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WHY NOT NICARAGUA?

By M. L. ALLEN, '31

The recent disturbance in Nicaragua has caused a number of American citizens to wonder just what motives influenced our government to handle the situation as it did. Quelling a revolt does not necessitate such a large expeditionary force as was sent down, but keeping peace in any Spanish-American country does.

The United States in such instances must protect her nationals and their interests. She is morally bound by the Monroe Doctrine to police Spanish-America. We attempt to keep peace in the Western Hemisphere on our own volition, because we realize that, if we do not, some European power will seize the opportunity to establish itself on the continent of either North or South America. Witness the Haitian and Dominican incidents. To keep from having a German or French occupation under her nose in the Caribbean, the United States paid off the debts of these two republics, and has undertaken, evidently with success, to place these two miniature republics on their feet.

In the Nicaraguan incident, this country had similar reasons for butting in, but a more vital issue was at stake. The purchased rights for constructing a canal through the republic were threatened, and the State Department decided to calm things down with a contingent of Leather-necks.

Shortly after the Civil War, the idea of building a canal through the Western continents to connect the Atlantic and Pacific oceans was suggested. All are acquainted with the hardships that sailing men of those days encountered rounding Cape Horn. A voyage from the Atlantic to the Pacific seaboard or the Far East was a lengthy as well as a dangerous enterprise. Congress authorized a commission to consider and report on the matter.

Four possible locations for such a project were apparent. The first to be considered was the route across the isthmus of Tehuantepec in Mexico. This route would place the project close to the eastern ports of this country; but two features of the terrain, high mountains and long distance, in comparison with other locations, caused the commission to disregard this route.

The second route proposed was the Nicaraguan. Here, as indicated in the illustration, nature provides the Rio San Juan, 110 miles long, proceeding from Lake Nicaragua. The river course lies in land having the extremely gentle slope of one foot per mile. This factor, when considered along with the facilities offered by the lake, which is 120 miles long and from 40 to 60 miles wide, makes this route the most feasible, as well as the best when considered from the important angle of cost.

These two bodies of water, together with Lake Managua, would provide a natural waterway, entailing but little exca-

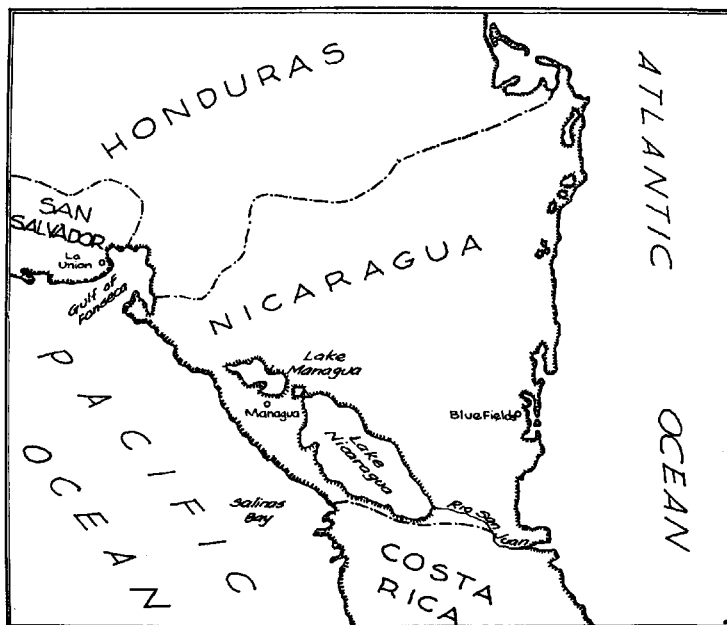
vating to reach the Pacific. The large quantity of water necessary to operate canal locks could be furnished from these natural lakes.

The third route, through the isthmus of Panama, was also a good location, but longer than the Nicaraguan, as well as being much farther from the United States and located in a tropical climate. The fourth and last route could not be considered. This lay along the Atrato River in the republic of Colombia. The river, to be sure, offered a natural waterway, but to connect it with the Pacific would mean to cut through one of the ranges of the Cordilleras, which reach 17,000 feet in elevation.

The commission reported in favor of the Nicaraguan route, as did the three commissions following. Congress could not decide definitely on a plan of action until the early part of the new century.

At that time, Zelaya was president of Nicaragua. He was antagonistic to the United States and refused to negotiate over the proposed canal. The vital need of the artificial waterway was apparent even to Congress, and negotiations were instituted with the republic of Colombia for the Panama route, Panama being at that time a province of the South American country. Colombia greeted the overtures of the United States in the same manner as did Zelaya of Nicaragua. Some well-known high-handed work on our part induced the Panamanians to "listen to reason," with the result that Panama declared itself a republic, handed the canal rights over to Uncle Sam for a handsome stipend, and went on its way whistling merrily, despite the fact that almost one-half of its soil had been leased to the Colossus of the North. Colombia has since been paid 15 million dollars for balm. Needless to say, the Colombians are satisfied.

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It is well known that in Spanish America the party that is in power really is in power. Zelaya was a Liberal and the Conservatives were out, both out of power and out of the country. The Conservatives fomented a little revolution, feeling the need of freeing the country from the abominable Liberals as well as anticipating the joy of granting the United States the canal rights and collecting the money. Accordingly, the east coast of Nicaragua broke out in revolt early in 1912. Zelaya dispatched 800 troops down the Rio San Juan to quell the disturbance. Two American mining engineers, Groce and Cannon, had thrown in their lot with the revolutionists and decided to delay the troops. To do this, they constructed and sent on its way a floating mine. The mine went off a few feet from the troopship, killing but a few of the Federals. Groce and Cannon took to the jungles, but were forced out by natural conditions three days later. They were captured by the Federals and later executed, despite the protests of the American consul.

Here was situation apparently made to order. The Americans intervened, a case of threatened nationals; resistance was offered and in the ensuing guerrilla warfare some 2000 Nicaraguans were killed, the principal towns captured, and Zelaya went into exile.

Adolfo Diaz was immediately made president by the Conservatives and the Bryan-Chamorro treaty, selling the canal rights to the United States for three millions was ratified by both governments. To discourage further outbreaks, a group of 110 Marines was maintained in Nicaragua as a Legation Guard.

All has gone on peacefully since then. American claims were paid out of the three million, the currency of the country stabilized so that even today the gold peso of Nicaragua is as good as the

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American dollar; roads were built, and sanitation introduced. All the benefits that come with an American colony have made Nicaragua one of the most prosperous of the Central American republics.

Until the recent disturbances, it was not fully realized that the Conservatives, who had been in power since the original intervention, are considerably in the minority. The Liberals were kept out of office by the simple expedients known only to the Latins. Revolt broke out, and the United States, knowing that her treaty would be abrogated if the Liberals got into power, stopped the uprising.

Since then, however, a Liberal has been made president. We are obviously on pleasant terms with the Nicaraguans, at least since President Hoover was amicably received by them. Our canal rights are still intact, despite the change of party.

The Panama Canal is at present being operated within 70 per cent of its capacity. The need of another canal is vital to our interests as a world power. Any damage done to Panama in event of war would without a doubt separate the Atlantic and Pacific fleets and cause the downfall of the Navy, if not of the country.

If this reason seems too far-fetched, consider the fact that the fiery Nicaraguans may change their mind about letting us keep the 99-year lease. However considered, the Nicaraguan Canal should be constructed with all haste.
