

AMERICANS IN PANAMA:
A CENTURY OF OCCUPATION AND INVASION

A Thesis

by

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ABSTRACT

Most scholarly works on Operation Just Cause, the code name for the 1989 invasion of Panama by the United States, have focused on the capture of General Manuel Noriega. This focus ignores the complexity of U.S.-Panamanian relations and the long history of American citizens in Panama, however, and reinforces a puppet narrative.

This thesis argues instead that the primary motive for Operation Just Cause was to protect the 35,500 American citizens at risk in Panama. By discounting this population, previous works offer limited insights into the invasion. Fully accounting for this large and vulnerable population makes clear that the use of military force represented a prudent response to a very real threat. The removal of Noriega was merely the means to an end: the protection of American citizens. Political, diplomatic, and economic pressure did not convince Noriega, who was never a “puppet,” to step down. In fact, they worsened the situation for Americans and compelled the Bush Administration to use the only remaining option: military force.

DEDICATION

"I love deadlines. I like the whooshing sound they make as they fly by."

- Douglas Adams

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Early on the morning of 20 December 1989, 26,000 American soldiers intervened in Panama under the code-name Operation Just Cause. It was the largest military operation by the United States since the Vietnam War and quickly overwhelmed the Panamanian Defense Forces. This military action appeared, to many, to follow a familiar pattern of U.S. direct military intervention in the Western Hemisphere. Under the pretext of establishing order, protecting American lives, or capturing a so-called wrongdoer, the United States conducted forty interventions between 1865 and 1930.¹ During the Cold War the United States intervened nine times, but only used military force in the Dominican Republic, Grenada, and Panama.²

In the case of Operation Just Cause, the use of force appeared solely for the removal of General Manuel Noriega, the “Maximum Leader” and a former U.S. ally. Critics both in the United States and abroad condemned the action as an unjustified invasion. In a *Washington Post* editorial on 16 January 1990, Senator George McGovern

¹ Alan McPherson *The Invaded: How Latin Americans and Their Allies Fought and Ended U.S. Occupations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014). In *Confronting the American Dream: Nicaragua Under U.S. Imperial Rule* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005) Michel Gobat states there were 43 interventions. In *Empire's Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006) Greg Gardin considered there to be 6,000 interventions based on the U.S. Navy's recording of naval warships sent to Latin America between 1865 and 1935. These visits were primarily ports of call and did not involve violence.

² Russell Crandell, *Gunboat Democracy: U.S. Interventions in the Dominican Republic, Grenada, and Panama* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006), 2.

(D-SD) called it “a Betrayal of American Principles.” He compared it with “Grenada in 1983 and a dozen other twentieth-century American invasions of defenseless little countries to the south of us.”³ McGovern’s criticism portrayed Operation Just Cause as a misuse of American force against a country that did not present a legitimate threat. It seemed to signal a return of the big stick foreign policy of President Theodore Roosevelt meant to reinforce U.S. hegemony over the hemisphere, now that the Cold War was ending and the United States became the sole super power.

In contrast, President George H. W. Bush justified the invasion as a means “to safeguard the lives of Americans, to defend democracy in Panama, to combat drug trafficking, and to protect the integrity of the Panama Canal Treaty.”⁴ The first of these reasons, the threat to American citizens, is often dismissed as a flimsy excuse.⁵ Six years earlier, President Ronald Reagan had justified a military intervention into Grenada because, “There were then about 1,000 of our citizens on Grenada” and he feared “that they'd be harmed or held as hostages.”⁶ But to the President’s embarrassment, when

³ George McGovern, “A Betrayal of American Principles,” *Washington Post*, 16 January 1989.

⁴ George H. W. Bush, “Address to the Nation on Panama” (televised address, Washington D.C., 20 December 1989) <<http://millercenter.org/president/speeches/detail/3422>> accessed 25 November 2011.

⁵ See Louis Fischer, *Presidential War Power*, 3rd ed. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2013); John Quigley, “The Legality of the United States Invasion of Panama,” *Yale Journal of International Law* 15, (Summer 1990), 281-297; Max Hilaire, *International Law and the United States Military Intervention in the Western Hemisphere* (The Hague: Kluwer Law International, 1997).

U.S. Marines landed on the beaches, sunbathing Americans welcomed them, unaware of the supposed danger.⁷ Consequently, when President Bush referenced safeguarding American lives, critics challenged his rationale and argued that Panama represented yet another invasion launched under false pretenses.⁸

This thesis argues the opposite. The primary purpose for Operation Just Cause was indeed to protect 35,500 American citizens at risk in Panama. By discounting the dangers to this population, previous works offered limited insights into the invasion and U.S.-Panamanian relations. American citizens had been travelling to Panama since the 1850s and a large-scale permanent population settled there in 1903. Fully accounting for

⁶ Address to the Nation on Events in Lebanon and Grenada October 27, 1983 <<https://reaganlibrary.archives.gov/archives/speeches/1983/102783b.htm>> accessed 28 April 2017.

⁷ Robert D. McFadden, "From Rescued Students, Gratitude and Praise" *New York Times* October 28, 1983. The story of sunbathing students appears apocryphal, but interviews with American students and faculty in the days following the invasion recounted how they did not feel threatened. Kenneth Dam, Eugenia Charles, Paul Tsongas, Charles Modica, Bobby Inman, Sally Shelton, Seymour Weiss, interviewed by Ted Koppel, Nightline, ABC, October 25, 1983, <<https://tvnews.vanderbilt.edu/broadcasts/656934>> accessed 17 December 2015; Michael T. Kaufman, "50 Marines Land At Barbados Field," *New York Times*, October 25, 1983; John T. McQuiston, "School's Chancellor Says Invasion Was Not Necessary To Save Lives," *New York Times*, October 26, 1983; Albert J. Parisi, "Students Reflect On Grenada Invasion," *New York Times*, November 6, 1983.

⁸ The criticisms appeared in Malcolm McConnell, *Just Cause: The Real Story of America's High-Tech Invasion of Panama* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1991); The Independent Commission of Inquiry on the U.S. Invasion of Panama, *The U.S. Invasion of Panama: The Truth Behind Operational 'Just Cause'* (New York: South End Press, 1999); Cindy Jaquith, Don Rojas, Nils Castro, and Fidel Castro, *Panama: The Truth About the U.S. Invasion* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1990); Phillip E. Wheaton, *Panama Invaded: Imperial Occupation Versus the Struggle for Sovereignty* (Trenton, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1993).

this large and vulnerable population makes clear that the use of military force represented a prudent response to a very real threat. U.S. policymakers had used numerous instruments of power to compel Noriega to retire. Economic sanctions had failed, and only brought hardship on the Panamanian people and intensified their anger against American citizens.⁹ Democratic elections held in May 1989 seemed to offer a political solution, but Noriega overturned the results when his preferred candidate lost. Diplomatic pressure from the Organization of American States proved ineffective. Finally, a domestic military coup in October 1989 failed to dislodge Noriega due to poor planning by the plotters and a lack of U.S. support. The harassment of American citizens intensified with each policy failure. A direct intervention by the United States military, which the administration sought to avoid, appeared the only remaining course of action.¹⁰

The need for a direct military intervention came on 16 December 1989 when Noriega's soldiers killed an American service member, wounded another, and detained a third along with his civilian wife. While in detention the soldiers beat the husband and

⁹ Lawrence A. Yates, *The U.S. Military Intervention in Panama: Origins, Planning, and Crisis Management, June 1987 – December 1989* (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, United States Army, 2008), 42.

¹⁰ CIA report, "The Harassment of US Personnel in Panama: Patterns and Objectives" Directorate of Intelligence, March 13, 1989, Panama Files, Panama [9], OA/ID# CF00741-022, National Security Council, Nicholas Rostow Files, Bush Presidential Records, George Bush Presidential Library. In the report the CIA warned that the Noriega Regime had engaged in a campaign of harassment against Americans in Panama as a way of pressuring Washington to limit economic sanctions and avoid using military force, because of the potential of Americans being taken as hostages.

sexually assaulted the wife. These attacks clearly proved that American citizens were in great danger. Critics condemned the Bush Administration for invading a foreign country and seizing the head of state after a single American death. However, one must take into account that the safety of the 35,500 American citizens living in Panama could not be guaranteed. President Bush responded swiftly to remove Noriega by launching Operation Just Cause.

The emphasis in the literature on the removal of Noriega reflects a trend in the historical literature on U.S.-Latin American relations during the Cold War. Part of a generational divide, works by scholars who lived through the Cold War take the view that the United States asserted political, economic and social domination over the Western Hemisphere. These works present the United States as the aggressor. Latin American nations are victims and the rulers were mere “puppets.”¹¹ Challenging the Cold War narrative is Max Paul Friedman. In his historiographic essay he critiqued the way historians have written about U.S.-Latin American relations because it is “representative of an approach that ascribes all agency to U.S. policy-makers, even as it

¹¹ Lars Schoultz *Beneath the United States: A History of U. S. Policy Toward Latin America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1998), 253. See also Peter H. Smith, *Talons of the Eagle: Latin America, the United States, and the World*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Eduardo Galeano, *Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1997).

criticizes their actions.”¹² Instead, he calls for historians to “retire the puppets” by “restoring Latin America to the equation in terms of both agency and archives.”¹³

Despite the call to “retire the puppets,” there has been resistance. Stephen Rabe concedes, “The United States was not omnipotent and Latin American leaders were not mere puppets,” but he warns “historians can go too far in denying the realities of the global disruption of power or the active U.S. role in fermenting chaos in the region during the Cold War.”¹⁴ In contrast and representative of the newer generation of historians is Hal Brands. He writes that “many scholars . . . interpret the Cold War as a ‘savage crusade,’ conducted by the United States and local reactionaries that broke popular movements, ravaged the Left, and eviscerated Latin American democracy.” He argues this “savage crusade” view is too reductionist and instead Latin America saw a complex struggle between the Right and Left during the Cold War. The Left advocated for a revolutionary overthrow of established governments to bring about radical economic and political change. The Right, in contrast, preferred conservative totalitarian rule through militarism. The weak democratic governments in Latin America could not survive these opposed political forces. The Cold War “fused together

¹² Max Paul Friedman, “Retiring the Puppets, Bringing Latin America Back In: Recent Scholarship on United States-Latin American Relations,” *Diplomatic History* 27: no. 5 (November 2003), 624.

¹³ Friedman, “Retiring the Puppets, Bringing Latin America Back In,” 636.

¹⁴ Stephen G. Rabe, *The Killing Zone: The United States Wages Cold War In Latin America*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), xl.

long-running clashes over social, political, and economic arrangements” and “U.S. power” came into conflict with “Latin American nationalism.”¹⁵

While the debate over the puppet narrative continues, one topic regarding U.S.-Latin American relations during the Cold War that remains overlooked is direct military interventions by the United States. The majority of historians make no distinction and lump direct military interventions with all other interventions, from supporting a coup to economic pressure. For instance, Rabe and Brands both group the three Cold War military interventions into a broad generalized category of intervention. They offer no distinction for the use of the United States military in Latin America.

This generalization can be seen in Michael Grow’s work, *U.S. Presidents and Latin American Interventions: Pursuing Regime Change in the Cold War*. He offers “a fresh interpretation of the root cause of U.S. interventionism” by arguing that each intervention occurred for different motives on the part of the United States. He looks at Guatemala in 1954, Cuba in 1961, British Guiana in 1963, the Dominican Republic in 1965, Chile in 1970, Nicaragua in 1981, Grenada in 1983 and finally Panama in 1989. Grow dismisses the previous argument that the United States intervened for either security or economic concerns and instead argues for “three entirely different factors — U.S. international credibility, U.S. domestic politics, and lobbying by Latin American

¹⁵ Hal Brands, *Latin America's Cold War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 7.

and Caribbean political actors.”¹⁶ Grow reconsiders the motives of the United States, and the role of Latin Americans in supporting interventions. However, he makes no distinction between interventions. The training of Cuban exiles for the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion, the 1965 invasion of the Dominican Republic by U.S. Marines, and U.S. support for the 1973 coup in Chile are presented as part of a general trend of Cold War intervention. Grow at least offers some analysis on direct U.S. military interventions, unlike other scholars. His work complicates the standard narrative of the United States merely asserting its will on Latin America by making room for a Latin American perspective.

In contrast, Russell Crandall distinguishes between interventions and focuses solely on the direct use of the U.S. military. He argues that the direct military interventions in the Dominican Republic, Grenada, and Panama were conducted for legitimate national securities concerns.¹⁷ He questions whether the United States needed to intervene and says that in all three cases U.S. involvement was not required. He concludes, however, that by using its military, the United States put institutions in place that led to democratic government. Using statistics such as the Freedom House’s ranking, Crandall shows that in 2006 the three nations were ranked as free and functioning democracies. Crandall employs the term “Gunboat Democracy” as a play on Gunboat Diplomacy and argues “democracy remained strongest where the United States

¹⁶ Michael Grow, *U.S. Presidents and Latin American Interventions: Pursuing Regime Change in the Cold War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008), xi.

¹⁷ Crandell, *Gunboat Democracy*, 22.

intervened most” i.e. directly using its military. He points out that the book does not “argue that American intervention...was the sole factor that led to stronger democracies.” Instead he calls for greater study of the countries after the intervention to see why these three cases ended up as stable democracies.¹⁸

Scholarly works on the individual interventions remain limited. There have been two historical monographs on the 1965 Dominican invasion, but both support the puppet narrative.¹⁹ There are a few operational histories on Grenada, but no scholarly works.²⁰ While there have been works on Panama, most reinforce the puppet narrative and do not consider the larger historical context of U.S.-Panamanian relations. The long declassification process of U.S. government documents has limited works on Panama and Grenada. Many primary sources have only recently been declassified.

A few operational histories on Operation Just Cause have been written, but these are narratives of military action.²¹ Complementing them are articles in military journals

¹⁸ Ibid., 227. Rabe calls the term fatuous though he does not say why nor does he engage Crandall’s argument.

¹⁹ See Piero Gleijeses, *The Dominican Crisis: The 1965 Constitutionalist Revolt and American Intervention* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978) and Eirc Thomas Chester, *Rag-tags, Scum Riff Raff and Commies: The U.S. Intervention in the Dominican Republic, 1965-1966* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001).

²⁰ Ronald H. Cole, *Operation Urgent Fury Grenada* (Washington, D.C.: Joint History Office, Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2013).

²¹ Several works include Ronald H. Cole, *Operation Just Cause: The Planning and Execution of Joint Operations in Panama, February 1988-January 1990* (Washington, D.C.: Joint History Office, Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1995); Dolores de Mena, *Operation Just Cause, Promote Liberty Supplement, Annual Command History, Fiscal Year* (Quarry Heights PM, SOUTHCOM Historian’s office,

that analyze planning and tactical execution of military units during the invasion. But, the lessons the U.S. military has drawn from Operation Just Cause focus on the capture of Noriega. They do not consider the large presence of American citizens nor any strategic lessons.²²

In addition to military writers, there were some works by journalists immediately after the invasion. Most are concerned with Noriega and the events leading to the invasion.²³ Political scientists and legal scholars have written on the invasion, but they

1993); Delores de Mena, *Soldiering in Panama* (Fort Clayton, Panama: History Office, U.S. Army South, 1997); Nicholas E Reynolds, *Just Cause: Marine Operations in Panama 1988-1990* (History and Museums Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps. Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1996).

²² Examples of these articles include “Ministry in Combat Operations,” *Military Chaplains' Review*, Summer 1990; Daniel K. Morgan, “Operation Just Cause: A Medical Logistics Perspective,” *Air Force Journal of Logistics* 14 (Summer 1990); Kevin H. Govern, “Sorting the Wolves From the Sheep: Enemy Prisoner of War Operations during Operation Just Cause.” *Military Police* 4 (October 2004); Kevin J. Hammond, and Frank Sherman, “Sheridans in Panama.” *Armor* 99 (March-April 1990); Joseph E. DeFrancisco, “Bayonet Artillery in Operation Just Cause,” *Field Artillery Journal* (June 1990).

²³ See Frederick Kempe. *Divorcing the Dictator* (New York: Putnam's Sons, 1990); John Dinges, *Our Man in Panama* (New York: Random House, 1991); Richard M. Koster, *In the Time of Tyrants* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991). The most recent works to discuss Panama include David Harris, *Shooting The Moon: The True Story Of An American Manhunt Unlike Any Other, Ever* (Boston: Little, Brown, 2001) and Benjamin Runkle, *Wanted Dead Or Alive: Manhunts from Geronimo to Bin Laden* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2011). Both focus solely on capturing Noeirga. Harris offers a historical narrative of the indictment and the maneuvering that went into preparing it. Runkle in contrast looks at Panama solely being about capturing Noriega and sees the invasion as part a long U.S. history of capturing individuals. For a limited Panamanian perspective see Godfrey Harris and Guillermo de St. Malo A. *The Panamanian Problem: How the Reagan and Bush Administrations Dealt with the Noriega Regime* (Los Angeles: The Americas Group, 1993) and Juan B. Sosa, *In Defiance: The Battle Against General Noriega Fought from Panama's Embassy in*

offer little historical analysis and are concerned with legal justifications for military action.²⁴ Louis Fischer, for instance, argues that the stated reasons for the invasion were flawed. He sees the protection of American citizens as a weak excuse that would allow the United States to intervene anywhere it desires.²⁵ Most legal scholars agree with Fischer's argument and portray Operation Just Cause as a violation of international norms. Max Hillare says military action in Panama violated both the United Nations and the Organization of American States Charters.²⁶ Yet legal scholars, citing the same legal principles argue that Operation Just Cause was a lawful response and the United States acted according to historical norms. Anthony D'Amato does not see the intervention as a violation of international law arguing that it did not violate the UN or OAS charter and by intervening in support of democracy it established a new international norm.²⁷

Washington (Washington, D.C.: The Francis Press, 1999); Luis Murrillo *The Noriega Mess: The Drugs, the Canal, and Why America Invaded* (Berkeley, California: Video Books, 1995). All of these works focus on Noriega and his removal from power.

²⁴ Jane Kellett Cramer, "'Just Cause' or Just Politics: U.S. Panama Invasion and Standardizing Qualitative Tests for Diversionary War," *Armed Forces & Society* 32 (January 2006), 178-201.

²⁵ Fischer, *Presidential War Powers*, 86. Other works that look at the justifications for the invasion of Panama include Jane Kellett Cramer "'Just Cause' or Just Politics: U.S. Panama Invasion and Standardizing Qualitative Tests for Diversionary War" *Armed Forces & Society* 32 (January 2006) 178-201.

²⁶ Max Hilaire, *International Law and the United States Military Intervention in the Western Hemisphere* (The Hague: Kluwer Law International, 1997).

²⁷ Anthony D'Amato, "*The Invasion of Panama Was A Lawful Response to Tyranny*," *American Journal of International Law* 84, (1990), 524.

Lawrence Yates has written the only historical work on Operation Just Cause. He shows how Panama had been a growing problem for the United States during the late 1980s. His study considers the population of American citizens in Panama and places the intervention into a larger context of U.S.-Panamanian relations.²⁸ While he discusses the large population of Americans, he limits his work to the late 1980s. He has also written a second volume concerned with the invasion, but this work is an operational history.²⁹

Operation Just Cause is a topic that would benefit from “retiring the puppets” by considering the larger historical relations between the United States and Panama, and looking beyond the capture of Noriega. New scholarship that challenges the puppet narrative has been published but these works do not take into account when the United States military became directly involved in the Western Hemisphere. This thesis studies Operation Just Cause by connecting the invasion with one hundred and fifty years of U.S.-Panamanian relations. Unlike previous works, it avoids focusing solely on Noriega, which otherwise supports a “puppet” narrative.

To that end this thesis is structured in four chapters. Chapter II looks at how U.S. goals in Panama evolved over time. It begins with California’s Gold Rush, followed by the construction of the trans-isthmus railroad, and concludes with the Panama Canal.

²⁸ Yates *The U.S. Military Intervention in Panama*, 15.

²⁹ Lawrence A. Yates, *The U.S. Military Intervention in Panama: Operation Just Cause, December 1989-January 1990* (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, United States Army, 2014).

Chapter III examines the establishment of the Canal Zone and the building tensions between long-term American residents, so-called “Zonians,” and Panamanians. It examines steps Panamanians took to gain control of the Canal and how U.S. policy slowly accommodated them. Chapter IV focuses on the deteriorating relations between the United States and Panama during the 1980s and Noriega’s rise as the de facto head of state. This chapter shows how the United States attempted to use economic and political pressure to remove Noriega from power, but failed. A “puppet” narrative would suggest that Noriega could be manipulated or easily replaced by his puppet-master, yet facts show that this was not the case. Instead he responded to American pressure by harassing and threatening American citizens. Chapter V analyzes how the overt threat to American citizens led to a direct military intervention. The thesis concludes with a brief discussion of the legacy of the United States in Panama and its slow departure during the ten years that followed.

CHAPTER II

AMERICANS IN THE ISTHMUS

A dispute arose during the 2008 U.S. Presidential election over the birthplace of one of the candidates. Opponents accused him of being born in a foreign country and thus ineligible to become President. Republican nominee John McCain might have become the first U.S. President born in a foreign country. His birthplace was Coco Solo Naval Air Station in the Panama Canal Zone.¹ The controversy was a curious footnote to the history of the Canal Zone, an unincorporated American territory straddling the Panama Canal and subject to American sovereignty for over seventy years. Like the other 8,123 Americans born in the Canal Zone, McCain was considered a natural born American citizen and thus eligible for the Presidency.² This population of American citizens, equivalent to a small city or large university, dated to the 1850s when the discovery of gold in California first led fortune hunters to the Isthmus, seeking quick transit to the Gold Rush. It was the first time, but not the last, that Americans surged into Panama.³

¹ Carl Hulse, "McCain's Canal Zone Birth Prompts Queries About Whether That Rules Him Out," *New York Times*, February 28, 2008.

² Adam Liptak, "A Hint of New Life to a McCain Birth Issue," *New York Times*, July 11, 2008.

³ Michael L. Conniff, *Panama and the United States*, 3rd ed. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012), 14-15.

U.S. citizens trekked along well-worn Spanish colonial trails. Since the sixteenth Century defeat of the Incas, silver from Peru had journeyed to the Isthmus of Panama where mule trains carried it overland to waiting ships.⁴ From there, the silver sailed to Havana and then Seville on the annual Spanish treasure fleet.⁵ The economy grew marginally, but tropical disease and the harsh jungle environment killed men and destroyed materials, hampering settlement. Panama's location on the shortest overland route between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans made it a vital link in Spain's global empire and a strategic thoroughfare for colonial trade, until its importance of the isthmus declined with the depletion of Peruvian silver and the development of new overland routes to Buenos Aires.⁶ The centrality of the Isthmus had faded by 1808, when the Latin American wars for independence began.⁷ Yet it remained an important thoroughfare between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans for travelers.

Panama played little direct role in the wars of independence due to its small and scattered population. The region remained loyal to Spain, until 1821, when elites bribed the Spanish garrisons to abandon their posts and sail to Cuba. With independence

⁴ Carl Ortwin Sauer, *The Early Spanish Main*, 4th ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 43.

⁵ Alejandro de la Fuente, *Havana and the Atlantic in the Sixteenth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 106.

⁶ Christopher Ward, *Imperial Panama: Commerce and Conflict in Isthmian America 1550-1800*, 2nd ed. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994), 33.

⁷ Steve J. Stern, *Peru's Indian Peoples and the Challenge of Spanish Conquest: Huamanga to 1640*, 2nd ed. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), 113.

secured, Panamanians swore allegiance to Gran Colombia and Simon Bolivar.⁸ Gran Colombia broke apart into Colombia, Ecuador, and Venezuela in 1830, but Panama remained part of Colombia until 1903. During that time both Colombian and Panamanian leaders realized that as the pivot between the Americas, Panama could influence trade in the region and around the globe. Limited resources and repeated depressions kept the region from utilizing its status as a trade route until 1849, when American citizens began arriving.⁹

News spread quickly of the discovery of gold in California in 1848. Fortune seekers raced to California from all over the world.¹⁰ Those coming from Europe and the Eastern United States, if they could afford it, chose the Panamanian route. It took six weeks and was the fastest.¹¹ Most prospectors arrived first in the city of Chargés then journeyed across the Isthmus on river barges and mules. The Gold Rush brought thousands of travelers who spent money on transport, supplies and services, and injected capital into the Panamanian economy. American citizens resented the high cost of goods and services and complained that merchants overcharged them. Panamanians accused foreigners of vandalizing property and being prone to violence. Panamanian merchants

⁸ Peter Szok, *La Ultima Gaviota: Liberalism and Nostalgia in Early Twentieth-Century* (Westport, CT: Greenview Press, 2001), 17.

⁹ Alex Perez-Venero, *Before the Five Frontiers* (New York: Ams Pres Inc., 1977), 155.

¹⁰ Mary Hill, *Gold: the California Story* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 1.

¹¹ Aimes McGuiness, *Path of Empire: Panama and the California Gold Rush* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009), 31-32.

also directed their anger at foreigners who established businesses that directly competed with them.¹²

The interaction between American citizens and Panamanians increased during the construction of the trans-Isthmus railroad. Prior to the Gold Rush the United States saw the strategic value of the Isthmus of Panama and signed the Bidlack-Mallarino Treaty with Colombia in 1846, which granted the United States the right to construct a railroad across Panama. The treaty also granted the United States the right to intervene in Panama in order to defend American citizens and property. With a treaty in hand, the United States contracted a private company to build a railroad. The rail line divided profits between the Colombian government and the New York based investors. The large volume of trade crossing Panama during the Gold Rush reinforced the economic value of building a railroad. Colombian officials approved of the provision that allowed the United States military to intervene in Panama in order to protect American citizens with the stipulation that the United States helped assert Colombian sovereignty.¹³

The large presence of American citizens on the Isthmus provided an economic benefit to the government in Bogotá, which received half the profits from the railroad. Colombia also saved money by abdicating responsibility for security in Panama to the U.S. military and the railroad company.¹⁴ The railroad, however, failed to reinvigorate

¹² Perez-Venero, *Before the Five Frontiers*, 90-91.

¹³ Conniff, *Panama and the United States*, 18-20. The Bidlack-Mallarino Treaty was the only alliance treaty ratified by the United States in the 19th century.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 33.

the local Panamanian economy. Instead of resurrecting colonial era prosperity, revenues from the line bypassed the region. During construction Panamanian merchants benefited from selling supplies, and mule train drivers profited by ferrying them. But as the railroad neared completion, the need for goods and services from towns in the interior declined and eventually ceased. Only Panama City and Chargés, the main rail hubs on the Pacific and Atlantic side, saw continued economic growth from passengers transiting across the Isthmus.¹⁵ Panamanians felt exploited by travelers and saw little benefit from the railroad.

Resentment towards foreigners triggered a number of riots against Americans citizens. The largest occurred in 1856. The so-called Watermelon Riot erupted when an American prospector took a piece of watermelon from a Panamanian fruit vendor without paying.¹⁶ The vendor demanded payment, and guns and knives were drawn. The bloodshed spiraled into a riot in Panama City. The United States landed one hundred and sixty soldiers who established order in the city, but the riot claimed two Panamanians and fifteen American lives.¹⁷ The intervention during the Watermelon Riot was the first time the U.S. military deployed troops to quell hostility in Panama, but

¹⁵ Perez-Venero, *Before the Five Frontiers*, 91.

¹⁶ Mercedes Chen Daley, "The Watermelon Riot: Cultural Encounters in Panama," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 70, no. 1 (February 1990): 88.

¹⁷ Alan McPherson, *Yankee No! Anti-Americanism in U.S.-Latin American Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 79-80.

it would not be the last. By 1903 the United States had invoked the intervention powers granted under the Bidlack-Mallarino Treaty thirteen times to protect American citizens and property.¹⁸

The interventions focused on the major cities, with troops landing in Panama City seven times, Colón six times and twice in Boca del Toro.¹⁹ The majority of these incidents involved small forces of Marines landing to establish order or a U.S. naval ship firing a broadside to quell hostilities. Another incident of note occurred in 1885 when the United States, at the request of the Colombian government, used six warships to land over a thousand troops in Colón and Panama City to thwart a secession movement. The U.S. military occupied the cities for two days and then relinquished control to the Colombian military. This occurred despite the fact that General Rafael Aizpuru, the Panamanian general leading the rebellion, offered to place “the Sovereign State of Panama” under the protection of the United States. The American consul Thomas Adamson declined the offer.²⁰

Panamanians never fully accepted Colombia’s authority. At the same time that American citizens poured into the Isthmus, Panamanians were attempting become an independent nation. Besides the 1885 rebellion, Panama attempted to secede on three separate occasions. Each time, Colombia reasserted sovereignty with support from the

¹⁸ McGuinness, *Path of Empire*, 3.

¹⁹ E. Taylor Parks, *Colombia and the United States, 1765-1934* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1935), 219.

²⁰ Parks, *Colombia and the United States*, 229-230.

United States.²¹ Historian Alex Perez-Venero argues that this signaled to the region that the “Isthmians—and even the Colombians—could not forge the destiny of their own land without interference from the United States.”²² During the colonial period Panama was reliant on Spain. After independence, Colombia replaced Spain as Panama had few economic resources, aside from its geography. The one significant change was that the United States acted as a brake on Panamanian ambitions for autonomy. The United States sided with Colombia on the Isthmus—up until they failed to reach an agreement for a trans-isthmus canal.²³

Dreams of a canal across Central America dated back to the sixteenth century when Alvaro de Saaverdra, a distant cousin of Hernan Cortez, presented Charles V a scheme to dredge a canal.²⁴ For the next three hundred years, numerous impractical plans were proposed. But not until the late nineteenth century had technology advanced sufficiently to make a trans-Isthmusian canal a reality. A French company led by Ferdinand de Lesseps, the developer behind the Suez Canal, made the first serious attempt. Yet tropical disease and the logistical challenges of undertaking a massive

²¹ Enrique Gaviria Lievano, *Historia de Panama y su Separacion de Colombia* (Santa Fe de Bogota, Colombia: Editorial Temis S.A., 1996), 4.

²² Alex Perez-Venero, *Before the Five Frontiers*, 156.

²³ Gaviria Lievano, *Historia de Panama y su Separacion de Colombia*, 4.

²⁴ David McCullough, *Paths Between the Seas: The Creation of the Panama Canal, 1870-1914* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1977), 27.

construction project in the jungles of Central America defeated the project.²⁵ The failure of the French effort demonstrated the complexity of attempting a large-scale engineering project in the jungles of Central America.²⁶ Despite these challenges, however, the United States viewed an interoceanic canal as a strategic necessity worth any risk.

Previous plans for a canal in Central America focused entirely on economics. Colombia and Panama both recognized the geographic importance of the Isthmus and saw a transoceanic canal as the means to develop the region.²⁷ Economic motives drove Panama and Colombia. For the United States, an inter-oceanic canal represented a strategic necessity. Development of the west coast during the later half of the nineteenth century and U.S. expansion into the Pacific after 1898 forced the United States to defend two large coastlines. Naval theorist Alfred Thayer Mahan had warned that the “exclusion of direct European political control from the Isthmus of Panama is as really [sic] a matter of national defence as is the protection of New York Harbor.” Mahan advocated the development of an inter-oceanic canal to provide quick passage for U.S. naval vessels between the Atlantic and Pacific.²⁸ He cited the 1898 Spanish-American

²⁵ Matthew Parker, *Panama Fever: The Epic Story of the Building of the Panama Canal* (New York: Anchor Books, 2009), 45.

²⁶ Michael LaRosa and Germán R. Mejía ed. *The United States Discovers Panama: the Writings of Soldiers, Scholars, Scientists, and Scoundrels, 1850-1905* (Lanham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 159.

²⁷ Gaviria Lievano, *Historia de Panama y su Separacion de Colombia*, 4.

²⁸ Alfred Thayer Mahan, *Lessons of the War with Spain* (Boston: Little Brown, 1899), 298.

war to prove the need. The battleship USS *Oregon* took sixty-six days to journey from the Pacific coast of the United States around South America to join the Atlantic fleet.²⁹ The war only lasted 180 days.³⁰ A trans-oceanic canal would have reduced transit between the two oceans by half. The United States needed a two-ocean navy. The most cost-effective way to acquire such a capacity navy was not by laying more keels, but by digging a canal.

Before digging a canal, the administration of Theodore Roosevelt entered into negotiations with the Colombian government in early 1902. U.S. Secretary of State John Hay and the Secretary of the Colombian Legation Tomas Herrán negotiated in Washington, D.C., and signed the Hay-Herrán Treaty on 22 January 1903. The treaty required the United States to pay Colombia a lump sum of \$10 million in gold and an annuity of \$250,000 for the next 100 years. In return, the United States gained control of a six-mile wide territory to build a canal. Colombia retained sovereignty over this territory. The treaty also required Colombia to provide protection for the Canal and, if it failed to do so, the United States could intervene as it had with the railroad.³¹ The United States Senate ratified the Treaty on 14 March 1903.

²⁹ Ken Lomax, "A Chronicle of the Battleship Oregon," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 106, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 135.

³⁰Louis A. Pérez Jr., *The War of 1898: The United States and Cuba in History and Historiography* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 5-6.

³¹ McCullough, *Path Between the Seas*, 333.

The Colombian government and public responded negatively to the negotiated treaty. The Colombian Senate rejected the treaty and negotiations broke down between the two nations. First, the Senate considered the payments too low since they had received the same amount for the railroad. Second, the treaty did not satisfactorily guarantee Colombian sovereignty. This rejection outraged Roosevelt, who believed the Colombian government wanted unreasonable concessions. He did not consider the Colombian public's negative reaction and refused to renegotiate the terms of the treaty.

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The failure to ratify a treaty frustrated Panamanian liberal elites, who felt neglected by the conservative Colombian government. They wanted to take advantage of Panama's geography by developing ties with either the United States or a European power. This was a common policy of liberal governments in Latin American during the nineteenth century. The failed treaty negotiations concerned these elites who feared a canal would never be dug.³³ A new secession movement gathered strength, emboldened by the treaty's failure. The United States had previously supported Colombian control of Panama in accordance with the Bidlack-Mallarino Treaty.³⁴ When Panama again attempted to secede from Colombian rule in 1903 and declared independence, the United States changed its policy. U.S. battleships prevented Colombia from landing troops to

³² Conniff, *Panama and the United States*, 64.

³³ Szok, *La Ultima Gaviota*, 33.

³⁴ Conniff, *Panama and the United States*, 66.

establish order.³⁵ The support provided by the United States resulted in Panamanian independence.

The newly created Republic of Panama swiftly entered into negotiations with the United States. U.S. Secretary of State John Hay and the Panamanian Ambassador to the United States Philippe Bunau-Varilla negotiated a treaty almost indistinguishable from the Hay-Herrán Treaty, but with two significant changes. First, the treaty granted the United States the Canal in perpetuity, unlike the Hay-Herrán Treaty, which limited canal ownership to one hundred years. Second, the planned Canal Zone expanded from six to ten miles.³⁶ The Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty outraged Panamanians, who felt Bunau-Varilla betrayed their country in return for personal wealth.³⁷ Bunau-Varilla had only lived in Panama since 1884 when he arrived as part of the French Canal project. He had invested in the French canal, and benefited personally when the Americans bought out French investors. After negotiating the treaty, he returned to France.³⁸

Under Article I the United States agreed to “guarantee and maintain the independence of the Republic of Panama.” Panama became a protectorate of the United States. In return Article II granted “the United States in perpetuity the use, occupation and control of a zone of land and land under water for the construction maintenance,

³⁵ Ibid., 70.

³⁶ Ibid., 57.

³⁷ John Major, “Who Wrote the Hay-Bunau-Varilla Convention?,” *Diplomatic History* 8, no.2 (April 1984): 121.

³⁸ McCullough, *Path Between the Seas*, 389.

operation, sanitation and protection of [a] Canal of the width of ten miles extending to the distance of five miles on each side of the center line of the route of the Canal to be constructed.”³⁹ Similar to the concerns of the Hay-Herran treaty, sovereignty of the Canal Zone became a point of contention. Technically, Panama retained titular sovereignty over the Zone, yet the United States treated it like an American territory.⁴⁰ It did so because the region was vital for the operation, maintenance, and defense of the Panama Canal.

The strategic necessity of a canal led the United States government to accept the risk of a large-scale construction project in Central America, provided steps were taken to mitigate the risks. The failed French attempt showed two major hurdles: the prevalence of tropical diseases and the logistical challenges of construction in a jungle. The death of several key French officials from yellow fever scandalized the French public and contributed to the abandonment of the project.⁴¹ To combat diseases, particularly yellow fever and malaria, the U.S. Army applied the knowledge it gained in Cuba during the Spanish American War.

³⁹ Convention for the Construction of a Ship Canal, U.S.-Panama, November 18, 1903, <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/pan001.asp> accessed 3 March 2012.

⁴⁰ In fact every U.S. Census from 1910 until 1970 counted the population of Americans in the Zone and stated “the territory was placed under U.S. sovereignty by the 18 November 1903 Hay- Bunau-Varilla Treaty.” *U.S. Census, 1970: General Population Characteristics United States* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1970).

⁴¹ McCullough, *Paths Between the Seas*, 138-139.

In 1898, U.S. Army doctors Walter Reed and William Gorgas proved the link between mosquitos and the spread of yellow fever, a theory proposed by Cuban doctors. The U.S. Army instituted quarantines and fumigation programs to kill mosquitos and isolate sick patients to prevent the spread of the disease in Havana. Reed and Gorgas succeeded in eradicating yellow fever in the city within eight months.⁴² As the chief medical officer for the Panama Canal, Gorgas extended these policies to Panama. However, the scale of this task was greater. Havana required the elimination of yellow fever from a city. Panama required elimination throughout a country.

Gorgas implemented three policies. First, he established hospitals in the Canal Zone, Panama City and Colón to treat and quarantine patients with yellow fever. Second, he began a large-scale fumigation program to limit the mosquito populations, the main vector of yellow fever. Finally, Gorgas pushed for the creation of water lines and sewage systems, which benefited the average Panamanians tremendously.⁴³ The water lines ended the centuries' long practice of cisterns, which had provided breeding grounds for mosquitos.⁴⁴ These policies eradicated yellow fever within a year and a half.⁴⁵ Worker mortality rates declined. Some Panamanian officials expressed

⁴² Ibid., 468.

⁴³ Conniff, *Panama and the United States*, 74.

⁴⁴ McCullough, *Paths Between the Seas*, 467.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 486.

annoyance because the sanitation measures ignored their sovereignty but the goodwill generated by new hospitals and public works offset this.⁴⁶

Having diminished the threat of disease, U.S. administrators next faced the logistical challenges of operating in the jungle. A complex logistics network provided food and supplies to workers. When construction began in 1904, workers poured into the region. The demand for food increased to the point that local supplies could not feed everyone. Panamanian merchants increased food prices to take advantage of the demand but were unable to adequately feed the rapidly growing population, which reached 62,810 American citizens by 1912.⁴⁷ The increased prices and limited supplies resulted in workers seeking cheaper but less nutritious foods such as sugar cane, which resulted in malnourishment and a decline in productivity. To counteract malnourishment, the Isthmian Canal Commission established a commissary system in the Canal Zone that sold essential food and provisions to the workforce at a subsidized rate during the Panama Canal's construction.⁴⁸ Unlike sanitation measures, the Commissary offered no direct benefit to the Panamanians. Instead, it separated the Canal Zone from the Panamanian economy. The Commissary, or *comissario* as Panamanians called the

⁴⁶ Conniff, *Panama and the United States*, 74.

⁴⁷ *U.S. Census, 1970: General Population Characteristics United States*, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1970), 57-4. This number did not include the thousands of West Indian workers who came to work in Panama.

⁴⁸ Noel Maurer and Carlos Yu, *The Big Ditch: How America Took, Built, Ran, and Ultimately Gave Away the Panama Canal* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 191.

stores and goods sold there, would become a lightning rod for hostility to the long-term American presence in Panama.⁴⁹ The unintended consequence was the creation of an isolated and separate American economy.

Within its first year of operation, as Americans flocked to Panama during the construction of the Canal, the Commissary expanded its selection. A system that started as a means to supply staple foods to workers began offering a wide range of products including luxury goods, furniture, and clothing.⁵⁰ Local merchants expressed their displeasure at this competition. In an attempt to quell their anger and prevent the Commissary being abused, President Roosevelt issued a decree that limited goods sold in the Commissary to those that could not be obtained in Panama. In August 1905, however, Canal officials declared that merchants were not reliably supplying goods at a fair price, so the Commissary expanded.⁵¹

Panamanian merchants reacted negatively to the increased competition from the Commissary, which charged no taxes, paid no import duties, and offered better quality goods at lower prices. Colonel George W. Goethals, the chief engineer and first Canal Zone Governor, warned “once Panamanian merchants get their grips on us they will squeeze us dry.” He cited the price increases by Panamanian merchants being “a problem that the French canal project faced” and proposed, “the Americans used the

⁴⁹ Ibid., 192–193.

⁵⁰ Lester Langley, “The United States and Panama, 1933-1941: A Study In Strategy and Diplomacy” (PhD diss., University of Kansas, 1961), 16.

⁵¹ Ibid., 18.

Commissary to avoid it.” He concluded that the French project saw “the cost of every item of work [become] enormously greater.”⁵² The creation of a commissary system limited the impact of price increases from construction but it also isolated workers from the local economy. In order to prevent this isolation, Goethals agreed to prohibit the commissaries from selling luxury items, but like President Roosevelt he also went back on his promise.⁵³

In the Canal Zone the Commissary became an economic force. It provided all sorts of goods and services to Canal employees and eventually military personnel stationed in the Zone. By 1914, when the Panama Canal opened, the Commissary boasted “wholesale dry goods and grocery departments, a mail order division, twenty two general stores, seven cigar stores, a cold storage and ice making facility, a tailor and cleaning shop, a bakery, coffee-roasting plant, an ice cream factory, a laundry and packing department, seventeen hostels, two terminal hotels, and forty eight mess halls.”⁵⁴ Subsidies paid by U.S. taxpayers and profits from Canal revenues financed the Commissary. The only benefit to Panama stemmed from the black market that developed.⁵⁵ The Panamanian government actively targeted the black market and passed

⁵² William Ludlow, “The Trans-Isthmian Canal Problem,” *Harpers Magazine* 96, no. 576 (May 1898).

⁵³ George W. Goethals, *Government of the Canal Zone* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1915), 12.

⁵⁴ Maurer and Yu, *The Big Ditch*, 192.

⁵⁵ Herbert Knapp and Mary L. Knapp, *Red, White, and Blue Paradise: The American Canal Zone In Panama* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984), 183–84. In

regulations to limit *comissario* goods and charge duties.⁵⁶ The efforts to halt the black market failed and the local economy could not compete with the Commissary. The expansion by the Commissary to supply ships passing through the Canal further weakened the Panamanian economy and caused government revenues to decline.⁵⁷

The measures that United States officials took during construction of the Panama Canal were a mixed blessing. On the one hand, sanitation measures carried out by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers reduced disease and improved public health. On the other hand, the Commissary system walled off the Canal Zone from the Panamanian economy and diverted trade from ships passing through the Canal. For generations, the Panamanian upper class had hoped construction of a canal would turn their country into a “Hanseatic country,” transcending its lack of resources by embracing trade similar to the Hanseatic League of early modern Europe.⁵⁸ Panama’s marginal position in the Spanish Empire and Colombia would become a memory as it became a major center of international trade.

their memoir the Knapps noted that Panamanian stores wrote *comisarrio* on goods purchased from the Canal Zone and resold in Panamanian stores, because these goods were perceived to be higher quality than local products.

⁵⁶ Thomas M. Leonard, “The Commissary Issue in American Panamanian Relations, 1900–1936,” *Americas* 30, no. 1 (July 1973): 86.

⁵⁷ Leonard, “The Commissary Issue,” 92.

⁵⁸ Szok, *La Ultima Gaviota*, 24. The League was composed of several German towns and cities near the North Sea and the Baltic and grew into a major trade network throughout Northern Europe.

Yet the Canal did not bring the prosperity that Panamanians had imagined. Instead, Panama became an American protectorate, bisected by a foreign military. Instead of a “Hanseatic Country” economically rooted in global trade, a new form of dependency began as profits from the Canal were diverted to the United States. The affronts to Panama and the limits on its sovereignty would be further exacerbated by the efforts to defend the Panama Canal and the evolving role of the United States military in Panama.

The United States sent troops into Panama thirteen times, but never permanently stationed them on the Isthmus. The construction of an inter-oceanic canal in 1903 changed the importance of Panama for the U.S. military and a formal military occupation began, which lasted for ninety-six years. Responsible for the defense of the Panama Canal, U.S. military planners frequently revised plans in an attempt to meet ever-changing threats to the strategically valuable Panama Canal.

The Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty granted the United States the right to defend the Panama Canal. Article XXIII stated that the United States had the right “to employ armed forces for the safety or protection of the Canal, or of the ships that make use of the same, or the railways and auxiliary works,” and that it could employ this right “at all times and in its discretion, to use its police and its land and naval forces or to establish fortifications for these purposes.”⁵⁹ The treaty established the framework that the United States would use to station troops and develop tactics to defend the Panama Canal. Early

⁵⁹ Convention for the Construction of a Ship Canal, U.S.-Panama, November 18, 1903, <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/pan001.asp> accessed 3 March 2012.

defenses, however, focused on maintaining civil order and did not consider a hostile power directly attacking the Canal.⁶⁰ The initial budgets projected no expenditures for defense, but costs quickly grew. Beginning in 1914 the United States spent a quarter of the budget for the Canal on defense spending.⁶¹

Despite the increase, early defenses were modest and focused on a series of coastal artillery guns meant to deter a naval assault. As such, they mirrored military defense plans for the United States during the majority of the nineteenth century.⁶² The first permanent U.S. military presence in Panama arrived in 1911, an Infantry regiment composed of 812 enlisted men and 33 officers from the 10th Infantry Division.⁶³ By 1914 the modest troop presence grew to include a Marine battalion and three Coastal Artillery companies, called the “Panama Canal Guard Force.”⁶⁴ But, the total number of

⁶⁰ Richard Houle ed., *An American Legacy in Panama: A Brief History of Department of Defense Installations and Properties* (Fort Clayton, Panama: Directorate of Engineering and Housing, 1995), 27.

⁶¹ Noel Maurer and Carlos Yu, “What TR Took: The Economic Impact of the Panama Canal 1903-1937,” *Journal of Economic History* 68, no 3 (September 2008): 690. Between 1903 and 1925 the budget for canal defense was \$158 million dollars out of a total budget of \$921.7 million Maurer and Yu compiled these figures in 1925 dollars, in 2017 dollars this translate to \$5.5 billion dollars for construction costs and \$ 1.1 billion for defense.

⁶² Brian Linn, *The Echo of Battle: The Army’s Way of War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 12-13.

⁶³ Dolores de Mena, *The Era of U.S. Army Installations in Panama* (Fort Clayton, Panama: History Office Headquarters U.S. Army South, 1996), 7.

⁶⁴ Richard Houle, ed., *An American Legacy in Panama*, 27-29.

U.S. troop represented less than 1 percent of the U.S. Army's total strength at the time.⁶⁵ With defenses in place and construction complete, the United States officially opened the Panama Canal on 15 August 1914. Despite the importance of linking the Atlantic and Pacific for the first time in millennia, global news coverage focused on the fighting in Europe, which had begun the month before.⁶⁶

President Woodrow Wilson initially proclaimed the Canal neutral during the First World War, like the United States itself. Belligerent and neutral nations were allowed to use the Canal, but they had to follow the rules of the Hague Convention and long-established international norms regarding neutral nations during war. President Wilson issued proclamations of neutrality twice more, in 1915 and 1916.⁶⁷ To enforce the neutrality, the United States increased the number of American soldiers in Panama to 6,248.⁶⁸ No combatant nation challenged the neutrality of the Canal during the course of the war because of the strength of the United States in the Western Hemisphere, but also

⁶⁵ Allan R. Millet and Peter Maslowski, *For the Common Defense: A Military History of the United States of America*, rev ed. (New York: Free Press, 1994), 319. In 1912 there were approximately 92,000 American soldiers in the U.S. Army so those in Panama represented less than 1 percent.

⁶⁶ McCullough, *Paths Between the Seas*, 609.

⁶⁷ Norman J. Padelford, *The Panama Canal in Peace and War* (London: Macmillan Company, 1943), 130.

⁶⁸ Houle, *An American Legacy in Panama*, 29.

the modest strength of the Central Powers' naval forces.⁶⁹ Ships passed through the Canal with no disruption until the United States entered the war in 1917.⁷⁰ Then, the defense of the Canal received two modifications. First, soldiers were placed aboard transiting ships in order to prevent sabotage. Second, the Central Powers were denied access to the Canal. After the war, however, changes in technology led to a new danger: a knockout blow from aerial bombardment.⁷¹

In 1921 the U.S. Navy conducted its first strategic exercise to defend the Canal from aerial attack. The exercise demonstrated the Canal's vulnerability to an aerial attack.⁷² The United States military needed air bases in Panamanian territory to station pursuit aircraft that could attack enemy bombers before they reached the Canal. The Hay-Bunau-Varilla treaty allowed the United States "the right to acquire by purchase or by the exercise of the right of eminent domain, any lands, buildings, water rights or other properties necessary and convenient for ... protection of the Canal."⁷³ The United States

⁶⁹ The Germany Imperial Navy was the sole naval threat to the Canal and the Kaiser's Fleet was more concerned with the Royal Navy than with trying to launch an attack against a heavily fortified Canal half a world away.

⁷⁰ Padelford, *The Panama Canal in Peace and War*, 133.

⁷¹ Susan I. Enscore, Suzanne P. Johnson, Julie L Webster , and Gordon L. Cohen, et al., *Guarding the Gates: The Story of Fort Clayton: Its Setting, Its Architecture, and Its Role in the History of the Panama Canal* (Champaign, IL: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, 2000), 3.37.

⁷² Craig C. Felker, *Testing American Sea Power: U.S. Navy Strategic Exercises, 1923–1940* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2007) 33-34.

⁷³ Convention for the Construction of a Ship Canal, U.S.-Panama, November 18, 1903, <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/pan001.asp> accessed 3 March 2012.

could have acquired air bases by invoking the treaty with little concern over Panama's objections, yet this did not occur. By this time there was a new Roosevelt in the White House. President Franklin Roosevelt changed the policies of the United States toward Latin America. Instead of the arrogant Gunboat Diplomacy of earlier administrations he began the Good Neighbor Policy, which advocated negotiation and accommodation. The United States entered into lengthy negotiations to acquire the air bases and signed the Hull-Alfaro Treaty of 1939 with Panama.⁷⁴ The United States considered the threat of Axis subversion in Latin America and Panama to be genuine. The vocal support for fascism by Rafael Trujillo of the Dominican Republic and Juan Peron of Argentina alarmed policy makers. U.S. Secretary of State Cordell Hull wrote in his memoirs, "To me the danger to the Western Hemisphere was real and imminent. It was not limited to the possibility of a military invasion. It was more acute in its indirect form of propaganda, penetration, organizing political parties, buying some adherents, and blackmailing others . . . the same technique was obvious in Latin America."⁷⁵ The treaty emphasized adjustment and accommodation between the United States and Panama.⁷⁶ It ended Panama's protectorate status and expanded its role in canal defense.

⁷⁴ Conniff, *Panama and the United States*, 91.

⁷⁵ Cordell Hull, *The Memoirs of Cordell Hull*, 2 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1948), 1:602.

⁷⁶ Stetson Conn, Rose C. Engelman, and Byron Fairchild, *United States Army In World War II: The Western Hemisphere Guarding the United States And Its Outposts* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1964), 311.

Officially Panama and the United States now carried out the defense of the Canal in partnership. In reality, however, the United States had the better trained and equipped military. With a treaty securing air bases in place, the United States began to deploy troops to Panama and increased the forces on the Isthmus as the world moved inextricably towards war.

When the war began in 1939, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt issued a neutrality proclamation similar to President Wilson's.⁷⁷ Belligerent nations were allowed to use the waterway, provided crews followed instructions and allowed American troops onboard during transit. As the United States shifted toward the Allied cause and ended its neutrality, the Canal became a vulnerable target in the assessment of U.S. military planners. The shift occurred during 1940 and 1941 as the United States began provocative naval actions against Germany in the Atlantic. The Canal Zone turned into a military bastion and civilian control ended as the civilian Canal Zone Governor transferred authority to the military commander of the Panama Canal Department.⁷⁸ More troops deployed to the region and stringent protective measures were enforced to protect the Canal.

⁷⁷ Padelford, *The Panama Canal in Peace and War*, 162.

⁷⁸ Conn, et al., *The Western Hemisphere: Guarding the United States And Its Outposts*, 310. It should be noted that though the Governor of the Canal Zone was a Major General in the Army Corps of Engineers, he functioned in a civilian capacity, not wearing a military uniform and being referred to as Governor and not General to prevent the appearance of the American military occupying Panama.

A troop buildup had begun in the late 1930s when U.S. military planners realized the decrepit status of the defenses of the American military bases in Hawaii, Alaska, the Philippines, and Panama.⁷⁹ In 1939, the Canal Zone contained 13,451 U.S. soldiers in two infantry and two artillery regiments.⁸⁰ In 1940 when it looked likely to enter the war the defense of the Canal became a priority. The United States negotiated several agreements to acquire territory for air bases throughout Latin America to prevent a hostile nation from placing bombers within range of the Panama Canal.⁸¹ As the Second World War progressed the threats seemed to multiply in the eyes of U.S. military planners. When France fell in 1940 the German Navy gained access to French ports and sent U-boats further into the Atlantic to threaten shipping. Washington quickly realized the Royal Navy could not protect the Atlantic as it had in the First World War. This caused the defense of the Canal to take on new importance. By midsummer 1941 the number of troops grew to 28,700.

In July of 1941 panic engulfed the Canal Zone when Naval Intelligence warned of a possible Japanese torpedo attack. This resulted in increased inspection of Japanese

⁷⁹ Brian Linn, *Guardians of Empire: The U.S. Army and the Pacific, 1902-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 115.

⁸⁰ Stenson Conn and Byron Fairchild, *United States Army In World War II: The Western Hemisphere: The Framework of Hemisphere Defense* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1960), 16.

⁸¹ Conn et al., *The Western Hemisphere: Guarding the United States And Its Outposts*, 310.

ships entering the Canal and a request for more troops.⁸² After July the U.S. military surged forces so that on 7 December 1941, when Pearl Harbor was attacked, there were 31,400 troops stationed in Panama.⁸³

The American military's efforts to protect the Canal extended into both the Caribbean and the Pacific.⁸⁴ This expansion came about in part when Britain offered the United States bases in Bermuda, Newfoundland, and the West Indies as part of the Bases for Destroyers Agreement and Lend-Lease. The new bases projected the reach of the United States military into the Caribbean and expanded the defense of the Canal. It also meant that the American military presence in Panama expanded its focus on a wider geographic area.⁸⁵

Despite the new protective measures, panic engulfed the Canal Zone after the attack on Pearl Harbor. Americans in the region feared that the Canal would be the next Japanese target, despite being three times further from Japan than Hawaii.⁸⁶ The War in the Pacific was a naval contest that relied on a huge overseas logistic network and the Panama Canal served as a transit point for supplies and war ships. Thus, U.S. military

⁸² Ibid., 336.

⁸³ Ibid., 348.

⁸⁴ John Major, *Prized Possession: The United States and the Panama Canal, 1903-1979* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 299.

⁸⁵ Conn et al., *The Western Hemisphere: Guarding the United States And Its Outposts*, 327.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 327.

planners feared that the Japanese military had developed submarines capable of reaching the Canal.⁸⁷

During the Second World War the Canal transported over 16,724,222 tons of military cargo from the Atlantic to the Pacific.⁸⁸ Warships also transited through, particularly the aircraft carriers, *Hornet*, *Wasp*, and *Yorktown*, which played important roles in the Doolittle Raid, the Battle of the Coral Sea, and the Battle of Midway. The importance of the Canal to the war effort has come into question by scholars recently. They argue that the United States could have used rail networks to transport goods to the Pacific coast and warships could have transited around Cape Horn.⁸⁹ Because of the nature of war, it is impossible to definitely predict how the savings of a few days impacted complex military campaigns. For instance in 1942 the time saved by

⁸⁷ *Secerts of the Dead, Japanese SuperSub* (New York, Thirteen, 2010). Japan had developed submarines capable of destroying the Panama Canal but never deployed the weapon system.

⁸⁸ *Annual Report To The Governor Of The Panama Canal* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1940-1947).

⁸⁹ Maurer and Yu, *The Big Ditch*, 192. Maurer and Yu question the importance of the Canal but fail to acknowledge the changing nature of war that could not be easily quantified; even an hour may have made the difference between victory and defeat. They instead offer a quantitative discussion of timetables, which dismiss any gains made from U.S. warships traveling through the Canal and not having to sail around Cape Horn.

American warships transiting through the Canal may have made the difference during the Battle of Midway.⁹⁰

As the war progressed, it became apparent to the U.S. military that the Axis powers would not be able to launch an attack against Panama. In 1942 a United States naval fleet sank four Japanese aircraft carriers at the Battle of Midway and blunted the ability of the Imperial Japanese Navy to conduct offensive operations. The following year, in 1943, the Allies won the Battle of the Atlantic, which ended the threat of a German attack against the Canal.⁹¹ A direct military threat ended and the United States diverted troops from the Canal Zone to the European and Pacific theatres. Panama began the war as a vital strategic link that needed to be defended at all costs and saw a huge influx of troops. By the end of the war the Canal became a transport link, important to the war effort but not a strategic necessity. This change was not due to failed plans but rather the changing fortunes of the war. The United States began to conduct the war more offensively when it became apparent the Axis powers had not coordinated their attacks and no longer threatened the Western Hemisphere. Towards the Second World War, military units in the Canal Zone were primarily being used to train Latin American militaries.⁹²

⁹⁰ Richard Overy, *Why the Allies Won* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), 3-4.

⁹¹ Williamson Murray and Allan R. Millett, *A War To Be Won: Fighting The Second World War, 1937-1945* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 33.

⁹² Lindsay-Poland, *Emperors in the Jungle*, 106.

When the Second World War ended, the defense of the Panama Canal changed again, as it had after the First World War. The development of long-range bombers and intercontinental ballistic missiles able to reach Panama was still years away, but the threat of atomic bombs led U.S. military planners to minimize importance of the Canal.⁹³ The Canal needed to be defended, but it became apparent that in the event of a global conflict with the Soviet Union nothing could be done to protect the Panama Canal from nuclear weapons. Military planners assessed it would only play a role transferring warships and supplies between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans prior to a nuclear war.

The United States had committed itself to expand the size of its navy and acquired a two-ocean fleet during the war.⁹⁴ The development of a two-ocean navy by the United States diminished the Panama Canal's importance. The U.S. Navy was no longer the small force it had been during the late nineteenth century when Alfred Thayer Mahan wrote on the importance of the Isthmus of Panama. The United States launched 6,768 ships during the course of the Second World War and with this large fleet the Americans became the predominant naval power.⁹⁵ The days when a small fleet of battleships was expected to project a two-ocean navy to defend the United States using a canal as a speedy link had ended. The United States now began to develop

⁹³ Sandra W. Meditz and Dennis M. Hanratty, eds., *Panama Country Study* (Washington, D.C.: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1987), 244.

⁹⁴ Gerhard Weinberg, *A World at Arms: A Global History of World War II* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 154.

⁹⁵ Michael A. Palmer, *The Navy: The Transoceanic Period, 1945–1992* (Washington, D.C.: Naval History & Heritage Command, 2014), 11.

commitments around the globe requiring a large permanent naval presence. The diminishing strategic importance of the Panama Canal did not end the Canal Zone's military value altogether.

The United States originally established military bases on the Isthmus of Panama to defend the Canal. As the Canal's strategic value diminished the missions of the bases changed.⁹⁶ No longer focused on defense, the military bases were used to project American influence in Latin America.⁹⁷ To see the expansion of the U.S. military mission one need only look at the evolution of the military command assigned to defend the Panama Canal. Originally the Army created a Headquarters of troops in Panama in 1914, attached to the Eastern Army Department located in New York. In 1916 the U.S. Army relocated the headquarters to Quarry Heights, Panama, and a year later the Army established a separate Panama Canal Department. The Panama Canal Department became the Caribbean Defense Command in 1941 and then Caribbean Command in 1948. The change reflected more than a new title. The Army commander at Quarry Heights gained operational control of troops stationed throughout the Caribbean expanding his authority outside of Panama.⁹⁸ In 1963 the Department of Defense renamed Caribbean Command to U.S. Southern Command. The name reinforced the

⁹⁶ Enscoe, et al., *Guarding the Gates*, 6-64.

⁹⁷ Michael Donoghue, *Borderland on the Isthmus: Race, Culture, and the Struggle for the Canal Zone* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), kindle edition, *loc* 3405.

⁹⁸ Cynthia Watson, *Combatant Commands: Origins, Structure, and Engagements* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2011), 87-88.

responsibility of U.S. Southern Command to include all of Latin America. The Command's mission focused on developing partnerships with Latin American militaries and curtailing the influence of the Cuban revolution.⁹⁹

Expansion of the U.S. military mission beyond Canal defense aggravated Panamanians nationalists. They challenged the way the Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty limited their sovereignty and the lack of Panamanian inputs over the operation of the Panama Canal. A number of treaties were negotiated between the two countries but none dealt with the long-term implications of the United States' perpetual ownership of the Panama Canal or of the increasing population of Americans. The bases and their missions came under closer scrutiny, and Panamanians protested how the U.S. military missions shifted from defense of the Canal.¹⁰⁰ Growing resentment compelled the United States to reevaluate its role and eventually led to accommodation.

⁹⁹ Stephen Rabe *The Most Dangerous Area in the World: John F. Kennedy Confronts Communist Revolution in Latin America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 143.

¹⁰⁰ Juan B. Sosa, *In Defiance: The Battle Against General Noriega Fought from Panama's Embassy in Washington* (Washington, D.C.: The Francis Press, 1999), 24.

CHAPTER III

PANAMANIAN AND ZONIAN

On the morning of 23 March 1911, Theodore Roosevelt reputedly assented to an audience at the University of California at Berkeley, “I took the Canal Zone.”¹ The press reported differing versions of the statement and a debate soon emerged. Some scholars have seen the speech as a frank admission by Roosevelt of his Big Stick foreign policy and U.S. imperialism.² Historian James Vivian, who consulted the original text, concluded that Roosevelt most likely said “I took a trip to the Isthmus.” Bad acoustics in the theatre may have contributed to the misquotation. The rest of the speech implied taking political action in Washington and not territory in Panama.³

Nonetheless, while TR’s speech at Berkeley may not have been a frank confession of U.S. imperialism, the way that the United States acquired the Panama Canal showed extraordinary arrogance. Article III of the Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty allowed the United States to act as “if it were the sovereign of the territory within which” the Canal and Canal Zone were “located to the entire exclusion of the exercise

¹ James Vivian, “The ‘Taking’ of the Panama Canal Zone: Myth and Reality,” *Diplomatic History* 4, no. 1 (January 1980): 95.

² Walter LaFeber, *The Panama Canal: A Crisis in Historical Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990) and David McCullough both quote Roosevelt, though LaFeber writes “I took the Canal Zone” and McCullough quotes “I took the Isthmus.” The only scholar to look at the original written document that Roosevelt read from was James Vivian who argues that Roosevelt most likely said “I took a trip to the Isthmus.”

³ Vivian, “The ‘Taking’ of the Panama Canal Zone,” 98.

by the Republic of Panama of any such sovereign rights, power or authority.”⁴ These rights resulted in the creation of a veritable American colony, the Canal Zone, in the middle of Panama. The legal system in the Zone was based on American common law and not Panamanian civil law.⁵ The Panama Canal Commission (PCC) established a separate police force, the Zone Police, which answered only to the Canal Zone Governor and enforced American laws.⁶ The language of the Zone was English, U.S. dollars the official currency. American citizens living in the Canal Zone and the U.S. government treated it as an American territory no different from Puerto Rico, Guam, or Hawaii.⁷

An American identity emerged in the Zone. Historian Peter Sahlins argues that in borderlands “states did not simply impose their values and boundaries on local society.” Instead, “local society was a motive force in the formation and consolidation

⁴ Convention for the Construction of a Ship Canal, U.S.-Panama, November 18, 1903, <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/pan001.asp> accessed 3 March 2012.

⁵ Wayne D. Bray, *The Common Law Zone in Panama* (San Juan Puerto Rico: Inter-American University Press, 1977), 94.

⁶ Harry A. Franck, *Zone Policeman* 88 (New York: Century Company, 1913), 9.

⁷ The U.S. Census from 1910 until 1980 counted the population of Americans in the Zone and state “that the territory was placed under U.S. sovereignty by the 18 November 1903 Hay- Bunau-Varilla Treaty” The Zone was not officially treated like an American Territory however since those born there were not granted birth right citizenship and several laws were passed to ensure only babies born to American parents, like John McCain, would be classified as Natural Born American citizens. Panamanians and West Indians born in the Canal Zone were consider Panamanian and the United States extended them no rights of citizenship.

of nationhood and the territorial state.”⁸ The local society in the Canal Zone formed and consolidated an American identity and turned the territorial state of the Canal Zone into an American territory that stood in stark contrast to Panama. Zonians had first arrived during the construction of the Canal. Many stayed to operate and maintain it due to the generous pay and compensation. When construction began in 1903 the builders realized they need a large permanent workforce. The Panama Canal Commission(PCC) provided generous benefits and an improved lifestyle in order to convince Americans to work on the Canal.⁹ Governor Goethals encouraged generous pay and benefits for workers.¹⁰

The high pay encouraged many Americans, but other intangibles played a role. In an oral history interview, Leo Krziza, an accountant for the PCC said that the “Panama Canal was a thirty-two year vacation with pay.”¹¹ Charles Morgan, a senior administrator added “I got to live in paradise for 26 years.”¹² Most Zonians had positive memories of the Canal Zone and considered it a paradise. They received subsidized

⁸ Peter Sahlin, *Boundaries: The Making of France and Spain in the Pyrenees* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), 8.

⁹ Donoghue, *Borderland on the Isthmus*, loc 492.

¹⁰ Goethals, *Government of the Canal Zone*, 13.

¹¹ Oral History Interview of Leo Krziza, audio recording of interview conducted 2009 by Candice Ellis and Amanda Noll, Samuel Proctor Oral History Program, Smathers Library, University of Florida, Gainesville <<http://oral.history.ufl.edu>> accessed 18 October 2013.

¹² Oral History Interview of Richard Morgan, audio recording of interview conducted 2010 by Nicole Cox, The Panama and the Canal Oral History Project, Smathers Library, University of Florida, Gainesville <<http://oral.history.ufl.edu>> accessed 18 October 2013.

housing and many could afford maids, gardeners, and nannies.¹³ The Commissary offered a wide range of goods at discounted prices. American citizens did not have to go without luxuries, like ice cream. There were sacrifices, for example television did not arrive in the Canal Zone until the late 1960s, but despite this Zonians almost always described Panama as a paradise.¹⁴

Zonians recounted their leisurely life in the Zone and their involvement in civic organizations.¹⁵ The Zone boasted two Masonic lodges, a Lion's Club, and a Rotary Club. The Canal Commission and U.S. military provided recreational centers that offered lessons and activities. Zonians hobbies included "photography, painting, classical music, square dancing, bagpiping, scuba diving, baseball, golf, hunting, sailing and theatre."¹⁶ The Canal Zone even had an official dish called "Johnny Mazetti," a modified version of a Mid-Western pasta casserole utilizing green onions that many Zonians recalled fondly in oral histories, memoirs and a Zonian cookbook. They

¹³ Oral History Interview of the Dolan family, audio recording of interview conducted 2009 by Candice Ellis, The Panama and the Canal Oral History Project, Smathers Library, University of Florida, Gainesville <<http://oral.history.ufl.edu>> accessed 18 October 2013.

¹⁴ Noel Maurer and Carlos Yu, *The Big Ditch*, 195.

¹⁵ Oral History Interview of Homer Piper, audio recording of interview conducted 2011 by Diana Dombrowski, The Panama and the Canal Oral History Project, Smathers Library, University of Florida, Gainesville <<http://oral.history.ufl.edu>> accessed 18 October 2013.

¹⁶ Knapp and Knapp, *Red, White and Blue Paradise*, 101.

claimed to have invented the dish.¹⁷ Zonians talked about how they maintained a society that had not become divided and still respected authority and American values. It was unlike the America they saw on the news in the 1960s and many Zonians felt they preserved the values of American society.¹⁸ This sense of community in recalling their past overlooked the division the Zone represented.

The Canal Zone may have been a paradise for Zonians, yet for Panamanians it was a species of hell. In 1958 and 1959 protests against the Panamanian government by unemployed workers in Colón spread to the Canal Zone. The marches began, as a demand for higher wages but soon became an anti-American riot. Over the next several months several well-organized marches targeted the Zone, as Panamanian nationalist demanded the United States government raise the Panamanian flag. The Eisenhower Administration responded in two ways. First, it declared that Panama had titular sovereignty over the Canal Zone.¹⁹ Second, they increased Canal revenue payments to Panama to stimulate the economy and fight unemployment, the original cause of the marches.²⁰

¹⁷ Panama Canal Museum, *Opening the Gates to Canal Cuisine: Preserving the American Era* (Gainesville, FL: Library Press at UF, 2017), 132.

¹⁸ Knapp and Knapp, *Red, White and Blue Paradise*, 155.

¹⁹ McPherson, *Yankee No*, 94.

²⁰ Conniff, *Panama and the United States*, 116.

In 1964, Panamanian anger exploded again with four days of rioting against the Zone and its inhabitants.²¹ The so-called Flag Riot began over the flying of the stars and stripes. The policy in the Canal Zone had long been to fly the flag in order to signal that the territory belonged to the United States. President Dwight Eisenhower acknowledged Panama's titular sovereignty over the Zone and had both the American and Panamanian flags displayed in prominent areas around the Canal Zone.²² In 1963 American President John F. Kennedy and Panamanian President Roberto Chiari announced a formal agreement that required all flagpoles in the Canal Zone to display both flags. Military bases were exempt.²³ Zonians disagreed with this policy and they began to display lone American flags, angering Panamanians.

On 9 January 1964, students of Balboa High School raised the American flag over their school after Christmas break. The students intended the act as a display of patriotic sentiment and defiance of the policy of displaying both the flags in the Canal Zone. They had the support of their teachers and parents as they camped out in front of their school to ensure the flag was not taken down.²⁴ The raising of the flag, however, angered students from a nearby high school who marched to the Zone demanding that

²¹ Donoghue, *Borderland on the Isthmus*, loc 381.

²² *Ibid.*, 29-30.

²³ McPherson, *Yankee No!*, 95.

²⁴ Donoghue, *Borderland on the Isthmus*, loc 585.

the Panamanian flag they brought also be raised. The Zonians rebuffed the Panamanian students and tore their flag.²⁵

This insult to their flag outraged Panamanians. Word spread into Panama City and protesters descended on the Canal Zone. The Panamanian Government allowed the marchers to go to the Zone and the Panamanian National Guard did not immediately provide security or crowd control.²⁶ The protest soon erupted into riots. The Canal Zone Governor and the U.S. Southern Command Commander called in American troops to defend the Zone and protect American citizens.²⁷ The resulting riots lasted four days and left twenty-four Panamanians and four Americans dead. Blame for the riot and the deaths was leveled at the United States and brought attention to issues regarding the Panama Canal. For the Panamanian government, according to historian Alan McPherson, the riots were a warning to not let nationalist sentiments get out of control, but also an impetus to reconsider the status of the Panama Canal.²⁸

Much had changed since the era of Theodore Roosevelt. The United States could no longer expect Panama to bend to its demands as grievances over sovereignty and

²⁵ McPherson, *Yankee No!*, 95.

²⁶ Alan McPherson, "Courts of World Opinion: Trying the Panama Flag Riots of 1964," *Diplomatic History* 28, no.1 (January 2004), 89.

²⁷ *Foreign Relations of the United States*, vol. XXXI, South and Central America; Mexico, 1964-68, ed. David Geyer, David Herschler and Edward Keefer (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2004), *Memorandum of a Telephone Conversation, O'Mera to Taylor, January 10, 1964*, doc. 367 <<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v31/d367>> accessed 20 August 2015.

²⁸ McPherson, *Yankee No!*, 107.

nationalism simmered.²⁹ The riots led to renegotiations of the Panama Canal Treaty spanning four Presidential Administrations.

Over the next thirteen years the Johnson, Nixon, and Ford Administrations attempted to negotiate a new treaty. These negotiations were opposed by a majority of Zonians, who felt they were the victims in the riots.³⁰ The American public also opposed the negotiations since they saw the issue as surrendering the Panama Canal, popularly seen as a symbol of national achievement. While these negotiations were under way the United States involvement in Vietnam increased. This altered many Americans' views of foreign relations.³¹

The Johnson Administration began negotiations for a new treaty but they soon stalled as the situation in Vietnam consumed more and more of the President's attention. This delay had repercussions for the Panamanian government, which felt pressured by its people to resolve ownership of the Panama Canal. The Panamanian National Guard used the stalled negotiations to legitimize a coup in 1968 that ousted the controversial President Arnulfo Arias.³² Arias fled to the Canal Zone and then a comfortable exile

²⁹ Rabe, *The Most Dangerous Area in the World*, 189-190.

³⁰ Conniff, *Panama and the United States*, 116-128.

³¹ Natasha Zaretsky, "Restraint or Retreat? The Debate over the Panama Canal Treaties and U.S. Nationalism after Vietnam," *Diplomatic History* 35, no.3 (April 2011): 536.

³² Koster, *In the Time of Tyrants*, 48.

Miami. A power struggle among military officers ensued, until Colonel Omar Torrijos consolidated power and installed himself as the Maximum Leader of Panama.³³

Torrijos positioned himself as a leader for all Panamanians, and used issue of Canal ownership to mobilize popular support. Brandon Groves, an embassy official in Panama at the time, recalled Torrijos presented a “large and ominous question mark in Americans minds.” In 1971 the Nixon Administration wanted to “maintain internal stability to insure the continued smooth operation and security of the Canal.”³⁴ Torrijos challenged this stability. He borrowed heavily from the rhetoric of decolonization to make ownership of the Canal an international issue and mimicked the policies that Gamal Nasser of Egypt used to nationalize the Suez Canal. At the UN Torrijos cast himself and Panama as a David, fighting the United States Goliath.³⁵ This resulted in the United States vetoing a UN Security Council resolution regarding the Panama Canal.³⁶ The international attention pushed negotiations forward and National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger, who previously ignored Latin American issues, led them.³⁷

³³ Kempe, *Divorcing the Dictator*, 34.

³⁴ Brandon Groves, *Behind Embassy Walls: The Life and Times of an American Diplomat* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2005), 164.

³⁵ Brands, *Latin America's Cold War*, 143.

³⁶ Tom Long, “Putting the Canal on the Map: Panamanian Agenda-setting and the 1973 Security Council Meetings,” *Diplomatic History* 38, no. 2 (January 2014): 433.

³⁷ Grove, *Behind Embassy Walls*, 166.

Zonians expressed anger over the riots and blamed Panamanians for the trouble in their paradise. Most actively fought treaty negotiations.³⁸ They saw the Canal Zone as American “property” no different from Puerto Rico or Guam. They organized letter-writing campaigns to influence the Senate and halt any new Panama Canal Treaty. They found an ally in the Governor of California, an aspirant to the Presidency.

Ronald Reagan made opposition to the Canal Treaty a key part of his 1976 presidential primary challenge against President Gerald Ford. Reagan would use the idea of “giving away” the Panama Canal to great effect and accused his opponent of surrendering an American crown jewel.³⁹ During the primaries, Reagan gave a nationally televised speech on 31 March 1976, which laid out his foreign policy. Regarding the Canal he said, “Negotiations ... go forward, negotiations aimed at giving up our ownership of the Panama Canal Zone. Apparently, everyone knows about this except the rightful owners of the Canal Zone, you, the people of the United States.” He went on to say, “Well, the Canal Zone is not a colonial possession. It is not a long-term lease. It is sovereign United States Territory every bit the same as Alaska and all the states that were carved from the Louisiana Purchase. We should end those negotiations and tell the General: We bought it, we paid for it, we built it, and we intend to keep it.”⁴⁰

³⁸ Knapp and Knapp, *Red, White, and Blue Paradise*, 112.

³⁹ Adam Clymer, *Drawing the Line at the Big Ditch: The Panama Canal Treaties and the Rise of the Right* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008), 24.

⁴⁰ Ronald Reagan “To Restore America” broadcast on 31 March 1976 accessed 5 November 2013 <<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/primary-resources/reagan-america/>> accessed 29 June 2015. The facts of the speech were a

That final phrase would be repeated by Reagan and become a rallying call for Zonians opposed to negotiations, “We intend to keep it.”⁴¹ This sentiment electrified the Reagan campaign prior to the North Carolina primary and resulted in the Governor winning the primary and presenting a credible challenge to President Ford. However, Reagan’s depiction contradicted both laws. Legally, the Canal Zone had never been American territory.

The original treaty only allowed the United States to act as act as “*if it were the sovereign*” of the Canal Zone.⁴² Reagan’s statements were political theatrics meant to tap into resentment among the general public about America’s diminishing prestige.⁴³ Better-educated conservative stalwarts such as author William Buckley, Senator Barry Goldwater, and even actor John Wayne came out in support of treaty negotiations. Even Reagan himself, once presented with the facts, expressed doubt and asked, “What if they are right?”⁴⁴ The ally Zonians thought they had in Reagan disappeared. Ford defeated Reagan in the Republican primary, but then lost to Governor Jimmy Carter in the general election.

complete misrepresentation since the United States never had sovereignty over the Canal Zone according to the original treaty and the actions of the United States.

⁴¹ Richard Jordan, *The Panama Odyssey*, 2 ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014), 334.

⁴² Convention for the Construction of a Ship Canal, U.S.-Panama, November 18, 1903, <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/pan001.asp> accessed 3 March 2012.

⁴³ Clymer, *Drawing the Line at the Big Ditch*, 30.

⁴⁴ Ronald Reagan, quoted in *Ibid.*, x.

When President Carter took office after the 1976 elections, he faced an uphill battle to negotiate a new Canal Treaty. Zonians developed a robust political opposition to the Treaty and leveraged all their political influence, which was limited since they had no congressional representation nor represented a large voting bloc in any one state. They still developed letter-writing campaigns that targeted senators and congressmen. Seeking any political ally and waging a public relations campaign to seek the sympathy of the American public.⁴⁵ The Canal Zone had never been an organized U.S. territory, but Zonians saw the Canal Zone as their home. Their grandfathers built the Canal, their fathers operated and maintained it, and they struggled to keep it and their way of life.⁴⁶ This brought about a battle of perceptions as Zonians were cast as an ungrateful and xenophobic group, who lived in an American taxpayer subsidized paradise.⁴⁷ Zonians never acknowledged that they lived in a foreign country at the expense of the American taxpayer.

⁴⁵ David Skidmore “Foreign Policy Interest Groups and Presidential Power: Jimmy Carter and the Battle over Ratification of the Panama Canal Treaties” in *Jimmy Carter: Foreign Policy and Post-Presidential Years*, ed. Herbert D. Rosenbaum and Alexej Ugrihsky (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press 1994), 94.

⁴⁶ Since the United States considered the Canal Zone an unincorporated U.S. territory it had no congressional representation. It also did not have a nonvoting Resident Commissioner like Puerto Rico, or nonvoting delegates like Guam, American Samoa, the U.S. Virgin Islands, or the Northern Marianas.

⁴⁷ Jane Morris, “A Terminal Case of American Perpetuity,” *Rolling Stone*, June 1, 1976, 15.

While negotiations over the Canal Treaty were ongoing, several bombs exploded throughout the Canal Zone in October 1976. The crude devices were placed near the cars of several prominent Zonians opposed to the treaty negotiations.

Robert Jordan, the U.S. ambassador in Panama during the treaty negotiations, reported it was unclear who placed the explosives. Zonians blamed the Panamanian government for the bombings as an intimidation tactic. Panamanians countered that the Zonians planted the bombs to win sympathy. Jordan reported to Washington, “One incident could have been a coincidence; three explosions in forty-eight hours could only be a deliberate campaign.” The guilty party was never identified.⁴⁸

The bombings caused panic and Panamanian and American officials met to resolve the issue. The meeting brought together the heads of each nation’s intelligence agencies, the Director for Central Intelligence George H.W. Bush, and Colonel Manuel Noriega, the Chief of Intelligence for the Panamanian National Guard. This was the first time the two men met, though their paths would cross again twelve years later when each became the head of state for his respective nation. The cordial meeting ended with an understanding that “let’s drop this subject—as long as it does not happen again.” No loss of life occurred but the bombings demonstrated the vulnerability of the large population of American citizens.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Jordan, *The Panama Odyssey*, 334.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 339-340.

In addition to the bombings, a rumor emerged that had the U.S. Senate not voted to ratify the New Canal Zone Treaty, the Panamanian National Guard would have detonated explosives along the Canal and launched a guerrilla war. Torrijos told English writer Graham Greene that though the damage to dams could be repaired, it would take "three years of rain to fill the Canal. During that time it would be guerrilla war waged from the jungle."⁵⁰ Noriega recounted the plan, dubbed *huele a quemado* (Spanish for burning smell), in his autobiography and laid out the plan, which called for the destruction of the Gatum dam and the locks.⁵¹ The likelihood of Panama destroying the Panama Canal and going to war with the United States seems unlikely. Evidence is incomplete though some documents mentioning the plans were allegedly seized in 1989 but never released.⁵² Like the bombings, sabotage against the Canal represented a danger the United States could not easily defend against. U.S. officials realized that a threat to the Canal and American citizens could emerge from within Panama itself.

The Carter Administration signed a new treaty in 1977, despite the best efforts of Zonians. The Torrijos-Carter Treaty established that the Panama Canal would be turned over to Panama on 31 December 1999. The treaty also brought an end to American

⁵⁰ Graham Greene, *Getting to Know the General: The Story of an Involvement*, new ed. (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1991), 61-62.

⁵¹ Manuel Antonio Noriega and Peter Eisner, *America's Prisoner: The Memoirs of Manuel Noriega* (Toronto, ON: Random House, 1997), 43.

⁵² "Documents Show Noriega Planned To Bomb Canal Attack Us Post," *Associated Press*, August 11, 1990.

control over the Canal Zone on 30 September 1979, the end of the fiscal year.⁵³ Four military bases and a tropical research center remained under American control, but they would be turned over on 31 December 1999. The majority of American citizens no longer lived in areas under direct U.S. control and the largesse and insularity of the Canal Zone ended.⁵⁴ An exodus of Zonians began, with many settling along the Gulf Coast. Those who remained worked for the PCC until they qualified for retirement and then left—expelled from paradise.⁵⁵

Panamanians feted Torrijos for successfully negotiating a treaty with the United States that would eventually turn the Canal over to Panama. For the Carter Administration, the treaty came at a steep political cost. While the treaty built goodwill in Panama and Latin America, in the United States Carter's political opponents cast it as a case of the President surrendering a symbol of American achievement⁵⁶.

The United States had acted boldly in Panama when American citizens first came to the Isthmus in the 1850s. From that time onward Americans got what they wanted in Panama, be it a piece of watermelon, a railroad, or an inter-oceanic Canal. The Flag Riots and the subsequent treaty negotiations were a reaction against the United States'

⁵³ "Panama Takes Control of the Canal Zone," *New York Times*, October 1, 1979.

⁵⁴ Watson, *Combatant Commands*, 90.

⁵⁵ Jorden, *Panama Odyssey*, 207.

⁵⁶ William L. Furlong and Margaret E. Scranton, *The Dynamics of Foreign Policymaking: The President, the Congress and the Panama Canal Treaties* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1984), 196.

aggressive actions, which forced an end to the Canal Zone and the eventual turn over of the Canal. This did not sit well with Zonians and some Americans, but the new Canal Treaty and signaled a willingness to eschew colonialism. For Panama the treaty seemed to signal a brighter future.⁵⁷ The future of the U.S. military remained an open question but it seemed likely that negotiations would extend the presence of American soldiers in Panama beyond 1999.

This bright future, however, would become complicated over the subsequent ten years. Omar Torrijos died in 1981 and Manuel Noriega assumed power in 1983.⁵⁸ When Ronald Reagan took office in 1980, it appeared that the Canal Treaty might be renegotiated.⁵⁹ From 1979 to 1989 the presence of American citizens in Panama become extremely complicated and provoked the greatest tension between the two nations in almost 150 years.

⁵⁷ Conniff, *Panama and the United States*, 139.

⁵⁸ Robert C. Harding, *Military Foundations of Panamanian Politics* (New Brunswick, N.J: Transaction Publishers, 2001), 155.

⁵⁹ Clymer, *Drawing the Line at the Big Ditch*, 35.

CHAPTER IV

FLAWED POLICIES AND A GROWING THREAT

On 31 July 1981, a Panamanian Air Force deHaviland-Canada Twin Otter took off from the Rio Hato airfield. The party on board consisted of two pilots, three bodyguards, a secretary and, Maximum Leader Omar Efraín Torrijos Herrera. Torrijos planned to inspect troops and spend the weekend at a mountain villa. Flight conditions were ideal when the plane took off from Rio Hato at 10:44 a.m. and landed fifteen minutes later at Penonomé. After inspecting the base for forty-five minutes, Torrijos and his party departed for their second destination, Coclecito. Heavy rainstorms rolled in and flight conditions became dangerous. The plane began landing, but then dropped from radar coverage, not unusual in the mountainous terrain surrounding the airport. When Torrijos and his party failed to arrive, a search began and located the wreckage a few days later in the Cerro Marta.¹

Investigators failed to establish the exact cause of the crash. The evidence remaining at the crash site offered no explanation, spawning theories about bombs, sabotage, and assassination. The suspects ranged from factions in the Panamanian military, Cuban intelligence, American business interests with the backing of the CIA, and the U.S. military.² Conspiracy theories aside, the death of Torrijos resulted in a succession crisis, as several men vied to replace the Maximum Leader.

¹ “Panama Leader Killed in Crash In Bad Weather: Torrijos Plane Found,” *New York Times*, August 2, 1981.

² Noriega and Eisner, *America’s Prisoner*, 141-142; John Perkins *Confessions of an*

Torrijos died at a transitional moment. The ratification of the 1977 Carter-Torrijos Treaty improved relations between the United States and Panama. Panamanians felt vindicated, knowing they would finally gain control of the Canal. The process would take twenty-two years, but this long delay had been grudgingly accepted. Resolution of the Canal Zone occurred on 1 October 1979, and Panama ceased being bifurcated by a *de facto* American colony. U.S. military bases remained and a final decision on their future remained a lingering concern. If no new agreement were reached, however, the bases would be returned on New Year's Eve 1999, the scheduled handover of the Canal.³ Finally, Torrijos had made a gentleman's agreement with President Carter that he would support a democratic transition.⁴ The relationship between the United States and Panama appeared to be heading in a positive direction until Torrijos' unexpected death. The resulting power vacuum threw the future of U.S.-Panamanian relations in doubt.

Economic Hit Man (San Francisco, CA, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2004). 156-157. In *Getting to Know the General*, Graham Greene at first dismissed any of the notions of a bomb plot when friends in Panama mentioned Torrijos had been assassinated, 187. He reassessed this however in the epilogue when shown bombs used by the Contras in Nicaragua saying that the possibility might exist but it still seemed incredibly remote, 220. The rush to conspiracies overlook the obvious fact that the Twin Otter, like most light aircraft, are dangerous to fly in bad weather and the most likely cause of the crash was a controlled flight into terrain due to pilot error during severe weather.

³ Conniff, *Panama and the United States*, 137, 184.

⁴ Whether Torrijos would have allowed for a democratic government is open to debate since President Carter made clear in a memo to the Bush Administration in May 1989 that an agreed transition in Panama to a democratic government was an informal agreement between Carter and Torrijos and not a binding clause of the Panama Canal Treaty.

The president at the time, Aristides Royo, was a figurehead with no real power. In Panama, whoever controlled the military controlled the country.⁵ The immediate successor to Torrijos as the Chief of the Panamanian armed forces was Colonel Florencio Flores Aguilar. Flores stayed in power for a year until Colonel Ruben Dario Paredes pushed him aside. Paredes also controlled the military for a year, when he resigned and attempted to run for President in 1984.⁶ Manuel Antonio Noriega replaced Paredes as Chief of the Panamanian military and eventually became Maximum Leader.⁷

A career military officer, Noriega became the chief of the G-2 Intelligence section in the Panamanian National Guard. He reached that position and his eventual control of Panama through ruthlessness. The illegitimate son of a civil servant and a maid, Noriega's father never acknowledged him and his mother abandoned him at five years old. Thereafter, a maternal aunt raised him in a poor section of Panama City.⁸ Noriega had been an adequate student and hoped to become a doctor, but poverty and illegitimacy barred him from medicine. Instead, Noriega secured an appointment to the Chorillos Military Academy in Lima, Peru, with the assistance of his paternal half-brother, Luis Carlos Noriega Hurto, a member of the Panamanian diplomatic mission in

⁵ Steve Albert, *The Case Against the General: Manuel Noriega and the Politics of American Justice* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1993), 14.

⁶ Frederick Kempe, *Divorcing the Dictator*, 113-118.

⁷ Albert, *The Case Against the General*, 15-16.

⁸ Murrillo *The Noriega Mess*, 27.

Peru.⁹ During his time at Chorillos, Noriega caught the attention of U.S. intelligence and while still a cadet in 1958 began receiving payments from the United States.¹⁰ After graduating from Chorillos in 1962, Noriega returned to Panama.

Upon his return Noriega earned a commission and was assigned to an intelligence section at David in the Chiriquí province.¹¹ While still a junior officer, Noriega attached himself to Omar Torrijos and sought the senior officer as a mentor. Noriega recalled, “Torrijos had a reputation of being an independent thinker and was well respected among new recruits like me.”¹² Seeking out Torrijos helped Noriega’s

⁹ Kempe, *Divorcing the Dictator*, 47-48.

¹⁰ “Substitution Documents on Noriega Payments,” Panama: General (jan- June), OA/ID CFD 01577, William T. Pryce Files, National Security Council, Bush Presidential Record, George Bush Presidential Library (hereafter cited as GBPL).

These documents were presented by the prosecution at Manuel Noriega’s trial on drug charges in U.S. Federal Court using information from a classified reports and receipts that the CIA and Department of Defense maintained to track the amount of money paid to Noriega and the serves he provided. The original documents were considered non-releasable so the prosecution sought a listing of figures to show how much the United States had paid Noriega and the judge and defense accepted this evidence without seeking the original documents. During the trial and in his biography Noriega disputed the figures and claimed that the United States had actually paid him millions of dollars for intelligence services. The documents show that the DoD continually paid Noriega between 1955 and 1986 with no break in payments. The CIA had a break in payment to Noriega in 1977 and 1978 but otherwise paid him every year between 1955 and 1986.

¹¹ Roger W. Fontaine, “Who is Manuel Antonio Noriega” in *Panama: An Assessment*, ed. Victor H. Krulak (Washington, D.C. U.S. Strategic Institute, 1990), 33.

¹² Noriega and Eisner, *America’s Prisoner*, 27.

career. The older officer “took him under his wing and groomed the young Lieutenant.”¹³

Noriega rose through the ranks and eventually headed an intelligence collection unit established with assistance from the United States military. Noriega received extensive training in intelligence gathering, counterinsurgency, interrogation and counterintelligence. He attended classes at the School of the Americas in the Canal Zone and at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. The training made him a valuable asset to both Torrijos and the United States, but also allowed him to gather information on rivals. His position as intelligence chief aided him in his later takeover of power.¹⁴

At the time of Torrijos’ death, Noriega was the Chief of Intelligence. It seemed unlikely that he would become commander of the National Guard as several officers outranked him. Yet through his shrewd maneuvering, he became head of the military and the de facto leader of Panama. Paredes planned to retire and run for the presidency in 1984.¹⁵ Noriega offered to support Paredes if the retiring general designated Noriega commander of the National Guard. In addition, the plan called for a power-sharing agreement between the commander and the President, weakening the military and taking a step towards civilian rule. Paredes agreed, stepped down from command in 1983, and

¹³ Dinges, *Our Man in Panama*, 31-34.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 34-38.

¹⁵ St. Malo and Harris, *Panamanian Problem*, 45.

supported Noriega as his successor. Once in power, Noriega marginalized Paredes.¹⁶ In the end Nicolas Ardito Barletta became the new president in an election that international observers considered fraudulent.¹⁷ The commander of the Panamanian military remained in control of the state, the elected president stayed a figurehead, and the notion of power sharing vanished.¹⁸

The 1984 elections presented a dilemma for the Reagan Administration since Arnulfo Arias Madrid, the president ousted in the 1968 coup, led the opposition party. The Administration considered him unfit for the presidency and feared that if he won the election, the Panamanian National Guard would depose him again. Noriega encouraged this assessment.¹⁹ Though the elections were a blatant fraud, the lack of U.S. criticism created the impression of an American endorsement for Noriega.²⁰

Once in command of the National Guard, Noriega restructured the government and the armed forces. He isolated popular officers and potential rivals by giving them ambassadorships or other foreign military postings.²¹ He merged all branches of the

¹⁶ Richard Millet, "Looking Beyond Noriega," *Foreign Policy* 71 (Summer 1988): 50.

¹⁷ Margaret E. Scranton, *The Noriega Years: U.S. - Panamanian Relations, 1981-1990* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1991), 72.

¹⁸ German Münoz, *Panamanian Political Reality: The Torrijos Years* (Coral Gables, FL.: University of Miami, May 1981), 9-10.

¹⁹ Millet, "Looking Beyond Noriega," 49-50.

²⁰ Albert, *The Case Against the General*, 15.

²¹ St Malo and Harris, *Panamanian Problem*, 48.

military into one service under his command and named it the Panamanian Defense Force (PDF). Training increased and several paramilitary units were formed whose abilities went beyond maintaining civil order and defending the Panama Canal. One of the new units, *Los Machos del Monte*, trained in light infantry tactics, jungle fighting, and guerilla warfare. They were fiercely loyal to Noriega.²² The PDF developed closer ties to the U.S. military by buying more American-made weapons.²³ Noriega also expanded the role of the military. Soldiers became responsible for traffic enforcement, customs and borders protection, and other functions usually associated with civilian bureaucracies.²⁴ These actions strengthened the grip of the military at the expense of the already weak civilian institutions.²⁵

The United States showed ambivalence toward Noriega's consolidation of power. Noriega had long been on the payroll of the United States Intelligence Community. What he provided in return for payment remains classified, but the Department of Defense and the CIA paid him \$320,000 dollars over the course of thirty

²² Their loyalty to Noriega stemmed in part to the benefits he provided the soldiers. These included tote bags that said "Machos Del Monte" and allowed them special access to seats on public transportation and discounts on goods and services.

²³ Harding, *Military Foundations of Panamanian Politics*, 162.

²⁴ Kempf, *Divorcing the Dictator*, 120-121.

²⁵ Harding, *Military Foundations of Panamanian Politics*, 156.

years.²⁶ This did not make Noriega a loyal ally.²⁷ According to Colin Powell, “You could not buy Manuel Noriega, but you could rent him.”²⁸ Noriega took money not only from the United States, but also from the Cubans, the Soviets, and Colombian Drug Cartels.²⁹

Noriega’s role in drug trafficking raised question and in 1985 the U.S. Department of Justice began investigating him. As the highest-ranking soldier in the Panamanian military Noriega earned \$2,000 dollars a month. This was nowhere near enough to finance a lifestyle that included a yacht, a BMW 750, and private planes.³⁰ The investigations led to an indictment against Noriega for drug trafficking in 1987 but only after public pressure compelled the Reagan Administration.

The relationship between the United States government and the Noriega regime publicly soured after the *New York Times* published an exposé by Seymour Hersh. Hersh had famously reported on the My Lai Massacre in Vietnam. He went on to become a staff writer for the *New York Times* and the *New Yorker*, and had a reputation for exposing major scandals.³¹ The June 1986 article brought Noriega to the attention

²⁶ “Substitution Documents on Noriega Payments,” OA/ID CFD 01577, William T. Pryce Files, National Security Council, Bush Presidential Records, GBPL.

²⁷ Harding, *Military Foundations of Panamanian Politics*, 172.

²⁸ Colin Powell, *My American Journey* (New York: Random House, 1995), 415.

²⁹ Harris, *Shooting The Moon*, 32-33.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

³¹ Conniff, *Panama and the United States*, 155.

of the American public. Hersh alleged that Noriega was involved in drug trafficking, arms running and selling intelligence to the United States, Cuba and the Soviet Union. Hersh contended, “General Noriega's activities [were] a potential national security threat because of the strategic importance of Panama and the Panama Canal.” The article concluded, “Many American officials, despite their hostility to General Noriega's involvement in [drug trafficking], expressed admiration for his ability to keep his various constituencies—such as the United States and Cuba—at bay.”³² Hersh’s article marked a turning point in the relationship.

Noriega had supported counterdrug missions flying out of U.S. military bases in Panama, and the Drug Enforcement Agency’s Joint Inter-Agency Task Force headquartered at Howard Air Force Base, Panama. The same day that the *New York Times* published Hersh’s article, Noriega received a medal at Fort McNair from the Inter-American Defense Board for Panama’s support to counterdrug missions.³³ The timing was less than ideal and showed how Noriega had played both sides by facilitating drug shipments while helping counterdrug operations. It also revealed the ignorance of US government officials.

³² Seymour M. Hersh, “Panama Strongman Said To Trade In Drugs, Arms And Illicit Money,” *New York Times* June 12, 1986.

³³ Crandell, *Gunboat Democracy*, 191.

The Defense Department and the CIA ended payments to Noriega after publication of the Hersh article.³⁴ The Justice Department's investigation was fast-tracked and on 17 July 1987 indictments for drug trafficking and money laundering were filed in Federal courts in Miami and Tampa against Noriega.³⁵ The Reagan Administration used the indictments to encourage Noriega to step down from power. By 1988 his requirement that the indictments be thrown out became politically unacceptable in the United States. Vice President Bush was campaigning for the Presidency in 1988 and his political opponents made Noriega a campaign issue. So the Reagan Administration changed its policies to force Noriega to step down.³⁶

In April 1988 the President Reagan signed Executive Order 12635. It imposed economic sanctions that stopped payments from the Panama Canal Commission, and prevented any "direct or indirect payments or transfers from the United States to the Noriega regime."³⁷ From that moment forward, "all U.S. citizens in Panama had to cease payments to Panamanians."³⁸ The sanctions made it illegal for all American

³⁴ "Substitution Documents on Noriega Payments," OA/ID CFD 01577, William T. Pryce Files, National Security Council, Bush Presidential Records, GBPL.

³⁵ Harris, *Shooting the Moon*, 15.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 281-283.

³⁷ Ronald Reagan, "Prohibiting certain transactions with respect to Panama" Executive Order 12635, 8 April 1988 <<http://www.archives.gov/federal-register/codification/executive-order/12635.html>> accessed 9 December 2011.

³⁸ Ronald Reagan, "Statement on Economic Sanctions Against Panama" (televised address, Washington, D.C., 11 March 1988) <<http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1988/031188a.htm>> accessed 3 December 2011.

citizens residing in Panama to pay their rents, buy goods, and engage in most business transactions.³⁹ Clearly, the second and third order effects of EO 12635 had not been considered, as thousands of American citizens were forced to choose between following American law or alienating their Panamanian hosts.⁴⁰ EO 12635 and the indictments were seen as a ploy to encourage Noriega to relinquish power since the United States did not have an extradition treaty with Panama.⁴¹ The Panamanian president at the time, Eric Delvalle, used the indictments as a pretext to fire Noriega as Commander of the PDF. Noriega ignored the order and instead ousted the president from office, replacing him with the more amenable Manuel Solis Palma.⁴²

While the Reagan Administration worked to reach an agreement with Noriega, the 1988 presidential campaign had been ongoing. Vice President George Bush, a candidate, faced accusations that he had known of Noriega's wrongdoing since at least 1976, when he served as the Director of Central Intelligence. No conclusive evidence directly linked Noriega to Bush. However, this did not stop political innuendo and mudslinging during the Republican primaries. Republicans Bob Dole and Jack Kemp both accused the Vice President of having been either oblivious to Noriega's crimes or acquiescent. If elected they would deal with Noriega to ensure that a dictator did not

³⁹ Yates, *The U.S. Military Intervention in Panama*, 143.

⁴⁰ William R Gianelli, "The Panama Canal and the Canal Zone" in *Panama an Assessment*, 11.

⁴¹ Dinges, *Our Man in Panama*, 283.

⁴² Conniff, *Panama and the United States*, 158-159.

gain control of the Panama Canal, when the United States turned it over in eleven years, something they asserted Bush was incapable of doing.⁴³ The issue did not derail the Bush campaign during the primaries and he was able to stave-off his Republican challengers.

Accusations resurfaced during the general election and Governor Michael Dukakis, the Democratic candidate, tried several times to make Noriega and his ties to Bush a campaign issue. During the first presidential debate Dukakis stated that the United States under Reagan had been “dealing with a drug-running Panamanian dictator.” He went on to attack the Vice President by stating “if our government itself is doing business with people who we know are engaged in drug profiteering and drug trafficking... that sends out a very, very bad message.” In his rebuttal, Bush avoided addressing Dukakis’s comments and instead implied the governor had potentially compromised classified information.⁴⁴ The Vice President then went on to say “seven Administrations” dealt “with Mr. Noriega” and “it was the Reagan-Bush Administration that brought this man to justice.” While true that the CIA and Department of Defense had Noriega on their payrolls since 1958, it was unlikely either Eisenhower or Kennedy

⁴³ Stephen Engelberg and Jeff Gerth, “Rivals Hint that Bush Understates Knowledge of Noriega Ties,” *The Washington Post*, May 8, 1988.

⁴⁴ John L. Helgerson, *Getting To Know the President: Intelligence Briefings of Presidential Candidates, 1952-2004* (Langley, VA: Central Intelligence Agency, 2012), 125-126.

were briefed on an obscure Panamanian Cadet.⁴⁵ Bush then went on to say, “there was no evidence that Mr. Noriega was involved in drugs, no hard evidence until we indicted him.” Bush admitted that he had met Noriega, but this occurred when Bush received the Panamanian president, Noriega was merely in attendance. In his closing remarks, Governor Dukakis tried to link Noriega to Bush by saying “the Administration has been doing business with Noriega. Has made him a part of our foreign policy.” He warned “You cannot make concessions to terrorists. If you do, you invite the taking of more hostages.”⁴⁶

After the debate, the Dukakis campaign tried once more to paint Bush as complicit in Noriega’s actions. A commercial began airing 21 September 1988 that showed Bush meeting with Noriega. It stated, “In 1982 George Bush was made responsible for stopping drug traffic from coming into this country. What happened? Cocaine traffic up 300%, more drugs in our classroom, and Panamanian drug lord Noriega kept on the government payroll. That’s the George Bush record on drug

⁴⁵ This was likely the case for the Johnson and Nixon Administrations since during those presidencies Noriega was a junior officer in the Panamanian military. The first President likely to be made aware of any dealing with Noriega would have been Gerald Ford since Noriega was the head of Panamanian Intelligence at that time. It should also be noted that the Carter Administration had the CIA halt payments to Noriega in 1977 and 1978, though the DoD continued to pay Noriega. So to say that the Reagan Administration was the first to deal with Noriega is a gross exaggeration.

⁴⁶ George Bush and Michael Dukakis, “The First Bush-Dukakis Presidential Debate” televised debate Winston Salem, NC 25 September 1989
<<http://www.debates.org/index.php?page=september-25-1988-debate-transcript>>
accessed 12 December 2012.

control.”⁴⁷ The efforts by the Dukakis campaign, like those in the primaries, did not harm Bush’s Presidential campaign. However, they did highlight U.S. involvement with Noriega.

George Herbert Walker Bush was inaugurated the forty-first President of the United States on 20 January 1989. The issue of Panama loomed throughout his first year. Economic sanctions and a criminal indictment had failed to convince Noriega to step down from power. The sanctions crippled the Panamanian economy and created resentment against American citizens in Panama, who were not meeting their financial obligations. At the same time the Bush Administration dealt with Noriega, the Cold War began to thaw. Eastern Europe separated from the Soviet sphere of influence, protests in Tiananmen Square rocked China, and anti-communist struggles in Central America were ending. Throughout these events the Bush Administration had appeared unable to deal with a tiny country often portrayed as the creation of the United States and a region seen as an American territory since 1903.⁴⁸ Panama also had the fourth largest expatriate population of American citizens aside from West Germany, the United Kingdom, and

⁴⁷ “1982 Noriega,” Dukakis, 1988. Museum of the Moving Image, The Living Room Candidate: Presidential Campaign Commercials 1952-2012. www.livingroomcandidate.org/commercials/1988/1982-noriega (accessed 10 December 2012).

⁴⁸ Szok, *Ultima Gaviota*, 33.

Japan.⁴⁹ Instead of exerting decisive influence, the President spent the next year facing accusations of being a “wimp” in matters of foreign policy.⁵⁰

The first piece of cited as evidence for the “wimp” image was the failure of the President to stop harassment of American citizens in Panama. In the United States, the *Washington Post* and *Christian Science Monitor* reported on the harassment.⁵¹ The 20 March 1989 *Army Times* cover story “Terror In Panama” exposed the attacks on American citizens. The story highlighted a pattern of assaults on service members and their families by the Panamanian military. The first occurred when a U.S. Navy Petty Officer was stopped at a roadblock, kidnapped, robbed and left in the jungles outside of Panama City.⁵² The second, more sensational incident occurred on 3 March 1989. Twenty-one buses carrying American children from U.S. military bases to their schools were stopped at a checkpoint manned by Panamanian soldiers and held at gunpoint. The soldiers accused the buses of not having the appropriate Panamanian registration, which the U.S. buses did not have because economic sanctions prevented them from paying the Panamanian government for them. The soldiers then tried to tow the buses with the

⁴⁹ *U.S. Census, 1990: General Population Characteristics United States* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1990).

⁵⁰ Bruce Curtis, “The Wimp Factor,” *American Heritage Magazine* 40, no. 7 (November 1989), 18.

⁵¹ Brook Larmer, “Noriega Pressures U.S. Residents.” *The Christian Science Monitor*, March 16, 1989; John M Goshko, “Panama Canal Official Says Harassment Growing.” *The Washington Post*, March 28, 1989.

⁵² Tom Donnelly, “Terror in Panama,” *Army Times*, March, 20 1989.

children still on board. A standoff ensued when U.S. Army soldiers were called in. Hundreds of children remained onboard, surrounded by heavily armed men.⁵³ American embassy officials negotiated an end to the standoff without violence. The school bus incident and other provocations throughout 1987 and 1988 were clearly part of an “escalating pattern of harassment against US personnel.” The articles concluded that the President, the Joint Chiefs, and officials in Washington had ignored the threats and not protected American citizens.⁵⁴ An American officer told the *Christian Science Monitor*, “You want to react. But what can you do that wouldn’t put Americans even more at risk.”⁵⁵ This was the dilemma facing President Bush. Political pressure forced him to act yet U.S. actions had done little except place hundreds of American school children in danger.

Noriega calculated that the pattern of harassment would intimidate the Bush Administration. The CIA provided the President with a report that highlighted how Noriega organized his harassment campaign. It warned, “Incidents involving US personnel are numerous but there has been an increase in both number and seriousness in the last two months.” The goal of this harassment was to “force Washington to rethink economic sanctions” prior to a statutory review of EO 12635 in April 1989. In addition the CIA warned that the harassment might “fan anti-US and nationalist sentiment”

⁵³ Yates, *The U.S. Military Intervention in Panama*, 146.

⁵⁴ Tom Donnelly, “Terror in Panama,” *Army Times*, March 20, 1989.

⁵⁵ Brook Larmer, “Noriega Pressures U.S. Residents,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, March 16, 1989.

among Panamanians. The report continued, “Noriega may also calculate that the increasing use of harassment will provoke a US reaction” that would anger Panamanians. Nationalist anger could then be used to his advantage. The report warned that Noriega was likely to “continue and possibly escalate his present effort to make life difficult for US personnel.”⁵⁶

Harassment led to a proposal to isolate U.S. Military bases from Panama, similar to the barriers that separated Guantanamo Naval Base from Cuba. The administration quickly dismissed the plan because the bases were not connected and a majority of facilities such as hospitals, commissaries, and even Quarry Heights (U.S. Southern Command headquarters) would remain in territory under Panamanian jurisdiction.⁵⁷ A democratic transition seemed to be the best means to resolve the issue and bring about a peaceable transfer of power. Panama scheduled presidential elections to occur on 7 May 1989.⁵⁸

Unlike the 1984 election, the 1989 election appeared likely to be open and fair since Noriega invited international election monitors. The possibility existed that if the vote went against Noriega he would be isolated and the military’s grip on power would

⁵⁶ CIA report, “The Harassment of U.S. Personnel in Panama: Patterns and Objectives” Directorate of Intelligence, March 13, 1989, Panama Files, Panama [9], OA/ID# CF00741-022, National Security Council, Nicholas Rostow Files, Bush Presidential Records, GBPL.

⁵⁷ Trip Report, March 11, 1989, Panama (Economic issues), OA/ID# CF 00732, William T. Pryce Files, National Security Council, Bush Presidential Records, GBPL.

⁵⁸ Robert A. Strong, *Decisions and Dilemmas: Case Studies in Presidential Foreign Policy Making Since 1945*, 2nd ed. (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2005), 180.

be weakened, allowing for Panama to transition to a democratic government from one of overt military rule.⁵⁹ The CIA warned on 24 April 1989, however, that “without major U.S. initiative,” Noriega would be able to “reassert his hold on power in Panama” regardless of the election results. The Panamanian people “would accept” fraud and “the election would strengthen his position in the Defense Forces.”⁶⁰ The CIA also warned that regardless of election results, nothing “will convince Noriega to end his harassment campaign” against American citizens. Thus President Bush could expect harassment to escalate unless he recognized Noriega’s political appointees or ended economic sanctions.⁶¹ Despite the CIA’s pessimistic reports, the Bush Administration had high hopes for the elections.

The international election monitors sent to Panama included the National Democratic Institute (NDI), a non-profit NGO formed in 1983 to promote democratic government and fair elections. The organization previously monitored the 1987 election in the Philippines that ended the reign of Ferdinand Marcos. The presence of outside elections monitors seemed to indicate that the elections would be free and fair. Former U.S. President Carter led the NDI delegation, because as Ken Wollack, executive Vice-

⁵⁹ Harding, *Military Foundations of Panamanian Politics*, 174.

⁶⁰ Intelligence Analysis, April 24, 1989, Latina America Directory [2], OA/ID# CF 00732, William T. Pryce Files, National Security Council, Bush Presidential Records, GBPL.

⁶¹ Harassment of DOD Personnel in Panama 1 Feb 88 - 10 May 89, May 11, 1989, Panama Files, Panama [5], OA/ID# CF00741-016, Nicholas Rostow Files, National Security Council, Bush Presidential Records, GBPL.

President for NDI, stated, “it would be impossible for Noriega to say no to Jimmy Carter.” The former president remained popular in Panama for having supported the ratification of the 1977 Torrijos-Carter Treaty.⁶² A separate delegation of U.S. Congressmen and Senators also went.

The Congressional delegation flew to Howard Air Force Base and toured U.S. military installations. When the group planned to leave American controlled territory General Frederick Woerner, the Commander of U.S. Southern Command (CINCSO), warned that he could not prevent their detention if they entered Panama without prior approval. He would make every effort to prevent or minimize their detention, but because they had entered a sovereign nation illegally the U.S. military could not directly interfere.⁶³ The group was not detained, but they reported to the White House that “[Southern command] was part of the problem, not part of the solution.” U.S. Secretary of State James Baker recalled that Senator John McCain in particular complained about Woerner’s timid attitude.⁶⁴

Despite negative perceptions, Woerner had a great deal of experience in Panama and Latin America. His career had been divided between infantry assignments and attaché postings throughout Latin America. He was fluent in Spanish, had a Master’s degree in Latin American history, and had been the Army War College director of Latin

⁶² Douglas Brinkley, *The Unfinished Presidency* (New York: Viking, 1998), 277.

⁶³ Harris, *Shooting The Moon*, 319.

⁶⁴ James A. Baker III and Thomas M. DeFrank, *Politics of Diplomacy: Revolution, War, and Peace, 1989-1992* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1995), 184.

American studies. The General also attended the Uruguayan War College in 1969, resulting in close personal ties with senior military officers throughout the Western Hemisphere. His familiarity with the region made him ideal to lead U.S. Southern Command's diplomatic mission. But the White House and Congress did not see Woerner's handling of Noriega as forceful enough.⁶⁵ U.S. Southern Command appeared ineffectual and American citizens in Panama and the visiting Senators gave General Woerner the moniker "Wimp Woerner."⁶⁶ The criticism against General Woerner was unfair since the White House had ordered him to avoid an escalation.⁶⁷

The elections began without incident, but within hours it appeared that Noriega's chosen candidate, Carlos Duque, had lost. Ballot boxes were immediately seized, and Duque declared the victor. A report by the NDI delegation spoke of a myriad of intimidation tactics undertaken by Noriega's regime and preparations for election fraud such as the stacking of ballots in favor of Duque appeared obvious.⁶⁸ When election fraud became apparent, Carter called a press conference the next day. He made it clear the elections were not free and fair. Noriega's candidates won through deception.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Yates, *The U.S. Military Intervention in Panama*, 240.

⁶⁶ Harris, *Shooting The Moon*, 321; Kurt Muse, *Six Minutes to Freedom* (Secaucus, NJ: Citadel Press, 2006), 56.

⁶⁷ Bob Woodward, *The Commanders* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991), 115.

⁶⁸ Brinkley, *The Unfinished Presidency*, 275.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 284.

The situation worsened over the next few days when a paramilitary group loyal to Noriega called “Dobermans” attacked Guillermo Endara, the projected winner, and his two vice presidents during protest marches. The “Dobermans” beat one of the Vice-Presidential candidates, Billy Ford, with sticks and shot his bodyguard. News agencies worldwide published a photograph of Ford covered in blood with his hands up, while a man attacked him with a stick. The candidates fled, with Endara seeking refuge in the Papal Nunciature and the two vice presidents on a U.S. Military base.⁷⁰ The United States and the Organization of American States (OAS) condemned the subversion of the democratic process to little effect. The Panamanian election commission declared Noriega’s candidate the winner.⁷¹ As the CIA had warned, Noriega engaged in blatant fraud yet remained in power.

The elections were the final hope to peacefully improve relations between the United States and Panama. President Bush had authorized Carter to negotiate with Noriega after the election to consider going into exile in Spain, which did not have an extradition treaty. Madrid showed a willingness to welcome what it considered “people from the colonies.”⁷² At a press conference President Bush condemned the fraudulent election. When asked about Panama he said “[Noriega] knows my position” and “if he does leave we would have the instant restoration of normal relations with Panama. That

⁷⁰ Yates, *The U.S. Military Intervention in Panama*, 169.

⁷¹ Edward M. Flanagan, *Battle for Panama: Inside Operation Just Cause* (London, UK: Brassey’s, 1993), 15-16.

⁷² Flanagan, *Battle for Panama*, 283.

has been conveyed to him very, very recently.”⁷³ When asked if the indictments would be dropped, President Bush stated, “I’m not going to do that. That has profound implications for our fight against narcotics, which has got to be worldwide.” When asked about the threat to American citizens the President stated, “I will do what is necessary to protect the lives of American citizens.” He continued by saying “we will not be intimidated by the bullying tactics, brutal though they may be, of the dictator, Noriega.” Near the end of the press conference a reporter asked, “Are you concerned about [Noriega] taking hostages.” The President reemphasized that, “I’m concerned about protecting the lives of Americans.”⁷⁴

At the time of the May elections, 51,305 American citizens lived in Panama. Only 10,130 were U.S. military personnel, and there was only one combat unit, the 193rd Infantry Brigade.⁷⁵ The 193rd reported directly to the Commander of U.S. Southern Command but were only trained to defend the Canal. The majority of U.S. military members worked as Foreign Area Officers and planners. U.S. Southern Command primarily conducted military-to-military relations by liaising with Latin America armed

⁷³ This is likely in reference to the statement by Jimmy Carter that he was authorized to tell Noriega that the United States would allow him to seek exile in Spain if he would step down. Quoted in Brinkley, *The Unfinished Presidency*, 283.

⁷⁴ George H.W. Bush, “Remarks and a Question-and-Answer Session With Reporters on the Situation in Panama,” Press Briefing (Washington, D.C., 11 May 1989) <<http://bushlibrary.tamu.edu/research/publicpapers.php?id=408&year=1989&month=5>> accessed 3 December 2011.

⁷⁵ American Community in Panama as of 31 Mar 89, SOUTHCOM PAO, May 31, 1989, Panama Files, Panama [6], OA/ID CF00741-019, Nicolas Rostow Files, National Security Council, Bush Presidential Records, GBPL.

forces. They had not conducted major military operations. The rest of the American citizens in Panama were spouses and children of military members, Department of Defense civilians, American workers in the PCC, and retirees—the very people to target.

Economic sanctions remained ineffective and a political solution vanished following the fraudulent elections. A direct military intervention appeared to be the remaining course of action, so the United States military and U.S. Southern Command revised ELABORATE MAZE, the 1986 contingency plan to defend the Canal. The revision represented a radical departure from U.S. Southern Command's previous plans, which presumed the Panamanian military would support the United States. The new plan considered the Panamanian Military the adversary. It focused on two concerns: preventing sabotage of the Panama Canal and protecting American citizens in Panama.⁷⁶

Woerner's plan had four separate phases. The first phase, KLONDIKE KEY, established "assembly areas in Panama City and Colón" and called "for evacuation to the United States" of non-combat personnel and civilians." The second phase, POST TIME, slowly increased the amount of U.S. troops in the country to intimidate the Panamanian military and encourage a coup against Noriega, negating a direct U.S. military intervention. If an overt threat against American Citizens occurred, then the third phase, BLUE SPOON, would commence. This phase would be "a joint offensive operation to defeat and dismantle the Panama Defense Force while protecting U.S. lives, U.S. property, and the Canal." But would occur only after "the slow deliberate placement of

⁷⁶ Cole, *Operation Just Cause*, 101.

troops in Panama . . . over a two-week period.” The final phase, BLIND LOGIC, planned for U.S. troops in Panama to establish civil control after a coup or combat. Ultimately the plan sought to create a new Panamanian government that would “reconstruct the PDF, reducing its size and powers and institutionalizing its loyalty to civilian authority and democratic government.”⁷⁷

During the summer of 1989 while the OAS attempted to mediate the elections, the United States slowly began to build up its forces in Panama as part of POST TIME.⁷⁸ By July the White House had lost confidence in Woerner and became frustrated with his slow, methodical pace. The General had followed orders to not provoke Noriega, but he appeared unsuited to lead a direct military intervention in Panama. Instead, the overzealous General Maxwell Thurman, who had no knowledge of Latin America, replaced Woerner on 1 October 1989.⁷⁹

At the same time the White House announced a change of command in U.S. Southern Command, it issued National Security Directive 17 on 22 July 1989. The directive authorized “military actions designed to assert U.S. treaty rights in Panama and

⁷⁷ Ibid., 8-9.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 10-11.

⁷⁹ Richard Halloran, “U.S. Military Chief Is Replaced In the Central American Region,” *New York Times*, July 21, 1989.

to keep Noriega and his supporters off guard.”⁸⁰ It increased the number of troops and evacuated military dependents from Panama. Between May and December 1989, the United States evacuated 15,805 nonessential American citizens. The directive also recalled all military personnel onto bases, which had limited housing for families, and no accommodations for bachelor officers. Nonetheless tensions off base required a relocation.⁸¹

U.S. policy had encouraged the removal of Noriega from power. The policies had failed. Economic sanctions made American citizens a target of hostility. Supporting elections to bring a peaceful democratic transition had been squashed with the fraudulent elections of May 1989. Besides a U.S. military intervention the only policy remaining to the United States was to encourage a military coup against Noriega by the PDF. As anticipated in U.S. Southern Command’s contingency plan, PRAYER BOOK.

On 3 October 1989 Major Moisés Giroldi Vega, the commander of the PDF 4th Infantry Company, led a coup.⁸² Giroldi told the CIA about the coup and they had high hopes for its success. General Thurman, in contrast, expressed his doubts, since the coup occurred three days after he took command of U.S. Southern Command. The

⁸⁰ Quoted in Cole, *Operation Just Cause*, 11. NSD 17 has not been reviewed for release or release has been denied in full. Cole was granted access to the document as part of his duty of writing the Department of Defense’s official history of Operation Just Cause.

⁸¹ Yates, *The U.S. Military Intervention in Panama*, 145.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 248.

General suspected that the coup was a ploy to embarrass him.⁸³ General Colin Powell, who had also taken over as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff two days earlier, shared Thurman's hesitation. The United States knew little about Giroldi and the few facts that the CIA confirmed were not reassuring. Giroldi had been seen as a Noriega loyalist up to that point, having put down a coup the previous year. His plans for Panama after the coup were a mystery. Powell recalled, "we did not want to replace one military dictator with another."⁸⁴

The coup plotters received the blessing of the United States, but were told that U.S. military forces would not take a direct part. The coup began well enough, with the capture of Noriega at the PDF headquarters at the *Comandancia*, but quickly unraveled. Giroldi planned to ask Noriega to step down and go into exile. This did not occur and a tense stand off ensued until Noriega called the *Machos Del Monte*, stationed in Rio Hato, as reinforcements.⁸⁵ They stormed the *Comandancia* and the plotters surrendered after a gun battle. With the failure of the 3 October coup, it seemed that all options had been exhausted. At this point the plan to carry out Operation BLUE SPOON had been revised and Thurman put an accelerated timetable into place with the military planning

⁸³ Woodward, *The Commanders*, 120.

⁸⁴ Powell, *My American Journey*, 421.

⁸⁵ Yates, *The U.S. Military Intervention in Panama*, 248.

effort being assumed by the XVIII Airborne Corps in Fort Bragg because Thurman did not feel U.S. Southern Command had the ability to plan a large-scale military invasion.⁸⁶

The failed October coup brought recrimination against U.S. Southern Command and the Bush Administration. At best, critics in Washington viewed President Bush as an incompetent who deserved the “wimp” moniker; at worst, he was coddling a drug-dealing dictator, who had incriminating evidence against him and the CIA. The options facing the Bush Administration dwindled, as diplomatic pressure from the OAS seemed unlikely to dislodge Noriega. Economic sanctions had a limited impact and only succeeded in alienating Panamanians, as American citizens did not pay their bills. In fact the policy to open military shopettes to American citizens appeared a return of the reviled *commisario* of the Canal Zone days. Finally a coup against Noriega, the main goal of ELABORATE MAZE, failed. This left the Bush Administration with limited options as political pressure built. U.S. Congressmen and Senators called for a freezing of the Canal Treaty until Panama elected a democratic government. Such an action would have thrown Panama into chaos and stoked nationalist sentiments, an outcome Noriega desired.⁸⁷ In the end the United States used military force to remove Noriega from power, returning to the precedents of the nineteenth century. This was merely the

⁸⁶ Woodward, *The Commanders*, 121.

⁸⁷ Duane Tananbaum, “President Bush, Congress, and the War Powers: Panama and the Persian Gulf,” in *From Cold War to New World Order: The Foreign Policy of George H.W. Bush*, Meenekshi Bose and Rosanna Perotti, eds. (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2002), 191.

means to an end, the protection of the American citizens in Panama. The only way these ends could come about however was through military force. Political, diplomatic, and economic pressure had not convinced Noriega to step down. In fact, they worsened the situation.

CHAPTER V

THE DECISION TO USE FORCE

The primary objective of the PRAYER BOOK contingency plan had been to encourage the Panamanian military to abandon Noriega. The coup's failure placed the Bush Administration in a difficult position.¹ Both Democrats and Republicans criticized the Administration for failing to oust Noriega. Some likened the failure to the 1961 Bay of Pigs fiasco, when President John F. Kennedy declined to support Cuban exiles attempting to overthrow Fidel Castro with U.S. air support. Congressman Les Aspin (D-WI), Chairman of the House Armed Services committee, claimed that the Bush Administration and U.S. Southern Command "did not seize the moment." Congressman Dave McCurdy (D-OK) said, "it would apparently have been relatively easy to support the rebels, but the Administration blinked," and, "Yesterday makes Jimmy Carter look like a man of resolve. There's a resurgence of the wimp factor."²

Senator Jesse Helms (R-NC), the ranking Republican on the Senate Armed Services committee, had often denounced the U.S. policy towards Panama as being too

¹ PRAYER BOOK was a series of Contingency Plans developed by General Frederick Woerner, General Thurman's predecessor as CINCSO. PRAYER BOOK had four parts: first was KLONDIKE KEY, a Noncombatant Evacuation Operation (NEO); second, POST TIME, a deployment of troops to Panama and a series of exercises that were meant to intimidate the PDF and encourage a coup against Noriega; third, BLUE SPOON, combat operation in Panama; fourth, BLIND LOGIC, the post combat and rebuilding phase of operation. The plan assessed that POST TIME would have a strong likelihood of success in encouraging a coup against Noriega and make military action unnecessary if the U.S. military waited and delayed military action.

² "Congressional Criticism Mounts Over Bush Inaction in Panama With Panama," *Associated Press*, October 4, 1989.

accommodating. Helms said that the Administration had reacted like a bunch of “Keystone Kops.”³ A long time opponent of the 1977 Panama Canal Treaty, Helms used any opportunity to show that Panamanian leaders could not be trusted to control the Canal and, thus, the United States should abrogate the treaty. The failed coup allowed him to gain support in Congress.⁴ He also led an anti-Noriega coalition in Congress that criticized the Administration. The coalition saw bipartisan support with both Democrats and Republicans criticizing the President and demanding a solution.⁵ The safety of American citizens remained a secondary concern to them.

Helms used the crisis as an argument to nullify or at least delay the Canal Treaty until a democratic government replaced Noriega. Many in Washington thought that democracy had been a precondition for turning over the Canal. Former President Carter, however, admitted that such an agreement had been reached informally.⁶ Any change to the treaty would have angered Panamanians and allowed Noriega to stoke nationalist sentiments. Some Senators came to Bush’s defense, including Senator Christopher J.

³ David Hoffman and Ann Devroy, “U.S. Was Caught Off Guard by Coup Attempt,” *Washington Post*, October 6, 1989.

⁴ Frederick Kempe “The Panama Debacle” in *Conflict Resolution and Democratization in Panama: Implications for U.S.* Eva Loser ed. (Washington, D.C.: The Center for Strategic and International Studies, 1992), 73.

⁵ William A. Link, *Righteous Warrior: Jesse Helms and the Rise of Modern Conservatism* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 2008), 325.

⁶ “Statement regarding elections in Panama,” May 8, 1989, Panama Jan. 20, 1989- Dec. 31, 1989 [1of2], OA/ID CF 01577, William Pryce, Latin American Directorate Staff Files, National Security Council, Bush Vice Presidential Records, GBPL.

Dodd (D-CT), head of the Western Hemisphere subcommittee of the Senate Foreign Relations committee. He said “They hate Noriega in Panama, but abrogate the treaty and they'd build monuments to him in every village.”⁷

Noriega used failed coup to close ranks by purging the military. He order ten officers executed and jailed seventy-seven with questionable loyalty.⁸ The message was clear: disloyalty would be severely punished. After the failed October coup, the likelihood of the military turning against Noriega vanished. The U.S. contingency plan now entered into the only remaining option to deal with Noriega—a direct U.S. military intervention.

General Thurman ordered the limited withdrawal of military families with small children.⁹ Between May and December 1989, the U.S. military evacuated 15,805 American citizens. These evacuations were not part of the planned large-scale evacuation. In addition to the limited evacuation of noncombatants, Thurman rehearsed the large-scale evacuation of all American citizens in Panama and ensured they all knew the location of their extraction point.¹⁰ The Bush Administration and U.S. Southern

⁷ R. W. Apple Jr., “3 Top Opponents Of Noriega Assaulted In Street Melee; Disputed Election Nullified; Bush's Trap On Panama,” *New York Times*, May 11, 1989.

⁸ Thomas M. Leonard, *Panama, the Canal and the United States: A Guide to the Issues and References* (Claremont, CA: Regina Books 1993), 103-104.

⁹ Woodward, *The Commanders*, 130. Between May and December 1989 a total of 15,805 American citizens left Panama. The Department of Defense also stopped new personnel from moving to Panama as part of normal annual job rotations.

¹⁰ Cole, *Operation Just Cause*, 8.

Command had to handle the evacuation carefully since it could not appear that a large-scale withdrawal was underway, which would have been interpreted as weakness both at home and abroad. Admiral William Crowe, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff prior to Colin Powell, asked Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney to transfer U.S. Southern Command's headquarters to Florida, allowing the CINCSO to focus on the rest of Latin America. Cheney flatly rejected the idea because, "No matter how it was dressed up, it would look like the United States was running. Just can't do it, no matter what the merits."¹¹

An exodus of Americans could have been perceived as the Bush Administration abandoning Panama. In 1977 President Carter's critics accused him of giving away the Canal.¹² Now, if President Bush ordered a large-scale evacuation of Americans from a region that ten years earlier had been considered part of the United States, he would have been condemned for surrendering to Noriega. The international perception likely played a role as well, since an American departure might have complicated the still ongoing the Cold War, though history has shown it was beginning to end.¹³ The evacuation of the United States from Panama would have lent an image of weakness on the international stage. For this reason the Bush Administration downplayed the limited evacuation of Americans.

¹¹ Quoted in Woodward, *The Commanders*, 103.

¹² Donoghue, *Borderland on the Isthmus*, loc 248.

¹³ Jeff Engel, "A Better World. . . but Don't Get Carried Away: The Foreign Policy of George H.W. Bush Twenty Years On," *Diplomatic History* 34, no.1 (January 2010): 26.

Thurman also prepared U.S. Southern Command for war by injecting a warrior spirit.¹⁴ First he required all military members under his command to wear the camouflage Battle Dress Uniform, instead of the more formal service dress that had been the standard. Thurman thought U.S. Southern Command “didn’t have the horsepower, staff or communications to run any large contingency operations.”¹⁵ Thurman looked to revise the contingency plan and in particular the combat phase, BLUE SPOON. The revision focused on the rapid deployment of U.S. troops into Panama from the United States. Instead of bringing forces in over a two-week period, he called for a lightning fast strike using airborne troops.¹⁶ He had also shifted military planning from U.S. Southern Command to the XVIII Airborne Corps at Fort Bragg.¹⁷ His experience as commander of the Army’s Training and Doctrine Command meant that Thurman was familiar with the modern capabilities of the U.S. Army and the feasibility of a large-scale airborne assault.¹⁸ In order to prepare for military action, Thurman had U.S. troops run a series of field training exercises.

¹⁴ Yates, *The U.S. Military Intervention in Panama*, 246.

¹⁵ Woodward, *The Commanders*, 103.

¹⁶ Cole, *Operation Just Cause*, 19.

¹⁷ Woodward, *The Commanders*, 121.

¹⁸ Maxwell R. Thurman, *Today's Victories And Tomorrow's Army, Institute of Land Warfare* (Arlington, VA: Association of the United States Army, Institute of Land Warfare, 1991), 2.

General Thurman had his staff begin rehearsing the execution of Operation BLUE SPOON. He wanted every detail refined “to a cat’s eye.” In order to get this level of detail the General had his staff “rehearse [the combat phase] every two months” telling them this would continue “for the next ten years.”¹⁹ The U.S. military spent the October and November in a constant series of exercises. The exercises were broken into two parts. First, large-scale maneuvers that rehearsed joint operations, which included seizing military objectives, securing bases and protecting American citizens.²⁰ The second, called for a series of small exercises that involved individual Army and Marine units.

During October and November the United States military conducted five large and forty-four small exercises.²¹ The increased activity strained the troops and military staffs. U.S. Southern Command still maintained its responsibility for supporting U.S. interests in the whole of Latin America and the Caribbean while it prepared for combat. Moving into December, military exercises declined as the Christmas holidays approached. The Panamanians relaxed for the holidays and Noriega recalled, “My troops had been reduced for the holidays; our bases had skeleton staffs.”²²

¹⁹ Quoted in Woodward, *The Commanders*, 133.

²⁰ De Mena, *Operation Just Cause, Promote Liberty Supplement, Annual Command History*, 8.

²¹ de Mena, *Operation Just Cause, Promote Liberty Supplement*, 7.

²² Noriega and Eisner, *America’s Prisoner*, 6-7.

Any notion of a break for the holidays vanished on 15 December when Noriega spoke to the Panamanian General Assembly. First he declared himself “Maximum Leader of Panama.” The assembly approved the measure.²³ Omar Torrijos had taken the same title. By appropriating it Noriega hoped to inspire nationalist sentiments against the United States.²⁴ His next statement declared Panama to be in “a state of war so long as the United States continues its policy of aggression.” The fiery rhetoric and language was meant for a Panamanian audience to build support for Noriega and condemn the past two months of U.S. military exercises. He continued, “We Panamanians will sit on the banks of the Canal to watch the dead bodies of our enemies pass by, but never would we destroy the Canal.”²⁵ Finally, he issued arrest warrants for two U.S. officers, Major General Marc Cisneros, the Army South Commander, and General Thurman, for crimes against Panama.²⁶ The Bush Administration limited its response to the speech. U.S. Secretary of State James Baker recalled, “Our initial reaction was to downplay these actions as rhetorical posturing.”²⁷ U.S. Southern Command maintained its security

²³ “Noriega’s Speech Before the Assembly,” Memorandum from White House Situation Room to Nicholas Rostow, Panama Files, Panama (Daniel Levin) [1], OA/ID CF00741-023, Nicholas Rostow, National Security Council, Bush Presidential Records, GBPL.

²⁴ De Mena, *Operation Just Cause, Promote Liberty Supplement*, 10.

²⁵ “Noriega’s Speech Before the Assembly,” Memorandum from White House Situation Room to Nicholas Rostow, Panama Files, Panama (Daniel Levin) [1], OA/ID CF00741-023, Nicholas Rostow, National Security Council, Bush Presidential Records, GBPL.

²⁶ “Panama Issues Warrants for 2 U.S. Generals,” *Stars and Stripes Europe*, December 16, 1989.

²⁷ Baker and DeFrank, *Politics of Diplomacy*, 188.

measures and implemented limited curfews for all military personnel and dependents.²⁸

The next day on 16 December the situation escalated with the death of an American citizen.

On the evening of 16 December four U.S. military officers assigned to the U.S. Southern Command Operations section (J-3) travelled towards Panama City. They stopped at a Panamanian Defense Forces (PDF) roadblock, turned around and were fired upon. The incident left one officer, Marine First Lieutenant Roberto Paz, dead and another wounded. Witnessing this event were Naval Lieutenant (jg) Adam Curtis and his wife Bonnie. The Curtises were detained and released after several hours.

The official debriefing sent to the White House from U.S. Southern Command stated that the four officers were heading into Panama City to have dinner at the Marriott Hotel. They became lost and were stopped at a military roadblock near the Comandancia in the *Chorillo* neighborhood. Panamanian soldiers attempted to drag the officers out of their car and place them under arrest. Fearful and “believing that their lives were threatened” the four turned their car around and fled from the roadblock. PDF soldiers shot at them. U.S. Southern Command reported this version of events back to the Pentagon and the White House in the official debriefing of the officers. If the officers had been part of an organized provocation by the U.S. military, the official

²⁸ SOUTHCOM Personnel Movement Limitations, Panama [3], OA/ID CF00703-026, Roman Popadiuk Files, National Security Council, Bush Presidential Records, GBPL.

debriefing would likely have mentioned this. Instead, the version released to the press mirrored the classified debrief.²⁹

Doubts have been raised regarding the justification for the invasion and the *Armed Forces Journal International* and the *Los Angeles Times* reported another version of events three years after the invasion. The two publications stated that the officers were part of a group called the “hard chargers” and planned to provoke the PDF to justify military action.³⁰ Noriega raised similar doubts about the official story since “American military personnel were restricted to base and were not allowed out to go to a movie or a restaurant.” How “could they have gotten so lost to drive right up to the Panamanian military command headquarters raised more questions than it answered.”³¹ The four officers were part of U.S. Southern Command and not subject to the restrictions against liberty and the stricter curfews troops deployed to Panama as part of Task Force

²⁹ “re: Events in Panama: Official Debriefing of Officers Involved in 16 December Incident,” From unspecified post to unspecified post, December 17, 1989, Panama (Operation Just Cause), OA/ID CF 00732-013, William T. Pryce Files, National Security Council, Bush Presidential Records, GBPL.

³⁰ John G. Roos, “Did President Bush Jump the Gun in Ordering the Invasion of Panama,” *Armed Forces Journal International* 130, no. 2 (September 1992), 14. The four officers were part of the J-3 Operations Directorate and not the J-2 Intelligence Directorate. Also, the term “hard charger” is a generic label given to enthusiastic officers with a high work ethic.

³¹ Noriega and Eisner, *America’s Prisoner*, 6. Though it is true that American military personnel were restricted from traveling off base and the Marine Command in Panama had restricted off-base liberty, Paz and the other three officers were assigned to U.S. Southern Command and did not have the same restrictions from traveling off base.

Panama were under. Their travel to the Marriot was not suspicious.³² Even Fidel Castro offered a version of events saying, ““They say that the Panamanians killed an unarmed soldier, but everyone knows that the soldiers had been in the bars of Panama. They were drunk, and who doesn't know what Yankee soldiers do when they are drunk.”³³ The officers could have lied during the official debriefing, but if there had been any doubts in their story it would likely have been mentioned in the official report. The debate over what the four officers were doing also seems moot, as the other part of the incident, the detention and assault of Lieutenant Curtis and his wife, has never been questioned.

Having been stopped at the opposite end of the road, the Curtises witnessed the shooting. Their testimony corroborated the three surviving officers the description of events. The American car did not fire at the PDF soldiers. The soldiers manning the roadblock detained the couple at a police station for several hours. While detained, the couple was separated and each threatened. Panamanian soldiers assaulted Lt. Curtis, kicking him several times in the groin, and threatened him with execution for being a spy. At the same time, the soldiers told his wife that her husband had been castrated. They then sexually assaulted her. After several hours both were released. The assault of the Curtis family has never been disputed nor their presence at a PDF roadblock near the

³² Nicholas E. Reynolds, *Just Cause: Marine Operations in Panama 1988-1990* (Washington, D.C.: History and Museums Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, 1996), 19.

³³ Fidel Castro, “Fidel Castro Speaks on Panama Situation” (radio broadcast, Havana, Cuba Rebelde Network 22 December 1989) <<http://lanic.utexas.edu/project/castro/db/1989/19891222.html>> accessed October 2, 2011.

Comandancia questioned.³⁴ The official debriefing again agreed with the version that the Bush Administration released to the press.

These two incidents were the tipping point that led to a direct military intervention. The reaction by U.S. policymakers was swift. Colin Powell saw the incident as “an unprovoked escalation” that “represented an increasing pattern of hostility toward U.S. Troops.”³⁵ Powell presented the incidents to the Secretary Cheney and tried to decide whether it was an “un-ignorable provocation.”³⁶ Both men agreed, that it was and presented this viewpoint to the President. President Bush said that the idea that the officers had shot at anyone was “Bull.” According to those present, the assault of Bonnie Curtis angered the President in particular because of her status as a noncombatant.³⁷ He made the decision on “Sunday afternoon,” 17 December 1989, to “put into motion a major use of force to get Noriega out.” But worried about the “loss of American life.”³⁸

³⁴ “re: Debriefing of Navy LT and Wife by NIS Agents,” From unspecified post to unspecified post, December, 17 1989, Folder: Panama (Operation Just Cause), OA/ID CF 00732-013, William T. Pryce Files, National Security Council, Bush Presidential Records, GBPL.

³⁵ Powell, *My American Journey*, 422.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 423.

³⁷ Woodward, *The Commanders*, 123.

³⁸ George H.W. Bush, *All the Best, George Bush: My Life in Letters and Other Writings* (New York: Scribner, 1999), 450.

The harassment of American citizens in Panama had increased over the past year. U.S. policy focused on pressuring Noriega to resign and he responded by threatening American citizens. Once it became clear that there was no way to resolve the situation in Panama without force the U.S. President approved the implementation of the Operation BLUE SPOON. President Bush accepted that “World opinion would be difficult, but I decided to send a cable to the OAS [sic] saying that what happened was unacceptable...the Soviet reaction will probably be negative... Certainly some of the Central Americans will be very wary.”³⁹ In spite of the possible negative repercussions, the President ordered the invasion of Panama.

The military intervention had Presidential approval. Generals Powell and Thurman decided however to rename the operation. Thurman considered the original name “Blue Spoon” undignified and Powell agreed saying, “You do not risk people’s lives for Blue Spoons.” Thurman suggested “Just Cause” and Powell concurred since “even our harshest critics would have to utter ‘Just Cause’ while denouncing us.”⁴⁰

The U.S. military implemented the renamed plan on 17 December 1989. Planners had concluded that they would need about forty-eight hours to put all the forces in place and launch the invasion. They set the morning of 20 December as D-Day and H-Hour at 0100. The next two days saw frantic preparations in the United States as the

³⁹ Bush, *All the Best*, 451.

⁴⁰ Powell, *My American Journey*, 426, The Generals did not consider though the way the name Operation Just Cause could also be played upon as “Operation Just Cuz” or that critics would merely refer to the operation as the invasion of Panama.

XVIII Airborne Corps recalled personnel and the U.S. Air Force Mobility Air Command prepared to transport troops. In Panama American citizens were not authorized to travel off base unless on official business, and anyone living off base had to prepare to evacuate to a military base with limited notice.⁴¹ Military forces built full-scale mock-ups of buildings to engage in detailed rehearsals.⁴² In Fort Bragg, the home of the XVIII Airborne Corps, commanders cancelled all leaves. As troops were being mobilized, the U.S. military took pains to prevent word about the invasion from getting out and eliminating the element of surprise.

On 20 December Operation Just Cause was underway. The first missions were an assault on Noriega's yachts and jet to prevent his escape, the dropping of laser guided bombs next to the Rio Hato army barracks, and a rescue operation of an American held by the Panamanian military. The prisoner was Kurt Muse, a military dependent and CIA contractor, arrested in April for setting up a pirate radio station critical of the Noriega regime. Noriega had warned that if the United States used military force, Muse would be the first American to die.⁴³ Muse had generated some media attention and war

⁴¹ SOUTHCOM Personnel Movement Limitations, Panama [3], OA/ID CF00703-026, Roman Popadiuk Files, National Security Council, Bush Presidential Records, GBPL.

⁴² Oral History Interview of LTC Lynn D. Moore Commander, 3d Battalion, 504th Infantry Interview, JCIT 077, conducted 1990 in the Headquarters of the 3d Battalion, 504th Infantry, Fort Bragg, NC, by Robert K. Wright, Jr., Historian, XVIII Airborne Corps.

⁴³ Muse, *Six Minutes to Freedom*, 115; Woodward, *The Commanders*, 136.

planners developed a rescue operation to prevent Muse's execution.⁴⁴ When the operation succeeded, Muse was freed.⁴⁵

At the same time as the rescue of Kurt Muse took place, special operations forces also cut off any potential escape routes available to Noriega. The first phase targeted Noriega's two yachts named *Macho del Monte I* and *II*, which were blown up in Balboa harbor.⁴⁶ The first objective was destroyed with no incident but the second, the destruction of Noriega's Learjet parked at Punta Patilla airport, resulted in several casualties. While crossing a tarmac the U.S. Navy SEALs were spotted and shot at by PDF members guarding the jet. Losing the element of surprise, the SEALs were completely exposed and suffered four deaths. The operation destroyed the plane and prevented Noriega from being able to escape, but at the cost of four men.⁴⁷ This incident angered Colin Powell and he highlighted it as one of the major errors in the conduct of Operation Just Cause.⁴⁸

U.S. Air Force's F-117 Nighthawks launched the first overt strike of Operation Just Cause. Two of the high tech planes dropped two 2,000lb Paveway III bombs next to the Rio Hato Army Barracks prior to U.S. Army Rangers parachuting in to seize the

⁴⁴ William Branigin, "U.S. Move in Panama Called Inept," *Washington Post*, April 29, 1989.

⁴⁵ Powell, *My American Journey*, 428.

⁴⁶ McConnell, *Just Cause*, 144-145.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁴⁸ Powell, *My American Journey*, 430.

airfield. The explosions would supposedly stun and disorient the sleeping Panamanian Defense Force soldiers.⁴⁹ When the plans were being revised in October and November 1989, Cheney questioned the request to use the F-117 stating, “The last time I checked there was no serious air defense threats.” General Thurman and Lieutenant General Carl Stiner, the XVIII Airborne Corps Commander planning the operation, argued that the F-117s were needed because of their accuracy in dropping munitions. Cheney gave his approval, but reduced the requested number of aircraft from six to two.⁵⁰

With Operation Just Cause underway, the F-117s dropped their bombs. The air strike failed. First, the laser-guided bombs landed 300 meters off target.⁵¹ Second, instead of stunning the soldiers, the bombs alerted them to the impending invasion. When the Rangers parachuted in, they were welcomed by anti-aircraft artillery and not the stunned defenders promised in the mission brief.⁵²

U.S. forces experienced some of the fiercest combat at Rio Hato. The base had to be seized in order to prevent the *Machos del Monte* from heading to Panama City to support the Panamanian military or fleeing into the countryside to launch a guerilla

⁴⁹ Stetson M. Siler, “Operation Just Cause: An Air Power Perspective,” *Air Power History* 55, no. 4 (Winter 2008), 41.

⁵⁰ Woodward, *The Commanders*, 140.

⁵¹ Michael R. Gordon, “Stealth's Panama Mission Reported Marred by Error,” *The New York Times*, April 4, 1990.

⁵² Siler, “Operation Just Cause: An Air Power Perspective,” 41.

campaign.⁵³ In addition to Rio Hato, U.S. paratroopers landed at the Torrijos-Tocumen Airport, in order to isolate Panama City. Forces from U.S. military bases encircled and neutralized the Panamanian military headquarters at the Comandancia.⁵⁴ Resistance vanished as combat quickly ended. U.S. troops put into practice the lessons they had learned from two months of rehearsals and constant drilling.⁵⁵

The campaign succeeded because it incapacitated the military leadership. Noriega had developed a contingency plan in case of an American invasion composed of three phases. The first, it established a safe perimeter around the Comandancia in order to maintain command and control of military and paramilitary forces. Second, it placed roadblocks to delay the movement of any U.S. forces. Finally, Noriega planned to mobilize civilians and his paramilitary Dignity Battalions for large-scale protests. The plan also called for attacks on three key American points, the U.S. ambassador's residence, U.S. fuel storage sites around the country and Fort Clayton, the base he assessed a military invasion would be staged from. Noriega intended to take a defensive position. Meanwhile, his diplomats would seek international support and condemnation of the United States in the court of world opinion.⁵⁶ The United States neutralized the plan completely as the Americans overwhelmed and isolated the Panamanian military

⁵³ Cole, *Operation Just Cause*, 39.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁵⁵ McConnell, *Just Cause*, 81.

⁵⁶ Noriega and Eisner, *America's Prisoner*, 7.

before any organized resistance could materialize. On the morning of the first day of hostilities, resistance to the U.S. military evaporated.

At 7:00 a.m. on 20 December 1989 President Bush informed the nation of the invasion of Panama. He justified the invasion in order “to protect the lives of American citizens in Panama and bring General Noriega to justice in the United States.” He mentioned Noriega’s declaration of war against the United States, followed by the killing of Lieutenant Paz, and the attack on Lieutenant Curtis and his wife, as acts of aggression. Bush also emphasized, “General Noriega's reckless threats and attacks upon Americans in Panama created an imminent danger to the 35,500 American citizens in Panama.”⁵⁷

During the President’s address a question surfaced. Should the U.S. military focus on searching for Noriega or pacifying the Panamanian military? General Thurman and the U.S. Southern Command staff decided that the Panamanian military presented a threat. If it could be neutralized, than Noriega’s power base would vanish along with the threat to American citizens. Lieutenant General Stiner surmised that “our operation the first night had been successful, and that even though we had not captured Noriega, the

⁵⁷George H. W. Bush, “Address to the Nation on Panama” (televised address, Washington, D.C., 20 December 1989) <<http://millercenter.org/president/speeches/detail/3422>> accessed 25 November 2011. Though Bush said “Noriega declared war,” Noriega said “a state of war exists between the United States and Panama.” The total number of American citizens mentioned by the President did not include the invasion force or the military forces prepositioned in Panama throughout the year as part of POST TIME. These would total 26,000 military personnel.

PDF had in fact been neutralized.”⁵⁸ Only after neutralizing the Panamanian military and ending the overt threat to American citizens did Operation Just Cause shift its focus to the capture of Noriega. But where had he gone?

When the invasion began, Noriega had been at a military training camp near the Torrijos-Tocumen airport.⁵⁹ In his memoir he claimed the invasion caught him by surprise but he still tried to organize military resistance.⁶⁰ He never organized a resistance. Constantly on the move to avoid capture, he shuttled through a series of safe houses.⁶¹ As U.S. forces established checkpoints, Noriega’s freedom of movement became limited and he decided to seek asylum at a foreign embassy. He preferred the Cuban or Nicaraguan embassy with hopes of being able to flee to Cuba and avoid arrest by the United States, but U.S. Southern Command planners had anticipated this and placed a security cordon around those two embassies.⁶² Both ambassadors filed protests, but the Americans ignored them and kept their positions to block an escape attempt by Noriega, violating the spirit of embassies inviolability. With limited options, Noriega

⁵⁸ Oral History Interview of LTG Carl W. Stiner, Commanding General, XVIII Airborne Corps and Joint Task Force South; XVIII Airborne Corps Historian oral history collection, Oral History conducted 1990 in the Headquarters of the 3d Battalion, 504th Infantry, Fort Bragg, North Carolina, by Robert K. Wright, Jr., Historian, XVIII Airborne Corps.

⁵⁹ Runkle, *Wanted Dead or Alive*, 122.

⁶⁰ Noriega and Eisner, *America’s Prisoner*, 3.

⁶¹ Scranton, *The Noriega Years*, 205.

⁶² Cole, *Operation Just Cause*, 54.

entered the Papal Nunciature, on 24 December. Once it became known where Noriega had taken refuge, U.S. forces surrounded the Nunciature and tense diplomatic negotiations began while the Cable News Network (CNN) broadcast the farcical siege live.⁶³ Noriega could not be forcefully removed without violating diplomatic protocol and the inviolability of embassies. Therefore, the United States waited for him to either leave of his own volition or be expelled by the Papal legate, Monsignor Jose Sebastian Laboa.

The U.S. military setup a series of roadblocks to prevent large crowds from descending on the Nunciature and to ensure that Noriega did not escape.⁶⁴ When negotiations began, U.S. Army Psychological Operations troops set up high-powered speakers around the Nunciature. The speakers proceeded to blare loud rock music in an attempt to drive out Noriega. News outlets picked up the story and reported that the speakers were a modern siege tactic. The reality of the use of the loud music to drive Noriega out of the Nunciature is only partly true. While U.S. and Vatican officials negotiated, journalists pointed parabolic microphones at them. General Thurman ordered that the microphones be disrupted so U.S. Army Psychological Operation troops played music. Soon the orders became muddled and music blared at all hours in the hopes of driving Noriega out.⁶⁵ The attempt at psychological warfare backfired and the

⁶³ Scranton, *The Noriega Years*, 210.

⁶⁴ Cole, *Operation Just Cause*, 57.

⁶⁵ *Psychological operations in Panama during Operations Just Cause and Promote Liberty* (MacDill AFB, FL: U.S. Special Operations Command, 1994), 4.

Monsignor politely asked for the music to be stopped since it only bothered him and his staff. Noriega seems to have enjoyed the music.⁶⁶

Besides the embarrassment of playing too much AC/DC, negotiations dragged on. The Bush Administration remained in contact with the Vatican and the President spoke directly to Pope John Paul II to reassure the pontiff that Noriega would be given a fair trial in the United States.⁶⁷ Monsignor Laboa urged Noriega to surrender.⁶⁸ On 3 January 1990 after ten days in the Nunciature, Noriega walked out. The U.S. military seized him and then placed him in the custody of two DEA agents at Howard Air Force Base, who flew him to Miami to stand trial.⁶⁹

The reconstruction phase of military operations began almost immediately. Operation Promote Liberty, the phase's new name, however, had serious problems.⁷⁰ While the U.S. military never lost civil authority there had been incidents of looting

⁶⁶ Harris, *Shooting the Moon*, 366.

⁶⁷ Memorandum, "Telephone Conversation with Pope John Paul II, 5 Jan 1989" January 17, 1989, OA/ID CF00904, NSC PA Files, National Security Council, Bush Presidential Records, GBPL.

⁶⁸ Larry Rohter, "The Noriega Case: Panama City; Papal Envoy Asserts Psychology, Not Ultimatum, Swayed Noriega," *New York Times*, January 6, 1990.

⁶⁹ Harris, *Shooting the Moon*, 368.

⁷⁰ Similar to renaming BLUE SPOON to Just Cause, Operation Promote Liberty was originally called BLIND LOGIC. Whether there was a debate to change this name is unclear but it seems likely that the military did not want to open themselves up to attack for naming the reconstruction phase Blind Logic.

early in the invasion.⁷¹ U.S. military planners had anticipated this possibility but decided that seizing military objectives and neutralizing the Panamanian Defense Forces was more important. Their planning accepted some disorder in the country.⁷² The lack of preparation for Promote Liberty led to major flaws in reconstruction operations. General Thurman conceded, “I did not even spend five minutes on [Promote Liberty] during my briefing as the incoming CINCSO in August” since “the least of my problems at the time was [Promote Liberty] ...we put together the campaign for Just Cause and probably did not spend enough time on the restoration.” General Thurman concluded, “The chaotic aftermath of the 1989 US invasion of Panama . . . a decapitated government initially incapable of managing basic governmental functions, a sizable refugee problem, and a widespread lapse in civil law and order all threatened to mock the attainment of the operation’s stated objectives.” The setbacks from the reconstruction efforts in Panama were met with widespread condemnation and carried over into critiques of the invasion.⁷³

In an effort to win support for the invasion, President Bush and Vice-President Dan Quayle called the presidents of Latin American countries to justify the invasion and

⁷¹ Richard Shultz, *In the Aftermath of War* (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air University Press, 1993), 55.

⁷² Oral History Interview of COL Michael G Snell Commander SOUTHCOM Operations section (J-3) Joint Task Force South; XVIII Airborne Corps Historian oral history collection conducted 1990 in the Headquarters of the 3d Battalion, 504th Infantry, Fort Bragg, North Carolina, by Robert K. Wright, Jr., Historian, XVIII Airborne Corps.

⁷³ Shultz, *In the Aftermath of War*, 16.

keep them informed on the situation. Many rebuked President Bush. President Carlos Andres Perez of Venezuela told him, "We are upset about the reason you are calling." He went on to say after listening to the reasoning, "I knew that it would end this way." Perez expressed disappointment that the situation could not have been resolved peacefully. But, he promised, "to soften the reaction [of other Latin American leaders] as much as possible" and assist in the recognition of the new Endara government.⁷⁴ Others were not as supportive. President Carlos Salinas de Gortari of Mexico said, "I have repeatedly spoken out against Mr. Noriega. Nevertheless, this action rebels against our principles." He criticized Bush for having used military force, but allowed that Mexico would recognize the Endara government.⁷⁵ The presidents of several other Latin American nations accepted the reasoning for the invasion during conversations with the U.S. President and Vice President, but they publicly condemned the invasion.

The OAS proposed a resolution condemning the invasion on 22 December. Luigi Einaudi, the U.S. ambassador to the OAS, said that the United States "acted in Panama for legitimate reasons of self-defense, and to protect the integrity of the Panama Canal treaties." He argued that the actions conformed "with Article 51 of the UN charter, Article 21 of the Charter of the Organization of American States and the

⁷⁴ Memorandum, "Telephone Conversation with President Carlos Andres Perez of Venezuela," December 20, 1989, OA/ID CF00904, NSC PA Files, National Security Council, Bush Presidential Records, GBPL.

⁷⁵ Memorandum, "Telephone Conversation with President Carlos Salinas of Mexico," December 20, 1989, OA/ID CF00904, NSC PA Files, National Security Council, Bush Presidential Records, GBPL.

provisions of the Panama Canal Treaties.” Besides defending the invasion’s legality the ambassador condemned the OAS because it “was unable to do anything about Noriega’s scandalous and bloody rape of the Panamanian elections of May 7.” He concluded, “It is time that this organization welcomed Noriega’s departure, just as the world has in the past welcomed the departure of Somoza, Duvalier, Marcos and more recently Honecker, Zhivkov and Husak.”⁷⁶ Despite the speech, the OAS condemned the U.S. invasion of Panama by a margin of 20 to 1. Only the U.S. voted against the resolution and Canada abstained.⁷⁷

The United Nations Security Council also condemned the invasion as a violation of international law. Thomas Pickering, the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, defended American actions in a speech before the general assembly. He invoked Article 51 of the UN charter and said “U.S. forces exercised their inherent right of self defense under international law by taking action in Panama in response to armed attacks by forces under the direction of Manuel Noriega.” He added, “The action is designed to protect American lives as well as to fulfill the obligations of the United States to defend the integrity of the Panama Canal Treaties.” A vote was put forth to the General

⁷⁶ Luigi Einaudi, Speech to the OAS, 20 December 1989, recorded in “Panama: a Just Cause” (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Dept. of State, Bureau of Public Affairs, 1990).

⁷⁷ James Brooke, "U.S. Denounced by Nations Touchy About Intervention," *New York Times*, December 22, 1989.

Assembly, and similar to the OAS, the vote went against the United States. There were not enough votes for a motion to be carried.⁷⁸

In the United States the American public reacted positively to Operation Just Cause. A Gallup-Newsweek poll, taken on 21 December 1981, showed 80 percent of the American public approved the use of military force in Panama. The Administration received strong bipartisan support.⁷⁹ On 7 February 1990 the U.S. House of Representatives passed a resolution that declared President Bush had handled the invasion of Panama “decisively and appropriately” only after “efforts to resolve the crisis in Panama by political, economic and diplomatic means” had been exhausted. But it warned, “Panama was a response to a unique set of circumstances.”⁸⁰ Indeed, Panama was unique. The United States would not be likely to ever again have half the invasion force already inside a country it is attacking, and would not be able to rehearse seizing objectives for two months.

Launching a large scale military operation because of the death of one soldier, the wounding of another and the harassment and assaults against an officer and his wife may seem extreme, but Operation Just Cause needs to be evaluated in the context of the large American presence in Panama. As the situation in Panama worsened an ongoing

⁷⁸ Paul Lewis, “Fighting in Panama: United Nations; Security Council Condemnation of Invasion Vetoed,” *New York Times*, December 24, 1989.

⁷⁹ Cramer, “‘Just Cause’ or Just Politics,” 178.

⁸⁰ Expressing the sense of Congress concerning Operation Just Cause in Panama, H.R. Res., 262, 101st Cong. (1990).

concern was the safety of American citizens. The population at the time of the invasion numbered 35,500. Prior to the May elections it stood at 51,305, giving Panama the fourth largest population of expatriate Americans after, West Germany, the United Kingdom, and Japan.⁸¹ Americans represented over 2 percent of the population and were concentrated near Panama City and Colón.⁸² There had already been 906 incidents of harassment against American citizens at the time the Panamanian military killed Lieutenant Paz.⁸³ These incidents were part of Noriega's organized harassment campaign meant to pressure Washington.⁸⁴ President Bush had seen how the Iran Hostage Crisis eroded confidence in the Carter Administration and the United States. He was concerned Noriega would begin taking more hostages.⁸⁵ After 16 December 1989, military force remained the only course of action available to the U.S. President.

In past instances of U.S. direct military interventions, from China during the Boxer Rebellion in 1900 to Grenada during Operation Urgent Fury in 1983, the United States invoked the need to protect American lives. Panama, however, presented a rare

⁸¹ *U.S. Census, 1990: Census of Population: General Population Characteristics United States, Department of Defense Estimate of Americans in Panama*, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1990).

⁸² The 1989 CIA World Fact Book lists the population of Panama at 2,373,053. The total number of Americans in Panama on 20 December 1989 was 35,500.

⁸³ De Mena, *Soldiering in Panama*, 7.

⁸⁴ CIA report, "The Harassment of U.S. Personnel in Panama: Patterns and Objectives," March 13, 1989, Panama [9], OA/ID CF00741-022, Directorate of Intelligence, Nicholas Rostow Files, National Security Council, Bush Presidential Records, GBPL.

⁸⁵ Cole, *Operation Just Cause*, 49.

case because of the large presence of American citizens in the country. As President Bush emphatically stated to the American people during the announcement of the invasion, “General Noriega's reckless threats and attacks upon Americans in Panama created an imminent danger to the 35,500 American citizens in Panama.”⁸⁶ Operation Just Cause represented a prudent response to a genuine threat. Based on events over the previous year, had President Bush not acted he faced a deteriorating situation that risked the lives of thousands of American citizens.

The use of military force then did not represent American strength. It represented weakness. Political, economic and diplomatic pressure by the United States did not convince Noriega to step down from power. Instead this pressure provoked him to attack American citizens. Ultimately, resulting in the death of an American serviceman, the assault of three others and the sexual assault of a civilian dependent. These attacks indicated a possible escalation of violence.

⁸⁶George H. W. Bush, “Address to the Nation on Panama” (televised address, Washington D.C., 20 December 1989) <<http://millercenter.org/president/speeches/detail/3422>> accessed 25 November 2011.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Visitors to the George H. W. Bush Presidential Museum are presented with exhibits that range from a mockup of the Oval Office to a section on the family dog, Millie. The focus is on the events of the four years of the Bush Presidency, including an imposing section on the end of the Cold War, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe. Almost immediately after this monumental display, an even more imposing exhibit on Operation Desert Storm introduces the visitor to the showdown in the Persian Gulf. Tucked between these two large exhibits, a sharp-eyed patron might notice a tiny display case with handcuffs and a mug shot of General Manuel Antonio Noriega. The insignificant exhibit is the museum's only reference to the 1989 invasion of Panama. Memory of "Operation Just Cause" began to fade almost immediately in the Bush Presidency.

When President Bush and his staff wrote the 1990 State of the Union Address a month after the invasion, the first draft made no mention of Operation Just Cause. It focused on events in Eastern Europe and the rollback of Soviet hegemony. A staffer wrote on the draft that it would be "unacceptable" to not mention the invasion of Panama since "23 American lost their lives in the conflict."¹ The second draft made a passing reference to Operation Just Cause, at the very end of the speech. Staffers again deemed

¹ State of the Union 1st Draft, 1st Draft NSC comments, S320-90 12852622 [6], 1990 State of the Union, January 22, 1990, White House Office of Record Management (here after WHORM), Bush Presidential Records, GBPL.

this “unacceptable.”² The third draft increased the importance of Panama by being the first major event the president discussed. In the speech, Operation Just Cause came before Solidarity’s electoral victories in Poland, free elections in Czechoslovakia, and even the fall of the Berlin Wall. At the conclusion, though, the speech declared an “end to hostilities in Panama,” the “termination of Operation Just Cause,” and “a complete withdrawal of all US troops” in Panama.³ In the fourth and final draft, the language changed again and Operation Just Cause was declared to have to “achieved its objective.”⁴ The change emphasized the success of military operations, but also the need for a continued U.S. military commitment to Panama for the foreseeable future.⁵

Despite such strong language, the American commitment soon faltered. The United States shifted its attention to other issues and areas of the globe. Though Bush’s State of the Union address positioned Panama as the most pressing event of 1989, history and Bush’s museum show that the Administration was far more concerned with the end of the Cold War and helping Eastern Europe embrace capitalism and

² State of the Union 2nd Draft, 2nd Draft NSC comments, S320-90 12852622 [6], 1990 State of the Union, January 22, 1990, WHORM, Bush Presidential Records, GBPL.

³ State of the Union 3rd Draft, 3rd Draft NSC comments, S320-90 12852622 [6], 1990 State of the Union, January 22, 1990, WHORM, Bush Presidential Records, GBPL.

⁴ Inserts for State of the Union With Staff Comments, S320-90 12852622 [6], 1990 State of the Union, January 22, 1990, WHORM, Bush Presidential Records, GBPL.

⁵ Operation Just Cause was the name for the combat phase of operations, which had been terminated at the time of the State of the Union; Operation Promote Liberty was being carried out at the time. The statement was changed to avoid confusion.

democracy.⁶ The invasion of Kuwait by Saddam Hussein and subsequent Persian Gulf War eight months later displaced Operation Just Cause as the major U.S. military engagement in the post-Vietnam era.⁷

The Panamanian economy had been moribund prior to the invasion, due to sanctions imposed by EO 12635. The Bush Administration promised Panama \$1 billion in rebuilding funds to repair damages from the invasion, but Congress only gave \$500 million to Panama, with the other half being earmarked for Nicaragua.⁸ The lingering economic challenges facing Panama created a difficult position for the newly installed government.

During the attack, Guelliermo Endara, the projected winner of the May 1989 elections, was sworn in as President of Panama and became head of state. His challenges included having to fend off a coup in 1991, rebuilding of Panama's economy, and repairing the damage from the invasion. When new elections were held in 1994, Jimmy Carter returned to Panama to again serve as an election monitor for the National Democratic Institute. Endara lost, but relinquished power gracefully. The election

⁶ In their book *A World Transformed* (New York, Random House, 1999), President Bush and his National Security Advisor Lieutenant General Brent Scowcroft offer an account of their foreign policy decisions. The book focuses primarily on the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, China and Desert Storm. They make a few passing references to Panama and do not discuss Operation Just Cause in any depth.

⁷ Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, *The General's War: The Inside Story of the Conflict in the Gulf* (New York: Back Bay Books, 1995), 15.

⁸ Fact Sheet, "Partnership with Panama: Action Plan to Foster Economic Recovery," Panama (2) [1 of 3], OA/ID CF 01082, Eric Melby Files, National Security Council, Bush Presidential Records, GBPL.

procedures and results pleased Carter. When asked if he would return to Panama he said, “Yeah in 1999,” for the next presidential election and the handover of the Canal.⁹ This was one of the positive aspects of the invasion. Though fragile, democracy, rule of law, and more importantly the peaceful transitions of governments took hold in Panama.

The handover of the Canal loomed as the major event facing the United States and Panama during the 1990s. The Bush Administration had considered delaying the hand-over procedures during Noriega’s time in power. This never occurred and Panama took on a larger role managing the Canal. In September 1990, Gilberto Guardia Fabr ega became the first permanent Panamanian administrator of the Canal Commission, responsible for the operation and maintenance of the Canal. This move signaled a commitment on the part of both nations to the turn over.¹⁰ Since then Panama’s successful operation has increased revenues and more ships have transited the Canal.¹¹ After centuries of outside powers controlling the region, starting in 2000 Panama finally enjoyed the benefits of its location. While the transfer of the Canal progressed smoothly, the negotiations for U.S. military bases faltered.

The Bush and Endara Administrations planned to negotiate an extension of U.S. military bases during their respective second terms, in order to avoid the perception that

⁹ Brinkley, *The Unfinished Presidency*, 294-295.

¹⁰ Conniff, *Panama and the United States*, 161.

¹¹ Maurer and Yu, *The Big Ditch*, 314.

the United States had placed Endara in power in return for military bases.¹² Both men lost their reelection bids and their successors did not reach an agreement. A Congressional report from 1997 stated “The likelihood of reaching any agreement to keep a continued U.S. military presence beyond the year 2000 in Panama is diminishing more each day.”¹³ The fact that the United States negotiated an extension for military bases and sought to avoid the perception of a *quid pro quo* for bases shows another shortcoming of the puppet narrative. The United States acknowledged Latin American sovereignty and did not merely take whatever it wanted.

As negotiations stalled, American citizens departed in growing numbers. Between May and December 1989, the United States evacuated 15,805 nonessential American citizens from Panama. Though this relocation was meant to be temporary, the majority never returned. The level of permanent military personnel in 1992 remained at the pre-invasion level of 10,800. By 1995 only 6,800 military personnel remained. In 1997 U.S. Southern Command moved its Headquarters to Miami, which dropped the number of Americans in Panama to 2,390.¹⁴ In 1999, the last year of a formal U.S. military presence, only 658 American citizens remained at Howard AFB, the last US military base in Panama. Their mission supported the “forward-based” counter narcotic

¹² Ibid.,180.

¹³ Future of U.S. Military Presence in Panama: A Staff Report to the committee on Foreign Relations of the United States Senate, S. Rep. No. 106-35 (1997), 1.

¹⁴ Future of U.S. Military Presence in Panama A Staff Report to the committee on Foreign Relations of the United States Senate, S. Rep. 106-35 (1997), 1.

air-operations.¹⁵ By 31 December 1999 the personnel at Howard AFB departed and the large-scale presence of American citizens ended. After 1999 only the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institution remained, with a permanent staff of 40 scientists.¹⁶ Considering that at its height the population of American citizens residing in Panama reached 62,234, the reduction to a mere 40 was a drastic change.¹⁷

The legacy of the United States in Panama, like Operation Just Cause, has faded. It is telling that the Department of Defense did not issue a formal campaign medal for Operation Just Cause. The U.S. military itself has limited the strategic importance of Operation Just Cause by focusing on the tactical use of force. By limiting the conflict to solely be about capturing a dictator the military has reinforced the historical scholarship that favors a narrative of the United States creating and retiring puppets in Latin America at will. Yet the long history of the United States in Panama reveals a very different reason why the Bush Administration pursued its “Just Cause.” The invasion was not about sustaining American hegemony, changing puppets, or reverting to Big Stick foreign policy. The Bush Administration invaded to protect American citizens

¹⁵ Staff Report on Post-1999 U.S. Security and counter-drug interests in Panama, H.R. Rep. No. 106-803 (1999), 6.

¹⁶ The Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute accessed 10 August 2014 <http://www.stri.si.edu/english/scientific_staff/index.php> accessed 11 December 2011

¹⁷ *U.S. Census, 1970: General Population Characteristics United States* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1970). Though there are Americans expatriates and retirees living in Panama, these American citizens are living there of their own volition and not part of an official U.S. presence.

during a critical transition that marked the end of one hundred and fifty years of
Americans in Panama.

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