

“By the Force of Our Arms” William D. Leahy and the U.S. Intervention in Nicaragua, 1912

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The morning of Thursday August 29, 1912, signified an auspicious moment for Nicaragua. As the first rays of sunlight dissipated the predawn gloom, 400 U.S. sailors and marines assembled at the railroad terminal in Corinto, a small entrepôt situated on Nicaragua’s Pacific coast. The landing party quickly entrained to move inland as revolutionary violence convulsed the Central American nation. The vanguard of a larger expeditionary force due to arrive within days, this advance battalion wasted no time positioning itself to protect foreign lives and property across western Nicaragua—with the U.S.-owned national railway as its primary objective. Although no one knew it at the time, the landing of the U.S. expeditionary force in August 1912 would mark the beginning of a two-decade occupation that many Nicaraguans still view as a national tragedy.¹



Lieutenant Commander William D. Leahy, USN, in 1916—four years after he participated in the Nicaraguan intervention of 1912.

For Lieutenant Commander William D. Leahy, USN, the auspicious moment was personal. As the naval battalion prepared to move out, Leahy suddenly found himself in charge of Corinto’s defenses. Watching the landing force depart, Leahy became concerned lest his minuscule garrison—10 sailors, a steam launch, and a small-caliber boat gun—might prove inadequate for securing the port. Leahy noted in his diary, “this was a thin force to even patrol the town,” much less defend it.²

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¹ Michel Gobat, *Confronting the American Dream: Nicaragua under U.S. Imperial Rule* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 100.

² William D. Leahy, *Diary, 1892–1921*, William D. Leahy Papers. U.S. Naval Academy Museum, Annapolis, Maryland.

To make matters worse, intelligence reported a force of some 200 rebels preparing to attack Corinto. Leahy's diary reports how he "became immediately alarmed" at the prospect of defending the town against such daunting odds. Consequently, the anxious commander scrambled to find reinforcements.³

Throughout his six-week tenure as military governor of Corinto, Leahy continued to record his experiences and observations "on the ground" in Nicaragua. His diary survives today as an important historical resource, from which scholars may develop a better understanding of U.S. empire-building during the early 20th century. The diary also illuminates the views and values that animated Leahy's actions in Nicaragua. Given Leahy's later prominence as a statesman, presidential advisor, and senior military leader, the diary's pages may help us to understand how he influenced national strategy and policy during World War II and the early Cold War years.

This study takes a fresh look at Leahy's Nicaragua diary through the lens of Critical Theory. Applying textual analysis techniques recently advanced by diplomatic historian Frank Costigliola, the study examines Leahy's language, syntax, and use of metaphor to reveal underlying assumptions, agendas, and attitudes. In particular, the analysis focuses on three themes: Leahy's responses to the challenges he faced in command at Corinto; his views on the people, politics, and society of Nicaragua; and his assessment of U.S. strategy and policy in the strife-torn nation. As will be seen, textual analysis helps the scholar unlock new meaning *within* (not between) the lines of Leahy's diary. The process reveals a surprisingly complex and conflicted personality striving to balance empathy and moral rectitude against ethnocentrism and a powerful sense of duty. This nuanced analysis both challenges and enriches previous scholarship on Leahy and on U.S. empire.

This study also introduces an important new source: a typescript version of Leahy's diary, likely produced during the 1920s and recently discovered at the U.S. Naval Academy Museum in Annapolis, Maryland. A preliminary review reveals no reference to this document in the relevant literature. When analyzed alongside diary volumes available from other collections, the USNA Museum typescript deepens our understanding of Leahy and his times.⁴

³ William D. Leahy, *Diary, 1897–1931*, 199, William D. Leahy Papers. Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin.

⁴ The author is indebted to Sondra DuPlantis of the U.S. Naval Academy Museum for bringing to light this previously overlooked version of Leahy's diary.

As a work of micro-history, this study focuses narrowly on Leahy's account of the U.S. intervention in Nicaragua during August–November 1912. It interweaves examples and interpretations of Leahy's journal-writing with a contextual narrative covering the important personalities, events, and developments that structured the intervention. The essay begins with a section introducing Leahy's diary and the interpretive challenges it poses to scholars. Three substantive sections follow. The first examines Leahy's personal responses to finding himself thrust into an unexpected maelstrom of revolt and intervention. The next segment offers insight into how Leahy viewed Nicaragua and Nicaraguans, followed by a section that reveals a surprisingly critical assessment of U.S. policy and strategy in a nation riven by civil upheaval. Finally, the conclusions place Leahy's attitudes and reactions to his Nicaragua experiences within the wider framework of U.S. empire in the early 20th century.

Leahy's Diary

Leahy developed a journaling habit early in his naval career, primarily to occupy spare hours at sea.⁵ Indeed, an inspection of his diary reveals regular entries over the span of five decades. From the late 1890s through the mid-1950s, Leahy carefully recorded his experiences and observations—sometimes daily, sometimes weekly, monthly, or more.

The diary project existed as a loose collection of notes and papers until 1926, when Leahy compiled his earliest jottings into a handwritten narrative covering 1897–1902. During 1930–31, he again gathered his notes, this time into a typewritten volume that encompassed the years 1893–1931. During the 1950s, Leahy deposited this and subsequent typescript volumes at the Library of Congress, with duplicate photostatic copies sent to the Wisconsin Historical Society in Madison. Readily accessible at these archives in paper form—and distributed as well on microfilm—scholars have made effective use of the Library of Congress and Wisconsin Historical Society volumes.⁶

Recently, however, another typescript version of Leahy's diary came to light. This volume, covering the years 1892–1921, resides in the U.S. Naval Academy Museum

⁵ William D. Leahy, *Diary, 1897–1902*, 1, William D. Leahy Papers. Subject Files, Box 1. Naval History and Heritage Command, Washington, DC.

⁶ Examples of scholarship using Leahy's diary include Henry Hitch Adams, *Witness to Power: The Life of Fleet Admiral William D. Leahy* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1985); Mark R. Shulman, *Navalism and the Emergence of American Sea Power, 1882–1893* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1995); Gerald Eustis Thomas, "William D. Leahy and America's Imperial Years, 1893–1917" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1974).

archives, apparently unnoticed by scholars until now. While it clearly draws from the same set of notes and shares some identical passages with the Library of Congress/Wisconsin diaries, this newly discovered typescript differs substantially in tone and content from the better-known documents. Questions remain as to when, how, and why this undated original document (bearing annotations in Leahy's handwriting) arrived at the Naval Academy Museum. Nevertheless, it represents an important find that informs this paper—possibly the document's first use in historical scholarship.⁷ As this study demonstrates, comparing various

NICARAGUAN WAR - 1912

After two days in the target area a secret cablegram directed the CALIFORNIA to proceed as soon as possible to Corinto, Nicaragua, and to be prepared to send a landing force ashore upon arrival.

We sailed before midnight leaving orders for the supply ship GLACIER and the Gunboat VICKSBURG to follow as soon as they were ready for sea.

After a six-day passage we anchored off Corinto in the afternoon of August 28, 1912, finding the U.S.S. DENVER, Commander T. Washington, and the U.S.S. ANNAPOLIS, Commander Terhune, in port.

Next morning at daylight a landing force of five companies of sailors and Marines from the CALIFORNIA, augmented by seventy men from the ANNAPOLIS, and commanded by Lieutenant G. W. Steele, started to take and hold the railroad between Corinto and Leon.

Admiral Southerland placed Commander Terhune in command of the entire expeditionary force consisting of 300 men from the CALIFORNIA, 70 from the ANNAPOLIS, 60 from the DENVER, and a battalion of 350 Marines under Major Smedley Butler who were already in the city of Leon.

The Admiral interpreted his vague instructions from Washington to mean that he should take control of the railroad as rapidly as practicable, and while remaining neutral in the revolution to permit neither of the belligerent factions to use it for military purposes.

Excerpt of opening narrative of Leahy's experiences in Nicaragua during 1912, from the U.S. Naval Academy Museum typescript.

⁷ For ease of reference, this study refers hereinafter to the typescript diary from the U.S. Naval Academy Museum as the USNA typescript, 1892–1921. Correspondingly, the citation LOC/WHS typescript, 1897–1931 refers to the first of several typescript diary volumes archived at the Library of Congress and Wisconsin Historical Society. Leahy's diary at the LOC consists of multiple bound volumes and unbound notes encompassing the period 1893–1956. The WHS holds photocopy duplicates of Leahy's bound diary volumes covering 1897–1931 and 1941–1945. Of note, the Naval History and Heritage Command holds yet another version of the diary: a handwritten volume covering 1897–1902, compiled by Leahy in 1926.

versions of the diary can inform our understanding of Leahy's life and times in ways not previously possible.

While Leahy's diaries may tantalize the scholar with the prospect for new insights, the process of extracting meaning from their pages is not always simple. From his earliest days of journal-writing, Leahy utilized his diary principally to chronicle the people, places, and events he encountered, rather than to express intimate thoughts and feelings. Thus the diary often reads as an impassive factual narrative, with interpretation, evaluation, and emotion rarely appearing. "He hid his feelings of disappointment or elation," observed Leahy biographer Henry H. Adams. "It was stiff upper lip all the way."⁸

Page after page of Leahy's diary affirm Adams's assessment, impressing the reader with terse facts and a circumspect tone. For example, Leahy's entry for October 25, 1944, records with characteristic detachment the momentous U.S. victory at Leyte Gulf, along with the lesser happenings of his day:

Reports telling of an extensive Naval battle in dispersed areas near the Philippines is in progress yesterday and today. Admiral Halsey is in command of the U. S. Naval Forces. Detailed reports have not yet come except that the U.S.S. PRINCETON is sunk.

Mr. Lansing Warren, Paris reporter for the New York Times, who was in France during my time as Ambassador, called to pay his respects.

Lunched with Mr. Morgenthau in his office and listened to his account of difficulties with the British Lend-Lease proposal.

Admiral Halsey reported at noon today: "It can be announced with assurance that the Japanese Navy has been beaten, routed, and broken by the United States Fleets." We as yet have no details as to the losses on either side.⁹

Frustrated by Leahy's reticent style, Adams commented in his 1985 biography: "unfortunately, the journal is of less use than it might seem from its great bulk."¹⁰ However,

⁸ Adams, *Witness to Power*, x.

⁹ William D. Leahy, *Diary, 1944*, 97, William D. Leahy Papers. Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin. This typescript volume of Leahy's diary covers events during 1944, and is a separate document from the LOC/WHS typescript of 1897–1931.

¹⁰ Adams, *Witness to Power*, x.

an analysis of Leahy's journal employing methods developed since Adams penned his biography can help us today to translate new meaning from Leahy's words. To this end, recent methodological work by diplomatic historian Frank Costigliola holds promise.

Over the past two decades, Costigliola has adapted Critical Theory methods to historical research. Borrowing from the social sciences and the fields of literary and cultural criticism, Costigliola advanced a methodology for extracting *implicit* meaning from texts and media. "[Critical] Theory extends our sensibility," Costigliola explains, "helping historians read for meanings that are not *between* the lines but rather are already *in* the lines."¹¹ Thus by applying critical theory to Leahy's diary, the scholar can glean assumptions, biases, logic, and emotions not explicitly articulated by the written text.

Guided by Costigliola's ideas, the remainder of this paper analyzes Leahy's diary entries covering the 1912 Nicaragua intervention. The analysis reflects a close reading of the diary, designed to recognize and interpret word choice, metaphors, syntax, repetition, the use of binary constructions, and overall tone of expression.¹² As will be seen, the Bill Leahy that emerges from this critical analysis is a complex and conflicted human being, contrasting distinctly from the stern, "stiff upper lip" personality described by Adams.

"In addition to my other troubles . . .":

Leahy Responds to an Unexpected Situation

A close reading of the diaries reveals family concerns weighing upon Leahy during the summer of 1912. On August 21—barely one week before his abrupt elevation to command at Corinto—Leahy returned to sea duty after a few days at home attending to his dying mother-in-law. Assigned as Pacific Fleet ordnance officer in the flagship

¹¹ Frank Costigliola, "Reading for Meaning," in *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations*, eds. Michael J. Hogan and Thomas G. Paterson, 2nd ed. (Cambridge & London: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 280.

¹² Costigliola's framework for critical analysis requires the scholar to identify, catalogue, and evaluate a set of overlapping literary qualities:

- Word choice, to include primary and secondary meanings.
- Metaphor, as expressed in phrases and words.
- Syntax, with an eye for unusual constructions.
- Repetition of words, phrases, and metaphors (to detect emphasis of certain ideas and assumptions).
- Binaries: paired ideas or concepts—dialectics or antimonies—that may convey assumptions and values. For example: Victorians often expressed ideas of strength and weakness through the binary "masculine vs. feminine."
- Tone: the overall mood or temper of a text, synthesized from the five qualities above. See *Ibid.*, 291–92, 299–302.

USS *California*, Leahy had obtained emergency leave just days after returning from an extended deployment to the Far East.¹³ In his diary, Leahy lamented a “short visit after more than eight months absence in distant parts of the world.”¹⁴

Returning to the cruiser *California* at San Diego, Leahy no doubt expected to set aside personal cares by absorbing himself in the familiar routines of fleet gunnery practice off San Diego. However, his plans changed abruptly when the Pacific Fleet commander, Rear Admiral William H. H. Southerland, received orders from Washington to sortie available units without delay and head south to deal with the Nicaraguan uprising.

The uprising erupted on July 29, when General Luis Mena led an armed column into the capital intent upon establishing himself as head of state. Mena headed a powerful political faction that rivaled that of the president, Adolfo Díaz.¹⁵ Furthermore, as minister of war within the Díaz government Mena controlled most of the army and national police force. Responding to Mena’s challenge, President Díaz quickly mobilized forces loyal to the regime.¹⁶

With pro-Mena forces moving quickly to secure strategic points across Nicaragua, the prospect of civil violence weighed heavily upon the Central American nation.

¹³ Leahy’s mother-in-law, Mrs. Sarah Hooper Harrington, suffered from incurable stomach cancer. In addition to leave during August 17–19, the Navy Department also sent Leahy home during mid-deployment to help care for Mrs. Harrington. Apparently, the terminology “emergency leave” did not yet exist—Leahy uses other words to describe his family leave in 1912. The author uses modern terminology here to enhance reader understanding of Leahy’s personal situation. LOC/WHs Transcript, 1897–1931, 192, 198.

¹⁴ USNA transcript, 1892–1921, 141.

¹⁵ Mena and his fellow revolutionaries hoped to re-establish a successor to the Liberal regime turned out of power in 1909, by a successful Conservative revolt. The “*Liberales*,” headquartered in León, were particularly hostile towards Americans, remembering the United States intervention in 1909 that boosted the conservatives to power.

In May 1910, the Liberal government under José Santos Zelaya captured and executed two Americans accused of insurgency, despite the prisoners’ claim of innocence and impassioned protests from the U.S. minister in Managua. The United States roundly condemned Zelaya for the executions, and U.S. Marines intervened to block government attempts to take Bluefields, the rebel headquarters. Historian Dana Gardner Munro describes U.S. intervention in 1910 as a decisive turning point that led to Conservative electoral victory. See Dana Gardner Munro, *Intervention and Dollar Diplomacy in the Caribbean, 1900–1921* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980), 183–85; Lars Schoultz, *Beneath the United States: A History of U.S. Policy Toward Latin America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 212–13.

¹⁶ Weitzel to Philander C. Knox, July 31, 1912, in United States Department of State, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States with the Annual Message of the President Transmitted to Congress December 3, 1912* (Wash., DC: U.S. Government Printing Office [GPO], 1912), 1027. Hereinafter *FRUS 1912*.



Landing party from USS *Denver* (C-14) traveling on the Ferro Carriel de Nicaragua, 1912. U.S. forces quickly moved out from their initial lodgment at Corinto to seize control of the national railroad.

On August 3, the Díaz government advised U.S. Minister George T. Weitzel that it could not assure the safety of U.S. lives and property in Nicaragua. The Díaz foreign ministry requested armed assistance from the United States to protect not only United States citizens but “all the inhabitants of the [Nicaraguan] Republic.”¹⁷

Weitzel acted quickly, arranging a guard force from the gunboat USS *Annapolis*, just then making an opportune port visit on Nicaragua’s west coast. During the early morning hours of August 4, about 100 armed sailors and marines from *Annapolis* reached Managua and stationed themselves at the American Legation. This modest force received reinforcement on August 15, when a battalion of U.S. Marines commanded by Major Smedley D. Butler arrived from Panama.¹⁸

When pro-Díaz government forces proved unable to stem the tide of revolution in Nicaragua, U.S. President Taft mandated stronger measures. Along with Admiral Southerland’s Pacific Fleet detachment, Taft ordered a provisional regiment of marines to Nicaragua on August 21. By mid-September,

¹⁷ Knox to Taft, Aug. 5, 1912, in *FRUS 1912*, 1032.

¹⁸ *Annapolis* was conducting a routine cruise along the west coast of Central America when the Nicaraguan revolt erupted. When contacted by Weitzel on August 3, *Annapolis* commanding officer Commander Warren J. Trehune promptly dispatched the landing force via rail from Corinto to Managua. Butler’s command consisted of some 350 marines. See George V.L. Meyer, “Annual Report of the Secretary of the Navy, November 20, 1912,” in *Annual Reports of the Navy Department for the Fiscal Year 1912* (Wash., DC: GPO, 1913), 12.

the total strength of U.S. naval forces on the ground reached 2,350, a number that included Lieutenant Commander Leahy and his small garrison at Corinto.¹⁹

Leahy's diaries convey the impression that he viewed his unexpected situation in Corinto with some trepidation. "The Admiral . . .," Leahy recorded, "gave me *in addition to my other troubles* Command of Corinto and its defenses."²⁰ To what troubles does Leahy refer in this passage? With typical reserve, he offers no explanation in his commentary. Nevertheless, it is possible for the scholar to "read in the lines" for implicit meaning. For one, we know from the diaries that the possibility of insurgent attack worried Leahy on August 29. We also know that family anxieties pressed upon him.

The diary also reveals a development that possibly added to Leahy's vexations. It appears that shortly before their arrival in Corinto Admiral Southerland appointed Leahy as chief of staff for the U.S. expeditionary force, in addition to his regular ordnance duties.²¹ Thus Leahy found himself juggling responsibilities that might reasonably employ *three* officers (fleet ordnance officer, military governor in Corinto, and chief of staff), plus family concerns, in a dynamic and dangerous alien environment. Furthermore, the dairies suggest that Leahy had been looking forward to shore duty after four years at sea, but the Nicaraguan intervention placed his transfer on hold.²²

Leahy no doubt felt some relief when the rumored assault failed to develop, and a company of sailors arrived from the cruiser USS *Colorado*. With these reinforcements in hand, Leahy now deemed his force "sufficient . . . to patrol Corinto and arrange a reasonably safe plan of defense."²³ However, his inner composure proved short-lived—apparently dissipated in mid-September when Southerland and most of the fleet staff relocated to Managua. The admiral left Chief of Staff Leahy behind in Corinto to manage affairs alone—and face new vexations.

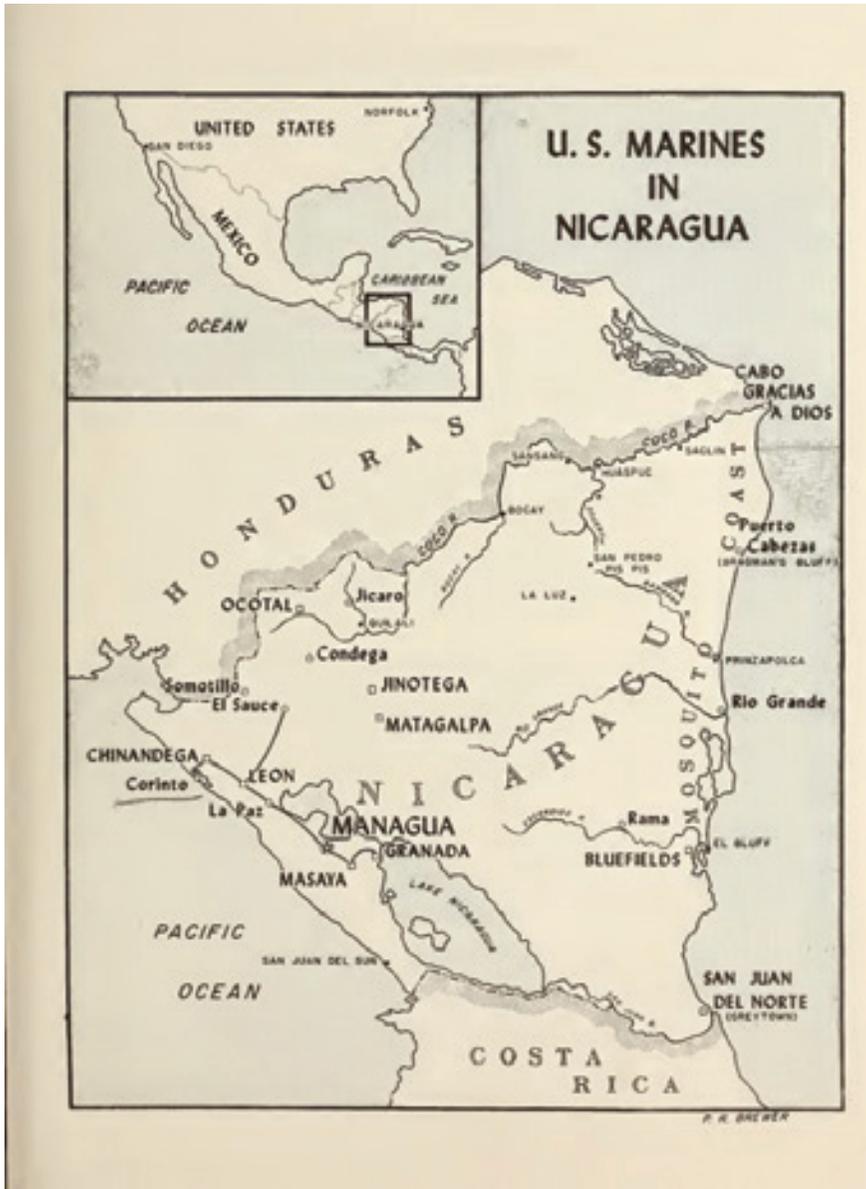
¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

²⁰ LOC/WHS transcript, 1897–1931, 199. Italics added.

²¹ USNA transcript, 1892–1921, 142, 152.

²² *Ibid.*, 148, 152; LOC/WHS transcript, 1897–1931, 205, 209. Leahy notes in the 1931 diary that he received transfer orders "some time before" the intervention, but Admiral Southerland held him in-country until U.S. military operations ended. Southerland eventually released Leahy in mid-October, some four weeks before the expeditionary force departed Nicaragua.

²³ LOC/WHS transcript, 1897–1931, 199.



Theater of operations for the U.S. intervention in Nicaragua, 1912.

Leahy's new worries involved the Ferrocarril de Nicaragua, Nicaragua's national railroad. Owned and managed by Americans, the railroad stretched inland from Corinto to Leon, Managua, and ultimately to Granada on the shores of Lake Nicaragua. When the Pacific Fleet arrived in late August, Admiral Southerland

found much of this vital transportation artery in rebel hands. Mindful of his orders from Washington and recognizing the railroad's strategic value, Southerland promptly acted to place the Ferro Carriel under U.S. military control.

To carry out his plans, the admiral divided among his subordinate commanders responsibility for securing, maintaining, and managing various sections of the right-of-way.²⁴ To Leahy he assigned the five-mile track run from Corinto to Paso Caballos. Leahy was grateful when Southerland appointed the fleet engineer officer, Lieutenant Commander Samuel I. M. Major, to manage the details of railway operation within the Corinto-Paso Caballos sector.

The admiral's design for securing the railroad initially went well. Declaring U.S. neutrality in the struggle between rebel and government forces, he negotiated with revolutionary leaders to surrender control of the railroad from Corinto to Leon. Southerland mandated that henceforth neither rebel nor government forces could use this U.S. asset for military purposes, a policy that presumably favored the government's position by hindering rebel movement.²⁵

U.S. expeditionary troops restored service to Managua by mid-September, overcoming numerous operating and engineering challenges, in addition to providing security. When Nicaraguan employees refused to work for fear of reprisal, U.S. commanders called upon their own men to fill in. "We substituted [in the place of Nicaraguan workers] men taken from the ships and who sometimes had worked on railroads at home before joining the Navy," Leahy recorded in his diary.²⁶

Despite this early progress, an unexpected flareup of rebel resistance soon compelled the Pacific Fleet commander to rethink his approach. Hoping to extend U.S. control from Managua to the lakeside terminus at Grenada, Southerland directed Major Butler and his marine battalion to push forward along the railroad. However, on the night of September 19 rebel troops ambushed Butler and his marines as their

²⁴ One of Southerland's subordinates subsequently described his orders at the outset of intervention: "to observe strict neutrality between the government and revolutionary forces, to permit no fighting in the vicinity of the railroad, [and] to permit no bombardment of unfortified towns or any act contrary to civilized warfare." Charles G. Long to Joseph H. Pendleton, Nov. 18, 1912, in Gobat, *Confronting the American Dream*, 111.

²⁵ LOC/WHS transcript, 1897–1931, 201.

²⁶ USNA transcript, 1892–1921, 143.

train passed through the town of Masaya—despite assurances of safe passage from revolutionary leaders. The ensuing firefight wounded a handful of marines, but Butler pressed on, reaching the environs of Granada three days later.²⁷

Meanwhile, Southerland decided to move his staff—minus Chief of Staff Leahy—to Managua. Situated closer to rebel strongholds at Masaya and Grenada, the capital offered a better headquarters site from which to direct operations. Remaining behind in Corinto, an anxious Leahy especially regretted the loss of Lieutenant Commander Major’s services. Without the capable engineer at hand, responsibility for managing the Corinto-Paso Caballos rail line fell directly upon the hapless commandant. Thus Leahy’s diary repeated the anxious language of his first days in Corinto, augmented by a clear sense of disgruntlement. “Lieutenant Commander Major’s departure,” he grumbled, “left me *in addition to my other troubles* the Corinto end of the railroad to handle and I found that the *most trying and least satisfactory* part of my work.”²⁸

“A condition of semi-barbarism prevailed”:

Leahy’s Assessment of Nicaragua

Butler’s surprise encounter with revolutionary forces at Masaya on September 19 precipitated a major turning point in the U.S. intervention. Perceiving a rise in rebel violence directed towards his troops, along with a sense for the apparent inability of Nicaraguan government forces to suppress the rebellion, Admiral Southerland shifted the expeditionary force from nominal neutrality to a more confrontational posture.

On September 24, the top revolutionary leader Mena surrendered himself and a sizable rebel force to Major Butler at Granada. Ten days later, U.S. troops captured the rebel stronghold at Barranca-Coyotepe, near Masaya. Together these actions broke the back of revolution in Nicaragua. Leahy detailed both events in his diary.

²⁷ Butler’s force departed Managua by train on September 15. Upon reaching Masaya (about 20 miles southeast of the capital) they encountered entrenched rebel troops blocking further progress. After several days negotiating with the rebel commander at Masaya, Benjamin Zeledón, Butler obtained a promise of safe passage to Granada. On the evening of September 19, the marine train entered Masaya. Despite the safe passage guarantee, Butler’s unit came under attack by rebel forces. The marines returned fire, suffering five wounded and three captured before finally exiting the town. Zeledón promptly sent Butler a letter of apology and returned the three captured marines. See “USNA transcript, 1892–1921,” 144–45; LOC/WHS transcript, 1897–1931, 201; Bernard C. Nalty, “The United States Marines in Nicaragua,” Marine Corps Historical Reference Series (Wash., DC: Historical Branch, G-3 Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, 1968), 8–9; Gobat, *Confronting the American Dream*, 115.

²⁸ LOC/WHS transcript, 1897–1931, 201. Italics added.

Drawing from eyewitness accounts and his personal involvement, Leahy constructed a reasonably accurate narrative of Mena's surrender and the Battle of Barranca-Coyotepe. More important for the purposes of this paper, a textual analysis of Leahy's commentary also reveals word choices, syntax, and an important binary that convey his values and attitudes towards Nicaragua and Nicaraguans.

Close reading shows how Leahy privileged U.S. notions of civilization over "uncivilized" Nicaraguans. In contrast to the progressive sensibility of his native culture, Leahy perceived Nicaragua as a shockingly primitive, backward society. "A condition of semi-barbarism prevailed that is completely outside the experience and beyond the understanding of North Americans at the beginning of the Twentieth Century," Leahy noted in the 1921 typescript.²⁹ His description of Nicaragua in the 1931 version suggests a hopeless land forsaken even by God: "An impossible condition of semi civilization exists that is almost unbelievable in this year of our Lord 1912."³⁰ To Leahy, the Nicaraguans themselves reflected this savage environment: turbulent, untamed, untrustworthy—alien. "Most of the natives of high degree and low with whom I came into contact," he observed, "were thinly veneered savages."³¹

This image of savagery intensified when Leahy considered the Nicaraguan ruling class. In the preface to his 1931 diary, Leahy made clear how he defined civilized values: "good [Northern European] ancestry," "traditional ideals," and devotion to "American democracy."³² By these measures, he characterized both government and rebel leaders in Nicaragua as uncivilized despots and thieves. "Those who are in office rob and persecute those who are not," Leahy observed.³³

To Leahy, Luis Mena, the instigator of revolt, epitomized the uncouth nature of Nicaragua's rulers. Brutish imagery appeared again in his description of the revolutionary leader: "Mena is an old savage, who has been the cause of much suffering in his unhappy country," Leahy penned in his diary after personally meeting the revolutionary leader, "who is probably not much better or worse than other leaders on both sides in this war."³⁴

²⁹ USNA transcript, 1892–1921, 143.

³⁰ LOC/WHS transcript, 1897–1931, 208.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 209.

³² *Ibid.*, 4–6.

³³ *Ibid.*, 208.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 202.

Leahy encountered General Mena on September 25, as the latter passed through Corinto en route to exile in Panama. Mena had surrendered to Butler in Grenada the previous day. Recovering from the shock of ambush at Masaya, Butler and his marines finally reached the lakeside city and rebel stronghold on September 22. Surprised when the approximately 1,000 troops under Mena's command offered no resistance, Butler demanded the general's surrender. In poor health and having lost heart for the rebellion, Mena acquiesced when Butler promised parole for his troops and safe passage out of the country for the general and his son (who commanded the rebel



Rebel soldiers marching through Leon, Nicaragua, in October 1912.

garrison at Grenada). The Americans whisked Mena away under cover of darkness, transporting him by rail to Corinto under heavy guard. Leahy described his arrival in a “steaming closed box car,” as a “pitiful sight. When I arrived the old man was lying on a canvas cot, his rhumatic [*sic*] legs and arm packed with pillows.”³⁵

Mena's surrender stunned his followers, and the revolution began to unravel. Despite this setback, significant resolve remained within the rebel ranks. With Mena's exit, the center of antigovernment resistance shifted to Masaya, where troops under General Benjamin Zeledón blocked the railroad connecting Managua to Grenada. Rebuffing U.S. demands to surrender, Zeledón and 800 rebel troops occupied twin fortified hilltops (known locally as Barranca and Coyotepe) that commanded the train tracks approaching Masaya from the capital. By early October, a force numbering some 1,000 U.S. sailors and marines and 4,000 government soldiers encircled Zeledón's position.

When government promises to drive out the rebels failed to develop, Admiral Southerland ordered the U.S. forces to attack on October 4. The ensuing Battle of

³⁵ Ibid.

Barranca-Coyotepe ended quickly, with Zeledón dead and his force utterly routed. The Americans suffered 10 killed and wounded in battle, while the rebels lost nearly five dozen; Nicaraguan governmental authorities claimed some 200 casualties.³⁶ With the heights secure in U.S. hands and the rebel army scattered, government troops rushed into nearby Masaya and restored national authority there.

In their descriptions of the action at Barranca-Coyotepe, Leahy's diaries amplified the civilized vs. savage binary. If the Nicaraguan people and their leaders seemed backwards by North American standards, the Nicaraguan soldiery was worse yet: undisciplined, unreliable, and cowardly—compared to the courage and efficiency of U.S. sailors and marines. Leahy's diaries compare how the Americans "gallantly assaulted" the rebel entrenchments on October 4 with the licentious behavior of Nicaraguan government troops following the battle: "when our flag was seen at the top of the hill, the federals [government soldiers] shouted with joy and ran in disorder into Masaya," killed any rebel survivors they came across, and looted the town.³⁷ Leahy also believed that indiscipline added to the government casualty count. "It is likely," he conjectured, "that Federals shot each other when the looting got well started."³⁸

In Leahy's estimation, the rebel ranks performed little better than the government forces. When he visited the Barranca-Coyotepe site about 10 days after the battle, Leahy speculated that Zeledón's troops lacked the stamina and fortitude to face a vigorous frontal assault by disciplined, well-led U.S. attackers. "The well entrenched defenders should have been able to hold their position indefinitely," he concluded.³⁹

³⁶ Gobat writes that 1,000 Americans and 4,000 pro-government troops ("Federales") surrounded Zeledón's 800 rebels. Leahy's numbers vary somewhat from Gobat's. U.S.: two Marine battalions and two naval companies (approximately 800 men); *Federales*: 2500 men; rebels ("*Liberales*"): 500. Leahy accounted for 4 Americans killed and 6 wounded, and 40 rebels killed with 15 wounded. Nalty reports 7 American and 27 rebels killed. Casualty figures in the *New York Times* correspond to those reported by Leahy; the *Times* listed each casualty by name, with a biographic summary for each. Leahy also reported 200 *Federales* lost as a "gross exaggeration"; the *Times* describes Federal casualties as 100 dead and 200 wounded. See *New York Times*, "Our Marines Take Fire-Swept Hill," *New York Times*, Oct. 6, 1912, 5; LOC/WHS transcript, 1897–1931, 202–4; Nalty, "The United States Marines in Nicaragua," 9; Gobat, *Confronting the American Dream*, 117.

³⁷ LOC/WHS transcript, 1897–1931, 204; "USNA transcript, 1892–1921," 147.

³⁸ LOC/WHS transcript, 1897–1931, 204.

³⁹ USNA transcript, 1892–1921, 149–50; Gobat, *Confronting the American Dream*, 117. Gobat reports that the rebel defenders at Barranca-Coyotepe were already low on food, water, and ammunition before the battle started, an explanation that Leahy did not address in his diary.

“The United States has sustained a weak tyrannical government”:**Leahy Challenges U.S. Policy**

Zeledón’s defeat and the ensuing fall of Masaya proved to be the rebellion’s death blow. Two days after the Battle of Barranca-Coyotepe, U.S. Marines moved upon the last major insurgent stronghold at León. After a brief skirmish, the city submitted to the American occupiers.⁴⁰ By October 6, United States forces occupied all major cities in Nicaragua as well as several lesser rebel strongholds in the northwest corner of the country. Leahy noted how U.S. presence in these areas restored order and helped to prevent acts of retribution against former rebels by supporters of the Díaz regime.⁴¹

On October 12 Leahy happily turned over his duties at Corinto and departed on an inspection tour along the railroad to Granada. With stops at León, Managua, Masaya, and Granada, the trip offered an opportunity to view firsthand the sites and battlefields of the recent insurrection. Frequent train derailments, breakdowns, gunfire, and scheduling snafus combined added excitement to the trip; Leahy remarked: “travel on the Nicaraguan railroad is slow but never dull.”⁴²

Returning to Corinto on October 16, Leahy was delighted when Admiral Southerland reactivated his detachment orders, which the exigent operations in Nicaragua had placed on hold. Soon Leahy departed for San Francisco to reunite with his family, before heading to a long-awaited shore assignment in Washington, DC.

The passage home via steamship afforded Leahy an opportunity to reflect upon recent events and sort out their meaning. His diary ruminations reveal a surprising sympathy for the revolutionary movement. Leahy expressed little respect for the Díaz government, which he described as “weak and tyrannical”—an “undisguised military despotism.”⁴³ Despite his evident low regard for the Nicaraguan people, Leahy believed they deserved better. Indeed, the extreme hardship and privation observed wherever he traveled in Nicaragua demanded action. Invoking natural law concepts of self-defense and just governance, Leahy argued “that a right to revolt against such conditions is inherent.”⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Although rebel authorities surrendered the city prior to U.S. forces entering, three marines were killed in street fighting at León on October 6. These were the last American fatalities of the 1912 intervention. Munro, *Intervention and Dollar Diplomacy*, 209.

⁴¹ LOC/WHS transcript, 1897–1931, 205.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 208.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 202, 206. In describing the Díaz government, Leahy emphasized the “weak and tyrannical” characterization repeatedly in his diary; the phrase also appears on pages 200 and 208 of the 1931 typescript.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 208; Gobat, *Confronting the American Dream*, 117.

Leahy questioned the legitimacy of the Díaz government, confiding in his diary that “the government is not in any sense representative.”⁴⁵ He disagreed with U.S. Minister Weitzel over the degree of popular support for the ruling regime. “[Weitzel] is now very much in favor of the *excuse for a government* that now holds office,” Leahy complained in his diary, with a hint of sarcasm.⁴⁶ “To me it appeared that the Liberals [rebels] counted in their ranks a large majority of the inhabitants” Leahy argued bluntly during a conversation with Weitzel, “but the U.S. Minister says not.”⁴⁷

Leahy concluded his diary reflections with a critique of U.S. strategy and policy in Nicaragua. He disagreed with the decision in late September that allowed U.S. forces to engage the rebels directly. Leahy argued instead that the expeditionary force needed only to maintain neutral control of the railroad to quell the revolt. He believed the resultant lack of mobility would have quickly strangled the rebellion. Thus Leahy applauded the original plan “to take the railroad as rapidly as the forces available permitted and to then permit no others than ourselves to use it for military purposes.” Such action, he argued, “would in a very short time have caused the rebellion to fail for lack of transportation facilities.”⁴⁸

While he regretted the perceived flaws in U.S. expeditionary strategy, Leahy aimed his strongest criticisms at the intervention’s underlying policy decisions. Writing in a cynical tone, he juxtaposed the U.S. casualty count in Nicaragua with an outcome he deemed unworthy of such sacrifice. His words again called into question the legitimacy of a government that relied upon foreign military muscle, not popular support, to remain in power. “Now that this specific revolution has been put down, with a loss of seven Americans killed and many incapacitated by wounds and sickness,” Leahy lamented, “it seems to one that the United States has

⁴⁵ LOC/WHS transcript, 1897–1931, 208.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 206. Italics added to emphasize Leahy’s metaphor.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 208; USNA transcript, 1892–1921, 151. The 1921 typescript version of this conversation is identical to that of 1931, except for the final clause. The 1921 version suggests a more emphatic disagreement: “but the U.S. Minister insisted I was wrong.”

⁴⁸ LOC/WHS transcript, 1897–1931, 200; William D. Leahy, *I Was There* (New York: Whittlesey House, 1950), 441. This critique of U.S. strategy in Nicaragua aligns with Leahy’s position on ending the Pacific War in 1945. In Nicaragua he conceived a notion to strangle the rebellion with minimal bloodshed by controlling the national railroad. In its essence, this indirect approach resembles his later arguments for using aerial and naval blockade, not atomic weapons, to compel Japan’s surrender. However, in 1945 as in 1912, higher authority tabled Leahy’s ideas and chose more sanguinary courses of action.

sustained a weak tyrannical government that can be kept in existence only by the force of our arms.”⁴⁹ He predicted that the popular will would assert itself once U.S. troops departed Nicaragua, spelling doom for the Díaz regime: “when our withdrawal makes it possible the Liberal [rebel] population will probably start a revolution in self defense.”⁵⁰

The U.S. expeditionary force began to withdraw from Nicaragua in mid-October, shortly after Leahy’s departure. Admiral Southerland departed in USS *California* with his remaining staff on November 14, as the official draw-down continued until January of 1913.⁵¹ However, in early December Minister Weitzel requested his superiors to authorize a permanent military presence in Nicaragua. “Withdrawal of all marines,” Weitzel remonstrated, “would be construed as the tacit consent of the United States to renew hostilities.”⁵²

Evidently, the U.S. minister now shared Lieutenant Commander Leahy’s doubts regarding the survivability of Díaz’s rule—one wonders whether Weitzel recalled his conversation with the naval officer some weeks before. In any case, Washington approved Weitzel’s request to retain a cadre of armed marines in Managua. This permanent U.S. Marine Corps presence in Nicaragua would continue until 1934.

Conclusions

A comparative and textual analysis of Leahy’s diaries reveals a complex and conflicted personality that belies Henry Hitch Adams’s depiction of a dour, “stiff upper lip” persona. In Nicaragua we see a very human Bill Leahy, vexed by unexpected challenges, worried by family and career matters, distressed by “impossible” local conditions, and questioning the policy, strategy, and social predilections favored by his superiors and peers.

⁴⁹ LOC/WHS transcript, 1897–1931, 208.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* Leahy aired much the same notion same on page 200 of the 1931 typescript: “the people will in self defense take up arms again as soon as we leave the country.” This repetition suggests that he placed particular value on the inherent right to self-defense (another point of natural law).

⁵¹ The final unit from Southerland’s expeditionary force departed Nicaragua on January 17, 1913. At the request of the American minister, the Navy Department retained a company of marines in Managua as a permanent legation guard. This unit remained on station until 1925. See Munro, *Intervention and Dollar Diplomacy*, 210; R. B. Farquharson, “List of Expeditions 1901–1929,” Navy Department Library–Naval Historical Center, June 7, 1929, <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/library/online-reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/l/list-of-expeditions-1901-1929.html> (accessed Mar. 5, 2018).

⁵² Weitzel to Knox, Dec. 14, 1912, in United States Department of State, *FRUS 1912*, 1069.

In many ways, the attitudes, ideas, and values revealed by the pages of Leahy's diary conform to social and cultural notions shared by many U.S. naval officers during the early 20th century. Naval historian Peter Karsten describes "Commerce, Christianity, and Civilization" as the animating missions.⁵³ Of these, the "civilizing" mission is most germane to Leahy's account of the Nicaragua intervention. Leahy's diary reveals a worldview framed by a "civilized" versus "uncivilized" binary. His tacit critique of Nicaragua as "savage," "tyrannical," and "semi-barbaric" privileges progressive values such as order, science, liberty, and prosperity—all of which he found notably absent from Nicaraguan society and politics.

Likewise, Leahy's perspectives on the U.S. intervention in Nicaragua seem to align with the hegemonic and racial views held by many U.S. policy makers and military professionals in 1912. Cultural historian Mary Renda classifies these attitudes as "Paternalism," which she identifies as the "reigning discourse" of U.S. service members tasked with imperial intervention in the Western Hemisphere between 1915 and 1940.⁵⁴ Renda studies a particular interpersonal process through which U.S. Marines in Haiti employed violence within a parent-child construct—that is, how the marine occupiers exercised paternalistic violence or its threat to shape Haitian behaviors and punish indiscipline, much as a parent exercises authority over a child.

Many aspects of the 1912 intervention in Nicaragua resemble Renda's model, most notably the decision in late September assigning U.S. troops to suppress the rebellion through direct action against the rebels. Given Leahy's supporting role in this drama, we cannot deny his implicit support of U.S. paternalism. However, Leahy's paternalism and racial attitudes were perhaps more nuanced than that of many of his contemporaries.

⁵³ Peter Karsten, *The Naval Aristocracy: The Golden Age of Annapolis and the Emergence of Modern American Navalism* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2008), 222; USNA transcript, 1892–1921, 149; LOC/WHS transcript, 1897–1931, 206. Karsten describes how the three missions sometimes battled with each other for primacy in the minds of naval officers. Leahy's frequent characterizations and comparison of "civilized" and "savage" actors suggest that he privileged Civilization as the overriding imperative. Indeed, on page 149 of the 1921 typescript and page 206 of the 1931 version, Leahy compares the earnest efforts of U.S. naval personnel to restore rail service to the motivations of railroad executives who seemed more interested in maximizing revenues.

⁵⁴ Mary A. Renda, *Taking Haiti: Military Occupation and the Culture of U.S. Imperialism, 1915–1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 16.

While his words painted Nicaragua as a backward society, Leahy also advocated giving Nicaraguans greater control over their own affairs. To be sure, Leahy did not depict Nicaraguans as intellectual or social equals to the U.S. occupiers. Yet his account of the U.S. occupation clearly expressed sympathy for the plight of the Nicaraguan people and validated their right to revolt against barbaric and inhumane conditions. In questioning the legitimacy of the ruling regime, the wisdom and morality of U.S. support for that regime, and the methods (direct military action against the rebels), Leahy suggested that the popular will should guide Nicaraguan affairs, not U.S. interests alone. In sum, Leahy seemed to argue that Nicaragua should be allowed to achieve the civilizing ideal from within, rather than have it imposed by a U.S. “parent.”⁵⁵

Despite his misgivings, Leahy ultimately accepted U.S. policies and earned distinction in performing his duties as part of the Nicaraguan intervention.⁵⁶ Given the evident contradictions between duty and conscience, how did Leahy reconcile the moral and social imperatives he felt in Nicaragua with his sense of order, his respect for the chain-of-command, and his loyalty to the nation and service? Diary reflections aside, it is clear from Leahy’s actions in Nicaragua (and throughout his naval career) that he privileged the values of duty when conflicts

⁵⁵ Leahy’s Nicaragua account offers another example of his racial ambivalence. During his short tenure as military governor, Leahy worked closely with James W. Johnson, the U.S. consul in Corinto. Johnson, an experienced diplomat, was African American. While Leahy’s commentary was generally critical of African Americans, it singles out Consul Johnson for praise: “One is accustomed to expect little from United States Consuls and almost as little of negroes, but . . . this one is a man of excellent education, of good judgement and well fitted for his post made difficult by our occupation of the country.” LOC/WHS transcript, 1897–1931, 209.

Leahy was not alone in praising Johnson for exemplary performance in Corinto. U.S. Minister in Managua G.T. Weitzel commended the consul to the Secretary of State for “good judgment and initiative;” Rear Admiral Southerland, commander of the American expeditionary force in Nicaragua, directed a fleet gun salute for Johnson; later the commanding officer of USS *California* hosted a breakfast honoring Johnson, attended by the other captains of the fleet. See Weitzel to Knox, Sept. 29, 1912, in United States Department of State, *FRUS 1912*, 1051.

From Johnson’s perspective, his collaboration with the Navy was not always congenial. In his memoir, Johnson describes his interactions with U.S. naval officials in Nicaragua as generally agreeable, but he also notes at least one officer “a young Southerner . . . with whom my relations were not fully cordial.” James Weldon Johnson. *Along This Way*. (New York: The Viking Press, 1961), 286.

⁵⁶ Admiral Southerland praised Leahy’s performance in a fitness report dated April 12–October 18, 1912: “Military Governor of Corinto, Nicaragua . . . assisted in the management of the railroad from Corinto to Granada. These duties were performed in the most thorough and satisfactory manner possible . . . an exceptionally able man . . . a man of marked ability.” Quoted in Thomas, “William D. Leahy and America’s Imperial Years, 1893–1917,” 116–17.

arose.⁵⁷ Using textual analysis, scholars may glean from the diary pages certain moments of conflict within Leahy's conscience, but the pages do not reveal how he resolved the conflict. Perhaps journaling itself was the outlet Leahy employed to maintain an even keel as he navigated the mental challenges and moral ambiguities of a long naval career.

Picture credits: Lieutenant Commander William D. Leahy, from Henry Hitch Adams, *Witness to Power: The Life of Fleet Admiral William D. Leahy* (1985); Diary excerpt, Leahy, *Diary, 1892–1921*, U.S. Naval Academy Museum; map, Bernard C. Nalty, “The United States Marines in Nicaragua,” Marine Corps Historical Reference Series, 1968; Landing party, Naval History and Heritage Command (NH 93078); rebel soldiers, Naval History and Heritage Command (NH 120395).

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⁵⁷ The most notable example of Leahy's inner conflicts center on the decision to drop the atomic bombs in August 1945. Leahy regarded these weapons as “barbarous” and lobbied against using them. However, in the end he accepted President Truman's decision to drop the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, despite his views that such action constituted “uncivilized warfare . . . not worthy of a Christian man.” Leahy laid out his case against atomic weapons in his published autobiography—*I Was There*, 441–42. Leahy served as Chief of Naval Operations from January 1937 to August 1939. Following his retirement from the navy in 1939, Leahy served for 14 months as Governor of Puerto Rico. In 1941, President Roosevelt appointed Leahy as Ambassador to Vichy France. Recalling him from France during the spring of 1942, Roosevelt then assigned Leahy to serve as the president's military chief of staff and chairman of the newly established Joint Chiefs of Staff. Thus Leahy acted as Roosevelt's top strategic advisor and oversaw the forging of U.S. grand strategy during World War II. He continued in these dual roles under President Harry S. Truman, through early 1949. Leahy was the first American military leader promoted to five-star rank (Fleet Admiral, in December 1944), making him *the* senior officer in the United States armed forces.