, said Stephens, had no authority to make an arrest on foreign soil. More than two dozen other Southern senators agreed. Even Buchanan, although applauding Paulding's motives, lamented the Navy officer's breach of authority.

Northern politicians, in turn, denounced the Southern reaction. Walker, they charged, was a thug who had led a lawless band of highwaymen against a foreign nation in violation of the United States' neutrality laws. He was a criminal, not a hero. Walker, they claimed, was a tool of Southern slave interests.

Meanwhile, the indefatigable Walker, who had taken to signing his letters "Commander-in-Chief, Army of Nicaragua," was brought to New York and interrogated by U.S. marshals. There he met Secretary of State Lewis Cass. The Secretary had made no secret of his admiration for Walker and of his own support for the filibustering missions. He had earlier declared, "The difficulties which General Walker has encountered and overcome will place his name high on the roll of the distinguished men of his age."

In May 1858 Walker was tried in New Orleans for violating neutrality laws. Ten of the twelve jurors voted for acquittal, and he was released.

WALKER LOST NO TIME in planning yet another expedition. Touring the South, he sought new recruits. In Mississippi he appealed to mothers "to bid their sons buckle on the armor of war, and battle for the institutions, for the honor of the Sunny South."

The "Sunny South" listened and responded with both men and money.

In December 1858 Walker sailed from Mobile, departing without clearance papers from the port collector, in defiance of the federal government. Off British Honduras, about sixty miles from the Nicaraguan coast, his ship struck a reef and sank. Walker was rescued by a British warship and returned to the South on New Year's Day 1859, to another tumultuous welcome.

The intractable Walker made one more try. Traveling

in small groups, ninety-seven filibusters rendezvoused in Honduras in the fall of 1860, where they hoped to join forces with former Honduras President Trinidad Cabañas, who was leading a Liberal revolt in that country. From there Walker hoped to invade Nicaragua and Costa Rica, and to reinstate the Central American federation.

Going on the offensive, Walker decided to attack a stone fortress that guarded the Honduran port of Truxillo. He planned to take the town, join Cabañas, and then take the country. Walker's raid was successful, and he raised the colors of the old Central American federation over the fort.

British authorities, upset when Walker declared Truxillo a free port (all customs revenue there had been previously assigned to the British government), felt compelled to intervene with military force. The warship *Icarus*, commanded by Captain Norvell Salmon, arrived at Truxillo, and Salmon ordered Walker to surrender. But Walker and his men fled in search of Cabañas's jungle encampment. A strong force of Honduran soldiers followed them.

The Hondurans eventually stopped Walker, trapping him in a swampy region near the Rio Negro. Salmon, in one of two British boats to sail up the river, again demanded Walker's surrender.

This time Walker did not resist.

The filibuster believed he was surrendering to a representative of the British government, but Salmon had other ideas. He turned Walker over to Honduran officials.

On September 12, 1860 a Honduran firing squad executed Walker, forever closing the infamous gray eyes.

AN EXCEEDINGLY COMPLEX MAN—beset by visions of fame and indestructibility, harboring in his puritanical mind demons only he would ever see, obsessed by causes he only vaguely understood, possessing an acute intelligence somehow gone askew—Walker, with few devices beyond his own ambition, cunning, and drive, had made an extraordinary impact.

Walker's raids had exacerbated the debate in the United States over slavery's extension. That debate would soon end violently in the American Civil War.

But Walker's mark was etched most deeply in Central America. The Walker invasions left a chasm of distrust, misunderstanding, and bitterness. In October 1860, on the eve of the election that brought Abraham Lincoln to the White House, Luis Molina, Nicaragua's Chargé d'Affaires in Washington, talked of a conspiracy of the Southern states to destroy the "nationality and independence of the States of Central America," to conquer them and to introduce slavery. The conspiracy lived, he said, under the protection of the flag of the United States. Even with Walker's death, the despicable treachery would likely continue. Central America, he promised, would remain vigilant.

William Walker's legacy is with us still.