

Whose Democracy is the United States Promoting in Nicaragua?

By Brynne Keith-Jennings | April 26, 2006

The U.S. government has been flexing its muscles in Nicaragua to defeat Daniel Ortega, candidate of the National Sandinista Liberation Front (FSLN), in that country's November presidential elections. Ortega, president during the Sandinista revolution in the 1980s, is running for president for the fourth time since his first defeat in 1990.

As in other parts of the world, the United States is touting its support of democracy as the justification for intervening in the internal affairs of a sovereign state.

In a recent interview in the Nicaraguan magazine *Confidencial*, U.S. Ambassador Paul Trivelli stated, "What we are trying to do is to support the democratic process, and tell people that in this country, in the electoral process there are antidemocratic forces and there are democratic forces." Through his actions, however, Ambassador Trivelli has shown a strange understanding of what it means to "support the democratic process."

On April 5, 2006, Trivelli sent a letter to several political parties offering to fund primaries that would result in a single presidential candidate in order to increase their chances of defeating Ortega. When this offer was rejected by the parties, all of whom had already declared their presidential candidates, Trivelli held a highly-publicized meeting with the leaders of the Liberal Constitutional Party (PLC). The party's head, former U.S.-supported ex-President Arnaldo Aleman, has been convicted of embezzling over \$100 million from state coffers and many other party leaders have been stripped of their U.S. visas due to their relationship with Aleman.

Trivelli urged the PLC to abandon its candidate José Rizo, chosen in internal party elections earlier this year, and participate in a broad effort to defeat Ortega. When the party refused to remove its candidate, Trivelli denounced the PLC, declaring, "A party that is controlled by Mr. Aleman is still not in the category of democratic parties ...". He then met with presidential candidate Eduardo Montealegre, a former PLC member who split from the party and has formed an electoral alliance called the Nicaraguan Liberal Alliance (ALN). In a statement that

barely fell short of endorsing Montealegre, Trivelli stated that he is the "democratic choice" for the Nicaraguan presidency.

Trivelli's recent actions show that for the U.S. State Department, democracy is a relative concept that need apply only when convenient. By negotiating with the PLC when seeking an alliance to beat Daniel Ortega, then denouncing it when the effort failed, the State Department has not only meddled in the internal affairs of a sovereign state but demonstrated a double standard for awarding democratic credentials.

All of these actions lead to the obvious question: "Why the fear of Ortega?" In a quote from the Nicaraguan daily *La Prensa* Trivelli referred to Ortega's previous term as president from 1984 to 1990 stating, "Ortega already governed, and he did so badly." The U.S. government's attempts to undermine the Sandinista government have been well-documented by Congress in the Iran-contra hearings; support for the armed opposition led to tens of thousands of deaths.

Recent statements by both Condoleezza Rice and John Negroponte suggest that the current fear is based on both the historical animosity and more recent geopolitical calculations. Faced with the possibility that an Ortega presidency will develop closer ties to Hugo Chavez in Venezuela and Fidel Castro in Cuba, the administration seeks to avoid what it sees as a growing front of leaders in the region who reject many of the dictates of Washington.

Trivelli himself has stated that he would support anyone "elected democratically, who governs democratically, with a sensible economic policy, and who is ready to cooperate with the United States on security issues." Although



Ortega has frequently challenged the U.S. role in Nicaragua, in recent years he has proven to be more a political opportunist than an ideologue or potential threat to the United States. He has not said that his government would renege on current IMF loans or otherwise alter neoliberal reforms that the State Department defines as “sensible economic policies.” Regardless, it should be the Nicaraguan people, not U.S. policymakers, who decide whether or not he deserves another term in office.

Beyond Trivelli’s wavering definition of democracy, however, is the issue of Nicaraguan sovereignty and U.S. interference in Nicaragua’s internal politics. Why is a U.S. official attempting to form an electoral alliance in another country? Trivelli demonstrates his arrogance and hypocrisy by acting in ways that impede the development of democracy in order to promote “the unity of democratic forces.”

Since 1990, when U.S.-favored candidate Violeta Chamorro defeated Ortega, the U.S. government has moved from the military force of the 1980s to a more subtle strategy that focuses on economic and political

pressures. Having already demonstrated who is “boss” in the region, it sends messengers like Trivelli to remind countries like Nicaragua of what happens if they depart from U.S.-favored policy.

The peace that holds in Nicaragua after 1990 is a painful, bitter peace, marked by extreme inequities and immense poverty. It is also a peace in which officials such as Trivelli feel free to intervene in internal politics as if they were another actor in the Nicaraguan system. Perhaps a larger movement will be necessary to change this relationship of domination and dependence. But as a diplomat, the very least Trivelli could do is to demonstrate due respect for the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, which states that “it is the duty of all persons enjoying such privileges and immunities *not to interfere in the internal affairs of that State,*” and show respect for the people of Nicaragua, who have the right to define their own political processes.

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