Dear Senator Kane

I am writing to urge you not to support for S 1881, Restoring Sovereignty and Human Rights in Nicaragua Act of 2023, and to reject imposing further sanctions on Nicaragua. The bill’s title is misleading inasmuch as its actual effect will be to undermine Nicaragua’s sovereignty.

Imposing added sanctions on Nicaragua, as S 1881 does, is wrong for a variety of reasons. **Sanctions are widely rejected as immoral and illegal acts of war** because the hardship they impose almost invariably affects ordinary people, in effect turning them into pawns in a geopolitical struggle. For this reason, many respected world leaders, including Pope Francis, have warned against sanctions. In addition, sanctions are a relatively ineffective weapon.

**Sanctions are counterproductive if our intent is to reduce immigration** from Central America to the United States. Increasing economic instability and distress in Nicaragua on top of the sanctions already in place is very likely to lead to an increase in emigration from Nicaragua, So far, the Nicaraguan government has been able to soften some of the impact of current sanctions on its people because the Nicaraguan government enjoys a good reputation among many international financial institutions as an honest and efficient user of foreign aid. The government has been able to make major contributions to the daily wellbeing of Nicaraguans in health care, food security, transportation and infrastructure, and more, often outpacing its neighbors in these achievements. Increasing sanctions threaten all of that and the stability of the country itself. Perhaps that is what sanctions are intended to do, but it would be a serious attack against a country that has so far been able to improve daily life for its people, There are a variety of reports from international financial and other institutions attesting to this. Sanctions threaten to undermine this and encourage emigration.

**Harming Nicaragua threatens to destabilize the region.** In the highly unstable Central America that exists currently, sanctions against Nicaragua act to destabilize not only that country but its neighbors as well, especially Honduras. Honduras and Nicaragua share a long history and many cultural, social, and economic ties. In times of crisis and stress, Honduras and Costs Rica have been the primary havens of relative safety for many Nicaraguans. The Honduran government of Xiomara Castro already has a long series of major dilemmas and difficulties to address, and the fragility of the advances it has tried to make in curbing corruption and violence and eliminating the most extreme poverty can contribute to lessening the massive emigrations from Honduras we have seen in the past decade. Castro’s government cannot afford the stress of major economic crisis in its close neighbor, Nicaragua. Nicaragua is now widely considered the safest country in the region. Destabilizing it is likely to open it to penetration by organized crime, gangs, and drug and human trafficking from Honduras and Costa Rica, destroying the security Nicaraguans enjoy from these threats, and fueling emigration.

**It is time to stop waging war on Nicaragua.** Since at least 1980, the ongoing campaign (obsession) of many in and out of the U.S. government has been to destroy the Sandinista movement and to roll back the Nicaraguan revolution. In the 1980s, it was the Contra War. Today, the campaign (the war) continues by means of sanctions, coupled with funds from government and quasi-governmental agencies such as the National Endowment for Democracy to train and support opposition against the Nicaraguan government. That ongoing campaign has never succeeded in destroying the Sandinistas or the revolution, but it has continued to make life harder for the Nicaraguan people. Supporting S 1881simply contributes to misguided warfare against a people whose only wish is to determine their own course and exercise their sole prerogative in deciding the government of their country, free from external forces. Despite its title,

S 1881 threatens to undermine Nicaragua’s national sovereignty. I have wondered why we are so concerned about other countries trying to influence our own U.S. elections and government, yet we insist on doing precisely that to other countries such as Nicaragua that pose no threat to us.

**As a reason for imposing more sanctions on Nicaragua, the accusation of religious persecution is false and misleading.** Recently, we have heard some in our government and in the media declaring that the Nicaraguan government is persecuting religion, that there is little or no freedom of religion there. Please recall that in the 1980s the second major arm of the Reagan Administration’s war against Nicaragua was to claim that the Sandinistas were persecuting religion. The Reagan Administration’s Santa Fe Document makes perfectly clear that there are two faces of religion in Nicaragua, one the conservative hierarchy of the Catholic Church, the other embodied in liberation theology. Reagan saw the hierarchy as his ally and liberation theology as contrary to the interests of the United States. Reagan rightly believed that the liberation theology of the Catholic Church was supportive of the political liberation proposed by the Sandinistas and embodied in the revolution. The situation is not so different today.

I was in Nicaragua for two years during the middle of the Contra War. I personally witnessed churches open and public acts of religion every day. I participated in many of them. I knew local Sandinista and Nicaraguan government officials, some of them Catholic Delegates of the Word or lay catechists, who said they joined the Sandinistas precisely because the Sandinistas and the revolution seemed to be the most practical way for them to live their religious values. You may recall that there were three Catholic priests the revolutionary Nicaraguan government. Maryknoll Father Miguel D’Escoto was Foreign Minister; Franciscan Ernesto Cardenal, Minister of Culture; and Jesuit Fernando Cardenal, Minister of Education. Why would a government bent on persecuting religion have a Jesuit as its Minister of Education?

Today, I hear from friends and acquaintances living in Nicaragua that religion is freely practiced. The trope of “religious persecution” that we are currently hearing is not new, but rather an old weapon. It was deliberately misleading in the 1980s and it is deliberately misleading now. The detention of several priests and members of the Catholic hierarchy for crimes that they would be prosecuted for in the United States should not be equated with “persecution of religion.” That false accusation rests on claiming that the Catholic hierarchy constitutes “the Church” but it ignores the daily and open exercise of religion (or the right not to be religious) by the rest of the population. The closure of the Jesuit run UCA is something that I do not fully understand, although I have talked with Jesuit friends and colleagues who lived there, as well as with others, many religious people, who live in Nicaragua and who believe the government was justified in its actions. I cannot pretend to understand this matter clearly, but I am always wary of what our government says about Nicaragua, given past experience. **I urge you not to use the “religious persecution” trope as a reason to support S 1881 or to impose more sanctions on Nicaragua.**

**My credentials.** I am a former Jesuit (New England Province, 14 years) who has lived in both Nicaragua and Honduras at various times over many years. I know and have accompanied Padre Melo (Ismael Moreno) in Honduras and his team at Radio Progreso and ERIC. I have also known and collaborated with Jesuits in Nicaragua, including several who were part of the Jesuit presence at the Universidad Centroamericana (UCA). I have many Honduran and Nicaraguan friends, some of whom my wife and I have continued to visit. As a social scientist, I have written two books about Honduras: *Honduras in Dangerous Times: Resistance and Resilience (*Lexington, 2015); and *Extracting Honduras: Resource Exploitation, Displacement, and Forced Migration* (Lexington, 2022, paperback 2023). I have published various articles about Nicaragua. I continue to follow closely and to write about events and conditions in those two countries and in Central America more broadly.

Thank you for your careful consideration of these matters.

Sincerely,



James Phillips, Ph.D.

Ashland, Oregon

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