

WILLIAM WALKER'S DARK DESTINY

Newly settled in Costa Rica, a recent alumnus investigates the legacy of “filibuster” William Walker M1843—largely forgotten in the US but still perhaps the most hated man in Central America.

By Myles Karp

A few months ago, I found myself browsing in a novelty store in Alajuela, Costa Rica, about an hour from where I live. Among garments displaying more familiar Costa Rican iconography—sloth on a surfboard, sloth with sunglasses, sloth trapped inside a glass of a tropical beverage—was a T-shirt bearing the proclamation: “William Walker was a punk ass bitch.”

I had moved to Costa Rica in January 2017 after a bout of restlessness and was trying—awkwardly—to learn the language, the customs, and the history; I still am. I had never heard of Walker, but I soon learned that—like me—he was a visitor to Central America from the US who had graduated from Penn and tried his hand at a few jobs before getting hit with wanderlust. From there, our paths

diverged. Whereas I had been lured by visions of sunshine and hammocks, Walker tried to take over large swaths of Central America to create his own personal slave republics. For a time, he succeeded.

Walker was the central antagonist in Costa Rica’s national history and mythology. Probably Nicaragua’s too. El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras all helped to vanquish him. Here in Costa Rica, the repulsion of the would-be invader and usurper was largely what first forged the young republic’s sense of national identity and unity. Though the past century and a half have largely effaced Walker from the historical imagination of the United States, Central Americans have not forgotten the misdeeds of the so-called “Grey-eyed Man of Destiny.”

Walker was born in Nashville, Tennessee, on May 8, 1824, a descendent of Lipscomb Norvell, a lieutenant in the Continental Army. Academically precocious, he graduated from the University of Nashville at age 14. After some time at the universities of Edinburgh and Heidelberg, he obtained a medical degree from Penn in 1843, by then all of 19.

Walker practiced medicine in Philadelphia and law in New Orleans for brief stints, before coming into control of a New Orleans newspaper called the *Daily Crescent* as editor and co-owner. At one point, his co-editor was a pre-fame Walt Whitman—who was fired, as he had been from other journalistic positions,

for his zealously anti-slavery views. Though no abolitionist firebrand like Whitman, Walker at the time wrote against the expansion of slavery in the growing United States.

In 1850, Walker moved to San Francisco, whose population had ballooned following the discovery of gold nearby in 1848. After obtaining an editorial position at the *San Francisco Daily Herald*, he made the enforcement of law and order in the relatively lawless young city his journalistic crusade. But despite his righteous tirades, Walker seems to have gotten caught up in the city’s culture of violence. He apparently fought three duels, one of which ended with a bullet in his leg.

While it was primarily the material promise of gold that drew prospectors to California, this mid-19th century westward expansion also had strong ideological underpinnings. During the 1845 debates over the annexation of Texas, journalist and politician John O’Sullivan wrote in the *Democratic Review* that it was “our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying billions.” The concept of manifest destiny, though not universally endorsed, became a rallying cry for the expansion into and annexation of territories near the country’s growing borders.

Politically, manifest destiny featured prominently in the platform of the Democratic Party. President James K. Polk, a Democrat, fervently pursued expansion



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during his tenure from 1845 to 1849, wresting 600,000 square miles of land from Mexico in the Mexican-American War.

During his time in California, Walker became a strong advocate of the manifest destiny ideology, and he eventually shifted his journalistic focus from local crime to American expansionism. His writings were especially concerned with Latin America; he advocated for the annexation of Cuba and US involvement in Nicaragua, which in addition to a territorial boon also promised to be a profitable business opportunity, given the country's role as a prominent shipping byway in the time before the Transcontinental Railroad and the Panama Canal.

Though Polk embraced manifest destiny, the US presidents who followed him—Zachary Taylor and Millard Fillmore, both of the Whig Party—proved less enthusiastic. With federal support lacking, zealous expansionists often took matters into their own hands, traveling to nearby lands with ideological compatriots or mercenaries and small arsenals to claim territory for the United States. These guerilla expansionists came to be known as *filibusters*, from an arcane Dutch word for pirates. Walker was not the first filibuster, but he became the most famous and—for a while—the most successful.

After hearing about a French colonial expedition to Sonora, Mexico, Walker set in motion his first plan to act upon his expansionist inclinations. Without waiting for permission from the federal government, which Walker believed to be too passive, the Tennessean arrived with a group of 45 mercenary recruits in Mexico on November 4, 1853. Despite a complete lack of military experience, Walker successfully commanded the capture of the governor of the Mexican state of La Paz and declared himself president of the new Republic of Lower California. Though he ostensibly intended to eventually join his republic with the United States, his installation of himself as president of an independent state might have foreshadowed a com-

mitment more to his own aspirations of power than to any patriotic ideology.

Though slight in appearance and of gentle affect, Walker inspired fear and loyalty in his men. According to the writer J.C. Jamison, who fought for Walker in Nicaragua:

“He was a man of small stature, his height being about five feet five inches, and his weight close to 130 pounds. His body, however, was strong, and his vital energy surprisingly great. The expression of his countenance was frank and open, and heightened by the absence of beard of any kind. His aggressive and determined character was plainly indicated by his aquiline nose, while his eyes, from which came his sobriquet, ‘Grey-eyed Man of Destiny,’ were keen in their scrutiny and almost hypnotic in their power. A woman’s voice was scarcely softer than Walker’s ... But with all his placidity of voice and demeanor, men leaped eagerly into the very cannon’s mouth to obey his commands.”

By the time of this first filibustering mission, Walker had long abandoned his mildly anti-slavery views and instead championed the institution’s expansion throughout the Americas. He may have had a change of heart—or may simply have recognized the usefulness of pro-slavery sentiment in gaining support and recruits for his filibustering. The most ardent advocates of manifest destiny were Southerners who viewed expansion and annexation as opportunities to establish new slave states, tipping the tenuous balance with the abolitionist North. Most of Walker’s enlistees on the Mexican misadventure had been recruited from the slave states of Tennessee and Kentucky. Once in control, Walker borrowed the laws of Louisiana for his new republic, making slavery legal by default.

Despite the hundreds of reinforcements who had come to join his ranks, Walker failed to take his second target, Sonora. Facing immense pressure from both the Mexican and American governments, he surrendered in early 1854.

Back in California, he was charged with violating neutrality laws, which forbade American military expeditions to allied nations. Representing himself in court, Walker deployed his substantial charisma and rhetorical charms to obtain an acquittal after eight minutes of jury deliberation. He was a popular hero in California, as well as throughout the sympathetic American South and West.

Walker settled into another newspaper position, but it was not long before he embarked upon his next filibustering journey. Nicaragua was in the throes of a civil war between the Legitimist and Democratic parties, based respectively in Granada and León. The Democrats sought mercenary help and contacted Walker. Eager to exploit the nation whose shipping route could prove immensely valuable to himself and to the United States, Walker agreed; this time, however, he made sure to circumvent neutrality laws by obtaining a contract to bring “colonists” to Nicaragua.

On May 3, 1855, Walker and 57 followers left San Francisco by boat. Shortly after arriving, and reinforced with local Democratic troops, they attacked the Legitimist stronghold of Rivas. They lost decisively, driven out of town after suffering significant casualties. Though his military prowess was questionable, Walker became the leader of the Democrats by default, when the chiefs of both the military and the executive branch died. On October 13, in what many consider to be the only truly adept maneuver of his military career, he commanded a ferry and sailed to Granada, taking the Legitimist forces by surprise. At this point, he effectively gained control of Nicaragua, installing a puppet interim president in Patricio Rivas. Soon after, he had himself elected president and was inaugurated on July 12, 1856.

Walker’s reign was characterized by the imposition of white American cultural and racial hegemony over the native people and traditions. He declared English the official language, confiscated property from Nicaraguan rivals to give

to American supporters, legalized slavery, and invited—practically begged—white Americans to immigrate in notices like this one from a New Orleans paper:

“The Government of Nicaragua is desirous of having its lands settled and cultivated by an industrious class of people, and offer as an inducement to emigrants, a donation of Two Hundred and Fifty Acres of Land for single persons, and One Hundred Acres additional to persons of family. Steamers leave New Orleans for San Juan on the 11th and 26th of each month. The fare is now reduced to less than half the former rates.”

He established a bilingual newspaper, *El Nicaragüense*, which originated his famous sobriquet, based on a supposed indigenous legend about a grey-eyed leader who would drive out Spanish oppressors. “This traditional prophecy has been fulfilled to the letter,” proclaimed a writer for Walker’s paper in December 1855. “‘The Grey-Eyed Man’ has come.”

If his ideological commitment to slavery had been ambiguous earlier, Walker was by now a zealous proponent. He also saw slavery as a means of limiting the race-mixing between Spanish and indigenous people that he considered the root of social unrest in the region.

Back in the US, Walker was practically beatified. Plays were staged about his exploits, with a playbill for one July 1856 production at Manhattan’s Purdy National Theatre calling him “The hope of freedom.” W.F. Brannin of Kentucky took it upon himself to write the “Nicaragua National Song,” presenting Walker as a tyrant-toppling liberator:

It needs not a Prophet or talker
To tell you in prose or in verse,
the exploits of Patriot Walker,
Whom Tyrants will long deem a curse -
A brave son of Freedom is Walker
And Nations his fame will rehearse.

In addition to lauding his bravery and accomplishments, many Americans saw

Walker’s reign in Nicaragua as an opportunity. Southerners seeking to add a slave state to the union, emigrants looking for new opportunities and land, and capitalists seeking new sources of profit each assumed he would champion their unique causes. But as he gained power, Walker demonstrated that his only unwavering ideological commitment was to himself.

It was his repudiation of powerful capitalists that led to his eventual downfall. Since 1849, the Accessory Transit Company, controlled by Cornelius Vanderbilt, had enjoyed contractual dominion over the transit route across Nicaragua. Assuming their compatriot would prove sympathetic to their aims once in power, company executives had provided much of the financial and logistical support for Walker’s mission. But shortly after gaining control of the country, Walker revoked the company’s charter and seized its boats. Though Walker had made a great number of enemies, none had been so rich, powerful, and vengeful as Vanderbilt.

As Walker established himself in Nicaragua and began hinting at greater ambitions in the region, nearby countries sought to prepare defenses. Costa Rican president Juan Rafael Mora became the primary galvanizer of opposition to the filibusters for both Costa Rica and the region as a whole. In November of 1855, about a month after Walker’s victory at Granada, Mora offered the following warning to his countrymen in a decree:

“Peace, that fortunate peace that, together with your industrious perseverance, has so increased our credit, wealth, and happiness, is perfidiously threatened. A gang of foreigners, scourge of all peoples ... plan to invade Costa Rica to look in our wives and daughters, in our houses and farms, pleasures for their fierce passions, nourishment to their unbridled greed. Will I need to paint for you the terrible ills that coldly awaiting such a barbaric invasion can result in?”

On February 26, 1856, Costa Rica officially declared war on the filibuster government of Nicaragua. A few days

later, Mora issued a proclamation calling to arms not only his countrymen but also the “Great Central American family” of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras.

Walker responded in kind with a decree of his own:

“The Natural law of individual protection obliges us, the Americans of Nicaragua, to declare eternal enmity to the servile party and the servile governments of Central America. The friendship we have offered them has been rebuffed. We are left with no option other than to make them recognize that our enmity can be as dangerous and destructive as our friendship is faithful and true.”

The Costa Ricans did indeed take up arms. The filibusters had, by that point, actually penetrated into Costa Rican territory, inhabiting a farm called Santa Rosa in the Nicoya Peninsula, just south of Nicaragua. Mora and the Costa Ricans reached Santa Rosa on March 20 and won the ensuing skirmish in 14 minutes, officially expelling the invaders from their country. They then continued to Rivas for a now-legendary battle. After grueling street fighting, the two sides reached a sort of stalemate, with the filibusters entrenched in the Guerra family’s home and boardinghouse, from which they maintained a secure firing position.

As the possibly apocryphal legend goes, a Costa Rican drummer boy named Juan Santamaría volunteered to charge the house with his torch as long as someone would take care of his mother in case of his death. He managed to light the house on fire, drawing out the filibusters, but he was gunned down in doing so. Juan Santamaría is now Costa Rica’s national hero. The international airport is named for him, and every April 11—the anniversary of the battle—the country celebrates Juan Santamaría Day.

Though they do also commemorate the anniversary of independence from Spain, Costa Ricans consider Juan Santamaría Day to be the primary national holiday, and mark it with comparable fanfare. This past April, fireworks displays audible

from around the Central Valley had the stray dogs that rule my street howling loudly and proudly; even the little dachshund-chihuahua mutt was celebrating the rout of Walker's men at Rivas.

The Costa Ricans had a key ally, and Walker a fateful enemy, in Cornelius Vanderbilt. The tycoon sought to seize back control of the San Juan River and his former boats, which had become Walker's lifeline for supplies and reinforcements. In doing so, Vanderbilt could help defeat his nemesis while simultaneously regaining the lucrative transit route. In December 1856, one of his agents, Sylvanus Spencer, led 120 Costa Rican troops by canoe and raft toward the ferry port at Greytown, Nicaragua. There they were joined by Mora and 800 more troops, well-armed with guns and ammunition supplied by Vanderbilt. Together they traversed the river and captured the ferry boats one by one, eventually gaining control of the route. Walker's lifeline was cut, and Vanderbilt had gotten his revenge.

Meanwhile, the allied coalition of Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala attacked from the north. As fighting went on, Walker's situation became increasingly desperate, exacerbated by outbreaks of disease and desertion among his men. Finally, on May 1, 1857, Walker surrendered and was brought to New York by the US Navy.

Once again greeted as a hero at home, he cast himself as the injured party, lodging a formal complaint against the US naval commander who had captured him in a meeting with President Buchanan. His continued criticism of the Navy for interfering cut into his popular support somewhat, and there were occasional run-ins with the law over his flouting of neutrality laws, but nothing came of them. He lectured widely, trying to raise money for a return to Nicaragua, and in 1860 published *The War in Nicaragua*, an autobiographical account of his military campaign, where he is listed on the title page as "Gen'l William Walker."

In a dedicatory note to "my comrades in Nicaragua," he describes the book as an effort "to do justice to their acts and motives: To the living, with the hope that we may soon meet again on the soil for which we have suffered more than the pangs of death—the reproaches of a people for whose welfare we stood ready to die: To the memory of those who perished in the struggle, with the vow that as long as life lasts no peace shall remain with the foes who libel their names and strive to tear away the laurel which hangs over their graves."

But Walker's next return to Central America would prove considerably less consequential to the region—and fatal for him.

A group of rogue British settlers hoped to establish a colony on Roatán, an island off the Honduran coast, and they asked the famed filibuster for help. He agreed, but shortly after arriving, he was captured by Commander Nowell Salmon of the British Navy. The British controlled the land that is now Belize and viewed Walker as a threat to their interests in the region. Salmon turned Walker over to the Honduran government—a gift surely received with pleasure. On September 12, 1860, at the age of 36, Walker was executed by a firing squad.

The *New York Times* report of the execution suggests the fervency with which the Honduran executioners undertook the task:

"Three soldiers stepped forward to within twenty feet of him and discharged their muskets. The balls entered his body, and he leaned a little forward; but, it being observed he was not dead, a fourth soldier mercifully advanced so close to the suffering man that the muzzle of the musket almost touched his forehead, and being there discharged, scattered his brains and skull to the winds. Thus ends the life of the 'Gray-eyed man of Destiny.'"

Though lionized during his lifetime, over the decades Walker faded into obscurity in the US. But Central Americans

haven't forgotten. Still-popular terms for both Salvadorans (*Salvatruchos*) and Hondurans (*Catrachos*) derive from the name of the allied commander in the war against the filibusters, Florencio Xatruch. Here in my adopted home of Costa Rica, the national heroes and holidays, the names of airports and highways, stem from the story of Walker and the heroic quest to prevent the country from becoming a Yankee-controlled slave state. As I was researching this piece in a room full of battle dioramas at the Juan Santamaría Museum in Alajuela, a group of schoolchildren around eight or nine years old entered the room, their teacher spinning the national yarns of the campaign against the filibusters; they looked like they had heard it all before.

It's all too easy to canonize our heroes and forget about our demons. Walker was an exceptional case, but he certainly was not the last demon in the story of the relationship between the US and Central America. Many of the most egregious transgressions are, like the Walker affair, left out of our history books. Even without sinister intention, US culture continues to exert a hegemonic—often uninvited—influence on Central America. Ironically, the words on the T-shirt that inspired my William Walker fact-finding initiative were, despite their anti-imperialist sentiment, printed in English.

Given the historical context, to welcome a visitor like me is an act of forgiveness for Costa Rica, and I've been striving to adapt to local customs and be a good guest—an anti-Walker. I'm not sure how we can keep the memory of our collective misdeeds alive—but a handy T-shirt with a disparaging quip about one of America's most nefarious punk ass bitches is a good starting point.

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