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Stay Out of Petty Central American Quarrels

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| August 31, 2010

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There appears to be a new batch of Nicaraguan contras organizing in the mountains and determined to mount a rebellion against leftist President Daniel Ortega^[3]. This development might cause one to think that we're experiencing a time warp and that we're back in the 1980s. And not surprisingly, the new contras hope for the kind of U.S. aid that Washington gave to their fathers. That's unlikely to happen—and a good thing, too.

Ortega never was a very savory character, contrary to the worshipful accounts of his groupies in the United States. Throughout the 1980s, his Sandinista regime combined Leninist economic

idiocies with some rather ugly authoritarian political tactics. And spending more than a decade-and-a-half in the political wilderness, after being voted out of office in 1990, has not improved his behavior. Although voters restored him to power in 2007, following a campaign in which he ran on promises of “peace and reconciliation,” his conduct since then is reminiscent of the quasi-dictatorial tactics of his good friend, Venezuela’s Hugo Chavez.

It is likely that the people of Nicaragua are in for a rough time, politically and economically, as are the unfortunate people of Venezuela. Nevertheless, there is no legitimate reason for the United States to get involved in either country’s messy domestic squabbles. Aid to the anti-communist contras was at least arguably in America’s security interests in the 1980s, given the Ortega regime’s flirtation with being a client state of the Soviet Union. Even then, the wisdom of the Reagan administration’s strategy was highly debatable. [4] But no hostile great power poses any kind of threat in Central America today. The petty, parochial politics of those chronically misgoverned countries are now just that—petty and parochial.

Only if Ortega (or Chavez) takes tangible steps to become a Chinese or Russian surrogate, or if either country mounted a credible program to develop nuclear weapons [5], would a serious security threat to the United States even arguably emerge. The latter development is relatively unlikely with regard to Venezuela, and it is in the realm of utter fantasy with regard to Nicaragua. Even worries about them becoming pawns of Moscow or Beijing are rather far-fetched.

If the Nicaraguan people move to get rid of Daniel Ortega’s government before he becomes a full-fledged dictator, we should wish them well. But we should also let his opponents know in no uncertain terms that Washington will not assist their cause. We simply do not have a dog in that fight.

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