

### The Forgotten Country: The British Protectorate of the Miskito Kingdom\*

Joseph E. Fallon writes that prior to 1894 and the “Great Rapprochement”, which grew into the “Special Relationship” that defines contemporary British-American relations, Washington viewed London as “the enemy”. The objective of U.S. foreign policy throughout the Nineteenth Century was in the words of Thomas Jefferson “...the final expulsion of England from the American continent.” To that end, the U.S. declared war on the British Empire in 1812, and threatened war in 1839, 1844-1848, 1849-1850, 1852, 1854, 1856, 1859, and 1894. Washington failed to expel the British from Canada, but succeeded in ejecting the British from much of Central America. Washington achieved this by abolishing the British Protectorate of the Miskito Kingdom.

The Miskito Kingdom, an independent, indigenous state, existed for over 250 years. The country was immense, occupying approximately one-third of Central America. From the Caribbean Coast, it extended north to include the eastern region of Honduras, south to the border of Costa Rica, and west to include the Central Highlands. It included 60 percent of present-day Nicaragua. The territorial size of the Miskito Kingdom was acknowledged in a Spanish map of 1780, [\[i\]](#) Heinrich Berghaus’s 1840 map of Central America, [\[ii\]](#) and U.S. maps of 1850s. [\[iii\]](#)

The Miskito Kingdom effectively exploited the rugged terrain of the Central Highlands of Central America separating it from the Spanish Pacific Coast, and its acquisition of European weaponry to defend its political independence and territorial integrity from repeated Spanish incursions.

Displaying a remarkable political continuity, which rivaled many of the Royal Houses of Europe, the Miskito kingship was held by a single family for the last 239 years of the state’s existence. The kingdom was a stable and successfully, indigenous country in a region often convulsed by Spanish colonial political turmoil. In 1638, London officially recognized the Miskito Kingdom as a sovereign state and in 1710, concluded an official treaty of friendship and alliance establishing a protectorate over the country that would endure for nearly two centuries.

Washington became acutely interested in the Miskito Kingdom during the California Gold Rush (1848-1855). Travel across the Miskito Kingdom to the Nicaraguan Pacific Coast then by ship to California provided a quick and safe passage for Americans journeying from the Eastern States

to the West Coast. U.S. businessman, Cornelius Vanderbilt who operated a railroad in Nicaragua used by these Americans, proposed building a canal to facilitate the journey. Washington wanted American control over such a canal. Since the Atlantic Terminus would be the Miskito port of Greytown, Washington engineered the overthrow of the British Protectorate of the Miskito Kingdom. This would occur in four steps – continuing even when the proposed canal was abandoned.

First, Washington negotiated with London on building a transoceanic canal. This resulted in the Clayton-Bulwer Treaty of 1850. Article 1 set the stage by calling for the “neutralization” of the Miskito Kingdom. “The governments of the United States and Great Britain hereby declare, that neither the one nor the other will ever obtain or maintain for itself any exclusive control over the said ship canal; agreeing that neither will ever erect or maintain any fortifications commanding the same or in the vicinity thereof, or occupy, or fortify, or colonize, or assume or exercise any dominion over Nicaragua, Costa Rica, the Mosquito coast [the Miskito Kingdom], or any part of Central America...” [iv]     This left the Miskito Kingdom defenseless, exposed, and vulnerable.

Second, in 1859, the U.S. pressured a London shaken by the 1857-58 Indian Mutiny to agree to surrender the Bay Islands and northern third of the Miskito Kingdom to Honduras. [v]

Third, as the American Civil War approached some U.S. politicians called for a war to annex British North American colonies. [vi]     At that time, London’s military position in the Western Hemisphere was weak. The Union Army would eventually total over 2.2 million men, while the British “had only 4,300 troops in all North America and a few, scattered garrisons in the Caribbean”.

[vii]     In an attempt to prevent the U.S. from invading or encouraging Nicaragua to invade the Miskito Kingdom, London signed the *Treaty of Managua* in 1860. An independent kingdom that had encompassed one-third of Central America was reduced to a “reservation” occupying a sliver of land on Nicaragua’s Atlantic Coast.

[viii]

By this treaty, London sought to preserve the autonomy of the Miskito Kingdom, now called the “Miskito Reserve”. However, Nicaragua attempted to annul these provisions. London and Managua submitted their conflicting interpretations of the treaty to international arbitration. Austrian Emperor Francis Joseph I heard the case and on July 2, 1881 rendered his decision supporting the British and Miskito interpretation. [ix]

Fourth, in 1894 the U.S. supported Managua in rejecting this decision and annexing the Miskito Reserve.

The "...administrative institutions established by the Nicaraguan government after 1894...were held by Mestizos from the Pacific areas of the country...Creole culture and the English language also came under attack from the Nicaraguan government, which tried to generalize the Spanish language and Hispanic culture among the inhabitants of the Mosquitia. In Bluefields, for example, special policemen were sent to scout for school children to put into Spanish public schools." [\[x\]](#)

Since the 1940s, over 100,000 Nicaraguan Mestizos have moved onto Miskito land. Originally, a spontaneous movement, this colonization was soon promoted by Managua. For the ancestral lands of the indigenous peoples " harbor some 80% of Nicaragua's overall wealth of natural resources."

[\[xi\]](#)

"Over the past century, the central government, primarily through its agrarian institutions, gave out thousands of hectares of lands in the Caribbean region to colonists." [\[xii\]](#) The result was major environmental damage and indigenous deaths as "...land was cleared without regard to its long-term potential...and Indians [were] killed by Spanish-speaking migrants..."

[\[xiii\]](#)

When the Sandinistas first seized power (1979-1989), they passed Autonomy Law 28 [\[xiv\]](#) for the indigenous peoples of the former Miskito Kingdom; however, it granted little meaningful powers or protections to the Miskito, Mayangna, Rama, Garífuna, and Creole. Instead, it partitioned their land into two autonomous regions and continued the colonization and exploitation of their land. This policy was continued by successive regimes and the returning Sandinistas.

In 2008, the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights noted the existence of racial prejudice against indigenous and Afro-descendant women in the Autonomous Regions; as well as "serious shortcomings in the health and education services...and the absence of a consultation process to seek communities' free, prior and informed consent to the exploitation of natural resources in their territories." [\[xv\]](#)

Nicaraguan colonists “came from all areas of the national territory, invading ancestral lands, pillaging community property, and preying on the habitats of indigenous peoples...”

[\[xvi\]](#)

“In the past 10 years, approximately 100 people — many of them leaders in their communities — have been killed during confrontations with *colonos*, according to CEJUDHCAN, a human rights organization... ‘It’s a form of genocide,’ says Dolene Miller, a member of the National Commission for Demarcation and Titling... ‘Just like the Spaniards came to this land hundreds of years ago and committed genocide against the natives, the mestizos are trying to get rid of us to colonize the land.’”

[\[xvii\]](#)

The objective of Nicaraguan colonization is to alter the demography of the autonomous regions. It is to establish a Nicaraguan “majority”, so if the regions were allowed to vote on independence it could be defeated “democratically”. This is the strategy currently being employed by Morocco in the Western Sahara. [\[xviii\]](#) It is the same strategy previously employed by Saddam Hussein in his “Arabization” campaign of Iraqi Kurdistan.

These acts by Nicaragua, past and present, against the Miskito, Mayangna, Rama, Garífuna, and Creole peoples violate Article II of the Genocide Convention

(a) Killing members of the group;

(b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;

(c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part.

(d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; [\[xix\]](#)

If the international community can support the restoration of independence for Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, it legally must support the restoration of independence for the Miskito Kingdom. As the Miskito Kingdom was a British Protectorate, London and the British Commonwealth should take the lead in seeing this objective is realized.

\*This is an Executive Summary of the article *"that we poor Indians may receive our rights"*: U.S. Strategic Interests in Central America And the Dispossession of the Miskito Kingdom, Fourth World Journal, Center for World Indigenous Studies, Summer 2016, Volume 15, Number 1. pp. 5-46. <http://cwis.org/FWJ/issues/#> , which covers in greater detail the history of the Miskito Kingdom including the planned Chinese Nicaraguan Canal.

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[i] *Realizado a partir de Eugenia Ibarra: "Mapa N.o 8. Costa de Mosquito en 1780" del fuente original: Public Record Office Foreign Office 137/78, fol. 148. Cartografía: Luis Pablo Cubero. IBARRA ROJAS Eugenia, Del arco y la flecha a las armas de fuego. Los indios mosquitos y la historia centroamericana. Editorial UCR (San José 2011) p. 229.ÂÂÂÂ* <http://www.ariadnatucma.com.ar/?p=2312>

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[ii] *Die Vulkanreihe von Guatemala, die Landengen von Tehuantepec, Nicaragua und Panama, und die Central Vulkane der Sud* <http://www.davidrumsey.com/luna/servlet/detail/RUMSEY~8~1~1515~160053> :Die-Vulkanreihe-von-Guatemala,-di e-#

[iii] Notes on Central America: particularly the states of Honduras and San Salvador: their geography, topography, climate, population, resources, productions, etc. etc, and the proposed Honduras inter-oceanic railway. (1854) P. xi

<https://archive.org/stream/notesoncentrala01squigoog#page/n16/mode/2up>

[iv] Yale Law School Lillian Goldman Law Library, The Avalon Project: Documents in Law, History, and Diplomacy. (2008). The Clayton-Bulwer Treaty, British-American Diplomacy, Convention Between the United States of America and Her Britannic Majesty. Government Document

[http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th\\_century/br1850.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/br1850.asp)

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[v] Stephen Luscombe. Bay Islands. The British Empire, <http://www.britishempire.co.uk/maproom/bayislands.htm>

[vi] Library and Archives of Canada, Government of Canada. (2016). Influence of the American Civil War. <http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/politics-government/canadian-confederation/Pages/influence-american-civil-war.aspx>

[vii] British Preparations for War with the North, 1861-1862 , Kenneth Bourne, The English Historical Review

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[http://www.jstor.org/stable/558199?seq=2#fndtn-page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](http://www.jstor.org/stable/558199?seq=2#fndtn-page_scan_tab_contents)

[viii] <http://www.sandinorebellion.com/eastcoast/ATL-1927/LOC-MosquitoShore1894.jpg>

[ix] [ix] Reports of International Arbitral Awards: Award as to the interpretation of the Treaty of Managua between the United Kingdom and Nicaragua, 2 July 1881, VOLUME XXVIII. pp. 167-184. [http://egal.un.org/riaa/cases/vol\\_XXVIII/167-184.pdf](http://egal.un.org/riaa/cases/vol_XXVIII/167-184.pdf)

[x] Wolfgang Gabbert. (2007). In the Shadow of the Empire - The Emergence of Afro-Creole Societies in Belize and Nicaragua. Indiana. núm. 24. p. 52. <http://www.redalyc.org/pdf/2470/247016522003.pdf>

[xi] [Courtney Parker](#) . (May 12, 2016). Miskito Political Leader Brooklyn Rivera Denounces violent 'Pillage and Dispossession in Nicaragua'. IC Magazine. <https://intercontinentalcry.org/miskito-brooklyn-rivera-denounces-pillage-dispossession-nicaragua/>

[xii] Anne M. Larson and Jadder Lewis-Mendoza. (2012). Decentralisation and devolution in Nicaragua's North Atlantic autonomous region: Natural resources and indigenous peoples' rights. International Journal of the Commons. pp. 179-199. <https://www.thecommonsjournal.org/articles/10.18352/ijc.315/>

[xiii] Peter Sollis. (October 1989). The Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua: Development and Autonomy. Journal of Latin American Studies. Vol. 21, No. 3. p.492. [http://www.jstor.org/stable/156960?seq=12#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](http://www.jstor.org/stable/156960?seq=12#page_scan_tab_contents)

[xiv] The Autonomy Statute (Law No. 28), Autonomy Statute for the Regions of the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua. <http://www.calpi-nicaragua.org/the-autonomy-statute-law-28/> . Government Document.

[xv] Poverty in Nicaragua's Autonomous Regions. (2014). Human Rights and Business Country Guide, Danish Institute for Human Rights. <http://hrbcountryguide.org/2014/03/poverty-in-nicaraguas-autonomous-regions/>

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[xvi] [Brooklyn Rivera B.](#) (May 12, 2016) Â Pillage and Dispossession in Nicaragua. <https://intercontinentalcry.org/pillage-dispossession-nicaragua/>

[xvii] [Ray Downs](#) . (December 8, 2015). Violent Land Invasions on Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast — 'Just Like the Spaniards'. Vice News. <https://news.vice.com/article/violent-land-invasions-on-nicaraguas-atlantic-coast-just-like-the-spaniards>

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[xviii] [Akbar Ahmed](#) and Harrison Akins. (March 14, 2012). Waiting for the Arab Spring in Western Sahara. Al Jazeera. <http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2012/03/14-western-sahara-ahmed>

[xix] The Genocide Convention. (1948), Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, <http://www.preventgenocide.org/law/convention/text.htm> Government Document.