

## N I C A R A G U A

# Butting heads

*National elections opened a deep rift in a country still struggling with the hatreds of the '80s.*

By David Dye  
MANAGUA, NICARAGUA

**I**n a homily delivered in Managua's new metropolitan cathedral three days before the national elections on October 20, Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo recited a not very biblical-sounding parable about a trusting human foolish enough to befriend an ailing snake, which promptly bit it to death. The parable was part of the cardinal's "orientation to Christians" about their duty vis-à-vis the electoral process.

Used to interpreting Obando's veiled language, Nicaraguan politicians and voters had no trouble deciphering who the prelate was alluding to. The devil in disguise was Sandinista presidential candidate Daniel Ortega. Ortega kept silent about the affair, not wishing to worsen matters. He had run on a new, moderate image, appealing to Nicaraguans

to trust him again. Late campaign polls showed Ortega rapidly narrowing the gap with the heavily favored right-wing Liberal Alliance candidate Arnoldo Alemán, the former mayor of Managua. But in the end, apparently heeding the prelate's words, voters handed Alemán an unexpectedly large margin of victory.

A whopping 80 percent of the eligible voting population came out to the polls. Although 26 political parties participated in this year's campaigns, voters went overwhelmingly for the frontrunners in the presidential contest, with 51 percent supporting Alemán and 38 percent supporting Ortega. Of the 93 seats in the National Assembly, the Liberal Alliance took 42, the Sandinistas took 37 (up from the eight they were left with when the Movement for the Renovation of Sandinismo split off over a year ago), and the remaining 14 seats were divided among nine other political parties. That means the Liberal Alliance and the Sandinistas will have to negotiate in the Assembly to win those parties to their side in any given

issue. In the 145 mayoral races, the Liberal Alliance took 91 while the Sandinistas won 52 (up from 13).

The fundamentalist Protestant political party, Christian Path, emerged to become the third force in Nicaraguan politics. The party, whose evangelism has a decidedly anti-Catholic tone, garnered 4 percent of the vote and won four seats in the National Assembly. Its leader, Guillermo Osorno, may become an important political rival of Obando. Whether Osorno will be a reliable ally of Daniel Ortega is not yet clear.

The cardinal's role in Alemán's victory was probably not decisive, but it may well have prevented a runoff. The main problem with Obando's venomous homily, however, was how it fed into the widening, ever more vicious rift between left and right in a country which has been struggling for years to get past the raw hatreds left behind by the contra war of the '80s.

The results marked the second straight defeat for the Sandinistas, who dominated Nicaraguan politics in the '80s. In fact, the Sandinistas received virtually the same proportion of the presidential vote this year as they did six years ago. In 1990, the debate between the Sandinistas and the United Nicaragua Opposition (UNO), headed by Violeta Chamorro, focused on the question of which party could lead the country to peace. This time around, the debate focused on which party would lead Nicaragua back to the past. The Sandinistas claimed that a Liberal Alliance victory would mean a return to the days of the Somoza dictatorship, while Alemán's supporters warned that a Sandinista victory would mean a return to the years of war and economic collapse.

The Sandinistas said they had learned from their past mistakes. This time, they placed a new emphasis on inclusiveness at the expense of ideology, offering what they called "a government for all." They no longer promised the dramatic social changes of the '80s—land reform, literacy brigades, massive government spending for health and education. Instead, their economic platform offered what Sandinista candidate Victor Hugo Tinoco described as "differences of shading" from the Liberal Alliance free-market strategy of economic reactivation by encouraging foreign investment.

The election, however, has now bequeathed a face-off between large right- and left-wing voter blocs. The Sandinistas' official response to their defeat has been to charge fraud and to claim they will not recognize the new Liberal Alliance government as legitimate. The FSLN, along with a number of other political parties, is asking for the elections in the departments of Matagalpa and Managua to be voided. This posture has international election observers in a quandary. Observers reported that the process was marred by two factors: political partisanship on the part of some election officials, and the government's failure to allocate sufficient resources to process all the votes in a timely and efficient manner. However, while there were massive irregularities in the voting, most observers believe they were produced mostly by simple disorganization, not skullduggery.

Mariano Fiallos, the former head of Nicaragua's Supreme Electoral Council who had agreed to serve as Ortega's foreign minister, criticized a new election law that stipulated that members of the electoral councils for each department were to be chosen from lists presented by the political parties. He pleaded, however, with his party to refrain from fraud charges. "For the good of Nicaragua," he argued, "we must not put either the institutions or the future stability of the country, about which we insisted so strongly in the campaign, at the slightest risk."

The plea fell on deaf ears. If raw vote totals were not always clear, Sandinista media and spokespeople distorted "discrepancies" to buttress their charges of vote-tampering. The left media made much of numerous differences between initial results telegraphed to the Supreme Electoral Council and the actual numbers recorded in the minutes from voting tables. When the latter were recounted at Sandinista request, Alemán's lead over Ortega actually increased.

The real extent of fraud in the October election—and who committed it—may never be known. But in the opinion of many Nicaraguan analysts, the Sandinista charges have less to do with whether votes were recorded unfairly than with the survival strategy of Ortega.

Ortega's second election defeat in a row may be fatal, producing an upheaval in Sandinista party leadership. But as a strong caudillo enjoying blind personal loyalty from many of his followers, "Daniel" will not easily be dislodged as the FSLN leader. He does have problems, however. Hav-

ing convinced the party faithful that they were going to win, he needs someone to blame for his loss. According to some accounts of internal Sandinista politics, he must also look over his shoulder at more radical elements in the party who may be preparing the ground to challenge his hold at the next party convention, which will be held in 1997.

If this view is correct, charges of fraud—made plausible by very real irregularities—fit Ortega's needs like a glove. They help in another respect as well, readying the party base for combat with the incoming Liberal Alliance government. After her 1990 victory, Chamorro accommodated herself to Sandinista power—retaining Humberto Ortega as head of the army and distancing herself from the right-wing sector of the UNO coalition. But Alemán and his "Liberal hordes" truculently assert a mandate to govern on behalf of, among others, property owners whose farms, homes and other assets were confiscated by the Sandinistas in 1979. For many Sandinistas, any attempt to take back this property is going for the jugular.

The coming conflicts will test the mettle of Nicaragua's fledgling institutions, which have been dealt a setback by the conduct of this election and its aftermath. The Sandinistas will probably swallow their pride and accept a major role in the emerging system. Under the new constitution promulgated in 1995, the National Assembly and the mayoralities have much more power than they did under the Chamorro government. Therefore, the Sandinistas elected to those offices will have considerable leverage. Important policy initiatives, such as economic adjustment measures, now have to be approved by the National Assembly. In the absence of the kind of concessions made by Chamorro, the Sandinistas will have little incentive to be a constructive opposition, and will contest the Alemán administration at every possible turn.

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# I N T H E A R T S

## Warped drives

**Star Trek:  
First Contact  
is a plea to  
make the  
world safe for  
our inner  
robots.**

By Bill Boisvert

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tar Trek movies provide brief respites from the TV series' never-ending treadmill of mirthless camp, offering bigger budgets, the chance to hear the word "bullshit" spoken on screen, and the fleeting release of the money shot, when the crew finally gets to sit back and *let* the ship go down in flames. The latest installment, *Star Trek: First Contact*, delivers as expected on the production values: The pacing is brisk, the sets opulent, the writing fluent, the special effects special. The characters meet the many point-less deadlines of a plot that effortlessly blocks their stabs at recognizable human behavior. Yet *First Contact* is a strangely half-hearted affair, as if the filmmakers themselves had grown impatient with their franchise's shibboleths. The crew seems frazzled and bitter. Captain Picard's

blustering *fuhrerprinzip* evokes the usual "he's the Captain; we obey his orders," but this time uttered with a hollow-eyed mixture of despondency and contempt. The Prime Directive is openly mocked. Even the Auto-Destruct Sequence is perfunctory—it gets aborted with whole minutes to spare.

*First Contact* opens with an attack on Earth by the Borg, the remorseless half-human, half-machine cyborg race that terrified the Federation over several TV episodes. Defeated in battle, the Borg open a "temporal vortex" and travel back in time to conquer the technologically backward Earth of the year 2063. The *Enterprise* pursues the Borg ship into the past and destroys it, only to find that the Borg have damaged the Earthlings' prototype warp drive that was supposed to power the first starship into space the very next day; even worse, the Borg have managed to sneak onto the *Enterprise* itself. The bulk of the movie chronicles the crew's struggles to launch the warp-drive spacecraft at the appointed hour and keep the Borg from taking over the *Enterprise*.

But the storyline is just an excuse to rehash *Star Trek*'s familiar psychosexual anxieties. The hackneyed time-travel device provides an excuse for the return of the repressed primitive: a mid-21st century, post-nuclear wasteland where people live in metal shacks, cook over open fires, engage in tribal warfare with other "factions," and dress in stylish fur garments that suggest *Mad Max* as outfitted by Ralph Lauren. The inventor of the warp-drive, one Zephraim Cochran, turns out to be a wastrel who swills tequila, listens to rock 'n' roll and scandalizes the Starfleet officers by going into the woods to "take a leak." His only goal in building the spaceship is to make enough money to "retire to some tropical island—with naked women." He fills the role normally played in *Star Trek* by the Ferengi/Jews—that of a conveniently displaced receptacle for the other characters' ids. This frees the crew members to focus their libidinal energies on the warp contraption itself, provocatively housed in an old nuclear missile. In one ecstatic scene, Data and Picard stroke the missile's bulbous tip and gleaming shaft, while the ultra-feminine Counselor Troi stands near them to absorb and neutralize excess homoeroticism.

The idyll ends when Data and Picard return to the *Enterprise* to deal with the Borg incursion into Deck 16. Oddly, the Borg never attack the crew members, except in self-defense. Their main targets are the ship's illumination and climate-control systems. As the lights dim and the temperature rises to a steamy "39.1°C with 92 percent humidity," the Borg seem to pose a largely inchoate threat of darkness, moisture and confinement. They are slowly turning the *Enterprise* into a womb.

The menace crystallizes in the person of the Borg Queen,