

Ortega Redux: A History Smolders on Cold War Embers

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MANAGUA, [Nicaragua](#), Nov. 10 — For most of the world, the cold war ended when the Berlin Wall came down. Not so in the Caribbean basin.

Here the stubbornness of old cold warriors in Washington and the equal tenacity of leftist governments in Cuba and Venezuela have kept a miniature cold war going. Just as it was 20 years ago, Nicaragua now finds itself smack in the middle of the conflict with the election this week of Daniel Ortega, the former Marxist rebel leader, as president.

Mr. Ortega faces a balancing act no politician would envy, both inside the country and on the world stage. On the one hand, to satisfy his supporters, he must fulfill promises to “eradicate poverty,” curb “savage capitalism,” and remain friendly with his leftist allies, [Fidel Castro](#) of Cuba and [Hugo Chávez](#) of Venezuela. Venezuela, in particular, could be a source of cheap oil and money for social programs.

On the other hand, he can ill afford to lose more than \$50 million a year in United States aid or credit from the [International Monetary Fund](#). Neither can Nicaragua, one of the poorest countries in the hemisphere, jettison the newly approved free trade agreement between Central American countries and the United States. Just to survive economically, this nation of some 5.6 million people needs to continue exporting textiles and fruit to the United States and receiving remittances from Nicaraguans in the north.

“Nicaragua is basically a welfare state that depends on foreign inputs to survive, remittances and foreign aid,” said an American diplomat, speaking on condition of anonymity.

What is more, Mr. Ortega won with only 38 percent of the vote, and the National Assembly is divided among four parties. Every move he makes will involve negotiation and compromise with conservative lawmakers, who are desperate not to anger the Bush administration.

“The problems facing him make it almost impossible to have a successful presidency,” said Larry Birns, the director of the Council on Hemispheric Affairs in Washington. “He has no arrows in his quiver.”

Mr. Ortega's precarious position may explain the careful nuance in his recent speeches. He ran on a rosy and vague promise of "jobs, peace and reconciliation," seldom attacked the United States, avoided Marxist rhetoric and wore his newfound religious convictions on his sleeve. These days he talks more on the stump about God than the proletariat.

For the moment, Mr. Ortega is walking very softly and speaking in dulcet tones. "Today more than ever, the Sandinistas have to be patient," he said to ecstatic Sandinista Party supporters after his victory this week. "We are not going to fall into provocations or insult anyone."

Still, once in a while, the old revolutionary flares in him. He has called President Bush "the Reagan of these times," and asserted that the "Yankee Reagan" wanted "to bring death and destruction to the region." Sometimes, he rails against the havoc the free trade agreement has wrought on small farms.

Since the election, he has taken pains to calm businessmen, assuring foreign investors on Wednesday that he will protect property rights in exchange for help combating poverty. "No one is going to allow the seizure of property big or small," he said. He has also reached out to his political opponents, saying he will keep in place reforms limiting the president's power.

Yet at his victory speech later the same day, Mr. Ortega made it clear that he would not be Washington's lackey. He thanked his leftist "brothers," Mr. Castro and Mr. Chávez, then took a dig at Washington, saying it was not the Sandinistas who broke off relations after the 1979 revolution. "It was the reverse," he said.

He also said he would push the country, which currently sells more than 60 percent of its exports to the United States, to join the anti-United States trade association Mr. Chávez wants to organize. And he said he would seek trade agreements with Europe and South America. "We have to know how to make our economy grow not depending on only one market," he said.

So far, the Bush administration has taken a wait-and-see attitude in the face of what seems like two different Ortegases. A State Department spokesman, Gonzalo Gallegos, said the United States' cooperation with Mr. Ortega would be "based on their action in support of Nicaragua's democratic future."

Meanwhile, Mr. Castro and Mr. Chávez have used Mr. Ortega's victory to feed their own propaganda machines.

In Havana, Mr. Castro put out a statement saying the victory "fills our people with joy, at the same time filling the terrorist and genocidal government of the United States with opprobrium." In Caracas, Mr. Chávez claimed he and Mr. Ortega would be "uniting as never before" to construct a socialist future.

The outcome of this tug of war hinges on what steps Washington takes, several experts on the region said. The Bush administration has many high-ranking officials who were involved to one degree or another in the covert war against the Sandinistas and Mr. Ortega in the 1980s, among them [Robert M. Gates](#), the man Mr. Bush put forward to be the new secretary of defense.

So even though Nicaragua is hardly a threat to national security, the memories of the 1980s may influence the Bush administration's policies, some experts say. "One of the big questions is, independent of what Ortega does, what approach will the U.S. take?" said Geoff Thale of the Washington Office on Latin America, an independent research group.

People who know Mr. Ortega worry his temper will get the best of him if Washington tries to put pressure on him.

"The worst thing that could happen is if Daniel Ortega extends his hand to Bush and Bush rejects it," said Sergio Ramírez, who was the vice president in the late 1980s under Mr. Ortega. "What will happen is that he's going to say, 'Fine, I will go with Chávez.'"