

# Let nations help, U.S. urges Ecuador's new president

**The United States wants new Ecuadorean President Rafael Correa to stop picking fights with creditors and countries.**

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**WASHINGTON** - Ecuador's new left-wing president, Rafael Correa, should avoid picking conflicts with countries and institutions that want to help him, a top U.S. official warned Tuesday, referring to a possible debt default by the Andean nation.

Thomas Shannon, assistant secretary of state for the Western Hemisphere, also expressed unease over Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez's plans to nationalize companies owned by U.S. interests, but reiterated the Bush administration's desire to enter into a dialogue with one of Washington's harshest critics on the international scene.

Speaking on U.S.-Latin American relations at the Center for International and Strategic Studies, a Washington think tank, Shannon continued the Bush administration's ongoing charm offensive toward left-wing governments in Latin America. He said U.S. diplomacy should "wash out" ideology and rhetoric to "focus on results."

But Shannon's pledge to work with nations to improve conditions for the region's poor by seeking a "larger basis for consensus" may be challenged by Correa, a charismatic U.S.-educated economist who has bashed President Bush as a fool and criticized key elements of U.S. policies such as free trade.

The Ecuadorean government has called the country's \$11 billion foreign debt "illegitimate," fueling concerns over a possible default. Several Latin American left-wing leaders, as well as Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, attended Correa's Jan. 15 inauguration.

Shannon said Correa, who handily won his election, has an opportunity to create a responsible government.

"When people want to help you, you should let them help you, as opposed to creating an environment in which there's conflict or confrontation," he said.

The U.S. government was represented at the Correa inauguration by Shannon and Health and Human Services Secretary Mike Leavitt. Both briefly spoke with Chávez. Shannon said at Tuesday's gathering that Chávez approached him and Leavitt to say that he wanted more friendly relations with Washington.

Shannon said the administration is ready for talks and that the ball is in Caracas' court.

Asked how the U.S. government would respond to Chávez's decision to nationalize U.S.-controlled phone and electricity companies, Shannon was cautious, saying the administration was in contact with Venezuelan authorities to get more details on the program.

"Obviously, we're interested in making sure that U.S. companies have their property rights respected," Shannon noted.