

Just Cause?: The 1989 U.S. Invasion of Panama

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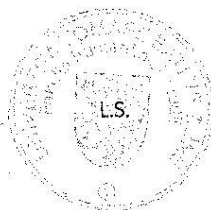
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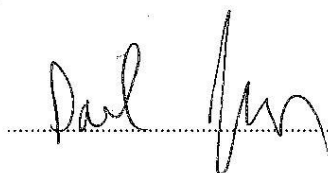
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ABSTRAKT

Operace Just Cause byl krátký ozbrojený konflikt Spojených států amerických proti Panamě v prosinci roku 1989. Hlavní uvedené důvody invaze byly bojovat proti obchodu s drogami, chránit životy amerických občanů v Panamě, chránit dohodu Torrijos-Carter a hájit základní principy demokracie a lidských práv občanů Panamy. Během invaze byl svržen samozvaný diktátor Manuel Antonio Noriega, který byl v Americe obžalován z mnoha zločinů týkajících se drog a praní špinavých peněz. Konflikt rozsáhle mapovala světová média a později byl silně kritizován za kontroverzní praktiky amerických vojáků během jeho trvání. Nesrovnalosti mezi oficiálními zprávami americké vlády a vyšetřováním spolu s četnými svědectvími vyvolaly mnoho otázek, které zpochybňovaly oprávněnost operace.

Klíčová slova: Operace Just Cause, Panama, Panamské průplavové pásmo, Monroeova doktrína, Rooseveltův doplněk, invaze, smlouva Torrijos-Carter, Manuel Antonio Noriega, CIA, Bushova vláda, aféra Írán-Contras, Panamské obranné síly, obchod s drogami.

ABSTRACT

Operation *Just Cause* was a short military conflict against Panama launched by the United States in December 1989. The primary reasons justifying the incursion were to fight drug trafficking, safeguard the lives of U.S. citizens in Panama, protect the Torrijos-Carter Treaties and defend basic principles of democracy and human rights in Panama. De facto Panamanian leader Manuel Antonio Noriega, who had been indicted on numerous drug-related and money-laundering charges in the United States, was overthrown during the invasion. The conflict received extensive media coverage world-wide and later came under heightened criticism due to the controversial conduct of American troops during the invasion. The discrepancies between the official U.S. reports and investigations supported by a number of testimonies have raised many doubts concerning the legitimacy of the operation.

Keywords: Operation Just Cause, Panama, Canal zone, Monroe Doctrine, Roosevelt Corollary, invasion, Torrijos-Carter Treaties, Manuel Antonio Noriega, CIA, Bush administration, the Iran-Contra Affair, Panamanian Defense Forces, drug trafficking.

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INTRODUCTION

According to one eyewitness “the Americans paid six dollars for every dead body brought to them. They were put in plastic bags and thrown into the sea.”¹ The conduct of American troops during the invasion of Panama has received harsh criticism and many questions have been raised regarding its legitimacy. Political tensions between the two countries had been building during the twentieth century and eventually led to a military denouement in 1989. The main objective was to overthrow the de facto military leader of Panama, Manuel Antonio Noriega, who became a U.S. public enemy during the Bush administration due to his involvement in the CIA’s covert activities and indictments on drug-smuggling and money-laundering charges. The situation in Panama received extensive international media attention, especially after the Panamanian general election held in May 1989. In December, in response to Noriega’s putative declaration of a state of war with the United States, President Bush ordered a military action against Panama, known as *Operation Just Cause*, to begin. The events leading up to the capture of Manuel Noriega and the invasion itself aroused many controversies. The testimonies and detailed accounts of the events during the invasion have revealed a number of inconsistencies in the official U.S. statements. Despite Bush’s argumentation justifying the invasion, the operation might not have been as just as its codename suggests.

¹ Ricaurte Soler, *La invasión de Estados Unidos a Panamá: Neocolonialismo en la posguerra fría* (Madrid: Siglo XXI editores, 1999), 92-95.

1 BACKGROUND

Before analyzing in depth the relations between the United States and the Panama, it is first necessary to take into consideration the geographical and sociopolitical peculiarities of the latter. The isthmus of Panama has always been, and was even in the pre-Columbian era, an area of transit, cultural confluence and trade. Due to their industriousness and proclivity to trade, the pre-Colombians of Central America “prioritized an anthropocentric world view and values.”² Three centuries of Spanish colonization also shaped the region politically and culturally. When this ended in 1821, Panama sought first autonomy and then sovereignty, and in this, it had the help of the United States.

Due to its inherent nature, the isthmus was a location of great strategic value. The region that would later become the state of Panama was first part of a larger governmental formation called *Nueva Granada*, and all the legal activities stemming from this involvement would, of course, have a direct effect on Panama. Between 1846 and 1848, diplomatic negotiations resulted in the Mallarino-Bidlack Treaty, one of several crucial agreements that would allow for the building of the Panama Canal Railway and Panama Canal. The treaty, brokered by the United States, guaranteed the sovereignty of the isthmus of Panama in exchange for the free transit of U.S. citizens across the isthmus.³ It gave the U.S. government an indirect right to take action in order to protect their citizens from danger.

The first U.S. intervention on the isthmus occurred on April 15, 1856. The so-called Watermelon War (*Incidente de la Tajada de Sandía*) was a riot between watermelon vendors and American passengers waiting to be ferried from Taboga island to the Panamanian mainland. When an American citizen refused to pay for a piece of the fruit and a local vendor threatened him with a knife, a sizeable dispute broke out, resulting in multiple casualties on both sides. When the dispute did not dissipate, Texas Rangers intervened, rescuing the Americans and occupying the railway station. The Rangers peacefully withdrew three days later without having fired a single shot.⁴ The Watermelon Riot was just the first of many upcoming clashes between the Americans and Panamanians over the transit zone.

² Soler, *La invasión de Estados Unidos a Panamá*, 16.

³ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁴ M. Daley, "The Watermelon Riot: Cultural Encounters in Panama City, April 15, 1856," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 70, no. 1 (1990): 85–108.

1.1 The Monroe Doctrine and Roosevelt Corollary

Panama (*Nueva Granada*) was not the only state the U.S. government had to deal with in order to secure sway in this strategically important area. In 1850, the United States signed a pact (Clayton-Bulwer) with Britain, ensuring neither of the countries would proceed in building an interoceanic canal without the endorsement of the other. However, another nation came into play. When *La Société internationale du Canal interocéanique* began the construction of a water passage between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans in 1881, the American statesman James G. Blaine suggested that the French were violating a doctrine the U.S. government had issued almost sixty years prior.⁵ The Monroe Doctrine of 1823 declared that any kind of European interference in the Americas would be considered as an aggression and would be dealt with. In his State of the Union Address, President James Monroe warned the European powers that “the American continents ... are henceforth not to be considered as subjects for future colonization.”⁶ This doctrine has defined U.S. foreign policy in the Western Hemisphere ever since. In the case of the French canal, however, the United States did not have to intervene. The French soon realized how monumental a task it was to build a canal across the isthmus and pulled the funding from the project. Purchasing the French assets, the United States then used the Panamanian independence movement to pressure Colombia into giving it rights to the Canal Zone (Hay–Bunau-Varilla Treaty), completing the construction in 1914.

The power of the Monroe Doctrine was further enhanced by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1904. If the Monroe Doctrine was more about preventing intervention from Europe, the Roosevelt Corollary to the doctrine sought to justify U.S. intervention throughout the Western Hemisphere. According to historian Walter LaFeber, “it’s a very neat twist on the Monroe Doctrine [that] confrontation with peoples in the Caribbean and Central America, ... was a really important part of American imperialism.”⁷ The U.S. government resorted many times to using these documents to justify military intervention

⁵ Soler, *La invasión de Estados Unidos a Panamá*, 24; “The French Canal Construction,” Canal de Panamá, <http://www.pancanal.com/eng/history/history/french.html>, Accessed March 2, 2016.

⁶ “Seventh Annual Message (Monroe Doctrine), December 2, 1823,” American Presidency Project, <http://millercenter.org/president/speeches/speech-3604>, Accessed March 2, 2016.

⁷ “Interview: Walter Lafeber, Historian,” PBS, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/interview/tr-lafeber/>, Accessed March 2, 2016.

in Latin America (The Second Occupation of Cuba, Estrada's Rebellion or Mena's Rebellion in Nicaragua, the Occupation of Haiti, etc.).⁸

1.2 Panama-United States Relations in the First Half of the Twentieth Century

Panama did not really disengage itself from the American distant but yet so omnipresent grip during the first decades of the twentieth century. Thanks to the Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty of 1903, Panama gained independence from Colombia. However, it was an independence mediated by the American empire and the Panamanian state was born as a quasi-American protectorate. Its subordination is illustrated by the fact the recently formed Panamanian government sent a letter to U.S. president Theodore Roosevelt asking for official recognition of the new government.⁹ Furthermore, the first Panamanian Constitution from 1904 states explicitly that the United States had "the right to intervene to guarantee Panamanian sovereignty and to preserve order"¹⁰ if they were to be disturbed. In 1915, the United States ordered Panama to reduce its presidential guard from 75 to 25 men. In response, the Panamanian president, Belisario Porras, openly stated in a letter to the U.S. government that the Panamanian republic, as a weak country, has no other option than to buckle under the weight of the United States and refer to the U.S. president as "your Excellency."¹¹

Although a significant step forward was made by signing the Arias-Roosevelt Treaty (1936), which eliminated the right of the United States to intervene in Panamanian internal matters, the U.S. government still held the reins. When Arnulfo Arias staged a coup d'état in 1931 assuming political control of the country, little did he know that after exactly ten years the irony of fate would eventually catch up with him and he himself would become the principal figure of the second overthrow in Panamanian modern history.¹² It comes as no surprise that the putsch was orchestrated by the U.S. government, as Arias had earlier opposed the installation of multiple military bases in the Panamanian territory which were

⁸ Alan Brinkley, *The Unfinished Nation: a Concise History of the American People* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2008), 596.

⁹ Soler, *La invasión de Estados Unidos a Panamá*, 25.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹² *Ibid.*, 32-33; C.A. Araúz and P. Pizzurno, "Arnulfo Arias Madrid," CRÍTICA, <http://web.archive.org/web/20130819201304/http://www.critica.com.pa/archivo/historia/f10-37.html>, Accessed March 2, 2016.

supposed to be part of the upcoming American defense strategy in World War II. Going against American interests, he simply had to be removed.¹³

1.3 The Torrijos-Carter Treaties

Growing tensions that had been building up over the first half of the twentieth century between Panama and the American empire finally crystallized into a violent clash. Once again, the Canal Zone became the scene of an upheaval in the early 60s, and the events from 1964 would forever change Panama-U.S. relations. The inferiority of the Panamanians and lack of recognition among the population in the Canal Zone caused a natural urge to fight for an officially-acknowledged cultural and national identity. Therefore, Panamanians started insisting that their flag should be flown in the Canal Zone along with the American one, a request that was further supported by the Panamanian president, José Antonio Remón (1952-1955), who demanded raising both flags as an act of equality.¹⁴ In January 1963, an executive order to fly both flags together “in all non-military sites in the Canal” was issued by President Kennedy. However, the new policy was not carried out because of Kennedy’s assassination.¹⁵

There had been several cases of rioting related to the flag issue prior to the crucial clash of January 9, 1964 (Operation Sovereignty in 1958, March of Sovereignty in 1958 and other minor ones).¹⁶ “The Panamanians were upset, they wanted the sovereignty that was rightfully theirs, they wanted some amount of equality with the Zonians, and they were not going to remain silent about those wishes.” Another problem that complicated the whole situation with getting the flags to fly in unison was rather prosaic, as there was a lack of flag poles and only one flag could be placed at a time in the specified locations.¹⁷

On January 9, a U.S. flag was raised at Balboa High School but was removed by school officials soon afterwards. In response to that, a group of students approached the flag pole and raised another U.S. flag, staying there to prevent its removal. When the students from Instituto Nacional found out about the students’ actions at Balboa High School, they left their classes and headed to the scene to fly their own Panamanian flag.

¹³ Soler, *La invasión de Estados Unidos a Panamá*, 33.

¹⁴ Víctor Avila, "La gesta del 9 de enero," *Cuadernos Universitarios* 6 (1989) 9; Michael Conniff, *Panama and the United States: The Forced Alliance* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001), 108.

¹⁵ Robert C. Harding, *The History of Panama* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2006), 59.

¹⁶ Gilberto Marulanda, "Participación y reacción de las mujeres ante los sucesos de enero de 1964," *Revista Lotería* 446 (January-February 2003) 19.

¹⁷ Perry, "January 9, 1964, The Day of the Martyrs," 20-21.

After arriving there, they were surrounded by Zonian students, their parents and even local police. Moments later, a scrimmage broke out. During the scuffle, the Panamanian's flag was torn, and a riot erupted. The number of people involved in the riots began to grow, and soon thousands of people had gathered at the scene.¹⁸ Students began to destroy the chain-link fence which separated the U.S. Canal Zone from Panama. Colombia's ambassador to the Organization of American States said a couple of days later that "in Panama there exists today another Berlin Wall,"¹⁹ alluding to the fence. American snipers took positions in the Canal Zone and armored vehicles were deployed. During the riots, many buildings were set ablaze, properties damaged and the final death toll was 25, including American soldiers and innocent Panamanians. In response, January 9, 1964 became a national holiday in Panama, known as Martyrs' Day.²⁰

After the riots, Panama and the United States entered a new era during which negotiations were necessary, but more importantly, inevitable. The first step towards a resumption of diplomatic relations was made in 1967 with the Johnson-Robles Treaty but the results were rather disappointing, as it was not approved by *La Asamblea Nacional* (the National Assembly) because public opinion was strongly against it.²¹ However, real progress came in 1977 with the Torrijos-Carter Treaties, which changed the U.S.-Panama relations once and for all. Since 1903, the U.S. military presence in the canal zone was justified thanks to the Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty, but the pact was basically cancelled by the new one, which ended U.S. control over the canal.²² Although the lawfulness of the treaty was questioned on several occasions due to the fact that General Torrijos had assumed political control by a coup in 1968, his signing is considered legitimate because of the general support in the country. Torrijos's political goals and determination regarding the relationship with the United States were clear much sooner before the treaty was signed. In 1973, during his speech at the reunion of the Security Council, he stated that

¹⁸ Ibid., 25-26; Harding, *The History of Panama*, 59-60.

¹⁹ "Story of cities #16: how the US-run Canal Zone divided Panama for a century," *The Guardian*, <http://www.theguardian.com/cities/2016/apr/06/story-cities-16-panama-canal-zone-history-us-run-divided-city>, Accessed March 6, 2016.

²⁰ Harding, *The History of Panama*, 59-60; Perry, "January 9, 1964, The Day of the Martyrs," 25-28.

²¹ Soler, *La invasión de Estados Unidos a Panamá*, 39.

²² Ricaurte Soler, *Panamá: historia de una crisis* (Mexico City: Siglo XXI editores, 1989), 91.

“Panama had never been, was not and would never be a colony or protectorate and that they did not want to just add a star to the U.S. flag either.”²³

The Torrijos-Carter Treaties did not take immediate effect, though. The changes regarding the closing of all the military bases in the Canal Zone were made in the form of a timetable, which set the date of transfer as December 31, 1999. The administration of the canal was supposed to be completely Panamanian by the end of the century. As soon as the treaties were signed, there seemed to be a change in the attitude of the Americans towards the canal. They no longer cared about its improvement. Moreover, the U.S. government pressured Japan²⁴ to not support Panama and tried to prevent it from extending alliances beyond the Americans.²⁵

Omar Torrijos Herrera, the Commander of the Panamanian and National Guard, died in an airplane crash in July, 1981. Six months earlier, Ronald Reagan had become the American president. Many doubts regarding Herrera’s death emerged, and there have been allusions that the U.S. government had something to do with it. A decade later, Frank Rubino who was an attorney for Manuel Antonio Noriega, stated that: “Gen. Noriega has in his possession documents showing attempts to assassinate Gen. Noriega and Mr. Torrijos by agencies of the United States.”²⁶ These accusations cannot be taken as “bulletproof” due to the fact that Noriega himself has been accused of the same exact crime. Nevertheless, John Perkins supports the Rubino’s theory saying that the CIA planted a bomb in the plane to satisfy U.S. interests.²⁷ Whatever the case, Torrijos’s death created a vacant space in the Panamanian government, which was filled in 1983 by military leader, Manuel Noriega.

1.4 The Rise of Manuel Antonio Noriega

It was an intricate journey for Manuel Noriega to become a high-ranking politician and the de facto military leader of Panama. Having lost both parents at an early age,

²³ Marcel Salamín et al., "Torrijos. Figura, tiempo, faena," *Revista Lotería* 305-309 (August-December 1981) 423.

²⁴ Japan, the United States and Panama had created a formal commission (Tripartite Study Commission on Alternatives to the Panama Canal) whose objective was to find means of improving the existing canal.

²⁵ M. Noriega and P. Eisner, *America’s Prisoner: The Memoirs of Manuel Noriega* (New York: Random House, 1997), 55.

²⁶ Warren Richey, "Noriega Strategy Unfolds Attorneys Hope to Drag Past U.S. Role into Trial," *Sun Sentinel*, http://articles.sun-sentinel.com/1991-05-01/news/9101220014_1_frank-rubino-gen-noriega-panama, Accessed March 6, 2016.

²⁷ John Perkins, *Confessions of an Economic Hit Man* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2004), 156-157.

“Tony” Noriega was raised an orphan. His poverty did not stand out in the neighborhood he grew up in and, being a Creole, neither did his dark skin. He devoured books and thanks to his older brother Carlos, who was in the Socialist party, Manuel became politically active. After high school, he studied military engineering in Chorrillos, Panama. It was not, however, only his brother thanks to whom Manuel “developed an intellectual life” because “another mentor” would soon have a deep influence on him.²⁸

In the early 1960s, Noriega joined the National Guard and became a common soldier. He was stationed in the Colón garrison under the command of Major Omar Torrijos, who became Noriegas’s “military protector and guru.” Torrijos took Noriega under his wing and made sure that Noriega was his subordinate for the next couple of years.²⁹

During his first years of service, Noriega’s demeanor was far from one of an exemplary soldier. Frequent all-night parties and being repeatedly AWOL³⁰ was common practice for the young lieutenant. Often on the nightly prow, Noriega gained a reputation for being a drunk and a violent person. There also were accusations of sexual abuse, which could have easily ruined Noriega’s military career before it had even started. However, he was lucky to be under the command of Major Torrijos, who saw potential and aptitude in the young soldier and gave him necessary protection without which “it is unlikely the young second lieutenant would have survived as an officer.”³¹

If Noriega did not measure up to the expectations the major had for him in the early years of their relationship, this was about to change at the end of the 1960s. As the animosity between Torrijos and Arnulfo Arias was growing, Arias, who recently won the presidency, started to get rid of the officials that did not fit his political beliefs. Torrijos was among them. Meanwhile, a group of officers put in motion a coup. They were about to be blacklisted by Arias as well. However, Torrijos was unaware of the ongoing conspiracy against the president and eventually, the overthrow of Arias occurred without any violence. Despite the fact that Arias was gone, Torrijos was still in danger after the coup. There were internal antipathies in the new government and there was another attempt of a coup. This time, they were plotting against Torrijos. During that time in Mexico, he got the news about the events right away thanks to Noriega, who played a crucial role as a representative

²⁸ Noriega and Eisner, *America’s Prisoner*, 24.

²⁹ John Dinges, *Our Man in Panama* (New York: Random House, 1990), 34-36.

³⁰ Meaning “away without official leave.”

³¹ *Ibid.*, 35-36.

of Torrijos. Noriega's organizations skills and prompt reactions guaranteed the solid support and loyalty of the officers back in Panama. When he got back to the country, Torrijos was welcomed with “¡Viva Torrijos!” and immediately assumed direct control over the National Guard.³²

Torrijos's greatest achievement was certainly the completion of the Panama Canal treaties, and Manuel Noriega was an essential figure during the negotiations. If Torrijos's role was public, Noriega's “assignment was darker: to provide intelligence and counterintelligence.”³³ Both the United States and Panama were engaged in an intense game of espionage. Bugged phones, clandestine operations and cloak-and-dagger tactics were common practice. As the chief of military intelligence of Panama or G2, Noriega ran various counterintelligence operations. One of them would later become known as *Singing Sergeants affair*. Noriega managed to turn a U.S. intelligence operative who then repeatedly leaked information and provided precious documents. Thanks to the mole, Noriega obtained a vast amount of knowledge about the U.S. surveillance operation, including technical manuals about the NSA and a list of NSA communication targets throughout Latin America, “a guidebook to U.S. electronic surveillance in the continent.”³⁴

In October 1976, the game of spy versus spy took a nasty turn. Just a few days before the U.S. presidential elections, a bomb planted under an empty car exploded. The car was parked near the U.S. commissary and not far away from the main Canal Zone administration building. Within a couple of hours, another two bombs went off in the Zone. There were no casualties, which seemed to be the intention, because the cars exploded in the middle of the night; presumably to minimize the chance of injuring anyone.³⁵

Although it was not confirmed whether the Americans or Panamanians were behind the bombings, they were a frightening reminder of the stirred-up atmosphere regarding the Panama Canal sovereignty issues. Many people believed that the anti-treaty supporters set off the bombs in order to sabotage the negotiations, and others were convinced that the bombings were carried out by the Panamanian National Guard to intimidate U.S. officials. There are certain indications that both the Americans and Panamanians might have been

³² Dinges, *Our Man in Panama*, 44-48; Noriega and Eisner, *America's Prisoner*, 35-37.

³³ Dinges, *Our Man in Panama*, 73.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 83.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 84.

involved, however. Manuel Noriega himself claims that it was a CIA proposal to bring a group of Panamanian men to the United State, train them in explosives and demolition tactics and then execute “a high-profile but harmless bit of sabotage, which would add urgency to the canal negotiations by questioning the security of Americans residents in the area.”³⁶

On December 8, 1976, about a month after the Republicans lost the presidential election, a meeting between CIA director George Bush and Manuel Noriega took place. Torrijos saw the new U.S. administration as an opportunity to establish stronger contacts between the nations and hoped the meeting could help with the Canal negotiations. One of the main subjects of the meeting was, of course, the bombings. Due to the intelligence operations they were both conducting against and with each other, trying to make the other one leak information while not making a slip of the tongue, it was like walking in quicksand. Then Bush brought up another topic, going straight to his real priority by asking if Torrijos was a communist. Torrijos was well known for his sympathy for the poor with campaign slogans such as “we are not against the rich; we are for the poor” and a social program that favored students and the working class. Having recently visited Cuba, his possible communist affiliation really weighed on Bush’s mind. With the Cold War in full swing, that certainly was not the kind of cooperation that the upcoming president would like to maintain.³⁷ Although all the details of the conversation are unknown, as it occurred only between Bush, Noriega and a translator, the important fact from the historical point of view is that it officially took place. There were later other meetings between the two which could indicate that there might have been behind-the-scenes negotiations and agreements which further influenced the course of the history.

Noriega’s role as an informant for the CIA is publically known. His collaboration with the U.S. government dates back to the early 1960s, right before he joined the National Guard. He received money for the information he provided and remained on the CIA payroll until 1988.³⁸ Noriega had access to large sums of CIA contingency funds that were paying agents who gathered intelligence for the CIA. As there are virtually no invoices or budgets, the quantity of the payments can be only estimated.³⁹

³⁶ Noriega and Eisner, *America’s Prisoner*, 45.

³⁷ Dinges, *Our Man in Panama*, 36.

³⁸ Mark Tran, “Manuel Noriega – From US Friend to Foe,” *The Guardian*, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/apr/27/manuel-noriega-us-friend-foe>, Accessed March 14, 2016.

³⁹ Dinges, *Our Man in Panama*, 51.

The post of high-ranking officer gave Noriega the opportunity to run all sorts of operations that either favored the country or himself. Apart from being a double agent, Noriega probably used his connections in the drug trade as well. Here comes into play the strategic significance of Panama again. Although Noriega denies any kind of involvement in drug trafficking during his career, there is a great likelihood that he formed part of a regular drug trade that was established between Latin American countries and the United States.⁴⁰

Although it is believed that Noriega had been involved in the drug trafficking business since the 1960s, the first serious allegations appeared in 1971. By the time the DEA, which replaced the BNDD (Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs), was founded, Panama was “a major transshipment conduit for heroin and cocaine” in the Americas. The BNDD planted two Spanish-speaking agents in the drug trade and eventually, the evidence led them to Manuel Noriega. Not only were there smugglers who confessed to having paid off Noriega, but they were also happy to corroborate. However, the international mechanisms that needed to be put in motion in order to extradite and charge a foreign official were too ponderous and complex. The indictment was not pursued after all.⁴¹

Manuel Noriega was not the only high-ranking officer to face drug charges during that time. After dropping Noriega’s case, another narcotics ring came into the spotlight. This time, the brother of Omar Torrijos, Moisés, was accused of smuggling heroin. However, he was never arrested.⁴² The BNDD long tried to develop a case against Panamanian officials, but never really succeeded. General Omar Torrijos expressed disgust that the narcotics were flowing through Panama and even agreed to an increased training for the National Guard’s central narcotic unit, which would double in size.⁴³ Nevertheless, the involvement of prominent figures in the drug trade might not be far-fetched at all.

As Noriega rose through the ranks, so did his value as an informant; perhaps to the extent that it shaded his illegal activities. Since the time the charges against him were dropped in the early 1970s, no serious questions about Noriega’s involvement in the drug trade were raised until the mid 1980s. The only exception was the Senate ratification

⁴⁰ Ibid., 124, 133-134.

⁴¹ Ibid., 53-59. The then head of the Miami office’s criminal division later became Noriega’s private attorney.

⁴² Reuters, “Moises Torrijos Herrera, Panamanian Ambassador, 74,” *New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/1990/12/23/obituaries/moises-torrijos-herrera-panamanian-ambassador-74.html>, Accessed March 16, 2016.

⁴³ Dinges, *Our Man in Panama*, 62.

process of the Canal Treaties in 1977, during which some of the Republicans, mainly conservative opponents, demanded a full airing of the charges and a review of classified CIA and DEA documents about Panama.⁴⁴ Their doing so had no influence on the ratification of the treaties.

After Torrijos's death in 1981, Noriega consolidated his position, becoming Panama's de facto ruler. He later promoted himself to full general in 1983. However, if it were not for the CIA protection, Noriega would probably have had a much harder time defending himself against the crimes he was charged with by BNDD/DEA. But for the U.S. government the CIA protection was definitely worth it.

Noriega's value went up even more during the 1980s when he allowed the United States to set up listening posts in Panama and helped the United States with its fight against the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua. It was a win-win scenario, because the American agencies turned a blind eye to Noriega's drug dealing and in return, the United States could smuggle money and arms across Panama. Such actions resulted in a political scandal that occurred during the Reagan administration and would later become known as the Iran-Contra Affair.

1.4.1 The Iran-Contra Affair

The Iran-Contra Affair brought together two seemingly unrelated countries, Nicaragua and Iran. In the Cold War atmosphere, the Nicaraguan leftist Sandinista regime burdened the United States to say the least. It was even perceived as an economic threat to U.S. interests and "in spite of the Sandinista victory being declared fair, the United States continued to oppose the left-wing Nicaraguan government."⁴⁵ The Reagan administration gave "strong support" to countries "which embrace[d] the principles of democracy and freedom," accusing the Sandinistas of helping leftist guerrillas in El Salvador.⁴⁶ In other words, military and financial support was provided to movements that opposed Soviet-supported governments. In Nicaragua, the right-wing militia groups formed *The*

⁴⁴ Ibid., 98-99.

⁴⁵ "1984: Sandinistas claim election victory," BBC, http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/november/5/newsid_2538000/2538379.stm, Accessed March 20, 2016; Marlene Cmons, "President Shifts Emphasis From Contra Warfare," *Los Angeles Times*, http://articles.latimes.com/1987-05-04/news/mn-4758_1_contras, Accessed March 20, 2016.

⁴⁶ "Cuba and Central America," National Security Decision Directives, <https://fas.org/irp/offdocs/nsdd/23-1554t.gif>, Accessed March 20, 2016.

Nicaraguan Resistance, widely known as *The Contras*.⁴⁷ In contrast to Carter's non-intervention foreign policy, the Reagan Doctrine of 1982 shifted the U.S. approach from "one of simply interdicting arms to one of supporting a change in government." The United States pursued an overall strengthening of its presence in the Central America and believed in putting pressure on foreign regimes via covert activities.⁴⁸ When the Boland Amendment of 1982 banned the U.S. funding of which the purpose was the overthrow of the Nicaraguan government, the Reagan administration had to seek an alternative source of money.⁴⁹

The second piece of the Iran-Contra Affair puzzle started to develop in the late 1970s when a radical Islamic movement overthrew a U.S.-backed government in Iran. The new Iranian government was viewed as potentially Soviet Union-friendly. Things further complicated when Lebanese terrorist groups took several American hostages.⁵⁰ The United States tried to secure the hostages and influence Iranian foreign policy in a pro-Western direction. Reagan hoped that the relations between the two nations could improve by offering supplies and weapons to Iran, and consequently lead to an improvement in the relations with Lebanon and the release of the captives.

At that point, the two originally separate initiatives started to work together. Due to the fact that exchanging arms for hostages was in direct violation of the Boland Amendment, in order to keep the operation going, Reagan's administration found a legal loophole using the National Security Council, to which the new amendment did not apply.⁵¹ The United States smuggled weapons via Israel to Iran, which had difficulties obtaining arms for the war against Iraq at that time, and then the money was used to fund the paramilitary in Nicaragua.

⁴⁷ Abbreviation from Spanish *contrarevolución* (counter-revolution).

⁴⁸ Rachel Hunter, "IRC Case Study 12.8," Brown University, https://www.brown.edu/Research/Understanding_the_Iran_Contra_Affair/overview.pdf, 6-7.

⁴⁹ Stefan A. Riesenfeld, "The Powers of Congress and the President in International Relations: Revisited," *California Law Review* 75 (January 1987): 408-411.

⁵⁰ "Understanding Iran-Contra Affairs," Brown University, http://www.brown.edu/Research/Understanding_the_Iran_Contra_Affair/iran-contra-affairs.php, Accessed March 20, 2016.

⁵¹ "Iran Contra Affair (1983-1988)," The Cold War Museum, <http://www.coldwar.org/articles/80s/IranContraAffair.asp>, Accessed March 21, 2016; Catherine Holden, "U.S. Foreign Policy and the Iran-Contra Affair: Was Oliver North a Patriot, a Pawn, or an Outlaw?," Baltimore County Public Schools, http://www.umbc.edu/che/tahlessons/pdf/historylabs/Oliver_North_and_the_Iran-Contra_Affair.PrinterFriendly.pdf, Accessed April 24, 2016.

However, the clandestine operation was soon to be revealed. The scandal broke thanks to Lebanese newspapers, which exposed the Reagan administration's arm deals. Later on, more information about the deals emerged when a CIA pilot was shot down over Nicaragua with secret documents aboard revealing many of the agency's covert activities.⁵²

After the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal, "Irangate" could easily become another black chapter in the U.S. history. Nevertheless, it did not undermine the U.S. government that much in the eyes of the public. Due to political pressures, mainly Republican, and time constraints, "the Iran-*contra* committees failed to delve fully into the domestic scandal." Some of the key operatives even remained in the government, as they were protected from full disclosure.⁵³ The role of the U.S. government, especially its duplicity in terms of different agencies operating separately, raised many questions and consequently, Reagan lost face with the public as Americans were upset about his dealing with terrorists.

1.4.2 From Friend to Foe

If the CIA protected Noriega and prevented the DEA from indicting him throughout the 1980s, at the end of the decade, the de facto leader of Panama was deprived of the privilege. When the CIA pilot was shot down over Nicaragua, not only did it mean exposure for the agency but for Noriega as well. The CIA's connections with Noriega were now revealed, and he became more of a burden than an asset for the U.S. government, which opened the way for the DEA's investigations. What also made the U.S. agencies distance themselves from Noriega was his increasing brutality, especially after the assassination of his opponent Hugo Spadafora whose body was found in 1985.⁵⁴ The 1988 Senate subcommittee on terrorism, narcotics and international operations stated that "the saga of Panama's General Manuel Antonio Noriega represents one of the most serious foreign policy failures for the United States" because he "was able to manipulate the U.S. foreign policy toward his country, while skillfully accumulating near-absolute power."⁵⁵

⁵² "Nicaragua Downs Plane and Survivor Implicates C.I.A.," *New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/1986/10/12/weekinreview/in-summary-nicaragua-downs-plane-and-survivor-implicates-cia.html>, Accessed March 21, 2016.

⁵³ R. Parry and P. Kornbluh, "Iran-Contra's Untold Story," *Foreign Policy* 72 (Autumn 1988): 27.

⁵⁴ Stephen Kinzer, *Overthrow: America's Century of Regime Change from Hawaii to Iraq* (New York: Times Books, 2007), 242-244.

⁵⁵ William O. Walker, *Drugs in the Western Hemisphere: An Odyssey of Cultures in Conflict* (Wilmington: Jaguar Books, 1996), 200.

Noriega's "absolute power" proved to be real during the presidential elections in 1989. There was an attempt to fake the election results, but Guillermo Endara Galimany, whose campaign was funded by the United States, won easily against Noriega's puppet candidate, Carlos Duque. However, the results were annulled by the Panamanian government three days later stating that it would be impossible to determine who had won the elections due to many irregularities, missing tally sheets and documents.⁵⁶ Former U.S. President Jimmy Carter, who was one of the election observers, expressed his concerns by asking, "Are you honest people, or are you thieves?"⁵⁷ The next day, Endara Galimany led a street protest, which was dissipated by so-called Dignity Battalions, Noriega's militia whose purpose was to help with any internal subversive activity. Endara Galimany and two other candidates were beaten with metal pipes and had to be hospitalized. The images of the events appeared on the cover of the May 22, 1989 edition of *TIME* magazine and brought world-wide attention to the Panamanian elections.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, Noriega maintained power by force claiming that his candidate had won the elections fairly and that the irregularities had been on the part of U.S.-backed candidates. By that time, the United States turned completely against Manuel Noriega and the new administration headed by President George H. W. Bush began actively seeking ways to get rid of him. Concerned about Noriega's disregard for law and international opinion, Bush reinforced the Canal Zone garrison and increased soldier training.⁵⁹

The United States was not the only entity that wanted to deprive Noriega of his power. In October 1989, a coup attempt took place. It was led by Moisés Giroldi, the very same man who had helped Noriega to foil a coup in March 1988. Giroldi planned to seize the Panamanian Defense Forces headquarters, *La Comandancia*, with the help of SOUTHCOM (United States Southern Command) by blocking the main roads to the headquarters, thereby preventing units loyal to Noriega from rescuing him. Giroldi did not want Noriega to have the impression that the United States was behind the operation and

⁵⁶ The National Republican and Democratic Institutes for International Affairs, "International Delegation Report, The May 7, 1989 Panama Elections," Washington D.C., 1989, 59, <http://www.cartercenter.org/documents/electionreports/democracy/FinalReportPanama1989.pdf>.

⁵⁷ Harding, *The History of Panama*, 112.

⁵⁸ Douglas Martin, "Guillermo Endara, Who Helped Lead Panama From Noriega to Democracy, Dies at 73," *Los Angeles Times*, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/30/world/americas/30endara.html?_r=0, Accessed March 21, 2016; "Panama's Election; May 22, 1989," *Time*, <http://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,19890522,00.html>, Accessed March 23, 2016.

⁵⁹ Ronald H. Cole, *Operation Just Cause: The Planning and Execution of Joint Operations in Panama* (Washington D. C.: Military Bookshop. 2012), 11.

requested that no U.S. aircraft fly near the headquarters. There was a moment when Giroldi actually captured Noriega but refused to hand him over to SOUTHCOM. Ultimately, Noriega somehow managed to fend off the coup.⁶⁰ Later, there was harsh criticism towards the Bush administration for its apparent unwillingness or inability to aid Giroldi during the coup. Tensions between the nations were increasing. Bush repeatedly called for an uncompromising and tough stand against drugs, also mentioning Noriega directly, saying, "I wanna see him brought to justice by our administration."⁶¹

The straw that broke the camel's back came on December 15, 1988, during a confrontation between four U.S. marines and PDF soldiers. The American soldiers were denied passage at a roadblock and tried to drive away. The PDF opened fire killing a marine lieutenant. The whole incident was witnessed by a U.S. navy lieutenant and his wife who had been stopped at the very same roadblock. They were both taken into custody and beaten.⁶² President Bush then used the incident as "an immediate cause for ordering the invasion." On the same day, the National Assembly passed a resolution stating that "due to U.S. aggression, Panama and the United States were in state of war," which the U.S. government basically viewed as a war declaration against the United States.⁶³

⁶⁰ Ibid., 14-16; A. Rosenthal and A. Gordon, "A Failed Coup: The Bush Team and Noriega, A Special Report; Panama Crisis: Disarray Hindered White House," *New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/1989/10/08/world/failed-coup-bush-team-noriega-special-report-panama-crisis-disarray-hindered.html?pagewanted=all>, Accessed March 24, 2016.

⁶¹ "George H.W. Bush: The War on Drugs (1988)," You Tube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_SBmhVukXro, Accessed March 22, 2016.

⁶² Cole, *Operation Just Cause*, 27.

⁶³ James Ciment, *Encyclopedia of Conflicts since World War II* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 490-491.

2 THE INVASION

By the end of the 1980s, both nations were heading towards a military denouement, and the order for the invasion was just a matter of time. The decision was supported both politically and, more importantly, publicly. If the persona of Manuel Noriega had been well in the background and out of sight during his collaboration with the United States, in the late 1980s, it was quite the opposite. The media depicted him as a drug smuggler, murderer and autocrat. Bush's rhetoric against him gradually grew stronger. Noriega was repeatedly accused of being responsible for the drugs coming into the United States and Bush also showed concern about the personnel and American citizens living in the Canal Zone, which appealed to the American public.

The hunt for Noriega was on. Political scientist David Ryan also argues that Bush "lacked an enemy of equivalent stature to the Soviet Union" and "was in search of monsters to destroy."⁶⁴ On December 17, there was a briefing where the main points of General Thurman's operation, called "Blue Spoon," were discussed and President Bush gave his approval.⁶⁵

In the early hours of December 20, the military incursion into Panama began. The first bomb reportedly landed at 0 hour 46 minutes local time, and more than sixty others quickly followed. Despite the high-strung situation between the countries, the attack caught the Panamanians by surprise and, commenced in the middle of the night, Panamanians showed little organized resistance. Besides the element of surprise, the numbers speak for themselves. About 26,000 U.S. troops were deployed to fight against approximately 16,000 members of the PDF, of which less than one-third were actually trained soldiers. On the other hand, the United States used different specialized corps such as Army, Air Force, Navy or Marines in order to maximize the effectiveness of the mission. Moreover, the U.S. army had much more advanced technology at its disposal.⁶⁶

In the first stages of the operation, the U.S. army focused on twenty seven strategic installations in order to paralyze the Panamanian defense forces. The main locations of the U.S. interest were the airports, military bases, naval bases and PDF headquarters. During

⁶⁴ David Ryan, *US Foreign Policy in World History* (London: Routledge, 2000), 184-186.

⁶⁵ Ciment, *Encyclopedia of Conflicts since World War II*, 491.

⁶⁶ P. Pizzurno and C. A. Araúz, "Estados Unidos invade Panamá: crónica de una invasión anunciada," *Crítica*, <http://portal.critica.com.pa/archivo/historia/f14-01.html>, Accessed April 12, 2016; Ciment, *Encyclopedia of Conflicts since World War II*, 491; Soler, *La invasión de Estados Unidos a Panamá*, 89.

the attack of the latter, also referred to as *La Comandancia*, an adjacent and densely-populated neighborhood, El Chorrillo was severely damaged. The testimonies of what happened during the bombing of El Chorrillo have one common denominator: ruthlessness. Witnesses described the attack as merciless and cruel. One witness remembered seeing “people being executed with their hands tied up” and said that he “had to walk between human corpses.” He also comments on the U.S. weaponry: “I saw a light. Anything exposed to it turned into an oil splotch. What kind of arm is that...?” Historian Ricaurte Soler argues that during December 20 and the following days, “Panama was a testing ground for the most advanced military technology.” For the first time, the United States put in use the Stealth F-117 fighters, which flew undetected even by the American radars in the Canal Zone. The new Apache helicopters were also used. Another eye witness described the U.S. practice regarding the bodies of dead Panamanians: “The Americans paid six dollars for every dead body brought to them. They were put in plastic bags and thrown into the sea. Three refrigerated trucks entered El Chorrillo to collect the bodies. Many of the wounded were put together with the corpses.” Coherence between the accounts can be seen in the statement of another witness, who claimed that there was a mass grave in the Corozal cemetery where three trucks unloaded a number of bodies. American journalist Godfrey Harris stated that “members of the 193rd Infantry Brigade told me that they had been detailed to load body bags-hundreds and hundreds of them-onto cargo planes bound for a secret burial at the large American air base in Honduras.”⁶⁷ Several people also agreed on having seen cremations in El Chorrillo. Furthermore, there was a suspicion that the fire which destroyed a great part of the El Chorrillo neighborhood was set intentionally by U.S. soldiers.⁶⁸

When the invasion started, the PDF commander, Manuel Noriega, was having drinks in a bar and did not attempt to take command of the Panamanian resistance. Later, Noriega found asylum in the residence of the papal nuncio. The important figures of the Panamanian political scene who were prevented from taking office in the earlier election, Arias, Ford and Endara, were staying at Fort Clayton near Balboa city at that time. They

⁶⁷ "Casualties in Panama," *Los Angeles Times*, (November 12, 1990).
<http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/latimes/doc/281193041.html?FMT=ABS&FMTS=ABS:FT&type=current&date=Nov+12%2C+1990&author=&pub=Los+Angeles+Times+%28pre-1997+Fulltext%29&edition=&startpage=4&desc=Casualties+in+Panama>, Accessed April 20, 2016.

⁶⁸ Soler, *La invasión de Estados Unidos a Panamá*, 92-95.

were guests of General Thurman and were immediately recognized by Washington as the new legal government of Panama.⁶⁹

2.1 The Capture

On the fifth day of the invasion, Noriega and four other aides sought sanctuary in the Vatican diplomatic mission in Panama City. Under Noriega's threat "to continue the struggle" if not taken in, Monsignor Laboa, given only a moment to decide, agreed. Despite the fact he did not confer with the Vatican, he let Noriega enter the Nunciature grounds because he "feared there would be many deaths if General Noriega were turned away."⁷⁰ According to the testimony, Noriega and his company carried "suspicious vials of injectable liquids and an assortment of guns." Monsignor Laboa demanded that Noriega hand over the guns, which he eventually did. However, a submachine gun was found later under his bed.⁷¹ With his boat sunk and jet destroyed, Noriega had no way to escape. The Operation Nifty Package could begin.

Since any direct action against the Church would be a violation of international law, the U.S. soldiers could only wait. But when the Vatican announced that it would not turn Noriega over to "an invading power," the U.S. administration began using diplomatic pressure. On Christmas Day, U.S. Secretary of State James Baker made an insistent phone call to the Vatican saying that "this is an exception to diplomatic immunity" because Noriega was an indicted criminal and a "threat to public security." Baker also said "we cannot allow Noriega to go to any other country than the United States."⁷² Nevertheless, the Vatican remained strong in their decision.

Although the options were limited for the United States, they came up with rather a bizarre plan. During the next couple of days, the U.S. Army turned to psychological warfare playing rock music at ear-splitting levels just in front of the Nunciature and flying helicopters above the church. The huge speakers positioned against the Nunciature's fence were blasting songs such as "I Fought The Law" or "You're No Good" nonstop in order to

⁶⁹ Ciment, *Encyclopedia of Conflicts Since World War II*, 491.

⁷⁰ Larry Rohter, "The Noriega Case: Panama City; Papal Envoy Asserts Psychology, Not Ultimatum, Swayed Noriega," *New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/1990/01/06/world/noriega-case-panama-city-papal-envoy-asserts-psychology-not-ultimatum-swayed.html>, Accessed April 20, 2016.

⁷¹ "A guest Who Wore Out His Welcome," *TIME*, <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,969148,00.html>, Accessed April 20, 2016.

⁷² Meenekshi Bose and Rosanna Perotti, *From Cold War to New World Order: The Foreign Policy of George H.W. Bush* (London: Greenwood Press, 2002), 181.

unnerve Noriega.⁷³ After several complaints to George H. W. Bush by the Holy See, the music was stopped on the third day.⁷⁴

Even though the peculiar approach of the U.S. Army might have helped, it was the psychological game inside the church which later turned out to be a key factor. Right from the beginning, the Vatican officials tried to weaken the general mentally little by little. First, they persuaded him to hand over the gun he carried on the day he entered the church and later, they made him give up a knife. Then they isolated him from the rest of his company. Placing him in a simple room with a broken TV, crucifix on the wall and no air-conditioning “had a tremendous impact on lowering his morale.” Being a vegetarian, he was forced to eat the food that was served to other embassy residents. He was limited only to one wing of the church, and absolutely no guests were allowed to him. With a few limited phone calls available, Noriega found himself increasingly isolated. It was the little things that made his morale deteriorate slowly.⁷⁵

Officials and diplomats later agreed that the strategy adopted by Monsignor Laboa “was a masterpiece of psychological persuasion.” He operated in such a way that Noriega had no other option than to surrender to the United States. “Every time General Noriega accepted that one solution was no longer possible, Monsignor Laboa would move on to the next point,” closing the doors one by one until Noriega himself was convinced that there was no other escape from the situation. If Noriega had not surrendered, there were also other possible alternatives. One of them was to simply lower the flag of the mission and declare itself no longer an embassy. Another one, which was seriously discussed, was to hand Noriega over to the Panamanian government. However, after several days of negotiations, the Vatican announced that Noriega “was not considered to be in diplomatic or political asylum but a person in refuge against whom there were criminal charges.” During the next couple of days, the United States encouraged Monsignor Laboa to intensify “his campaign to break down General Noriega's resistance.”⁷⁶ On Wednesday afternoon, Laboa told Noriega that his sanctuary would run out at noon that day, and the man who had survived coups, gunfights and intensive political pressure gave in. On

⁷³ Leon Daniel, "Installing the Gringo's Guy," *The Bryan Times* (January 5, 1990) 4.

⁷⁴ "A guest Who Wore Out His Welcome," *TIME*,

<http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,969148,00.html>, Accessed April 20, 2016.

⁷⁵ Andrew Rosenthal, "Noriega's Surrender; Chronology," *New York Times*,
<http://www.nytimes.com/1990/01/05/world/noriega-s-surrender-chronology-vatican-issues-ultimatum-general-takes-walk.html?pagewanted=all>, Accessed April 20, 2016.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*; Daniel, "Installing the Gringo's Guy," 4.

January 3, 1990, General Manuel Noriega, wearing his military uniform, walked out of the gate of the Nunciature where American soldiers waited to handcuff him. He was put into a waiting helicopter and taken to Howard Air Force Base near Balboa City.

2.2 The Sentence

In April 1992, the 58-year-old deposed dictator, Manuel Antonio Noriega, was found guilty of eight out of ten drug, racketeering and money laundering charges in a trial held in Miami. Noriega was sentenced to forty years in a Miami federal jail. The sentence, which was later reduced to thirty years, could have been much higher, as the maximum penalty for drug trafficking on such a scale that Noriega was found guilty of was 120 years.⁷⁷

The verdict was absolutely crucial for the Bush administration, as a hung jury or “not guilty” would have been a huge embarrassment for the White House. Considering the unconventional conduct in the Noriega case and the international attention, it was necessary for the United States to win the trial. Nevertheless, it is believed that “the outcome of the Noriega case in Miami was never in doubt from day one. It was a show trial, a warning to others.”⁷⁸

Apart from the sentence in Miami, Noriega was convicted of more crimes later during the 1990s. In 1999, he was sentenced in absentia to ten years of imprisonment from a Paris court for having laundered drug money by buying properties in France. In 2007, the court ruled that Noriega would be extradited to France but due to Noriega’s appeals to avoid it arguing that he had a status of a Prisoner of War, the extradition did not take place until April 2010, when Secretary of State Hillary Clinton signed the order. He was found guilty and sentenced to seven years in prison. His legal odyssey took another turn in December 2011, when a second extradition took place, as Noriega was wanted back in Panama where he had been charged with killing his political rival Hugo Spadafora.⁷⁹ Having suffered

⁷⁷ Robert L. Jackson and Mike Clary, "Noriega Convicted on 8 Drug and Racketeering Charges," *Los Angeles Times*, April 10, 1992; Gilberto Marulanda, "Participación y reacción de las mujeres ante los sucesos de enero de 1964," *Revista Lotería* 446 (January-February 2003): 19.

⁷⁸ Simon Tisdall, "Why Manuel Noriega Became America’s Most Wanted," *The Guardian*, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/cifamerica/2010/apr/28/noriega-panama-france-america>, Accessed April 22, 2016.

⁷⁹ "U.S. Judge OKs Noriega Extradition to France," CNN, <http://edition.cnn.com/2007/US/law/08/28/noriega/>, Accessed April 22, 2016; "Manuel Noriega Fast Facts," CNN, <http://edition.cnn.com/2013/08/19/world/americas/manuel-noriega-fast-facts/>, Accessed April 22, 2016.

from several health complications, Manuel Noriega remains in the Panamanian prison El Renacer.

2.3 Justification of the Invasion

Thanks to Bush's anti-drug rhetoric and growing media coverage on Noriega's negative attributes, the American public widely supported the invasion. In fact, right after it started, they considered it to be "morally justified," and two-thirds believed that the United States "made every effort to negotiate a peaceful settlement" prior to the invasion.⁸⁰

On December 20, 1989, President George H. W. Bush delivered an address to the American people where he justified his order to invade Panama, stating that the goals of the United States were to "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." He also said that the invasion was a reaction to Noriega's declaration of state of war with the United States. Moreover, Bush remembered the Panamanian election held in May and the brutal attack on two primary candidates, Guillermo Endara and Guillermo Ford, emphasizing that the objective of the United States is to guarantee "democracy, peace, and the chance for a better life in dignity and freedom" for the Panamanian people.⁸¹

In his speech, President Bush, also stressed that Noriega had been convicted of being a drug trafficker, a fact that had become a regular constituent of his public speeches that time. Noriega was shown in the worst possible light both by the president and the media. He was said to practice voodoo "with animal entrails and buckets of blood, keep a witch's diary," have "a stash of pornography" and display a portrait of Adolf Hitler.⁸²

All the arguments given by Bush to invade Panama seemed reasonable, however, there might have been more to it. First of all, Bush's argument about "safeguarding" the thousands of Americans in the Canal Zone who were suddenly in peril because of the state of war that Noriega had declared "with the United States" might have been intentionally misinterpreted in favor of the U.S.'s cause. The truth is that the Panamanian

⁸⁰ George Skelton, "The Times Poll: Americans Strongly Back Bush on Panama Invasion," *Los Angeles Times*, http://articles.latimes.com/1989-12-22/news/mn-684_1_american-lives, Accessed April 23, 2016.

⁸¹ "Address to Nation on Panama Invasion," American Rhetoric, <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/ghwbushpanamainvasion.htm>, Accessed April 23, 2016.

⁸² Daniel, "Installing the Gringo's Guy," 4.

National Assembly did not declare war against the United States, it simply passed a resolution that the country was in a state of war, being well aware of the imminent danger of an invasion.⁸³ Secondly, in the early 1990s, the relationship between Noriega and the CIA was not known publicly, and the Bush administration might have just used the “drug trafficker” label to get rid of an inconvenient and potentially dangerous individual. In spite of being “a thug,” for many years “he was America’s thug – until he turned on his mentors.” In other words, he was no longer a valuable asset and knew too much.⁸⁴ Thirdly, another reason why the United States invaded Panama might have simply had something to do with the American supremacy. Being a world superpower and given its invasive nature dating back to the Monroe Doctrine, the United States might not have been able to tolerate “disobedience” in the American sphere. Same as in Nicaragua and its Sandinista regime, any excessive divergence from the United States’s world view and political strategy had to be readjusted. That’s exactly what the Bush administration tried to do with their puppet presidential candidate, Endara, during the election held in May 1989. To have a pro-U.S. president in Panama would have been a valuable asset. But, when Noriega thwarted the U.S.’s plans nullifying the results, it only incensed the United States, making it opt for other more effective alternatives.

Another fact that casts a pall over the actions of the United States in Panama is certain discrepancies between the U.S. official statements and what many eye witnesses or investigative journalist and reporters saw. First of all, the total amount of Panamanian losses was slightly over 300 according to Americas Watch, however, the Commission for the Defense of Human Rights in Central America has given much higher numbers, 2,500-3,000 deaths. Investigations by human rights groups have estimated that even up to 7,000 people could have been killed only on the Panamanian side.⁸⁵ For the Americans, it might have been an inevitable collateral damage, as “there were overriding political reasons that

⁸³ Independent Commission of Inquiry, *The U.S. Invasion of Panama: The Truth Behind Operation 'Just Cause'* (Boston: South End Press, 1991), 26.

⁸⁴ Simon Tisdall, "Why Manuel Noriega Became America's Most Wanted," *The Guardian*, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/cifamerica/2010/apr/28/noriega-panama-france-america>, Accessed April 23, 2016.

⁸⁵ Luis Fernando Angosto-Ferrández, *Democracy, Revolution and Geopolitics in Latin America* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 81; Ciment, *Encyclopedia of Conflicts Since World War II*, 490-491; Larry Rother, "Panama and U.S. Strive To Settle on Death Toll," *New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/1990/04/01/world/panama-and-us-strive-to-settle-on-death-toll.html>, Accessed April 23, 2016.

required that the war be ended quickly and with few U.S. casualties.”⁸⁶ In 2015, there was an initiative by Vice President Isabel De Saint Malo de Alvarado to publish so-called “truth report” to mark the 26th anniversary of the attack. A special independent commission’s goal would be to identify all the victims, pay reparations to the relatives and establish public monuments honoring the Panamanian history. There have been claims that the existing investigations into the invasion have been funded by the U.S. government and therefore are biased.⁸⁷

The greatest controversy over the conduct of the operation was probably the bombing of the El Chorrillo neighborhood where the PDF headquarters (La Comandancia) was located. It was recorded that, in the area of the capital city, in the first fourteen hours of the attack, one bomb was dropped every two minutes and 422 bombs were dropped in total. Later, this came under heavy criticism, as there was no warning to the civilian population prior to the bombing and shelling.⁸⁸ Testimonies of people who witnessed loaded trucks with dead bodies, mass graves, cremations and excessive use of arms appear in a number of sources.⁸⁹

The Bush administration also faced strong criticism regarding the indiscriminate conduct of American troops in general. The official U.S. reports describe the operation as a great success. Hardly any lapses in conduct of the operation are mentioned, on the contrary, they talk about a swift and effective action done with “surgical precision” while minimizing casualties and avoiding “excessive damage to Panamanian property.”⁹⁰ They stress perfect cooperation of the units, great tactical and strategic execution and efficient usage of the military equipment. However, there have been allegations that “the tactics and weapons utilized resulted in an inordinate number of civilian victims, in violation of

⁸⁶ Independent Commission of Inquiry, *The U.S. Invasion of Panama*, 26.

⁸⁷ “Panama to Launch ‘Truth Report’ on 1989 US Invasion,” *TeleSur*, <http://www.telesurtv.net/english/news/Panama-to-Launch-Truth-Report-on-1989-US-Invasion-20151220-0028.html>, Accessed April 28, 2016; “Truth Report Investigating 1989 US Invasion of Panama Warms Up,” *TeleSur*, <http://www.telesurtv.net/english/news/Truth-Report-Investigating-1989-US-Invasion-of-Panama-Warms-Up-20160126-0031.html>, Accessed April 28, 2016.

⁸⁸ Soler, *La invasión de Estados Unidos a Panamá*, 96.

⁸⁹ “Casualties in Panama,” *Los Angeles Times*, <http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/latimes/doc/281193041.html?FMT=ABS&FMTS=ABS:FT&type=current&date=Nov+12%2C+1990&author=&pub=Los+Angeles+Times+%28pre-1997+Fulltext%29&edition=&startpage=4&desc=Casualties+in+Panama>, Accessed April 20, 2016; Soler, *La invasión de Estados Unidos a Panamá*, 92-95.

⁹⁰ R. Cody Phillips, *Operation Just Cause: the Incursion into Panama* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1990) 3.

specific obligations under the Geneva Conventions.”⁹¹ Many doubts arose about the burnings in El Chorrillo, an area where eye witnesses asserted to have seen U.S. soldiers setting fires; a claim that was denied by the Pentagon.⁹² The already suspicious conduct of the American soldiers came under further scrutiny when a Spanish journalist was killed on the streets of Panama. Eye witnesses claimed that the U.S. troops had shot him intentionally because he might have taken compromising photos, whereas the Southern Command’s version said that he was caught in the crossfire between American and Panamanian troops.⁹³ Whatever the case, the press coverage in situ was probably under careful scrutiny. A sixteen-person press pool⁹⁴ was flown to the area but did not reach Panama until several crucial hours had already passed since the first attacks. The Pentagon spokesman Pete Williams later said that they regretted “not being able use the media pool more effectively” due to a “breakdown in the ability to move around,” as the helicopters had to be utilized for the operation itself. The press was also denied access to the U.S. military bases during the first thirty-six hours.⁹⁵ According to Rear Admiral Eugene Carroll, the media “were taken to see only what the government wanted them to see.”⁹⁶

Media coverage of the invasion has been subject to a number of studies. A study analyzing mainstream newsweeklies *Time*, *The Nation* and *Newsweek* conducted between May 1989 and April 1990 found that they were “far more supportive than oppositional,” however, at the same time they expressed many doubts regarding Bush administration policies. Other study conducted between December 1989 and March 1990 revealed that *Time* relied mostly on U.S. government sources not giving almost any space to voices of Panamanians. Consequently, despite questioning some of the U.S. government policies, the coverage was primarily supportive of it. Where the most criticism towards Bush administration appeared were minor newspapers and opinion articles. As for the television

⁹¹ Human Rights Watch, "Human Rights in Post-invasion Panama: Justice Delayed is Justice Denied," *HRW*, <https://www.hrw.org/reports/1991/panama/>, Accessed April 25, 2016.

⁹² Rtxyz1, "The Panama Deception" (video), January 1, 2014, 38:05, Accessed April 25, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zo6yVNWcGCo>.

⁹³ Alan Riding, "U.S. Sued in Death of a Journalist in Panama," *New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/1990/06/24/world/us-sued-in-death-of-a-journalist-in-panama.html?pagewanted=1>, Accessed April 25, 2016; Rtxyz1, "The Panama Deception" (video), January 1, 2014, 48:53, Accessed April 25, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zo6yVNWcGCo>.

⁹⁴ Reporters of major media at that time, such as the Associated Press, NBC TV, *Time Magazine*, Reuters and others.

⁹⁵ Rtxyz1, "The Panama Deception," (video), 46:07.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 46:57

news coverage, a study analyzing *ABC*, *NBC* and *CBS* came to a similar conclusion. Since American government sources predominated, “the television reports had a decidedly pro-US policy bent.” Although U.S. government sources predominated in both types of media, the newspaper coverage included a much wider spectrum of sources such as foreign reports and local residents that rarely appeared in the television. In sum, it seems like the media played the role of a “cheerleader” rather than critic.⁹⁷

⁹⁷ Howard M. Hensel and Nelson Michaud, *Global Media Perspectives on the Crisis in Panama* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 54-77.

CONCLUSION

The American troops came into the city after midnight, in great numbers, both from the air and on land, without any warning. They were swift, resolute and merciless. Their goal was high-priority and any collateral damage was an inevitable cost. According to official U.S. reports, the operation itself was a great success and all the units performed flawlessly. Nevertheless, independent investigations and testimonies of the locals claim otherwise. The final death toll given by the United States seems understated, as other sources mention numbers multiple times higher than official American figures. The excessive and ruthless use of military equipment was a sad attribute of the operation. The El Chorrillo neighborhood became a symbol of the American misconduct during the operation.

Despite the arguments justifying the operation given by President George H. W. Bush, the American incursion caused international outrage and came under heavy criticism. Apart from the official reasons of the invasion, given the history between Noriega and the American government, the Bush administration seemed to be driven by almost personal motives. Another aspect of the invasion that corresponded to the American *modus operandi* as a superpower was the fact that it simply took what it wanted. To invade or exercise power over smaller countries was a common practice of the United States, but the *Operation Just Cause* took it to the next level. For the first time, the United States used its military in order to remove a leader of a sovereign country “when no external threat or menace was present.”⁹⁸ Moreover, it did so completely openly, regardless of international opinion.

Besides the actual material damage and losses of life, the invasion had a deep impact on the public morale. The sense of national pride and Panamanian sovereignty once propagated by the general Omar Torrijos Herrera were pulverized in a matter of days. The United States left the country wounded both physically and spirit-wise. The US-backed president, Guillermo Endara Galimany, proved inept to help the country, and the U.S. financial aid was eventually reduced and delayed.

In sum, the United States took advantage of their superpower status in order to pursue its interests no matter the cost, and the reasons of the invasion it formulated were used as a

⁹⁸ Stewart Brewer, *Borders and Bridges: A History of U.S.-Latin American Relations* (Westport: Greenwood, 2006) 146.

pretext to get rid of the U.S. public enemy, Manuel Antonio Noriega. The controversial conduct of the invasion itself, the violation of international conventions and the apparent misinterpretation of the details cast a shadow over the whole operation which, based on the facts presented, does not deserve the designation *Just*.

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