

Chamorro's win in Nicaragua came out of hopes for peace

By John Thomas

It has been more than two months since I left Nicaragua. I spent four months working on a construction project in the rural town of Matiguas, situated in the mountainous central region of the country.

Twelve other North Americans and myself lived with families and worked in the small town from mid-November until mid-March. From this perspective, I was able to observe the national elections on Feb. 25 and the months of campaigning preceding them.

Commentary

Over the past six years since Nicaragua's last election, where the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) won 67 percent of the vote, much has changed. After the initial improvements following the 1979 revolution in land reform, education and health care, the situation has deteriorated.

The U.S.-funded Contra war reached its destructive height between 1986 and 1988. To make things worse, the Reagan administration began an economic embargo in 1985.

The International Court of Justice (which in its 1987 decision found the United States guilty of aggression against Nicaragua) estimated the damage done to Nicaraguan economy at \$17 billion.

Fiscal mistakes by the Sandinista government, including rationing and over-investment in large-scale projects, added to the U.S. economic warfare led to inflation. By the late 80s, the economy was in a state of crisis.

In this context of a war that has cost many Nicaraguan lives and a destroyed economy, Violetta Chamorro and the National Opposition Union

(UNO), an alliance of 12 parties, won the presidency and a majority of seats in the national assembly with 54 percent of the vote.

President Daniel Ortega and the FSLN received 41 percent of the vote.

For many of the people I got to know in Matiguas, the war and the economy were the major issues that influenced their voting decisions. One would think that UNO's links to the Contras, in addition to their financial support from the U.S. government, would make it unpopular.

However, for many Nicaraguans, these were the very reasons they voted for UNO. Some mothers I met voted for UNO because they had lost a son in the war, or had a son in the military, or had a son who would soon be of draft age.

"If UNO wins, the U.S. will stop the war," one woman told me.

I also met a soldier in the Sandinista army who was planning on voting for UNO. He said to me, "Violetta has promised to end the military draft. If she wins, I can go home."

Additionally, many people thought the millions of dollars given by the United States to finance the UNO campaign was a sure sign the economic embargo would end, and that the United States would send aid if UNO won the election.

In much of the U.S. media, Chamorro's victory is portrayed in the same light as the changes in Eastern Europe. However, it becomes very clear after spend-

ing time with the people of Nicaragua that the situation bears almost no connection to the fall of the Soviet-installed governments in Europe.

The history of the FSLN as a revolutionary movement that overthrew a dictator, the U.S.-funded war and a bad economic situation were the major factors that shaped the issues of the campaign.

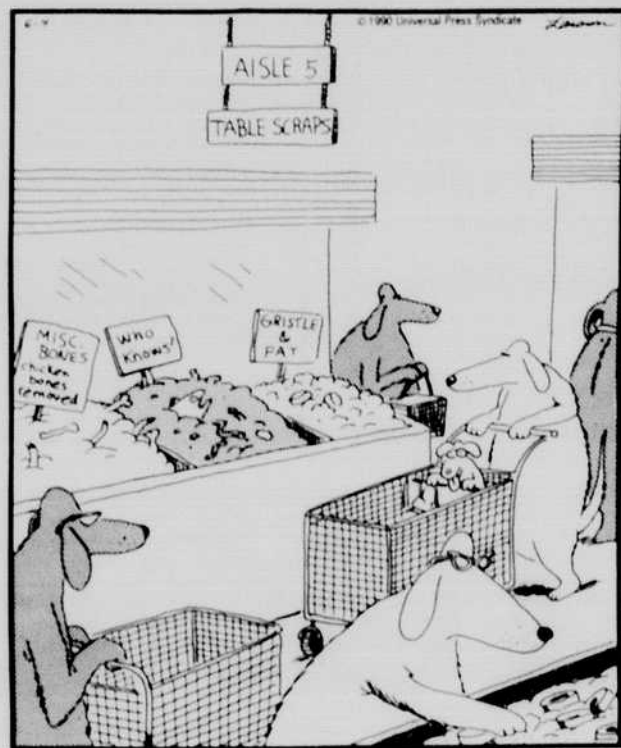
People wanted peace and improvement of the war-torn economy. With UNO having the approval and financial backing of the United States, it is not surprising that it won a majority of the vote in this war-weary country.

One might say that many Nicaraguans cried "uncle" by voting for UNO.

John Thomas is a University student currently on exchange with the University of Massachusetts.

THE FAR SIDE

By GARY LARSON



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