

“Gringo(s) go home” say Nicaraguan government and popular opinion

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By Michael Zoorob / July 5, 2016 [Click to read this article in Spanish](#) [Click to read this article in English](#)

On June 14, the Nicaraguan government expelled three individuals employed by the United States government. U.S. State Department Spokesman John Kirby [decried](#) the action as “unwarranted and inconsistent with the positive and constructive agenda that we seek with the Government of Nicaragua.” But, according to public surveys, it may be that Nicaraguans want a different agenda with the U.S.—or at least its military.

Nicaraguan Ambassador to the U.S., Francisco Campbell, said that two of the U.S. officials were involved in [anti-terrorism activities](#) “carried out without the knowledge or the proper coordination with Nicaraguan authorities, which is ... very delicate and sensitive.” He further emphasized to the United States “the necessity to inform (them) about official missions that come to Nicaragua, and to coordinate their work.” The two officials worked on [export certification](#) for the Customs-Trade Partnership Against Terrorism.

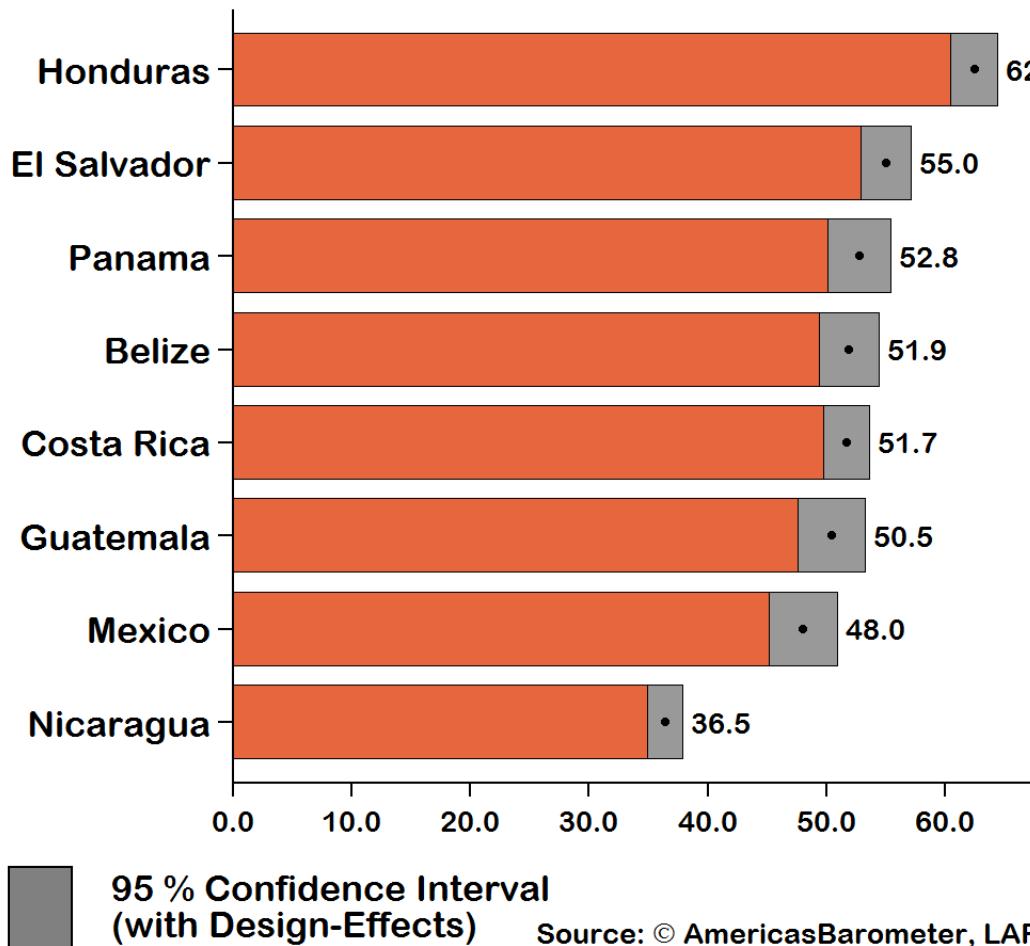
The third expelled individual was [Evan Ellis](#), a professor at the U.S. Army War College whose research focuses on Latin American relations with China. Ellis, a civilian-employee of the U.S. government, visited Nicaragua to study the “Great Canal” project and was told to [leave the country](#) on short notice one evening soon after he arrived in country. [Full disclosure: he is also a contributor to this website, but had no role in this article.]

These incidents directed toward two U.S. anti-terrorism officials and one academic affiliated with the U.S. military highlight the distrust of the United States—and those connected with United States security and military institutions in particular—that prevails within the Nicaraguan government.

But what about Nicaraguans themselves? Do they agree? Public opinion data from the [AmericasBarometer by LAPOP](#) demonstrates that the average Nicaraguan has low regard for the U.S. military. This is particularly the case among supporters of President Ortega and those who see U.S. influence in the country as negative.

Compared to the rest of the hemisphere, Nicaraguans are exceptionally distrustful of the U.S. military. Figure 1 shows the average degree of trust toward the U.S. military on a 0 to 100 scale; the mean in Nicaragua is 36.5, the lowest in Central America, and significantly lower than in neighboring Costa Rica (51.7) and Honduras (62.5). These levels of distrust, understandably, may be rooted in the fraught history between the two countries, especially U.S. government’s past [support](#) for Contra rebels’ insurrection against the Ortega government and the Sandinistas in the 1980s.

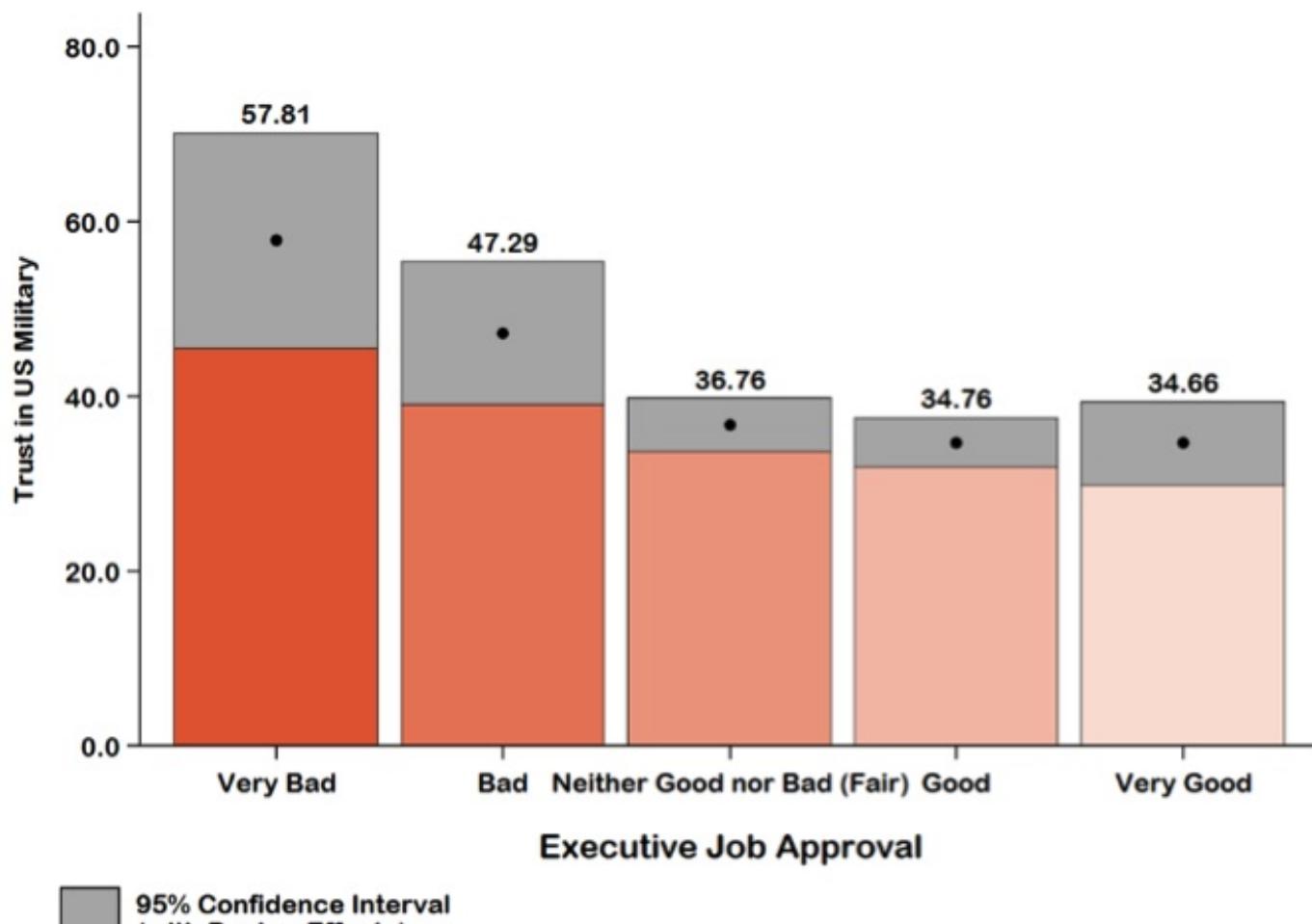
Figure 1. Average Degrees of Trust in the U.S. Military in Central America and Mexico, 2014



But other, more contemporary, issues may also be at play. Relations between the United States and Nicaragua have been [strained](#) since Sandinista President Daniel Ortega was re-elected (after being voted out of office in 1990) in 2006. The recent expulsions softly echo previous diplomatic spats between the U.S. and Nicaragua. In 1988, during the earlier Ortega presidency (1985-1990), Nicaragua [expelled](#) the American ambassador and seven other American diplomats, charging them of fomenting political opposition. The Reagan Administration [reciprocated](#) by expelling Nicaragua's diplomats from the U.S., threatening to suspend diplomatic relations, and petitioning Congress to give aid to the "Contra" rebels fighting Ortega and his Sandinista Liberation Front (FSLN) government.

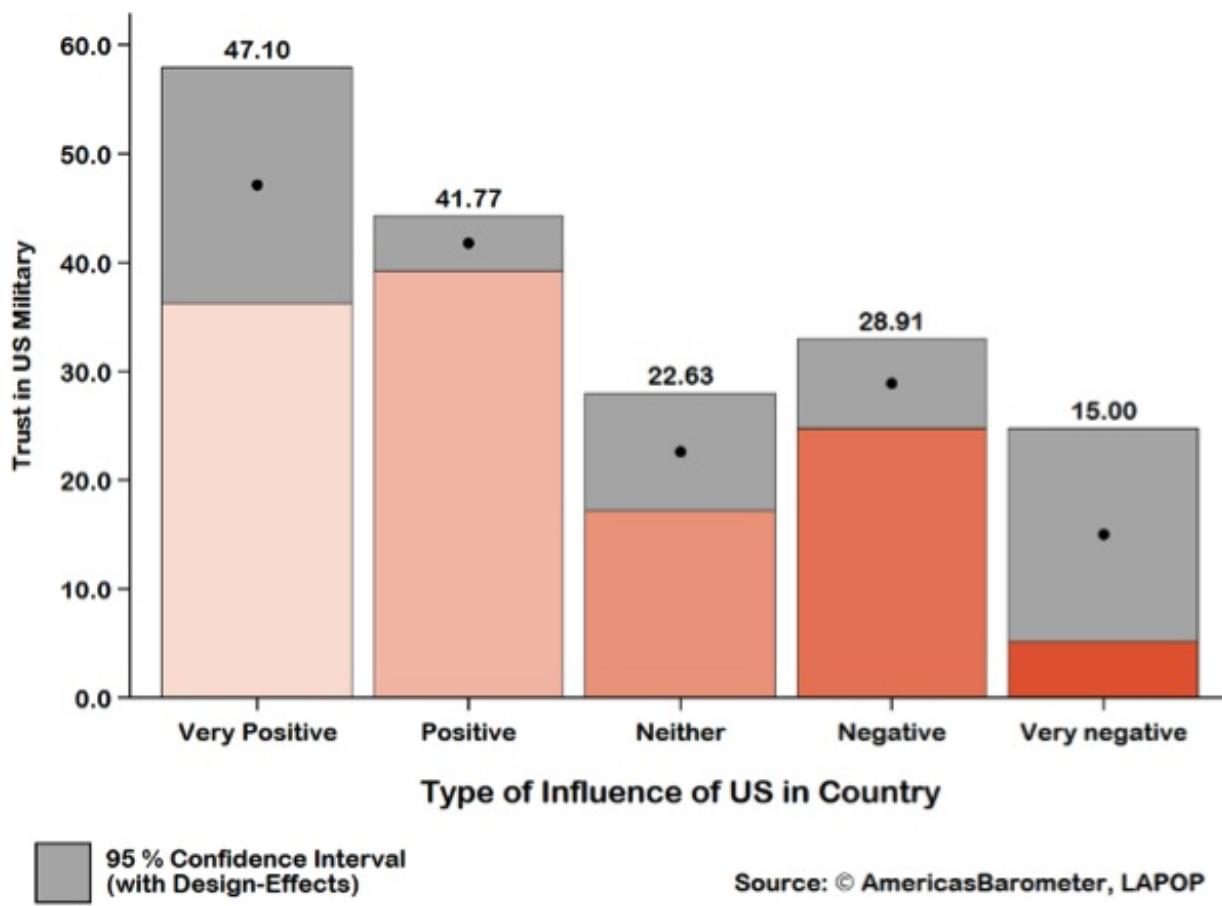
Given the central role played by Ortega in both of these periods, attitudes in Nicaragua toward the U.S. military are likely structured by support for Daniel Ortega. Indeed, as Figure 2 shows, *disapproval* of the executive in Nicaragua is associated with higher levels of trust in the U.S. military, and vice versa. Respondents who evaluate the performance of the executive negatively (bad or very bad) have statistically significantly higher trust in the U.S. military than those who approve of the executive.

Figure 2. Approval of the Ortega Administration and Trust in the U.S. Military in Nicaragua



Perhaps unsurprisingly, how Nicaraguans feel about the influence of the United States is also related to their trust of the U.S. military. As Figure 3 shows, Nicaraguans who evaluate American influence in their country positively express significantly higher levels of trust in the U.S. military. On average, Nicaraguans with very positive views of American influence are three times as likely to trust the U.S. military as those with very negative views. However, even among those who think that the United States has a positive or very positive influence, the average degree of trust in the U.S. military falls on the lower-half of the scale. (Interestingly, most Nicaraguans believe that the United States as a whole has a positive influence on their country but remain highly skeptical of the U.S. military. In response to the 2014 AmericasBarometer question, 67.21% of respondents stated that U.S. influence was positive and 4.51% said it was very positive.)

Figure 3: Perception of American Influence and Trust in U.S. Military in Nicaragua



The data suggest that the recent expulsions of U.S. government employees are unlikely to result in censure of the Nicaraguan government by the mass public. Quite the opposite. The government's snubbing of U.S. citizens associated—even loosely—with the U.S. military is consistent with public attitudes, especially with support for Ortega. By framing the two U.S. customs officials as “security,” rather than trade related (which they were), the government was attempting to tap into this skepticism of the U.S. military.

In contrast, private sector elites condemned the move. Dean Garcia of Nicaragua’s Association of Textiles and Clothing [criticized](#) the expulsion of the two officials, saying it would hurt Nicaraguan exports.

Widespread distrust of the U.S. military in Nicaragua may impede security cooperation between the two countries. If distrust leads to additional diplomatic disputes—and is supported at the popular level—cooperation between the two countries in other areas, such as [health and drug smuggling](#), could be jeopardized. Clearly, public opinion remains potentially exploitable if Ortega and his government opt to do so.

Who will suffer in the long term, though, remains an open question. For that—the future—it’s impossible to gather survey data.

Michael Zoorob is a recent Vanderbilt graduate and a staffer with the Latin American Public Opinion Project at Vanderbilt University. All views in this piece are his alone.