



# Tycoon's War: How Cornelius Vanderbilt Invaded a Country to Overthrow America's Most Famous Military Adventurer

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When he died in 1877, Cornelius Vanderbilt, founder of the Vanderbilt dynasty, was wealthier than the U.S. Treasury. But he had nearly lost his fortune in 1856, when William Walker, a young Nashville genius, set out to conquer Central America and, in the process, take away Vanderbilt's most profitable shipping business. To win back his empire, Vanderbilt had to win a bloody war involving seven countries. *Tycoon's War* tells the story of an epic imperialist duel--a violent battle of capitalist versus idealist, money versus ambition--and a monumental clash of egos that resulted in the deaths of thousands of Americans.

Written by a master storyteller, this incredible true story, impeccably researched and never before told in full, is packed with greed, intrigue, and some of the most hair-raising battle scenes ever written.

## **Tycoon's War: How Cornelius Vanderbilt Invaded a Country to Overthrow America's Most Famous Military Adventurer Details**

Date : Published September 1st 2008 by Da Capo Press (first published August 25th 2008)

ISBN : 9780306816079

Author : Stephen Dando-Collins

Format : Hardcover 373 pages

Genre : History, North American Hi..., American History, Nonfiction, Politics, Business, Military, Military History



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## **From Reader Review Tycoon's War: How Cornelius Vanderbilt Invaded a Country to Overthrow America's Most Famous Military Adventurer for online ebook**

### **Colin says**

I first heard of William Walker when I was in Nicaragua and remained curious about him. I picked this book up when we made plans to visit the Biltmore estate in Asheville, North Carolina - built actually by Cornelius' eldest son. I was familiar with the Vanderbilt and Rockefeller battles, but I never knew of any connection between Walker, Nicaragua and Vanderbilt. I enjoyed this book. It is well researched, non-partisan and an interesting subject matter. I think it helps the author is from Tasmania.

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### **Raegan Butcher says**

Hard to enjoy this book because, like a lot of history, there are no good guys to root for. William Walker was hardly a military or political genius and the various Central Americans come across as a basket of snakes: corrupt, vain, power-hungry, treacherous, and cruel. And worse than all of them, somehow, is the robber baron, Cornelius Vanderbilt, the epitome of a sociopath-turned-successful-businessman.

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### **Robert says**

Once I put it down, I couldn't pick it back up. What should probably be a very interesting story isn't told very well, losing the reader's interest. It's all right for the account of Walker's unlikely early successes, but then bogs down once he and Vanderbilt are at odds.

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### **John Gurney says**

Fascinating history of Tennessee-bred adventurer William Walker, who joined one side of a Nicaraguan Civil War, ending up as President of the Central American country. Interestingly, this circumvented the US Neutrality Act as, importantly, Walker crossed Cornelius Vanderbilt, whose ships then brought passengers from the East Coast to the West Coast via Nicaragua. Walker's ultimate defeat by Vanderbilt proxies not only ended in his ultimate execution, but pushed the steamer transfer business to Panama, where, history would find the great canal built. Nicaragua, of course, was the option viable canal route, since it came with significant interior waterways and the large Lake Nicaragua.

This book is very readable, with battles and key events written much in the style of a novel. Well worth reading.

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## **Paul Hinman says**

What starts as a fairly fascinating read somewhat dissolves into repeated descriptions of failed military battles, where the dead and wounded have as much significance as they might in a video game.

William Walker was truly a fascinating figure. And the means by which he incurred the wrath of Cornelius Vanderbilt sets the stage for a great story. Unfortunately, the author fails to ever really capture Walker's true motivations, leaving me as a reader any real attachment for him and his cause, and thus remorse for the numerous American filibusters he lead to their deaths.

Likewise, while the first few chapters (as well as the book's cover and title) would lead you to believe this was a battle waged between Walker and Vanderbilt, the author also fails to really dive into the life and motivation of Vanderbilt after a certain point.

Rather than a war in which you can root for one side or the other, were presented with the arrogance of American colonialists who nearly destroyed a country for unspecified reasons.

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## **Liam says**

"Gentlemen, you have undertaken to cheat me. I won't sue you, for the law is too slow. I'll ruin you. Yours truly, Cornelius Vanderbilt." (Vanderbilt to Morgan and Garrison, 36)

"After the war with Walker, the governments of Central America never again combined in a common cause." (332)

"Ask anyone in Central America, and most will not have heard of the Vanderbilts. But mention William Walker, and Central Americans will tell you all about the king of the filibusters. Throughout Central America today, Walker's name ranks with that of Hitler and Stalin." (335).

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## **James Vallejos says**

Fascinating read on the attempted take over of Central America by the american adventurer William Walker. If he had succeeded the course of American history might have been different with the incorporation of the Central America into the United States. The degree with which Vanderbilt was able to use his money to influence American policy has direct correlations to todays struggles between the government and US corporations.

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## **Roslyn says**

I had no idea the story of a war could read like a thriller. I'm exaggerating, but only a little. This book was well-researched and very interesting. Stephen's conclusions at the end made a lot of sense.

People were so rebellious back in the 1850's. You really had to learn to get along, because they did not give a hoot about the "law" most of the time. And there wasn't law most of the time...

Cholera killed more people than the war.

Soldiers forced to fight are useless and generally flee as soon as the battle starts.

Vanderbilt destroyed Nicaragua for short-term revenge. If he hadn't done what he did, all of Latin America might very well be part of the US right now.

In the 1850's Nicaragua was very European, full of French, Germans, Americans, Brits, Irish.

"The name is only as great as the principle it represents."

Race was a convenient way to rally the Nicaraguans to fight a war, but it was just a play on the part of the Costa Rican president to annex a large chunk of Nicaragua.

No one fighting the war knows what they are really fighting for, just what they have been told.

Unfairly, Walker is remembered in Nicaragua like Hitler is remembered in Europe.

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### **Astarzak says**

This piece of history seems so pointless in its objective. Although, I realize that most wars fought are in reality, incredibly pointless and self-serving. Decent read, however the writer did not capture my interest as much as I would have liked. There were definitely some exciting parts and history in general is fun to learn about...however this bit of history just pissed me off.

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### **Clark Hays says**

#### **The ugly (only?) side of manifest destiny**

I consider myself pretty well read and at least passably knowledgeable in American history, which is why I was surprised that I knew so little about William Walker. I first came across him in an odd little book called "Legendary Outlaws of the West" (Williams). A chapter discussed his early attempts to invade and claim Baja, Mexico. He was rebuffed by a notorious outlaw/rancher named Melendrez, who later was commissioned as a general in the army for helping defeat Walker and his men.

You'd think Walker would return to the U.S. humbled, but instead - driven by an unwavering commitment to manifest destiny (translation: it's our right to do whatever we want) he set his sights on Nicaragua, ultimately leading a successful invasion with a handful of filibusteros (based on the Dutch word for freebooter - pirate - and source of today's "filibuster"). His dreams of empire were in direct opposition, ultimately, with shipping magnate Cornelius Vanderbilt who wanted to control access across the country via Lake Nicaragua to profit from trips to the west coast of America (at the time, pre-railroad, boats were much faster than going overland and the profits were obscene.)

It was hard to know who to pull for in this war: a tough as nails mercenary who, after a series of victories, was elected president of Nicaragua, or the epitome of a capitalist successes, Vanderbilt, literally a self-made man able to devote millions to destabilizing Walker's regime in order to make more millions.

This is a great book, thoroughly researched - in fact, I started to lose track of the many battles and the many

players strutting across the stage only to be executed against an adobe wall - and I highly recommend it. My favorite passage, near the end, was an inspired bit of sabotage that ultimately sealed Walker's defeat.

It really puts in stark light the mind set that possibly still shapes American idealism - that we have some moral obligation to reshape the world in our image. Sadly, the only force greater than manifest destiny appears to be capitalism and the desire to concentrate vast amounts of wealth by hook or by crook or, in this case, by arming soldiers and mercenaries and tempting them to invade other countries.

In Walker's own words, to his troops after his defeat, "You have written a page of American history which is impossible to forget or erase." Sadly, he appears all but forgotten in his own country though his dark legacy lives on in Central America.

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### **Jerome says**

I knew the basic story from MacPherson's *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era*, and, not knowing much about William Walker, I thought this would be interesting.

The ground here is so fertile; it's a shame that Stephen Dando-Collins does approximately nothing with it. We start with one of the coolest lines in the history of capitalism -- a letter from a tycoon to his erstwhile business partners:

"Gentlemen, you have undertaken to cheat me. I won't sue you, for the law is too slow. I'll ruin you. Yours truly, Cornelius Vanderbilt."

The story of wrongs avenged gets better. Because while Vanderbilt's partners are scamming him, the American William Walker is trying to take over Nicaragua. Vanderbilt needs Nicaragua; the gold rush is heating up in California, and Vanderbilt wants to shuttle passengers from the east coast to the west. Without a railroad or a Panama Canal, the quickest way to do this had been to send them around the southern tip of South America. Vanderbilt had another idea: send boats through the Caribbean to Nicaragua, get on the San Juan River at Greytown, follow the San Juan to Lake Nicaragua, use mules to cover a small strip of ground between the Lake and San Juan Del Sur, and dump them out onto the Pacific. From there, the trip up to California is comparatively short.

There will be conflict eventually. On the one side we have Walker, the American "filibuster" (a term meaning something like "treasure-seeking cowboy" before it meant "reading from the phone book for 72 consecutive hours"), hoping to carve out a new nation under his tutelage in South America. On the other we have a ruthless businessman who needs Walker's territory to make his money. While Vanderbilt plots his enemies' destruction, Walker draws thousands upon thousands of Americans down from the north into his private army and names himself president of Nicaragua. How do those thousands of Americans get there? They need to take ships, obviously. The collision course is set.

Unfortunately, Dando-Collins does as little as possible with these promising materials, and by the end of "Tycoon's War" he reminds us how little he's done with them. For instance: one might want to know what motivates Walker to do what he does. Is it money? Fame? Power? You'd think that in a book ostensibly about "America's Most Famous Military Adventurer," his motivations would be woven into most every page of the book. Yet Dando-Collins saves them for the end, in a couple-page-long chapter entitled "The Protagonists' Motives."

Dando-Collins wants us to believe that Walker was hugely important within American history. He may well be, but nothing Dando-Collins tells us would suggest so. The best he can come up with is to note that "To this day, there is an historical marker honoring Walker outside the Nashville house where he was born and grew up." Mt. Rushmore it isn't.

The unfortunate reality seems to be that Dando-Collins is a William Walker fanboy. Near "The Protagonists' Motives," we get this: "Throughout Central America today, Walker's name ranks with that of Hitler and Stalin." That is the sole unflattering line about Walker in the book's 342 pages, and it takes 334 pages to get there. The reader is not equipped to understand why Central Americans might view Walker that way.

We can at least hope for solid military history. "Tycoon's War" is a reasonably engaging on that score, and indeed that seems to be the only part of "Tycoon's War" that really interests Dando-Collins. He mostly lets the Walker biography, the Vanderbilt biography, the broader story of the U.S.'s role in this hemisphere, and the clash-of-titans aspects drop.

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### **Ronald Newton says**

Southern against Northerner in the decade leading up to the U.S. Civil War. Businessman against nation builder. And win at all costs against stand with your principles.

The book read like fiction and left me thirsting for the next twist. Highly recommend it for those who want to learn of the craziness of and haphazard look in both war and business.

As I read about Vanderbilt versus Walker, I got another lesson regarding the importance of priorities: if your goal is to win, sometimes need to consider aligning yourself with strange bedfellows.

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### **Scot says**

William Walker, the Nashville born adventurer who went to Nicaragua in 1855 with a vision of empire-building, and became progressively a soldier for one side in the Civil War there, then that side's military leader, then the president of the country, represented one ideal American of the last ante-bellum decade: he was a brilliant (former child prodigy), militaristic, ambitious, hard working, loyal gentleman from the South. The rough and tumble men who followed him were called regenerators, or filibusters, and they embodied the mercenary ideal of American expansionism based on an assumed superiority of Anglo-Saxon/western European cultures over Latin American mestizo and Indian peoples. At the time, Nicaragua provided the crucial connecting route for travelers and mail flowing from the Atlantic and Gulf coasts of the U.S.A. to the booming state of California, which had joined the union in 1850, and it also served travelers, mail and that oh-so-precious gold flowing back.

Cornelius Vanderbilt, the American millionaire who made his fortune in transportation (first steamers, then as the nineteenth century went on, in railroads) controlled that Nicaragua transit route, and when some business competitors hoodwinked him while he was off in Europe, and outmaneuvered the company control from him, Vanderbilt dedicated himself, as he always did in such cases, to getting even no matter what the cost or how long it took. Walker, newly coming to power in Nicaragua, made a deal with Vanderbilt's enemies in the best interest of the Nicaraguan government (and Walker's personal advancement). That

decision triggered the conflict between these two larger-than-life men that was played out with the lives of thousands and the political futures of several Central American countries affected as a result.

This detailed history examines the struggles between the two men with precision. This historian has done his research well. The series of military campaigns and wars in Central America are described and delineated thoroughly, in fact so thoroughly this aspect of the book got a bit boring for me, but I am sure it will prove fascinating reading for those more interested in military history, as the writer has a clean, crisp style.

Previously, I had always understood Walker as a rabid pro-slavery expansionist just out to create a Dixie Empire, but now I appreciate he was not that pro-slavery at all for most of his life, and only adopted that stance as a political ploy to get more support for his control of Nicaragua as the 1850s went on. And reading all of Vanderbilt's Machiavellian ploys and international intrigues just to settle a business vendetta was captivating. Dando-Collins' account helps me see that the colonial presence of settlers from the United States and the mixing in the politics of Central America by American commercial interests was much greater in the 1850s than I had heretofore realized. I knew that we had meddled there, of course, but somehow I thought that had all really developed and expanded after the Civil War, as we became more concentrated on empire building.

Although he lost in the end, managed to get out and get back to the United States, and then returned twice more to try and restore himself to political power in Central America, in 1860 Walker was killed by a firing squad after capture in Honduras. He had lived a very full life and yet was only thirty-six years old when he died. Hatred and fear of him brought the different Central American state governments together briefly in the 1850s, and honoring those in resistance against him became powerful traditions in their developing national patriotic traditions and civil religions. But there were many in Nicaragua, both locals who accepted him and American enlistees who flocked to him, who supported Walker and the future vision he stood for while he was there, and he indicated he had no plan of annexing Nicaragua to the United States as some supposed, but rather of building a new empire in the tropics of Central America. He died as he had lived, a dashing romantic figure, a man whom Vanderbilt never broke though he destroyed him. In the epilogue, the author suggests that this well could be the reason why Vanderbilt chose Nashville as the home for the private university he would endow, in a late life action of very uncharacteristic philanthropy. In this way, Nashville, the home of William Walker, where he was loved and revered even after death, through the input of lots of money could be brought around to honoring the name of Vanderbilt even more after they were both long gone.

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## Gregory says

From <http://weeksnotice.blogspot.com/2015/...>

Stephen Dando-Collins' book *Tycoon's War* chronicles William Walker's infamous effort to become president of Nicaragua and to colonize the country in the mid-1850s. What a miserable affair: I mean that effort, not the book, which flows well. We see 19th men in all their vainglory and extreme prejudices. Walker wanted glory over "uncivilized" people, Cornelius Vanderbilt (who helped defeat him) wanted unfettered access for his transit company across Nicaragua, soldiers of fortune wanted violent adventure and spoils, the American public wanted accounts of how superior they were to Central Americans, while Central Americans themselves mostly wanted to be left alone.

There's not much good to be said of anyone in the book. The Central American (and I refer to the region

because it united briefly to drive Walker out) leaders themselves stabbed each other in the back constantly. It's telling that the end of the book describes all the executions that took place, including Walker's. It seems most of the protagonists soon ended up against a wall. Meanwhile, the bulk of Walker's soldiers ended up joining the Confederacy. Indeed, Walker had ended the ban on slavery in Nicaragua precisely to gain southern support.

Page after page shows the lives lost, sometimes in horrific ways (such as burning) for no real purpose at all. Filibusters came with bloodlust, taking enormous risks and dying (often of disease) for nothing. There was no way Walker would maintain any sort of government long-term. Even though he was self-proclaimed president, he had no government, no policies, no popular support, and no knowledge of governing. He was emphatically uninterested in Nicaraguans themselves.

In the U.S. we've forgotten the sordid story entirely. In Nicaragua, September 14 is San Jacinto Day and a national holiday because it remembers a key Nicaraguan victory against Walker's forces in 1856. The assault on sovereignty Walker represented means nothing to us, which is unfortunate. And all too common.

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### **David R. says**

A very nice rendering of a footnote incident in American history. In a nutshell, adventurer William Walker and his "filibusters", seeking their own glory in Central America, helped the liberal resistance take power in 1850s Nicaragua. But the conservative forces, allied with neighboring dictatorships and the vengeful Cornelius Vanderbilt (stymied in a bit to dominate the precursor of the Panama Canal) eventually topple the fairly naive Walker. It's a complex episode not neatly portrayed as Good Guys-Bad Guys and certainly not as some kind of eccentric Pre-Confederacy. Dando-Collins avoids cheap stereotyping and if anything documents the often unsavory characters on both sides of the struggle. The only suggestion I would make is to look at the filibuster effort in the wider sense: did it impact Nicaragua's eventual destiny? and if so, how? And how do the victorious Legitimists compare with modern forces?

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