

"The present regime is an illegitimate one."

PANAMA



"... it becomes extremely difficult to understand how a country whose hallmark has been not to be colonialist insists on maintaining a colony in the very heart of my country. Surely for that people this must be a shame, since they were a colony and they knew how degrading it was to be so."

- General Omar Torrijos,
at the U.N. Security Council Meeting
held in Panama, March 15-23, 1973.

by Maximilian C. Forte

On Wednesday, December 20, 1989, the world witnessed the illegal American invasion of another small and weaker nation — Panama. This act of aggression was a violation of Panamanian sovereignty, as well as the Panama Canal Treaties of 1977.

The invasion and subsequent occupation of Panama by American invaders resulted in the flattening of entire neighbourhoods, the deaths of hundreds of Panamanians and American civilians, the wounding of journalists at the Marriott Hotel on December 21, the denial of access to Red Cross workers to zones of heavy civilian casualties, as well as the abduction of Panamanians as political prisoners.

We also witnessed the United States, in its role as world policeman, kick out one government, and manufacture another "Made in the USA" regime, headed by President Guillermo Endara.

Once again Latin Americans are being looked down upon by the U.S. as incapable of ruling themselves, thus requiring the tutelage of a "civilized" superpower. The U.S. is again using the pretext of danger to its citizens' lives and interests to smash through someone else's home and show them how to order their affairs. Ex-Panamanian president General Manuel Noriega is portrayed as the typically corrupt,

demonic, debauched and swinish Latino, while other racist stereotypes abound. This entire miserable action has demonstrated the arrogant disdain the U.S. holds for Latin Americans.

American president George Bush advanced certain extremely questionable pretexts for rushing forces into Panama. He said this action was to "restore democracy" to Panama, to apprehend Noriega and bring him to "justice," to "protect the lives of U.S. citizens" and to defend the "integrity" of the canal.

First of all, the U.S. historically has a way of using democracy as a metaphor for something quite unrelated: the implanting of a surrogate regime which is closely aligned to U.S. interests, vulnerable to U.S. pressures and headed by a local oligarchy.

Secondly, a nation's arbitrary indictment of a foreign head of state does not give it the right to invade another nation, kill scores of people and hunt down and kidnap its leader. If we accept this state of affairs, we should allow Bush to be indicted by Colonel Qaddafi, be abducted and brought to justice in Libya.

Also, U.S. citizens only became threatened after the invasion by U.S. forces — not before. At no time was the canal ever threatened by Panama. How could the canal be threatened by those who hold it as a source of national pride? What the U.S. means by defending the integrity of the canal is that it is seeking to protect U.S. domination over it in perpetuity.

On January 1, 1990, the Bush administration, in violation of the canal treaties, chose a Panamanian administrator. He was to be appointed by the Panamanian government which declined its duty claiming, in "President" Endara's words, "we have more important things to worry about."

Moreover, Noriega never declared war on the U.S. Rather, he declared Panama to be in a "state of war." The difference is that, while one is a statement of intent to attack, the second is an observation that one is under attack and that defensive actions must be taken.

The U.S. Justice Department said it acted in accordance with Article 51 of the United Nations Charter, which recognizes the inherent right of nations to act in self-defense, and Article 4 of the treaty covering the neutrality and operation of the Panama Canal. How was the neutrality of the Canal threatened? Who threatened it and when? It was, after all, U.S. forces that shut the canal down for the first time in its history.

Panama has never threatened U.S. security. The self-defense justification is comical to say the least and criminal at worst. Don Edwards, a California Democrat, criticized Bush, saying, "There was no danger to our national security from this weak, small country, nor was the Panama Canal in real peril."

In a statement of understanding signed by former U.S. president Jimmy Carter and Panama's Brigadier General Omar Torrijos Herrera, in October 1977, both agreed to defend the neutrality of the canal. The agreement went on to state, "This does not mean, nor shall it be interpreted as, the right of intervention of the United States in the internal affairs of Panama. Any United States action will be directed at insuring that the canal will remain open, secure and accessible, and it shall never be directed against the territorial integrity or political independence of Panama."

It appears Panama has been held prisoner by its past, while the United States has not allowed it to escape this captivity. John Weeks, a professor of international studies at Middlebury College in the U.S., noted that, "Politically, Panama has been distorted by continuous domination and intervention by the United States. And economically, Panama suffers from extreme denationalization." Weeks also indicated that the U.S. embassy and military served as "arbitrators in intra-oligarchic conflicts" and that local politics evolved into a "sycophantic competition generated by U.S. overlordship." Clearly then, the newly handpicked rulers of Panama can be located within this dependent, pro-American tradition.

Endara said he would allow U.S. forces to capture Noriega and put him on trial, simply because Panama supposedly lacks the means to try him. This is odd, considering that extradition of Panamanian citizens to the U.S. is a violation of Panama's Constitution.

The latest invasion was only one of many U.S. interventions in Panama's history. Including the invasion of December 20, there have been 19 American military interventions in Panama. On January 9, 1964, American Canal Zone police and residents killed 21 unarmed Panamanian civilians and wounded more than 500, when the U.S. tried to stop Panamanian students from raising the Panamanian flag in the Zone, as the U.S. and Panamanian governments had previously agreed to. In the course of the slaughter, U.S. forces violated Panamanian jurisdiction outside the Canal Zone.

The U.S. has always been loath to yield the Canal Zone. Up to the 1970s the Zone was directly ruled by the U.S., with American laws, police, courts and jails exercising order over Panamanian employees. The Americans maintained their own government in the region, which prohibited Panamanian private enterprise from entering the Zone. As former U.S. president Ronald Reagan said during his campaign in 1980 with reference to the Panama Canal, "We bought it... we paid for it... we built it... it's ours and has to continue being ours."

In the process of justifying its brutal militarism, the U.S. has concentrated an extraordinary amount of its energies on vilifying and demonizing Noriega. By either exaggerating or fabricating accounts of Noriega's activities and personality traits, Bush is engaging in psychological warfare against U.S. public opinion by brainwashing it into believing that this was a mere SWAT operation to capture a "Scarface" figure.

The U.S. is playing St. George against Noriega the Dragon. Saul Landau, a senior fellow at the American Institute for Policy Studies in the U.S. in noted, "The public does know the image of the 'devil,' General Noriega, who has emerged as a cocaine and steroid dealer, who tortures and kills his enemies, has a craving for teenage girls and pals around with the Colombian cartel goons and Fidel Castro. And he is ugly. A Qaddafi magnified, an Ayatollah with horns. It's all a wonderful diversion."

Of course Bush does not want to remind us that in November 1984 it was Noriega who supplied information which led to the arrest of Colombian kingpin Jorge Ochoa in Madrid; that in 1987, Noriega collaborated with the Americans in a joint investigation of drug money laundering at Panama's international banking centre. Nor are we reminded of how, on May 25, 1987, the U.S. Justice Department's Steve Trott called Noriega's cooperation in drug interdiction "superb. Putting icing on the cake, *The New York Times* noted in an article (published December 31, 1989) that no paper trail of documents was captured in seizures of Noriega's property, that "no smoking gun" has been discovered linking Noriega to drugs. Federal officials reportedly complained that, so far,

their case is based largely on the testimony of criminal drug dealers who implicated Noriega in exchange for immunity from prosecution.

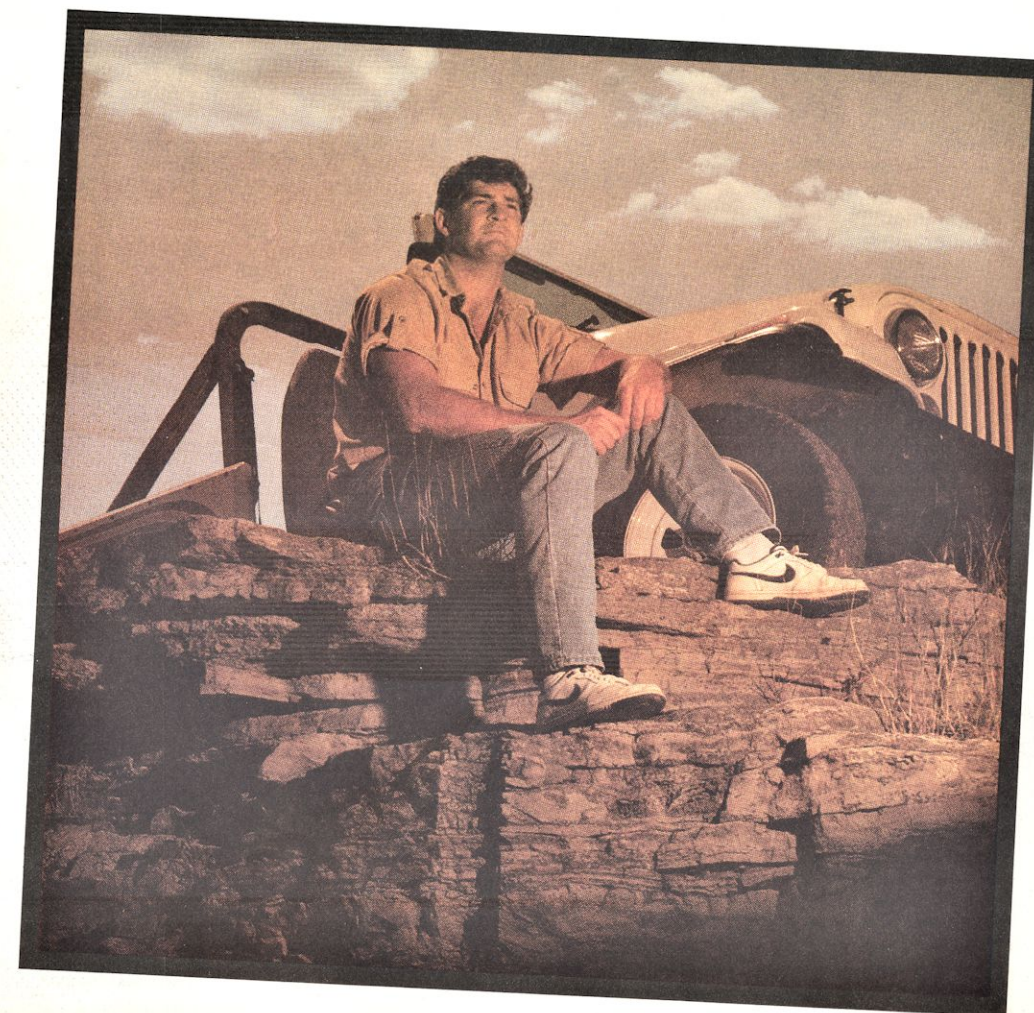
The real problem with Noriega was that, as a servant of the U.S., he didn't know how to be servile enough. After double-crossing his CIA paymasters he "thumbed his nose" at the Americans. He refused to openly support U.S. policies in Central America. In December 1985, Admiral John Poindexter travelled to Panama, urging Noriega to take part in the training of Nicaraguan Contras. Noriega refused. In 1986, Oliver North sought Noriega's help in framing the Sandinistas in a plan which sought to plant a shipload of Soviet weaponry in El Salvador to be "found" and "traced" to Nicaragua. Again, Noriega refused.

The present regime in Panama is now an illegitimate one. Coming to power on a wave of popular mobilization is one thing; coming to power on the shoulders of the 82nd Airborne Division is quite another. Endara never won any free elections, with the May 1989 elections being subject to a flood of \$10

million from the CIA (as Bush publicly revealed last summer). This money not only bought the votes of many poor people, but corrupted the entire electoral process right up to Noriega's officials. Endara is said to have won on the basis of counts of exit polls — all conducted by anti-Noriega characters. Endara represents the pro-U.S. upper classes in complete opposition to the poor and Afro-Panamanians. When he called a curfew, the masses instead took to looting the stores of Endara's wealthy supporters.

Ultimately Noriegas can come and go by the dozen; the Panamanians' struggles to achieve sovereign independence and the total decolonization of their territory will never cease under the present circumstances and will always continue, relentlessly, ever going forward to a new and proud destiny.

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Barbara Henry's illustration, depicts the struggle between Uncle Sam and General Manuel Noriega.