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Why Meddle in Nicaragua?

By Michael Shifter

As Latin America's busy election cycle winds down, the Bush administration deserves a lot of credit. In election after election it has shown admirable restraint and has wisely avoided taking sides. Nicaragua, however, has been the exception. U.S. conduct in advance of Sunday's election has been anything but restrained. The Bush administration has blotted its otherwise exemplary record in a small and impoverished Central American country -- probably the one in which there is the least at stake for U.S. interests.

Washington has been in a dither about the prospect of former Sandinista president Daniel Ortega returning to power after 16 years. To be sure, an Ortega win would not be cause for celebration. He has essentially become a corrupt and cynical party boss, intent on amassing and maintaining power. His pact in 2000 with former president Arnoldo Aleman, who was later convicted of embezzlement, tightened his grip on key electoral and judicial institutions. Ortega has forged alliances with a number of former enemies, including contras -- members of the U.S.-supported rebel army that sought to topple the Soviet-backed Sandinistas in the 1980s. The chances that an Ortega presidency would usher in the kind of fundamental economic and social reforms that Nicaragua desperately needs are next to nil.

Yet Ortega's possible comeback would not have far-reaching repercussions in Latin America and surely would constitute no threat to the United States. Intervention in Nicaragua's internal affairs is unwarranted. Nevertheless, an alarmed Bush administration seems to be suffering from a Cold War flashback. U.S. officials have threatened dire consequences for Nicaragua should Ortega be elected. Both Commerce Secretary Carlos Gutierrez and the American ambassador in Managua, Paul Trivelli, have said that an Ortega presidency would scare off foreign investors and jeopardize Nicaragua's participation in the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) with the United States. Nicaraguans have been given notice that U.S. aid would be cut under an Ortega administration. Most egregious, Reps. Dana Rohrabacher, Ed Royce and Pete Hoekstra sent letters to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff requesting that they block remittances sent by Nicaraguans living in the United States back to their families -- an important part of the Nicaraguan economy -- in the event of an Ortega win.

These tactics are clearly intended to prevent Ortega -- who, polls suggest, is hovering around the 35 percent he would need to win outright -- from returning to the presidency. The Bush administration has also tried without success to persuade a divided opposition to unite behind the candidacy of conservative Eduardo Montealegre, who recent polls show would be Ortega's strongest challenger.

Adding to the spectacle, Oliver North, who helped raise funds for the contras in the 1980s by selling arms to Iran, went to Nicaragua last week to throw his weight behind another candidate, Jose Rizo, who is aligned with Aleman.

U.S. interference in the Nicaraguan election -- criticized by the Organization of American States monitoring group -- has been motivated in part by a sense that under a Sandinista government Venezuela's Hugo Chávez, an ally of Ortega and adversary

of President Bush, would be able to cause further mischief and gain a foothold in Central America. But such fears are exaggerated. Chávez's capacity to carry out his agenda has been limited. In fact, Chávez's support for anti-U.S. candidates in various elections this year -- including those in Peru and Ecuador -- has largely backfired. At a minimum, any possible criticism of Chávez for interfering in Nicaragua by giving oil and fertilizer to Sandinista-controlled municipalities is neutralized by Washington's own questionable role.

Before Nicaragua, the Bush administration could claim the moral high ground in dealing with Latin American elections this year. Even in the tight Mexican election -- where there is clearly more at stake than in Nicaragua -- U.S. officials were highly professional, winning praise even from advisers in the campaign of leftist Andrés Manuel López Obrador. In Peru, where a stridently anti-U.S. and pro-Chávez candidate had a real chance of winning the presidency, the United States was properly discreet.

But it seems it couldn't resist the temptation to meddle in an election to thwart an old Cold War foe. Too bad. There was reason to believe Washington had finally learned its lesson.