Mission to Nicaragua

McCoy did not return alone from the Philippines in 1925. Developments toward the end of his tour in Manila effected a fundamental change in his life. Even in his correspondence with his family, McCoy was reticent in discussing his personal affairs. Certainly he enjoyed the company of women. But in his gentlemanly way, he refrained from recording the details of his relationships with them. Although there had been romances, the sparse surviving evidence makes it difficult to evaluate their seriousness. To be sure, McCoy’s papers contain numerous letters from a Texas schoolteacher, E. Bliss Baldridge, whom he met during his tour on the Mexican border. She was smitten, but how McCoy responded is unclear. Similarly, there are hints of a romantic attachment between McCoy and Daisy Harriman, the worldly, attractive, and politically active widow who was a Family friend and had followed the AEF to France. In the overall context of McCoy’s life, however, the importance of such episodes was negligible. Since leaving West Point, he had subordinated the needs of his private life to the demands of his profession. Among other things, this priority led McCoy to value highly his independence. To preserve that independence, it made sense to avoid long-term relationships with the opposite sex. Always on the move, surrounded by male associates, McCoy appears to have been quite content with the arrangement.

By the time McCoy returned to the Philippines in 1921, however, he had grown weary of bachelorhood. For a time, he shared quarters with Peter Bowditch in Manila and thus had someone’s company while off duty. But in 1922, Bowditch went home, and McCoy thereafter lived alone. To his family, he remarked glumly,

“If it were my habit, I think I should cast about to find someone to marry,”
adding quickly, “but it isn’t so don’t be alarmed.” A year and a half later,
without having given the slightest inkling of what was afoot, he addressed
the subject of matrimony a second time. “Dearest Mother,” he wrote,

I was married yesterday to Frances Judson after some weeks of stress and
strain, for though I had been proposing daily and determinedly, Frances did
not want to be married and did want to go home to Mother, sailing . . . on
the 28th. That was more than I could bear, so yesterday morning while
driving her about . . . and in a moment of weakness, of sympathy for my
evident distress, she allowed herself to become engaged, and before she
knew it I had . . . the Bishop ready, telephoned for the General and Mrs.
Wood . . . and [we] were married at 12:30. . . . We drove back to Malacanan
for lunch, and drove off right after to Baugio where the General has given us
the house for our honeymoon. We are very happy and always will be.3

By all accounts they were. The twenty-eight-year-old bride from New York City
was spirited, outspoken, and accustomed to living her own life. Having made her
decision, however, she became an ideal companion for McCoy, willingly adopting
his itinerant life, sharing his interests, and making his friends her own. In
appearance, according to her husband, she was a “tall, slim, red head, lovely in
face and figure.”4 Beyond her attractive personal qualities and charm, Frances
was an intriguing choice as a bride for McCoy. Although he told Cameron Forbes
that “falling in love was the last thing I anticipated,” McCoy’s decision to marry
was not as impulsive as it appeared. Twenty-one years her senior, he had known
Frances since she was a young girl; she was in fact a favorite niece of Wood and
his wife—almost another daughter. Indeed, one of her periodic visits with the
governor general’s family provided the occasion for McCoy to fall in love and to
court her. Thus, marrying Frances in effect formalized what had been heretofore
an unofficial claim to membership in Wood’s immediate family. Long McCoy’s
mentor, role model, and chief, Leonard Wood became something like McCoy’s
father as well. If binding himself more closely to Wood’s family gratified McCoy,
Wood no doubt returned the feeling. His own sons, Osborne and Leonard, Jr.,
repeatedly disappointed him. Now the man whom above all others the governor
general would have chosen for his son symbolically became just that.5

The McCoys used their return to the United States as an excuse for a
European honeymoon. In Rome, they visited Fletcher and Summerlin, Family
friends who were both assigned to the American embassy. The couple continued
on to Venice, Florence, and Paris where they stayed with William Phillips and
James Logan. In July, the McCoys finally reached New York. They spent the rest
of the summer calling on relatives, first in Lewistown and then in Newport,
Rhode Island, where Frances’s family was living. When McCoy completed his
vacation, he was slated to assume command of an infantry brigade at Fort Sam
Frances Judson before her marriage: independent, outspoken, and, for McCoy, irresistible. (Courtesy U.S. Army Military History Institute)

Houston, Texas. Yet, even before leaving for his new assignment, orders from the War Department diverted him to Washington. McCoy had been tapped to serve on the court-martial panel that would try Col. William Mitchell, an old friend from Pershing’s staff in France. Mitchell, of course, was the great publicist for the concept of air power. Frustrated by the lack of support for his ideas in the War Department, Mitchell devised a bold plan to generate interest in his cause. Determined to bring his dispute with official
Washington before the public, Mitchell called a press conference on September 5, 1925, and read a lengthy statement denouncing the War and Navy departments for “incompetency, criminal negligence, and almost treasonable administration” in running their air services. As Mitchell had anticipated, such insubordination left the War Department with no choice but to bring charges against him.\(^7\) The court-martial itself, beginning on October 28, greatly inconvenienced McCoy and his wife. They took up temporary quarters at 1718 H Street and then lived for awhile with friends assigned to Washington. When “the Mitchell court-martial began to look like the length of a deep sea cable rather than a piece of string,” they rented a house on I Street.\(^8\)

McCoy approached the trial with ambivalence. On the one hand, he understood and to a degree sympathized with Mitchell’s motives. While waiting for the trial to begin, McCoy predicted to Wood that the Philippines would become a topic of much discussion in the near future. He went on to remark that he considered such discussion “good as a matter of education—pretty much like the air investigation and Billy Mitchell—good for everybody but Billy.”\(^9\) With this in mind, McCoy kept his sense of humor throughout the presentation of the airman’s long, combative defense. Mitchell’s attorneys, McCoy admitted, handled the case so adroitly that “to the public, the War Dept. is on trial instead of the festive Bill.” McCoy found himself cast as one of the villains of the piece while the accused had contrived to become “the town and national hero.”\(^10\) Only the trial’s duration evoked any expressions of discontent. “The court-martial keeps me sitting as I never sat before,” he told Cameron Forbes in November. McCoy complained of feeling “like Mrs. Page’s darky ‘sometimes setting and thinking, and sometimes just setting.’ And the end is not in sight.”

When the end did come on December 17, the court found the defendant guilty. McCoy’s correspondence contains nothing to suggest that he dissented from the majority. Indeed, for a man who placed discretion and obedience high on his own scale of professional traits, it would have been out of character for him to have done so, whatever his sympathy for Mitchell’s views. Yet McCoy valued personal loyalty as well. Thus, his friendship with Mitchell survived the court-martial intact. The following spring found Mitchell, since resigned from the service, enjoying a long visit as McCoy’s guest at Fort Sam Houston. (McCoy confided to Wood that Mitchell had “allowed [that] he never would have had to break the china had you been in the W[ar] D[epartment].”) McCoy later became godfather for one of Mitchell’s children, and at Mitchell’s funeral in 1936 he served as a pallbearer—the only former court member to do so.\(^11\)

In early 1926, McCoy assumed command of the Third Infantry Brigade, Second Division, at Fort Sam Houston. He remained there for more than a year, until May 1927 when he was reassigned to command the First Artillery Brigade at Fort Hoyle, Maryland. This return to troop duty provided a quiet interlude in an otherwise hectic career. Besides troop training and garrison duties, McCoy supported Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) and Citizens’ Military
Training Camp (CMTC) activities and participated in infrequent maneuvers with the rest of the division. The schedule provided adequate time for leisure, a situation of which McCoy strongly approved. He told his officers that each of them “should have some avocation or sideline of interest that will . . . distract his mind occasionally from, and refresh him for, the labors of his chosen profession.” McCoy insured that those labors would not be excessive. In a memo that captures the flavor of the army of the 1920s, he directed that “the policy of this brigade will be so far as possible to leave the afternoons and evenings to the discretion of the individual officer.” The brigade commander set the example in his own activities. Polishing up his tennis game, McCoy entered the Corps Area Tennis Tournament and “was too successful for my age and condition,” reaching the semifinals in the singles competition and the finals in the men’s doubles. Evenings were spent with Frances, frequently at the movies. As a result of his years overseas, McCoy told his family, he was “very much behind on all the famous pictures” and so was “enjoying even those which seem old to the rest of you.”

The summer of 1927 reunited McCoy briefly with Leonard Wood when the governor general returned to the United States. Yet even unmistakable signs that Wood was ailing did not prepare McCoy for the news of his mentor’s death on August 7. Vacationing in the Adirondacks with Henry Stimson, McCoy received word that Wood had died on the operating table during a third attempt to relieve the painful and debilitating effects of a brain tumor. McCoy rushed back to Washington, took charge of the funeral arrangements, and served as a pallbearer during the ceremony. Wood’s death left McCoy with a sense of irreplaceable loss. “I shall always miss him,” he told Mrs. Wood a year later. “My whole life and work were wrapped up in him, much of the savor of life has gone with him.”

Wood’s death set off a flurry of speculation that McCoy might become governor general. Even before Wood’s funeral, the New York Times touted McCoy as a leading candidate for the job. A bit later, the New York American reported “a steady stream of letters . . . pouring into the White House from all over the United States and the Philippines” in McCoy’s behalf. In the Philippines, too, McCoy picked up the endorsement of papers such as the Mindanao Herald, which lauded “his suaveness, his facility for making friends, his gracious demeanor . . . , and the courteous manner with which . . . he can administer a rebuke and make the patient feel like a dog, but like it.” McCoy remained silent as to his own preferences in the matter, promising only that should an offer from the president materialize, “I shall be ready with a decision.” In all likelihood, McCoy would have accepted an appointment to serve as governor general. But whatever his final decision might have been, he never had reason to reveal it. A presidential call for his services did come in the fall of 1927, but instead of returning McCoy to the Far East, it set him off on a new tack—to Nicaragua.
Back in the United States for surgery in 1927, an ailing Wood visits McCoy for the last time. (Courtesy U.S. Army Military History Institute)

U.S. military involvement in Nicaragua began in 1912 when U.S. Marines landed in the midst of civil war to restore order and protect American lives and property. Although the occupation was not intended to be a long one, an American garrison remained for over a decade, propping up the increasingly unpopular regime that
had invited the United States to intervene. Once the ill effects of this extended military presence became evident—particularly its corrosive impact on relations with the rest of Latin America—Washington committed itself to terminating the occupation at the first suitable opportunity. When Calvin Coolidge finally ordered the last troops home in August 1925, Americans believed that their Central American military ventures had ended once and for all. Such hopes, however, proved illusory.\textsuperscript{15}

The stability that permitted the withdrawal collapsed immediately, with civil war erupting within a month. By March 1926, the Nicaraguan president had resigned, the vice-president had fled the country, and Emiliano Chamorro, the unscrupulous but charismatic leader of the Conservative party, had installed himself as chief executive. The State Department, citing the unconstitutionality of Chamorro's actions, denied him diplomatic recognition, thereby effectively declaring open season on the new regime. Internal order—briefly reestablished by the Conservative strong man—again disintegrated. Although Chamorro struggled to consolidate his position, in October 1926—bankrupt, harried by a Liberal party insurgency, and frustrated by American nonrecognition—he resigned the presidency. Turning to the problem of designating a successor, the State Department threw its support behind Adolfo Diaz, a pliant Conservative and former president who had welcomed the intervention of 1912. When vigorous lobbying in the Nicaraguan Congress secured his election on Armistice Day of 1926, American recognition followed.

Unfortunately, the ouster of Chamorro did not end the episode. No happier with the new American-sponsored president than they had been with his predecessor, the Liberals continued their "revolution" without pause. As Díaz's position deteriorated in the face of Liberal pressure, the American commitment to his survival increased. To prevent the outright collapse of the Díaz government, on Christmas Eve of 1926 U.S. Marines began returning to Nicaragua on an unprecedented scale; by February 1927, the number of American military personnel stationed in Nicaragua or enroute had swollen to nearly 5,500.\textsuperscript{16} On the surface, this second intervention, following hard on the heels of the previous year's long-awaited withdrawal, seemed inexplicable. More than mere loyalty to Díaz had triggered the sudden reversal. Other hemispheric developments (specifically, the erratic course of the Mexican revolution) altered the State Department's perception of the real issues being contested in the Nicaraguan civil war—and of the real contestants.

By 1926, relations with Mexico had fallen to another low, the ostensible bone of contention being President Plutarco Calles's determination to reclaim Mexican oil properties controlled by American investors. Yet American concern extended far beyond simply protecting the holdings of a few Yankee oil barons. Mexican nationalism potentially threatened American political hegemony, the acceptance of American economic ground rules, and the universality of the American model of national development.\textsuperscript{17} To a suspicious State Department, Mexican radi-
calism lurked behind the uprising in Nicaragua. In December 1926, Mexico audaciously recognized the “government” of former Vice-President Juan B. Sacasa, the leading Liberal claimant to the Nicaraguan presidency. Accusations soon followed that Calles was covertly providing the insurgents with arms and ammunition as well. To officials in Calvin Coolidge’s administration, this alleged support of the revolution in Nicaragua posed a direct challenge to the United States. Mexico’s actions, they argued, transformed Nicaragua into a critical “test case” of American prestige and influence throughout the Caribbean and hence required a forceful and determined response.  

Yet the mere presence of American troops would not suffice to contain this supposed spread of radicalism. Liberal resistance showed no signs of wilting just because the marines had landed. Coolidge attempted to forestall a further widening of American involvement by sending Henry L. Stimson to Managua to mediate a solution. But the resulting Tipitapa Agreement of May 1927 that Stimson engineered was only a partial success at best. Although the Liberal military commander, General José M. Moncada, agreed to disarm in exchange for an American pledge to supervise the 1928 Nicaraguan election, many insurgents rejected out of hand any settlement underwritten by the Yankees. They vowed to continue the struggle and rallied to the leadership of a hitherto obscure Liberal general, César Augusto Sandino. Within weeks, the Nicaraguan countryside was again in turmoil. As the American minister in Managua reported to the State Department, Sandino “preached communism, Mexican brotherly love and cooperation, and death to the Americans until the rabble . . . joined him in his plan to massacre Americans . . . and to set up his own government.”

Abandoning any pretense of neutrality, the Marine Corps confidently launched a full-scale pursuit of the remaining rebels. Although ill-equipped and outnumbered, the Sandinistas proved aggravatingly elusive. In classic guerrilla fashion, they capitalized on their familiarity with the rugged local terrain and on the sympathy of the Nicaraguan people. Inaccurate intelligence, a sparse road network, and dependence on the cumbersome logistic train all conspired to hamper marine effectiveness. Sandino shrewdly encouraged the Americans to expend themselves on grueling, futile expeditions into the mountainous interior and then pestered his exhausted adversaries with hit-and-run ambushes and raids. In July 1927, a spectacular siege of an isolated marine garrison in the village of Ocotal convinced many that the struggle in Nicaragua had settled into a frustrating stalemate.

Support for American policy at home, never great, evaporated as the military failed to make good on its optimistic predictions. By mid-1927, criticism of the administration—much of it from the president’s own party—had become intense. Privately, the administration was as unhappy as its detractors. By the end of 1927, even the most enthusiastic proponent of reintervention recognized the policy for what it was: a blunder of the first order. Panicked by the phantom of Mexican radicalism, the United States plunged headlong into a sticky guerrilla
war that threatened to drag on for months or even years. Diplomatic attempts to untangle the situation not only failed to resolve the military problem but actually deepened the American commitment by pledging supervision of the Nicaraguan election of 1928. The ensuing marine campaign to destroy the Sandinistas failed. At home, efforts to rally public support misfired completely. Abroad, the re intervention damaged U.S. diplomatic relations throughout Latin America and in much of Europe. Noting the gap between his preaching and the marines' practice, some Europeans even began questioning the seriousness of Secretary of State Frank B. Kellogg's advocacy of a worldwide treaty to outlaw war. Thus, an early end to the American presence became a matter of vital importance. The administration disagreed with its critics only on the manner in which the withdrawal should be accomplished. The wreckage of the previous year notwithstanding, any disengagement needed to take place amidst the trappings of political and diplomatic success. Neither the Republican party nor the United States could tolerate even the suggestion of humiliation. Acting on Stimson's advice, President Coolidge turned to McCoy to salvage his Nicaraguan policy.

The mission to Nicaragua inaugurated a new phase in McCoy's career as a military diplomatist. Coming into his own as heir to Leonard Wood, he no longer would stand off-stage as someone else's aide, assistant, or chief of staff. Henceforth McCoy would gain diplomatic employment as a principal in his own right. For McCoy personally, however, growing prominence provided less gratification than did the opportunity to carry on his mentor's work. As he confessed to a friend, "General Wood's death has distressed and shocked me even more than I would imagine." As a device to help McCoy overcome his sense of loss, the timing of the Nicaraguan mission was fortuitous. That the enterprise itself would surely have won Wood's endorsement was a source of added consolation.

On June 26, 1927, Kellogg handed McCoy his commission as personal representative of the president. Formally, his mission was simply to carry out the promise made by Stimson a month earlier to supervise the Nicaraguan presidential election of 1928, thereby expediting the withdrawal of American forces. Such a withdrawal required that McCoy first restore domestic harmony, reduce the level of political corruption, and administer an election of such procedural correctness as to gain the support of Nicaraguans of all political persuasions. In addition, McCoy was to advise the American government on matters pertaining to Nicaragua and to "do everything possible to assist the Nicaraguan Government in electoral and military matters."  

The administration's commitment to the mission's overt purpose was not insincere. Credible evidence of evenhandedness would restore some luster to the tarnished American image as sponsor of democracy in Latin America and, by mollifying domestic critics, might prevent Nicaragua from being a source of further Republican distress. Yet, beyond staging a graceful exit for U.S. occupation forces, the Coolidge administration also viewed the mission as a
vehicle for achieving a more substantial goal, namely, upholding American regional hegemony. Here, success hinged on different requirements: the liquidation of Sandino, a symbol and potential model for other anti-American movements in the region; installation of a pro-American regime; and the creation of instruments of power capable of sustaining that regime after the marines departed.

After a month spent preparing for his assignment, McCoy departed New York on August 10 to assess the situation in Nicaragua at first hand. Arriving in Managua on August 27, McCoy spent the following month investigating local conditions. To his eyes, Nicaragua recalled “Santiago de Cuba in ’98 and ’99.” Although a backward country, it had “stirring possibilities if we can help out for some time.” Deprived of American support, he predicted that Nicaragua would “go forward like a crab.” With the countryside in disarray due to continuing attacks by Sandino and other bands of chronic outlaws and violent political partisanship rife among the people, restoring order and preventing renewed flare-ups of political violence would demand a firm hand. In an interim report, McCoy cautioned Kellogg to defer plans to reduce the marine garrison and urged the administration to augment Nicaragua’s embryonic national police force—the Guardia Nacional—with more American officers and increased financial aid.26

Returning to Washington in October to report on his findings, McCoy began assembling a staff, for the most part choosing old army acquaintances, with “a few civilians to take the blight of militarism off the affair.”27 At the same time, he mapped out his overall strategy. Guaranteeing an orderly campaign with an agreeable outcome required that McCoy exercise absolute control over Nicaragua’s electoral machinery. Armed with such authority, he could block the candidacy of any Nicaraguan unacceptable to the United States and discredit political elements inclined to question the election’s legitimacy. In addition, convincing American guarantees of the election’s honesty would conceivably persuade the losing side to accept the outcome of what had been presumably a fair fight. Mindful of these requirements, McCoy and Harold W. Dodds, a political scientist who served as his chief technical adviser, soon drafted an election law defining the prerogatives of the electoral mission. This law, according to Kellogg, was the sine qua non of the American effort. It created, as the New York Times reported, “an American dictatorship over the coming elections,” giving McCoy, as president of the National Electoral Board, virtually unlimited authority.28

Developments in Managua during McCoy’s absence, however, threatened the mission’s success virtually before it began. As soon as the United States committed itself to supervising the elections, Emiliano Chamorro petitioned the State Department to permit him to run for president. His plea met with little sympathy. Because of Chamorro’s systematic oppression of political enemies in the past, the Liberal party would never accept him as president. Given that his election in 1928 would be a disaster, in all likelihood rekindling the civil war, the State Department staunchly opposed his candidacy.29 Although informed of this
verdict in late October, Chamorro refused to accept it. Hoping to extort a change in the American attitude toward him, he mobilized his influence within the Conservative party to bottle up the American-designed election law (la ley McCoy) in the Nicaraguan Congress. Simultaneously, he began undermining Díaz’s position by criticizing the president’s submissiveness to American demands. Deprived of la ley McCoy and the incumbent president’s cooperation, McCoy’s mission would be seriously jeopardized.

By mid-January 1928, as McCoy again sailed from New York, Chamorro’s intrigues culminated in a full-fledged crisis. La ley McCoy passed the Nicaraguan Senate but appeared irretrievably stalled in the Chamber of Deputies. Caught between Chamorro’s insistent attacks and pressure from the American legation, Díaz announced his intention to resign. Apprised of this news during a layover in Panama, McCoy cabled Dana G. Munro, the charge in Managua, to do whatever was necessary to “prevent or retard” the resignation of the president. He then scrapped his own itinerary and seized upon the fastest available transportation, a navy ammunition ship, to hasten his arrival in Nicaragua.

McCoy reached Managua on January 22 and plunged into a series of conferences with Díaz, Moncada, and Chamorro. For the moment at least, Munro had allayed the president’s anxieties. Expressing his absolute confidence in Díaz, McCoy bolstered the wavering president’s commitment to remain in office. Efforts to persuade Chamorro to allow passage of la ley McCoy proved less successful. Chamorro remained adamant in his opposition, arguing that it was unconstitutional to surrender control of Nicaragua’s internal affairs to a foreigner. The Nicaraguan’s pose as an “apostle of the constitution” struck McCoy as ludicrous. The real motive behind the former dictator’s ploy was unvarnished personal ambition. Whatever his purpose, such obstructionism irked McCoy: “My carefully laid plans are all awry,” he grumbled privately.

The stumbling block of greatest immediate concern was the Nicaraguan Congress’s adjournment, scheduled for March 13. Failure to gain favorable congressional action by that date would require drastic measures to enact la ley McCoy. Unfortunately, the prospects for weakening Chamorro’s grip on the legislature were poor unless pressure could be brought to bear on obstructive deputies. McCoy’s hopes that Díaz would apply that pressure on his Conservative colleagues were disappointed. Although Díaz was outwardly cooperative, McCoy cabled Kellogg, the president’s real attitude remained open to question. Certainly, he was doing less than his utmost to break the congressional log jam.

As adjournment neared, McCoy himself began twisting the arms of recalcitrant Conservative deputies. The manner in which he did so, however, suggests that he had already reconciled himself to proceeding without congressional consent. Meeting with groups of Chamorrista deputies on March 12, McCoy demanded a yes or no vote on the measure. Yet whether or not the law was enacted, he warned, the United States had no intention of reneging on its commitment to supervise the election.
Chamorro, in fact, overestimated the importance that the Americans attributed to having Nicaraguan legislators enact la ley McCoy. Although congressional endorsement would lend legitimacy to the electoral mission, such legal niceties were not essential to its success. Above all, the State Department and McCoy as its chief agent were determined to adhere to the original American plan—without Chamorro for certain, and without the Nicaraguan Congress if necessary. Already in mid-February, Munro was insisting that the United States inform the Nicaraguan Congress “very strongly and very specifically that we are going to go ahead with or without a law.” The State Department concurred, stating that the United States would not be thwarted “by any man or group of men in Nicaragua playing the game of party politics with purely selfish motives.” If the Nicaraguan Congress refused to act, McCoy could persuade Díaz “to arrogate to himself practically dictatorial powers,” implementing la ley McCoy by executive decree. Failing that, “the only remaining course would be for the United States to take matters into its own hands and give General McCoy full powers.”

On March 13, McCoy got his vote. The lower house decisively rejected the American election law and adjourned shortly thereafter. As elated Chamorristas converged on Managua’s cathedral and rang the bells, tolling in honor of the death of McCoy’s law, the man after whom the measure was named began prodding Díaz to enact the election law on his own authority. Although admitting that the legality of such a decree might be questioned, McCoy maintained that its “strictly legal status” was of “distinctly secondary importance.” After all, the Nicaraguan constitution, representing “abstract statements of political theory rather than practical and effective guides for governmental action,” was hardly sacrosanct. And although executive decrees were “not in accord with Anglo-American custom,” they had long been common features of Latin
American politics. More to the point, la ley McCoy was critical to the electoral mission’s success, and implementation by presidential order was preferable to the only other practical course, namely, for McCoy to issue the law on his own authority. Whatever the merits of McCoy’s arguments, Díaz quickly assented, if only to avoid having the Americans arbitrarily seize complete control of the country—as they were clearly prepared to do. A member of McCoy’s staff drafted the proclamation, and, after some minor haggling, Díaz enacted it on March 21, 1928.

The decree vested authority for supervising the 1928 election in a National Electoral Board. It recognized McCoy as president of the board and Ramón Castillo and Enoc Aguado, representing the two major parties, as members. In practice, the Nicaraguans played a largely decorative role: The board could not meet without the president in attendance; no action by the board was valid without his concurrence; and in an emergency—as defined by the board’s president—he could act alone to take whatever actions he deemed “indispensable to the conduct of a free and fair election.” The decree also gave McCoy authority over the Guardia Nacional.

Having, in the words of the Washington Herald, “been made the Mussolini of Nicaragua,” McCoy at last possessed the authority to get on with the business at hand. The one problem demanding attention above all others was Sandino. By the spring of 1928, the rebel leader had attained international stature, with an especially warm following among critics of American policy in the United States. Support for Sandino reached even the floor of the U.S. Senate, where Burton K. Wheeler of Montana applauded the Nicaraguan’s struggle for “the same principles of liberty and free government for which our forefathers fought in 1776.” Admiration for Sandino grew the longer he mocked the military’s claims that his demise was imminent.

Members of the electoral mission in Nicaragua did not share that admiration. According to Capt. Matthew B. Ridgway, one of McCoy’s trusted subordinates, exposure to Mexican radicalism had infected Sandino with “the bolshevism that aims at [the] brotherhood of all men and control by the present laborers.” Having absorbed a “fanaticism that wants to make the world over in a day by destroying all that opposes it,” the guerrilla leader was “eager to grasp the opportunity to establish bolshevism in Nicaragua.” Yet, as McCoy emphasized, it was not ideology alone that made Sandino the object of concern, but his emergence as “the symbol of opposition to United States policy throughout Latin America and at home, a useful figure to those who desire to attack us.” For those inveighing against American domination of the Caribbean, Sandino was the subversive archetype of the patriot fighting for his native land against the United States as oppressor.

On March 3, Kellogg requested McCoy’s personal assessment of the military situation in Nicaragua. The secretary of state voiced the fear that the insurgency would go on indefinitely with a continuing sacrifice of American lives and
without concrete results. The optimistic reports regularly issuing from the Navy Department satisfied him no more than they did the administration's critics. “People cannot understand why the job cannot be done,” he complained, “and frankly I do not understand myself.” McCoy shared Kellogg's concern about the lack of progress being made against Sandino. Yet he was sensitive to the “extreme delicacy” of his position in regard to strictly military measures—a polite way of saying that the marines would resent outsiders prying into their affairs. Although mindful of the need to reinvigorate the sagging American military effort, McCoy had waited for a suitable opportunity—one such as Kellogg's query provided. Not surprisingly, within forty-eight hours, he cabled a detailed reply.

In general, McCoy reported, the military outlook was dismal. Recent successes had so enhanced Sandino’s prestige that he threatened to “greatly embarrass our electoral program.” Yet the Sandinista problem, he admitted, posed more than ordinary difficulties. The advantages that Sandino enjoyed were not to be underestimated: superior mobility, knowledge of the local terrain and language, genuine popular support, and the ability to fight largely at times and places of his own selection. Nevertheless, McCoy found severe deficiencies in the marines’ performance, particularly their inability to collect accurate intelligence and their “failure to maintain continuous contact with Sandino forces once they have been located.” The root of the problem, in McCoy’s view, was leadership, especially the lackluster performance of the marine commander, Brig. Gen. Logan Feland.

In the weeks following this report, McCoy began concerning himself more directly with marine operations. The weekly conferences of senior officials over which he presided at the American legation became increasingly acrimonious whenever military issues arose. According to Rear Adm. David F. Sellers, Feland’s immediate superior as commander of the Special Service Squadron offshore, McCoy galled the marine commander with his searching inquiries about what the marines were doing or intended to do about Sandino. Sellers himself, already resentful that a one-star general should be his temporary superior, complained loudly when McCoy assigned his principal deputy, Col. Frank Le Jau Parker, to investigate marine operations for the State Department. That an army colonel should be reporting on the command of a rear admiral was almost unbearable.

Yet polite efforts to spur Feland and Sellers had no noticeable effect. In a letter to Stimson in April, McCoy complained that “Sandino still flies around like a mosquito. . . . There seems to be no chance of getting him except by a stroke of good luck.” Exasperated, McCoy provoked a showdown at a legation conference on April 18. “Where is Sandino?” the captor of Datto Ali demanded of Feland. “You don’t know. Your intelligence service is a failure and we stand just where we did six months ago.” He accused Feland of having lost touch with the situation by remaining in Managua instead of taking to the field. Finally, he delivered his ultimatum. “I am the Special Representative of the President,” he
reminded the marine commander. "If you haven't gotten Sandino in a month from now . . . you will have failed and I shall so report to the State Department."46 The shock waves of this encounter, passing through Sellers back to the chief of naval operations, did little to endear McCoy to the Navy Department. Whether or not the attempt to intimidate Feland was itself beneficial beyond establishing the
primacy of McCoy’s own authority, the overall American military effort did improve thereafter. For one thing, McCoy asked for and received reinforcements, 1,000 more marines in mid-March and an equal number in June. Employing these forces with greater aggressiveness, the American command stepped up the pressure on Sandino, soon forcing him to seek refuge outside Nicaragua.  

When aerial reconnaissance into neighboring Honduras located a concentration of Sandinistas, apparently secure in the belief that they were beyond American reach, McCoy asked the American minister in Tegucigalpa, George T. Summerlin, to secure permission for the marines to strike across the border. Summerlin was unresponsive—he had not “really grasped [sic] that this was our war in Nicaragua and that getting Sandino was a matter of vital importance”—so McCoy dispatched Munro to confer with the Honduran leaders. Munro quickly cajoled President Miguel Paz Barona into permitting American forces to pursue Sandino into Honduras and even to attack him from the air—“with the understanding however that the matter be kept absolutely quiet.” Not even the Honduran foreign minister was informed.  

The marines’ ability to disregard this international boundary undoubtedly made it more difficult for Sandino to maintain a secure base from which to launch attacks back into Nicaragua. As part of this revitalized campaign against Sandino, McCoy accelerated the development of the Guardia Nacional. The State Department had emphasized that the Guardia was “the most vital feature of the entire [American] program” because it would constitute “the cornerstone of stability for the whole country long after the election.” During the period of the electoral mission, the Guardia tripled in size and made considerable strides toward improved training and effectiveness. Although McCoy gave Feland operational control of elements pursuing Sandino in the field, he did not surrender his overall responsibility for the Guardia. Through its jefe director, Brig. Gen. Elias R. Beadle, he took daily interest in its activities and progress. Whereas Feland viewed the Guardia as a conventional military force that should help the marines by taking a more active and larger part of the campaign against Sandino, McCoy envisioned it primarily as a constabulary devoted to preserving order and enforcing the law. Realistically, the Guardia lacked the competence to render more than marginal assistance against Sandino. With an eye on the election, moreover, McCoy was anxious to replace the local police, who “have been used as an instrument of oppression, a source of graft, and often a cause of disorder,” with a national police force free of corruption. To make the American presence less intrusive, meanwhile, the marines would refrain from the “exercise [of] civil police functions if it can be avoided.” In short, McCoy believed that “it was much more important for the success of the elections, to have the guardia police the cities, small villages, and districts in which the elections were actually taking place, leaving to the marines the job of keeping Sandino covered.” Beadle agreed with McCoy. Consequently, the Guardia adhered to the orientation that they, rather than Feland, thought appropriate. The improvement in police and military
capabilities orchestrated by McCoy paid dividends. During the summer of 1928, over 1,600 guerrillas surrendered. By autumn, the level of Sandinista activity had fallen dramatically. Marine and Guardia casualties declined. By late October, McCoy could claim that Sandino had been effectively eliminated as a factor in the election. And yet—much to McCoy’s annoyance—Sandino himself eluded capture.

Hopeful that the threat posed by Sandino was being reduced, McCoy returned to Washington in May for consultations. The purpose of his visit was twofold. On the one hand, it provided an opportunity to neutralize domestic opponents of the intervention who remained wary of the McCoy mission. Back in the capital, McCoy participated in a series of briefings for journalists, congressmen, and prominent businessmen. Such proselytizing formed only a part of a larger public relations offensive. To the administration, mustering support for the electoral mission was no small matter. McCoy later recalled that, in first sending him to Managua, Coolidge had been “very definite in directing me to change the public opinion” regarding Nicaragua. Stimson believed that the best way to convert the administration’s critics was to “invite the sunlight of publicity as an antiseptic [to] all this backdoor gossip” about the intervention. He even proposed that representatives from the Pan-American Conference, then meeting in Havana, be invited to observe the election. But McCoy demurred. Outsiders would be receptive to anti-American propaganda, he argued. Their mere presence “would probably result in complicating very seriously our supervision.”

McCoy was less interested in inviting outside scrutiny than in reshaping the image of the American role in Nicaragua that was being projected back to the United States. His intention was to manage carefully the type of information provided for public consumption. As a first step toward properly informing the public back home, he added to his staff a full-time public relations adviser, Walter Wilgus, an old friend and former editor of the Manila Times. Next, McCoy, in an effort to gain the support of key opinion makers, bombarded a long list of prominent Americans with carefully constructed explanations of what his mission was doing and why. The targets of the campaign included such diverse figures as Walter Lippmann, Frank Knox, Felix Frankfurter, William Howard Taft, and the president of Standard Oil of New York. The flattering attention that McCoy paid these men, many of them acquaintances, proved surprisingly effective. “There was gladness when I read that you were put in charge of America’s honor and good sense in Nicaragua,” wrote Frankfurter in reply, adding that “it seemed like an old family party that you should succeed Stimson in the task.” And the old progressive Newton D. Baker responded: “I do not know where the white man’s burden begins and ends and I have no clear conviction as to whether we have a manifest destiny in the election you are supervising . . . but I dismiss all these questions because you are there.” Had the marines continued to sustain a high level of casualties, of course, public relations techniques alone would have been ineffective. Combined with improved conditions in the field, however, they
helped defuse much of the unfavorable attention Nicaragua aroused throughout
the previous year. By the fall of 1928, success was virtually complete: Americans
had lost interest in Nicaraguan politics—a situation most gratifying to a
Republican party preparing for a presidential election.

The second purpose of McCoy’s Washington visit was to discuss the steps to be
taken after the election to insure a stable pro-American Nicaragua. McCoy
himself urged that the United States “guard against the unduly optimistic belief
that a fair election is a panacea for Nicaragua’s troubles.” Rather, he said, “the
election itself is but one detail of the country’s general problem.” Having seen
firsthand in Nicaragua the same awful backwardness that he had encountered in
Cuba and elsewhere, McCoy recognized that arranging an orderly political
succession of itself would accomplish little. He went on to outline an ambitious
program of internal development reminiscent of the reforms sponsored by
American proconsuls in the Philippines and Cuba in years past. To build a stable
and progressive Nicaragua, he called for “the preservation of order, the
development of communications, ... the elimination of widespread corruption
of the government, the improvement of health conditions and the extension and
modernization of schools.”

Implementing such a reform package would require money—inevitably, Ameri­
can money. To McCoy and most other American officials in Managua, a made-to­
order vehicle for generating that money already existed in the Cumberland Plan, a
State Department-sponsored survey of Nicaragua whose outlines were familiar
through much of the Caribbean. In return for a sizable loan, an American­
controlled commission would direct key areas of the Nicaraguan economy—
customs, currency, governmental expenditures—creating a new climate of expan­
sion, with political order as a by-product. McCoy argued for the plan to both
Kellogg and “the terrible Wall Street bankers who are strangling poor Nic­
aragua.” The secretary of state, however, feared that the proposal would provide a
powerful weapon to critics who were charging that Americans were “taking
advantage of a so-called military occupation of Nicaragua to impose upon it a
permanent economic domination.” When he refused to associate the American
government with the loan, Wall Street backed away from the proposal. The demise
of the Cumberland Plan, despite McCoy’s assertions of its importance, emphasizes
Kellogg’s reluctance to extend American involvement in Nicaragua beyond the life
of the electoral mission. Kellogg’s timidity, contrasting sharply with his earlier
rashness, frustrated McCoy, who saw himself charged with establishing a new order
in Nicaragua while denied the wherewithal to do so.

Although disappointed by the lack of enthusiasm for Nicaraguan development,
McCoy could spare little time worrying about the setback. In Managua, further
political problems awaited his return. An election providing a satisfactory
outcome to the United States required from the outset two “acceptable”
candidates. The identity of the Liberal nominee was a foregone conclusion: The
accommodating General Moncada received his party’s endorsement even before
the decree of \textit{la ley McCoy}. Finding an equally agreeable leader for the Conservative ticket proved more difficult. Chamorro still refused to count himself out.

As Munro noted, Chamorro remained still the real leader of the Conservatives, exercising full control of the official party machinery.\textsuperscript{57} The Nicaraguan made no secret of his intention to parlay this influence into the nomination of a Conservative candidate personally loyal to him. Díaz, for once willing to stand up to Chamorro, was equally determined that as president he should designate the party’s nominee. When attempts to nominate a candidate in May 1928 resulted in a deadlocked convention, the party divided into two factions and rump sessions nominated separate tickets. Each then petitioned the National Electoral Board for recognition as sole legitimate representative of the Conservative party.

At about the same time, two other factions, identified with neither traditional party, began to coalesce, insisting that a free and fair election would grant them a place on the ballot in November. These new splinter parties, called Liberal-Republican and Conservative-Republican, along with the split in the Conservative party, raised the possibility that no candidate would receive an absolute majority of the vote, thereby throwing the contest into the Nicaraguan Congress beyond McCoy’s control. It was incumbent upon the National Electoral Board, therefore, to thin out the suddenly crowded ranks of Nicaraguan party politics. Later McCoy would recall that he had sidestepped the recognition of any third party. In fact, his action was much more direct. Ignoring existing Nicaraguan statutes that would have recognized the two new splinter parties, McCoy denied their viability, flatly declaring in each instance that no bona fide party existed.\textsuperscript{58} There would be no new parties in the 1928 election.

The problem posed by the split in the Conservative party was less easily solved. Recognition of a Conservative representative was necessary to avoid the farce of a noncompetitive election. Nonetheless, the prospect of choosing between the Conservative claimants based strictly upon the credentials that each could muster was an unattractive one. A decision made in strict accordance with a “technical legal determination of the issues,” Parker told McCoy, would oblige the board to side with that faction whose actual head had openly stated his purpose of obstructing the electoral plan—Chamorro. Such a rebuff to President Díaz “might result in the withdrawal of his financial and other cooperation and even in his resignation.” On the other hand, to ignore the Chamorristas would expose American claims of impartiality as hypocritical.\textsuperscript{59}

Although McCoy disavowed any intention of acting privately as an arbiter to resolve the Conservative squabble, he had no intention of remaining passive. On July 23, McCoy opened a session of the board by reading a draft resolution “giving [the] Conservative Party til 25 July at noon to get together.” Beyond that deadline, the board would refuse to consider the application of any additional candidates. Failure to agree on a unified ticket, in other words, would exclude the
Conservative party from the election altogether. Castillo, the board’s Conservative member, stated his opposition to the proposal in the strongest terms. The effect of its passage “would be liquidation of [the] Conservative Party and his own resignation.” Chamorro, he insisted, was the sole obstacle to party unity: “Had it not been for him, an agreement already would have been made.” To permit a final attempt to resolve the situation, McCoy temporarily tabled his resolution, providing Castillo with a copy for Chamorro “in order to make him realize what will happen unless action is taken soon to get [the] party together.”

Armed with this ultimatum, Castillo brought his party to heel. McCoy, he warned, was prepared to declare that “the historic Conservative party had ceased to exist.” Facing the prospect of political extinction and lacking the nerve to call McCoy’s bluff, the party leadership capitulated. Both factions abandoned their candidates and, on July 27, nominated a compromise figure, Adolfo Benard, acceptable not only to Chamorro and Díaz but to the United States as well. McCoy had forced the Conservative party to heal its split, reported the New York Times. The assessment was a fair one. His stratagem secured the party’s participation in the election while avoiding the pitfalls of either recognizing Chamorro or disaffecting Díaz.

By August 1928, McCoy could finally turn his attention to the details of voter registration and the actual balloting. To insure order at the polls and minimize procedural irregularities, McCoy intended to saturate Nicaragua’s electoral machinery with Americans. Each of Nicaragua’s thirteen departments received its own electoral board, headed with one exception by U.S. Army officers. Grouped under each department were district boards for each of the 352 precincts—enough, remarked McCoy, that “no blooming native will have far to go to vote.” American military personnel headed these boards as well. Voter registration, scheduled for five days in late September and early October, provided the first test of the American scheme. The outcome was encouraging. Only two incidents of violence marred the otherwise uneventful period. In all, some 150,000 Nicaraguans registered, 25 percent above the 1924 totals; the increase persuaded some observers that many would-be voters had been recorded on the rolls more than once. McCoy defended the totals as accurate and credited the increase to the success of marine and Guardia efforts to protect citizens from intimidation by their political opponents.

The election on November 4 went even more smoothly. As during the registration period, marine ground and air units deterred any intrusion by Sandino. To counter expected allegations of an inflated final tally, McCoy devised a method of discouraging “repeaters.” Before casting his ballot, each voter dipped his thumb into Mercurochrome—a gimmick sufficiently novel to attract favorable editorial notice. Predictions of widespread violence on election day proved completely unfounded. An obviously pleased McCoy informed Kellogg that “the only case of disorder reported [was]... the death of a steer which ran amuck... and was shot by a marine”—an incident culminating in nothing more
ominous than an impromptu barbecue. The large turnout—88 percent of those registered—resulted in an unequivocal Liberal victory. More important, the defeated Conservatives professed their willingness to abide by this outcome. A Conservative spokesman, calling the election both fair and honorable, laconically explained the results with the simple admission that “our party lost.” Indeed, both parties were so pleased with the supervision of the campaign that, even before election day, Moncada and Benard publicly called upon the Americans to supervise succeeding presidential contests.

To most observers, the mission achieved an impressive success. With few exceptions, the press enthusiastically commended the U.S. supervision and especially the role played by McCoy. But, even in the midst of continuing accolades—the Managua city council entertained a resolution to erect a statue of McCoy in the city plaza—unresolved questions began to intrude. The overt premise of American strategy had been that supervision of an “honest” election would allow the United States to pull out. Although McCoy delivered that election, he recognized that little of substance had changed. “This election is a good step in the right direction,” he told Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., “but . . . it is neither the first nor the last”; “until we . . . take some permanent steps to
establish peace and order,” he added, “we have not finished the job.” Yet any serious attempt to address the fundamental problems that perennially convulsed Nicaragua (and tangentially raised doubts about the effectiveness of American power) would require a prolonged presence of the very type that McCoy had been commissioned to avert. Not surprisingly, McCoy’s superiors showed little interest in his proposals for a sustained commitment to Nicaraguan development. They refused to see Nicaragua as a latter-day Cuba, with McCoy in the role of Leonard Wood.

Nonetheless, his awareness of the mission’s cosmetic accomplishments and of the limited headway made toward achieving its larger goals nagged at McCoy. What nagged above all was the knowledge that however reduced the scope of the Sandinista movement, McCoy’s efforts to destroy the insurgency and Sandino himself had failed. “Strictly speaking,” McCoy acknowledged after the elections, “the obligations of the United States have been carried out.” But a second implicit requirement—the elimination of Sandino and other bandit leaders—was essential to any stable peace in Nicaragua. That obligation remained all too clearly unfulfilled. In an angry encounter with Feland and Sellers, McCoy betrayed his obsession with Sandino. Shortly after the election, the naval and marine commanders drafted a dispatch to the Navy Department recommending an immediate reduction of American forces in Nicaragua. Given the election’s ostensible success, the step seemed logical enough. But the proposal infuriated McCoy. After reading the dispatch, he “threw it on the table and stated emphatically that he did not agree at all.” Then, according to Sellers, McCoy “started on a tirade.” The proposed reduction showed once again that the navy and marines had never fully grasped the situation in Nicaragua. McCoy personally had never had the slightest concern over his ability to hold a successful election. The principal problem, he said, had been to catch Sandino, who had successfully defied the authority of the United States. Indeed, “until Sandino . . . had been killed, captured, or run out of the country the Marines had signally failed in their mission.” Sandino’s forced inactivity of recent months was not enough. “All of the armed forces of the U.S. in Nic[aragua] have been organized into an expeditionary force with the announced purpose of getting Sandino.” Mere survival against such an onslaught evoked plaudits throughout Latin America.

McCoy was convinced that a premature troop withdrawal would jeopardize the meager progress toward stability that his mission had achieved. On November 14, he cabled Kellogg to urge that the marines remain “at full strength . . . until Sandino and the major armed groups of bandits have been eliminated or the Guardia [is] sufficiently developed to handle the situation.” The next months would be “critical with regard to our friendly efforts here,” he emphasized. “Any changes . . . should be made with great caution.” By calling for the retention of American troops in Nicaragua, McCoy tacitly conceded his mission’s failure. He had been unable to demonstrate the futility of challenging the United
Our man in Managua, 1928: Sandino eluded his grasp, and Washington rejected his strategy. (Courtesy National Archives)
States in Central America. Nonetheless, as McCoy embarked for home in mid-December 1928, few recognized the limited nature of the mission's accomplishments. Observers in the United States for whom the election of a Nicaraguan president without bloodshed seemed success enough gave the returning emissary an impressive reception. Touting McCoy to succeed Stimson as Philippine governor general, the New York Times bestowed on the general its supreme absolution, declaring him “free from the characteristics which are usually held to the disadvantage of army officers in civilian posts.” More substantively, due largely to his services in Nicaragua, McCoy was promoted to major general and became the first American officer to receive a second award of the Distinguished Service Medal.

Such laurels notwithstanding, Sandino had bested McCoy. He had set out to wreck the American plan for the election of 1928. In the end, because the insurgent remained at large, McCoy felt compelled to ask the administration to scrap its hopes for disengaging from Nicaragua as soon as the balloting was complete. However wary of the sweeping commitment implicit in McCoy’s admonition about Sandino, the new administration of Herbert Hoover could not ignore his warning altogether. Although the strength of the marine brigade gradually declined during 1929, substantial forces remained. By January 1931, the American garrison had stabilized at approximately 1,400 marines. For the United States, this middle course produced the worst of both worlds: an occupation force too feeble to deal with a resurgent Sandino but large enough to insure that Nicaragua remained an embarrassment. Thus, despite its trappings of success, the McCoy mission was doubly disappointing. It failed either to demonstrate beyond question the strength of American dominion or to terminate decisively an intervention that virtually everyone conceded had been a mistake in the first place. For the United States, the legacy of the mission was merely to prolong an error. For Nicaragua, the consequences would be tragic: The American-created Guardia ultimately became an instrument of oppression and the base of power for the Somoza tyranny.