
1989: Invasion of Panama

Context

The Panama Canal has dominated Panama's history. U.S. military invasions and interventions occurred in 1895, 1901-1903, 1908, 1912, 1918-1920, 1925, 1950, 1958, 1964 and 1989.⁹⁶ In November 1903, U.S. troops ensured Panama's secession from Colombia. Within days, a treaty gave the U.S. permanent and exclusive control of the canal.⁹⁷

Panama's former military leader, Manuel Noriega, was recruited by U.S. military intelligence in 1959, attended the U.S. Army School of the Americas in 1967 and led Panama's military intelligence the next year. By 1975, the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency knew of his drug dealing. Noriega met, then-CIA Director, George Bush in 1976.⁹⁸

In 1977, Presidents Jimmy Carter and Omar Torrijos, signed a treaty to return the canal to Panamanian control in 1999. However, other Americans worked to undermine the treaty using "diplomatic...and political pressure, through to economic aggression and military invasion."⁹⁹

In the early-1980s, Noriega's drug smuggling helped fund the contras in Nicaragua. He took control of Panama's National Guard in 1983 and helped rig elections in 1984. Noriega eventually fell out of U.S. favour, and so they indicted him for drug crimes in 1988.¹⁰⁰

On April 14, 1988, Reagan invoked "war powers" against Panama. In May, the Assistant Defense Secretary told the Senate: "I don't think anyone has totally discarded the use of force."¹⁰¹

Pretext Incident

On December 16, 1989, the U.S. corporate media reported on an "unprovoked attack on a U.S. soldier who did not return fire."¹⁰² The soldier was killed when driving "through a military roadblock near a sensitive military area."¹⁰³ Panama's government said "U.S. officers... fired at a military headquarters, wounding a soldier and... a 1-year-old girl. A wounded Panamanian soldier... confirmed this account to U.S. reporters."¹⁰⁴ The U.S. soldiers said they would "frequently hassle Panama's forces at roadblocks....claimed that they were lost, yelled obscenities at the Panamanian soldiers, and quickly sped off."¹⁰⁵ The wife of a U.S. officer was reportedly arrested and beaten.

Follow Up

George Bush called the Panamanian military's alleged attack on U.S. soldiers an "enormous outrage"¹⁰⁶ and said he "would not stand by while American womanhood is threatened."¹⁰⁷ Noam Chomsky has questioned why Bush "stood by" when a U.S. nun was kidnapped and sexually abused

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by police in the U.S.-backed military dictatorship of Guatemalan only weeks prior to the pretext incident in Panama. Chomsky also pointed out that two U.S. nuns were killed by U.S.-backed contras in Nicaragua on January 1, 1990, and that a U.S. nun was wounded by gunmen in U.S.-backed El Salvador around the same time.¹⁰⁸

As the pretext evolved, the media demonized Noriega and focused on the need to arrest him for drug smuggling. The media turned the "'Noriega' issue into an accepted justification for the invasion.... Colonel Eduardo Herrera, ex-Director of [Panama's] 'Public Forces,'...said: "If the real interest of the U.S. was to capture Noriega, they could have done so on numerous occasions. [They] had all his movements completely controlled."¹⁰⁹

On December 20, 1989, "Operation Just Cause" began. More than 4,000 were killed. U.S. crimes included indiscriminate attacks, extrajudicial executions, arbitrary detentions, destruction of property (like leveling the Chorrillo neighbourhood), use of prohibited weapons, erasing evidence and the use of mass burials.¹¹⁰

A U.S.-friendly president, Guillermo Endara, was soon sworn in on a U.S. military base in Panama.

Real Reasons

A right-wing, U.S. think tank stated in 1988 that: "once [Panama] is controlled by a democratic regime.... discussions should begin with respect to a realistic defense of the Canal after...2000. These discussions should include the maintenance, by the U.S., of a limited number of military installations in Panama...to maintain adequate projection of force in the western hemisphere."¹¹¹

The invasion of Panama also:

- rectified "Bush's 'wimpy' foreign relations image,"
- gave a "spectacular show of U.S. military might in the final months before the Nicaraguan elections, hinting... that they might want to vote for the 'right' candidate,"
- signalled "that the U.S....[would] intervene militarily where the control of illegal drugs was ostensibly at stake,"
- "demonstrated the new U.S. willingness to assume active, interventionist leadership of the 'new world order' in the post-Cold War period,"¹¹²
- led to the abrogation of the Carter-Torrijos Treaty and the complete dismantling of Panama's military, and
- allowed the U.S. to test new weapons systems, such as the brand new B-2 bomber (worth U.S.\$2.2 billion).

Footnotes:

96. Zoltan Grossman, "One Hundred Years of Intervention," 2001.
97. Commission for Defence of Human Rights in Latin America (CODEHUCA), *This is the Just Cause*, 1990, p.115.
98. Richard Sanders, "Manuel Noriega," *Press for Conversion!*, Dec. 2000.
99. CODEHUCA, pp.117, 108
100. Sanders.

101. CODEHUCA, p.108
102. Richard K. Moore, "The Police State Conspiracy an Indictment," *New Dawn*, Jan.-Dec. 1998.
103. Noam Chomsky, "Operation Just Cause: the Pretexts," *Deterring Democracy*, 1992.
104. Chomsky.
105. Jim Huck, *The Anointed One: The Rise of George W. Bush*.

106. Alex Safian, *Myth of Excessive Force*, Nov.9, 2000.
107. Chomsky.
108. Chomsky.
109. CODEHUCA, p.106.
110. CODEHUCA, *passim*.
111. "Panama: Test for U.S.-Latin American Foreign Relations," *Interhemispheric Resource Center*, May 1995.
112. FOR.

Provoking the Pretext

By Mark Cook, a freelance writer reporting on Latin America for two decades, and Jeff Cohen, founder and director of the media watch group, Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting.

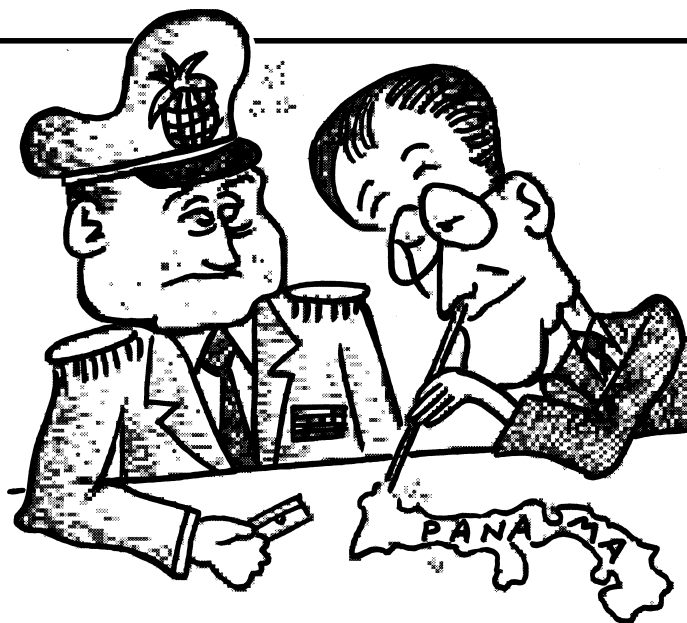
The U.S. media showed little curiosity about the December 16 confrontation that led to the death of a U.S. Marine and the injury of another when they tried to run a roadblock in front of the Panamanian Defense Forces headquarters. The officers were supposedly “lost.”

The Panamanian version of the event was that the U.S. soldiers, upon being discovered, opened fire – injuring three civilians, including a child – and then tried to run the roadblock. This version was largely ignored by U.S. journalists even after the shooting two days later of a Panamanian corporal who “signaled a U.S. serviceman to stop,” according to the administration. “The U.S. serviceman felt threatened,” the administration claimed, after admitting that its earlier story, that the Panamanian had pulled his gun, was false (*New York Times*, December 19, 1989).

As for the claim that a U.S. officer had been roughly interrogated and his wife had been sexually threatened, the administration provided no supporting evidence (*New York Times*, *op cit.*; *Newsday*, December 19, 1989). Since the Marine’s death and the interrogation were repeatedly invoked to justify the invasion, the lack of press scrutiny of these claims is stunning.

For months, U.S. forces had tried to provoke confrontations as a pretext for an attack. In response to an August 11 incident, Panamanian Foreign Minister Jorge Ritter asked that a UN peacekeeping force be dispatched to Panama to prevent such encounters. The U.S. press largely ignored his call (*El Diario/La Prensa*, August 13, 1989).

Source: Excerpt, “The Media Goes to War: How Television Sold the Panama Invasion,” *Extra!*, January-February 1990. <www.chss.montclair.edu/english/furr/panamainv.html>



Drugs, Noriega and Bush Sr.

By Jim Huck, a college teacher of political science, U.S. history and international relations for 30 years.

As CIA director [1976-1977], George Bush kept Manuel Noriega on the CIA payroll and increased his annual take to \$110,000. When Bush was replaced by Stansfield Turner in 1977, Noriega was dropped from the CIA payroll. In order to push for the Panama Canal Treaty, Carter ignored Noriega’s drug trafficking. In 1981, President Reagan put Noriega back on the CIA payroll with an annual salary of \$185,000. The CIA first deposited Noriega’s salary in the Bank for Credit and Commerce International, which later pled guilty to money laundering for drug traffickers.

While working for the CIA in the 1980s, Noriega charged \$100,000-\$200,000 per plane to use Panama as a conduit in running drugs from Colombia to the U.S. The Reagan-Bush administration ignored this.

In 1985, CIA director Bill Casey asked Noriega for the use of Panamanian military bases to train Contra troops. Noriega declined. National Security Council official, Lt. Col. Oliver North tried again to convince him. He asked Noriega for logistical support in striking Nicaraguan economic targets such as oil refineries and communication systems. He requested that Panama’s facilities be used to train commandos. North offered a front company, to store Con-

tra weapons, that was used by Syrian arms/drug dealer Manzer al-Kasser who worked with Colombia’s Medellin cartel. However, Noriega still refused.

As a result, the Bush administration in the late 1980s began drumming up anti-Noriega sentiment by leaking information that he was heavily involved in drug trafficking.

In 1989, Bush looked around for other excuses to use as a pretext to invade Panama. He claimed that the U.S. was in danger of losing the canal. In December 1989, it was revealed that four U.S. Army soldiers, known as the “Hard Chargers,” drove through a Panama City roadblock controlled by Panamanian soldiers. The Hard Chargers frequently hassled Panama’s forces at roadblocks. On one occasion, Panamanian soldiers opened fire on U.S. soldiers who refused to stop, and a U.S. lieutenant was killed. The Pentagon denied this had occurred. However, the other three U.S. soldiers confirmed that they were not lost (as they had claimed), and said they deliberately went to various checkpoints to hassle troops, swearing and making obscene gestures, and then speeding off.

Four days later, Bush called for the U.S. invasion and stated that the killing was the “trigger to the decision.” Along with this as justification for the American invasion, Bush stated that the U.S. must protect the canal.

Source: Excerpt, *The Anointed One: The Rise of George W. Bush*. <www.angelfire.com/ca3/jphuck/Book4.html>