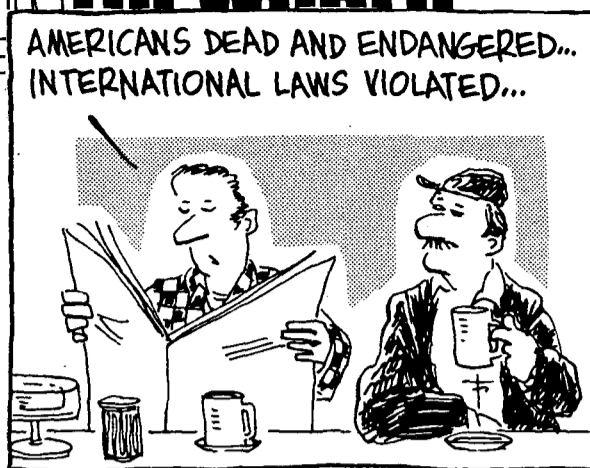
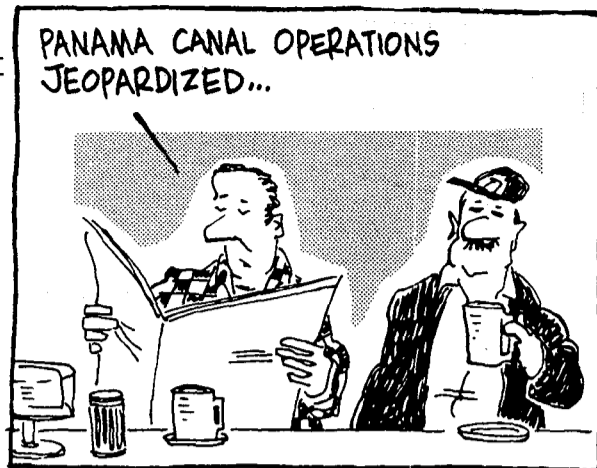


IN THE WORLD



U.S. invaded for all the wrong reasons

By John B. Judis

WASHINGTON

THE U.S. INVASION OF PANAMA IN DECEMBER caused hundreds of deaths and several hundred million dollars in property damage, but it also led to the ouster of a brutal, corrupt dictator. Coming on the eve of the scheduled appointment of a Panamanian to oversee the canal, the invasion probably prevented the abrogation of the Panama Canal treaty. Every historical action must be judged, however, not only by its immediate results but also by the larger framework in which the action took place.

On this score, President George Bush invaded for the wrong reasons and he is already drawing the wrong lessons from the invasion's ostensible success. From all accounts, Bush's decision to invade stemmed from domestic political imperatives rather than from finely wrought foreign-policy calculations. Like the Reagan administration's invasion of Grenada in 1983, the invasion of Panama was an attempt to win public favor by exploiting American anxieties about imperial decline.

By the same token, the invasion reflected the Bush administration's narrow view of global reality. Like former President Ronald Reagan, Bush is fixated on the military trappings of power while ignoring the deeper problems of the global economy that affect both the U.S. and Latin America. Instead of seeing the invasion as an unfortunate diversion justified by unique circumstances, Bush viewed it as an essential feature of his Latin American policy—at one with the "war on drugs." This will have disastrous consequences for U.S. foreign policy.

Politics and passion: The first point to recognize about the U.S. invasion is that it had become almost unavoidable. Whoever was in the White House—Republican or Democrat—would probably have called in the troops. The reason was partly the wackiness and intransigence of Manuel Noriega, but it was also the political whirlwind into which the issue had been swept.

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Anxiety about national decline has been a central feature of American politics for almost two decades. It has been fed by defeat in Vietnam, humiliation at the hands of Iran's Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and the replacement of "Made in the U.S.A." by "Made in Japan." To the extent decline is real, its roots are economic rather than military, but Americans have tended to focus on

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symptoms rather than on causes—on anti-American mullahs, military hardware and the specter of foreign-made drugs. When an issue becomes part of this political psychology, it acquires a life of its own. This is what happened in the case of Noriega and Panama.

The adoption of a Panama Canal treaty in 1978 had been a high point in U.S.-Latin American relations, but the battle over treaty confirmation in the Senate had awakened primordial anxieties about American national decline, which new-right politicians exploited in 1978 and 1980. The canal issue resurfaced in the summer of 1987, when Panamanians took to the streets to oust Noriega, who had seized power in 1981 after the death of Gen. Omar Torrijos. Then in February 1988, two Florida courts issued indictments against Noriega for cocaine trafficking.

By linking Noriega to the anti-drug mania, the Florida indictments transformed him from a foreign nuisance into a potent symbol of evil. Noriega replaced Khomeini as the American Antichrist. He symbolized both U.S. impotence abroad and the erosion of America's spiritual infrastructure. He became a prime participant in the 1988 presidential election and then in the politics of Bush's presidency.

During the presidential race, the Reagan administration tried desperately to force Noriega out of office but couldn't strike a deal with him because of Bush's concern about being compromised in the eyes of the electorate. According to the *Washington Post*, Bush and then-Secretary of the Treas-

ury Jim Baker, who later became Bush's campaign manager, sabotaged negotiations in May 1988 that might have resulted in Noriega voluntarily leaving office.

Democratic presidential candidate Michael Dukakis, unwilling to run a populist economic campaign, hinged his own political fortunes on tying Bush, then the administration drug czar, to Noriega. Dukakis repeatedly accused Bush of having kept Noriega in power. Then, during Bush's first year as president, Democrats kept up the attack. When the October 1989 coup by former Noriega loyalist Maj. Moises Giraldi failed, Democrats criticized Bush for not throwing the military behind Giraldi, even though the coup, if successful, might have installed a regime equally as corrupt as Noriega's. It was "wrong," said Sen. David Boren (D-OK), the chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, "to stand by and allow these people to fail."

Bush's failure to dislodge Noriega also reawakened charges that he was a "wimp." Immediately after the failed October coup, Bush began actively planning an invasion. There were reasons Bush had to act quickly. In June of 1989, the Senate had voted 63 to 31 to reject any nominee that Noriega proposed for canal administrator. With the transfer of administration of the canal due on January 1, the U.S. faced the possibility that it would have to abrogate the Panama Canal treaty. The pressures for an invasion had become irresistible.

Of course, Noriega did his part to justify an invasion, declaring a state of war with the U.S. and encouraging his thugs in mid-December to murder a Marine lieutenant and to rough up a Navy lieutenant and his wife. But while the Marine's murder merited a strong response, it hardly justified an invasion. In May, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Defense Richard Brown had told Congress of 1,200 canal treaty violations by the Panamanians without suggesting that these violations merited Noriega's forceful overthrow. Bush used the December brutalities

as a pretext for invading. As one administration official admitted to the *Post*, "I'm not sure Bush wasn't looking for an excuse at that point."

In explaining their actions afterwards, Bush administration officials suggested that if the U.S. had not invaded in December, it would have had to invade soon afterward, as Noriega threatened American forces at the canal. But outside of rumor, the administration never presented any concrete evidence that Noriega was planning an assault against U.S. forces. Nor did U.S. forces uncover any evidence of this during the invasion.

The other factor in Bush's decision was that he had become obsessed with Noriega in the same way that the late President John Kennedy had been obsessed with Cuba's Fidel Castro and Reagan with Libya's Muammar Khadafy. "I've been frustrated that he's been in power so long, extraordinarily frustrated," Bush told reporters just after the invasion. In this respect, Bush was not only exploiting irrational popular fears and anxieties about drugs, decline and Noriega—Bush had embodied those anxieties.

Own worst enemy: The invasion has bolstered the Bush administration's military approach to foreign policy. Pentagon officials are now arguing that the U.S. needs new funds for "low-intensity warfare." Administration officials are also pressing for a naval blockade of Latin American drug supply routes. Meanwhile, the Bush administration continues to ignore the region's economic problems. Indeed, the U.S. war on drugs will probably significantly worsen the Andean nations' economic woes by removing their most profitable export without providing any new outlets for export.

Improving Latin America's economic health is not merely a moral imperative. One of the main reasons for the American trade deficit is the sharp reduction in the '80s of American exports to Latin America—a result not of Japanese competition but of austerity programs forced on Latin American countries by rising debts to U.S., Japanese and Western European banks. From 1950 to 1981, Latin American imports to the U.S. rose at annual rate of 10 percent. From 1981 to 1985, the U.S. increased its share of the market to 38 percent, but its total exports fell 26 percent. From 1985 to 1990 the pattern has continued. If during this period Latin American imports had increased at the same rate as they had increased from 1950 to 1981, the U.S. would not have had a trade deficit.

Ironically, Panama was one of the few countries that was not burdened by overwhelming debt, but American economic sanctions have accomplished what U.S. banks failed to achieve. From 1987 to 1989, Panamanian imports from the U.S. declined by 14 percent. And the U.S. will now have to spend more than \$2 billion to restore the Panamanian economy to its condition before the sanctions.

If the Bush administration wants to find a scapegoat for U.S. problems in Latin America, it would do better to look around Wall Street than around Panama City, Managua or Medellin. It should be putting economic sanctions on John Reed's Citicorp rather than on Panama's Noriega. But the Bush administration, like the Reagan administration, is determined to look elsewhere for both scapegoats and solutions. □

By Salim Muwakkil

NOT ONLY DID THE U.S. INVASION AND OCCUPATION of Panama trample on one of the most sacrosanct principles of international law—non-intervention—the action also had a racist motivation, according to Carlos Russell, a former Panamanian ambassador to the Organization of American States (OAS).

Relations between the U.S. and Panama

PANAMA

have always contained a racial dimension, Russell contends, and the dynamics of those relations can easily be discerned by glancing at the casualty figures of Panamanian civilians during the recent invasion. According to his sources, more than 7,000 civilians—mostly black—were killed in the invasion and thousands more were injured.

What's more, he says, U.S. forces are summarily arresting thousands of Panamanian men and holding them in custody without charge. He numbers the homeless at near 20,000. Official U.S. sources list 400 dead, 2,000 wounded and 13,000 displaced in its effort to oust the regime of Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega. "The U.S. callously wiped out thousands of Panamanian lives just so it could experiment with the Stealth bomber and other high-tech weaponry," Russell charges. "They used the Panamanian people like they were guinea pigs."

Rabi-Blancos: This utter disregard for civilian casualties cannot be explained by any reasons but racism, he insists. "It's an insult to the intelligence of the U.S. to say it invaded an entire country just to get rid of Noriega, the so-called drug dealer. Why then did they bomb black neighborhoods like San Miguelito and Chorrillo until there was nothing left but rubble?" Russell asks. "They were trying to send the black and brown Panamanians a message that our day is over and that control is once again in the hands of the 'Rabi-Blancos.'" That term means literally "white tails," Russell explains, and is Panamanian slang for the white business oligarchy that controlled the country as a proxy of the U.S. from its 1903 creation to the 1968 military coup by Col. Omar Torrijos Herrera that overthrew President Arnulfo Arias Madrid.

Caribbean roots: Russell, 55, was born in Panama City, but has lived in the U.S. since 1955. He has a doctorate in political science and has taught at Brooklyn College for the last 20 years. In the '60s he organized a conference of Panamanians in this country that was instrumental in sparking talks on renegotiating the canal treaty. He was Panama's alternate delegate to the United Nations when U.S. President Jimmy Carter and Torrijos finally signed the renegotiated treaty in 1977. He was appointed ambassador to the OAS in 1988.

Russell's ancestors, like those of many Panamanians, were among the thousands of Caribbean blacks enlisted to build the Panama Canal during the early 1900s. "Panama is actually a predominantly black country," Russell contends, although he concedes there is no official census data to document his claim. "To those who know the country, there is no doubt that most of its inhabitants are black or various racial mixtures of black, Indian and white, which are called mestizos."

But despite their greater numbers, Russell says, darker Panamanians have remained clustered on the lower rungs of society. Economic and political control of the coun-



Gen. Manuel Noriega waves from where the U.S. would like to put him—behind bars.

Racism a factor in invasion, says former OAS ambassador

try has always been held by the Rabi-Blancos; this is a demographic pattern disturbingly similar to that in many Latin American countries with links to the U.S.

Russell's reading of Panamanian history casts the U.S. as the major villain. By actively supporting a white business oligarchy that has grown fat on canal-generated largesse, the North American giant has helped perpetuate Panama's grossly uneven distribution of wealth. In fact, Russell contends, the

Some 7,000 civilians—mostly black—were killed and thousands injured in the invasion, and U.S. forces arrested and held thousands of Panamanians without charge.

U.S. invaded the country 13 times primarily to maintain the economic and racial status quo.

The 1968 coup, engineered by the country's national guard under Torrijos' leadership, was an attempt to alter the country's colonial relationship with the U.S. and to narrow Panama's wide and race-specific economic disparities. "When Omar [Torrijos] came into power, he started changing things. Several black Panamanians were appointed to important government positions for the first time: we had a black minister of the treasury, a black minister of justice and a black ambassador to the OAS. But more than that, we began to feel that we could control our own destiny as a nation."

Russell recalls that Torrijos worked out an arrangement with the oligarchy in which

he allowed them continued economic power but little political power. The government thus became a major protector and employer of black and mestizo Panamanians. "Many in the oligarchy resented this arrangement and have been consistently trying to undermine it," Russell says. "With this latest U.S. invasion it looks like they'll get their wish."

Invasion reasons: President George Bush said that his reasons for invading the tiny Central American country were to safeguard American lives, to defend democracy, to combat drug trafficking and to protect the integrity of the Panama Canal treaty. To achieve those objectives, Bush launched the largest U.S. military operation since the Vietnam War, involving at least 24,000 troops and the latest high-tech weaponry.

The invasion plunged Panama into anarchy, resulting in massive destruction of property and widespread looting. According to the Dec. 31, 1989, edition of the *New York Times*, U.S. officials were somewhat "embarrassed" by the "collateral damage—as civilian casualties and property damage were euphemistically called in combat operations," that occurred during the invasion. In addition, according to Pentagon figures, 23 U.S. troops were killed and nearly 400 wounded.

Russell argues that there were three real reasons for the invasion. First, to destroy the Panamanian defense forces. "This was done to prevent Panama from having the capability to defend the canal in 1999, when we were supposed to assume full control according to the treaty." Thus the U.S. would be justified in maintaining its own security forces in the Canal Zone despite provisions in the treaty that specify a total transfer of control to Panama.

Second, the U.S. wanted to change Torrijos' 1968 arrangement and reassert control over the Panamanian government. "The U.S.

attempted to do this in the so-called free election it flagrantly tried to buy for \$10 million last May," Russell claims.

This is the election that Noriega nullified, an action U.S. officials point to as an example of his disregard for democratic principles. Russell sees things a bit differently. "The CIA openly announced it was financing the opposition campaign of Guillermo Endara, and its support clearly was not limited to financial assistance," he explains. "Now, just imagine for a moment if the Japanese, seeking a better business environment, announced they would begin financing and offering other kinds of assistance for the campaigns of conservative Republicans. How do you suppose most Americans would respond to that? And that's not even mentioning the stringent economic sanctions the U.S. had already imposed on the country."

Third, the U.S. wanted to get rid of a man who had stood up to it. After Noriega refused to allow former National Security Adviser John Poindexter to conduct contra operations in Panama, he suddenly became an enemy to the U.S., Russell contends. "A number of U.S. officials had written several letters commending Gen. Noriega for his drug-fighting efforts. What could suddenly have changed him from a staunch ally in the drug war into a criminal of such reputed evil?" he asks. "I am amazed and angered that the U.S. could stoop to action that is so transparently full of deceit. But I'm even more amazed that the American people seem to eat it up."

Black criticism: Russell is encouraged by the response of the African-American politicians who denounced the invasion. Rep. Charles Hayes (D-IL) has called for a federal investigation of the Panamanian civilian death toll and for emergency aid to those Panamanians left injured and homeless by the U.S. invasion. Rev. Jesse Jackson blasted the mainstream media for reporting more on the details of Noriega's personal life than on the "mass graves where hundreds of nameless, faceless civilians were buried."

Jackson charged that the media surrendered its "watchdog role" and became a "cheerleader for the invasion." At a news conference at Operation PUSH headquarters in Chicago, Jackson said, "Those of us who depend on the American media know more about the color of Noriega's underwear and his [alleged] fondness for voodoo dolls than we do about what motivated our government to invade his country."

Even Rep. Charles Rangel (D-NY), chairman of the House Narcotics Committee, criticized the attack. "As much as I would like to get rid of the bum in Panama, I don't see the legal authority for the use of the military." And, Rangel said, resources for the war on drugs could be better spent "in our own cities and towns, where the real war on drugs is being waged."

Although Russell remains outraged by the U.S. invasion of his native country, he is comforted by what he says is the U.S.' eroding credibility. "No other country in the world, except Britain, is recognizing the U.S.-imposed Endara government. Of course they will have to eventually, but their current reluctance tells the U.S. that it is very low on moral currency. Events in Eastern Europe, where Moscow has adopted a hands-off policy, have isolated the U.S. and its primitive style of gunboat diplomacy even more." Russell only hopes the lesson sinks in before the U.S. destroys another country and kills thousands more civilians in the name of democracy. □

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