

12-4-2003

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Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "US SoS Makes a Mess." (2003). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/9152>

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US SoS Makes a Mess

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Nicaragua

Published: 2003-12-04

US Secretary of State Colin Powell arrived in Nicaragua Nov. 4 for the reported purpose of discussing security and economic matters, but his visit had become a diplomatic disaster by the time he left. One item on his agenda was to convince the Nicaraguan government and the army to destroy the 2,000 SAM-7 shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles stored in warehouses since the 1980s.

The missiles, of Russian manufacture, were brought from the Soviet Union during the contra war, in which the US funded a right-wing insurgency against the Sandinista government. These missiles are the same type recently used in Iraq to bring down a US Chinook helicopter, killing 16 US combatants, and wounding more than 20 others. Nicaragua's President Enrique Bolanos' government had previously offered to destroy the weapons.

Nicaragua is in sensitive negotiations on several fronts with the US, including the Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) and an effort to get some of its debt forgiven. Bolanos has been called "subservient" by opposition officials for his willingness to go along with US desires, and he has been pushing for Central American disarmament. One action that has irritated opposing politicians has been outlawing all anti-US protests. Protesters had gathered outside the US Embassy to demonstrate against US policy in Iraq, where Bolanos has sent Nicaraguan troops and doctors, as well as against CAFTA.

In a joint news briefing with Bolanos, Powell said of the missiles, "We have a very strong view that they should be eliminated." He said, "I will hope to persuade [the military] that they are not needed for any regional balance and certainly not for the superiority of Nicaragua. They are a potential danger." The US has a vision of what it would like Central American military forces to look like. The superpower has told the region's governments that it would prefer that their armies become better suited to fighting "criminal mafias" than each other (see NotiCen, 2003-06-26). It has called for the countries to sign a mutual nonaggression pact and to restructure their security institutions.

Bolanos said that he and the other regional presidents were in talks regarding a "reasonable balance of forces," including missile inventories. "We are studying in the military how and when this reduction can be carried out that will lead us to a reasonable balance of forces among Central American nations," he said. Powell's agenda called for talks with Nicaragua's defense minister and army chief of staff, as well as with Bolanos.

But Chief of Staff Gen. Javier Carrion is on record as opposing the total destruction of the missiles, and, after meeting with the secretary of state, told the press that he said as much to Powell. "The United States has made clear its position that it doesn't want missiles in Nicaragua. We have told them that, yes, we are going to keep our missiles. How many? That is what we are going to work on later," said the top Nicaraguan soldier. Carrion said he asked Powell about his "marked" interest in Nicaragua getting rid of these arms that Carrion considers defensive and which are under the

secure control of the army. "I asked him why they are only working in this direction [destruction of missiles] in Nicaragua, if in Latin America there are armies that also have missiles," he asked. "Or is this really about politics?"

Bolanos bends

The decisive statement from Carrion appeared to have had its effect on the government. Soon after the public statements, Presidential Communications Secretary Joel Gutierrez said that Bolanos' words had been misinterpreted, the president "has not spoken of total destruction, but of a substantial reduction, so that a balance can be reached and the other countries can follow the example and leadership of Nicaragua."

This reversal gained momentum with a statement from the Asamblea Nacional vice president, Frente Sandinista para la Liberacion Nacional (FSLN) Deputy Rene Nunez, who called Powell's petition "interference," and suggested that the real US motive was the disarmament of the country. The objective is "to try to pressure and blackmail the army, which has a revolutionary origin," said Nunez. "It's no secret that the US would prefer that this were a different army."

From the other side of the decades-old antithesis, Deputy Maximino Rodriquez of the Partido de la Resistencia Nicaraguense (PRN) the party of the ex-contras agreed with his former adversary. "Nicaragua is being pressured by the United States," he said. "Last week I was in the US Embassy, and they told me they are interested in having the missiles destroyed next year." Even the Azul y Blanco party, which is aligned with the government, disagreed with the unilateral loss of the missiles.

Deputy Augusto Valle was looking for incentive rather than pressure in suggesting that, if the US insisted on the destruction of the SAMs, then the government must insist on getting "new military equipment like helicopters or speedboats to combat narco-trafficking." Minister of Defense Jose Guerra said that, before any action is taken, a national commission would do a study of the arms inventory and prepare a plan of action.

Embarrassment at the embassy

Powell's interest in Nicaragua's arsenal, however, was not necessarily the irritant that most inflamed his hosts. The secretary raised the hackles of the Arnoldista faction of the ruling Partido Liberal Constitucionalista (PLC) when he said, at a meeting at which he was seen to be "ordering" new political alliances, that Arnoldo Aleman (see NotiCen, 2003-01-09) "is a thing of the past" and that "he has no political future in Nicaragua; that means he is history."

The quote was passed on to the media by Presidential Secretary Leandro Marin Abaunza, who was at the meeting. Marin Abaunza told the reporter, "I believe the message was clear." But perhaps the most serious insult and breach of diplomacy came not from Powell directly, but from the US Embassy's public affairs officer Jean Hartman. In preparing the press packet for foreign journalists, the purpose of which is to provide background for reporters who know little about the country,

Hartman provided a brutally negative picture of the country, its citizens, and institutions. Copies went to each of the drop-in reporters who had come to cover the Powell visit. The embassy moved immediately to remove Hartman from her job in an effort to control the diplomatic damage.

Ambassador Barbara Moore issued a communique offering apologies to the Nicaraguan people "for the insulting manner in which they were described by a member of this embassy." Hartman had written in her briefing, under the title Public Opinion in Nicaragua on the Eve of the Visit of Secretary of State Colin Powell, that Nicaraguans were malnourished illiterates who cared little for world affairs, or for political matters that went beyond Managua. "Nicaraguans in general have little interest in international affairs. The world revolves around Managua," the briefing said, concluding, "They follow US issues only as they directly relate to Nicaragua and have virtually no interest in the Middle East, China, the EU, Africa, or global issues like the environment, disarmament, or terrorism." The document also mentioned the contribution of troops that Nicaragua made to the Iraq occupation, but said it was done begrudgingly and that Nicaraguans increasingly wanted to know what "Nicaragua gets in return."

The embassy's exculpatory dispatch said that the Hartman document was "unauthorized, baseless, and full of errors." But most of the press coverage of the affair took the document to task more for its derogatory tone than for its inaccuracy. The document also said, "Most Nicaraguans are subsumed by the struggle to find the next plate of rice and beans and, therefore, have little time to think about the United States or world affairs in general."

Taking on the Nicaraguan officialdom, the piece said, "The decision-makers see the US as a selfish neighbor, who lives relatively nearby, but who drives a bigger car, has a better house, sends his kids to better schools, and who is so busy making money that he doesn't have time to stop and chat, much less care about the troubles of a less fortunate neighbor." The little black cloud that seemed to hang over Powell during his visit burst after he left.

The allusions to Aleman resulted, or at least were seen to have resulted, in the release of the ex-president from jail. Sandinistas, angered by Powell's interference in domestic affairs, influenced a judicial decision allowing Aleman to return to house arrest.

FSLN leader Daniel Ortega had first called upon the government to halt US political intervention in the country and then appealed to the Arnoldista wing of the PLC to struggle against Bolanos, who, he said, had become a "force and instrument of US political interference in Nicaragua." President Bolanos was, reportedly, furious. A poll showed more than 70% of Nicaraguans to have been against the release. The Sandinista outrage at US interference stems not only from the Sam-7 and Aleman issues, but also from attempts by the US to marginalize the party to prevent a FSLN electoral victory in 2004.

The US responded to the partial freeing of Aleman by suspending US\$49 million in aid to the Nicaraguan judicial system. On the missile front, meanwhile, Defense Minister Jose Adan Guerra Pastora told US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld at a Pentagon meeting late in November that his government would co-sponsor an international convention regulating the keeping, transporting, and use of its SAM-7s. As for giving them up, however, Guerra was reported only to have said that

Nicaragua would "analyze" their eventual destruction within the framework of the regional balance of forces.

-- End --