

# The First Banana Wars

**BLUF:** The First Banana Wars were a series of police actions and interventions by the United States in Central America and the Caribbean following the Spanish–American War in 1899. The U.S. Marine Corps most often carried out these military intrusions. On occasion, the Navy provided off-shore support, and Army troops were also used to maintain American imperialist policies in the region.

**GENERAL STORY:** The motivation for these conflicts by the U.S. was mostly economic, using the military to impose its policies. The term "Banana Wars" was devised to explain how the interventions preserved American commercial interests in the region. With the opening of the Panama Canal in 1914, the American sphere of influence expanded. Businesses like the United Fruit Company moved into Central America, which heightened the financial stakes in the region for the United States. The U.S. military patrolled the region as part of President Theodore Roosevelt's "*Big Stick Diplomacy*."

Interest in building a canal somewhere in Central America dates back to the mid-19th century with the Mallarino–Bidlack Treaty and the Watermelon War. By 1899, the U.S. established a treaty with the new Panamanian republic to build a canal. As economic interests increased for other parts of the region, their political interests became a primary concern for the U.S. When civil wars and revolts broke out, Marines were used to assist in resolving the disputes. By the start of World War I, the U.S. had participated in over a dozen military actions in the region.

**MARINE STORY:** The Marine Corps was Roosevelt's "*Big Stick*" in Central America and the Caribbean. They were also maintaining their relevance to prevent their extinction. The most prominent Marine of the era was Smedley Butler. With nicknames like "*Maverick Marine*" and "*Old Gimlet Eyes*," he saw action in Honduras in 1903 and served in Nicaragua, enforcing American policy from 1909 to 1912. In 1914, Butler was awarded his first Medal of Honor for his role in Veracruz, Mexico. He received his second Medal of Honor for his bravery and leadership in Haiti in 1915. The participation of Marines in the First Banana Wars guaranteed their preparedness for World War I.

## QUESTIONS

1. How did the First Banana Wars expand the American sphere of influence?
2. Why was the Panama Canal an essential part of the development of the region?
3. What was the role of the Marine Corps in terms of "Big Stick Diplomacy"?

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