

A new Malvinas crisis is now building over Panama

by Gretchen Small

While U.S. State Department officials continue to issue their assurances that the Reagan administration's campaign to oust Panama Defense Forces commander, Gen. Manuel A. Noriega, enjoys wide popular backing in Panama and will soon succeed, the worst nationalist backlash against the United States in decades is building in Panama. The U.S. news media's blackout of any news which throws in doubt this assessment, has only worsened Washington's miscalculations on the Panama crisis.

General Noriega has made it clear that he does not intend to resign, that he has the backing of the military, and that he enjoys widespread popularity with Panama's civilian population, if not its bankers.

National and continental support against the United States is quietly building, as the U.S. campaign is increasingly viewed as an attempt to eliminate Panama's military entirely, as the first step to reneging on the U.S. treaty commitment to return full sovereignty to Panama on Dec. 31, 1999.

American policy toward Panama is blindly leading to a new hemispheric crisis, equal to or greater than that created by U.S. support for Great Britain against Argentina during the 1982 Malvinas War. U.S. relations with its neighbors, and in particular, U.S.-Ibero-American military cooperation, have never fully recovered from the damage caused by that 1982 decision, made under the direction of then-Secretary of State Alexander Haig, to ignore hemispheric treaty obligations.

The Teddy Roosevelt problem

"This is our Malvinas," Noriega told an Argentine audience during a mid-August interview. Radio de la Plata's Carlos Varilla had questioned Noriega on the Reagan administration's non-negotiable demand that he be removed from office. "We have left behind the times when the policemen dictated guidelines to Latin American peoples," the Panamanian general answered. "The attack comes from all sides, but the Panamanian people are perfectly capable of defending

themselves."

Noriega likened U.S. propaganda that he is a "corrupt dictator" involved in narcotics, to the campaigns of slander and vilification run against other Ibero-American nationalist military men, including Argentina's Gen. Juan Domingo Perón and Peru's Gen. Juan Velasco Alvarado. "When someone hoists the flag of national dignity, when someone defines himself and says, I am not a 'yes man,' right away, if you are a leader, you must run the risk of being slandered."

Teddy Roosevelt rides again in the United States, Noriega warned. The U.S. campaign "portrays the policeman with the same rifle and the same big stick Theodore Roosevelt used at the time of the 'big-stick' policy, which the United States has imposed on us since 1904. . . . Here is where we have the whole problem. The whole problem lies there."

For his part, Noriega's Argentine interviewer characterized the recent U.S. actions against Panama as "a very grievous meddling in Panamanian internal affairs by the U.S. embassy," so "offensive" that, had it been any other country in the Americas, "relations with the United States . . . would have probably come to an end, at least temporarily."

Washington has been forced to acknowledge that it has as yet received no support from Ibero-America for their anti-Panama campaign. In fact, U.S. actions were censured by an unprecedented majority of Ibero-American nations, when the Panamanians took up the matter at the Organization of American States on July 2.

U.S. 'secret government' hit

On Aug. 11, the four leading members of Panama's diplomatic team assigned to the United States, broadcast an extraordinary, nationally televised "Report to the Nation" on their efforts to halt the emerging U.S.-Panama crisis.

Special Ambassador Aquilino Boyd opened the program with a warning that the U.S. media's disinformation and outright lies on the situation in Panama is playing a significant role in Washington's miscalculations on the Panama crisis.

"I want all Panamanians to understand how grave this aspect of the problem is," Boyd stressed. "To illustrate the problem to you, I can say that if they would give us one dollar for every word of slander, the half-truths, the crafted reports, and the most extraordinary exaggerations which have been published in the U.S. newspapers, you could pay all the foreign debt of Panama, and have money left over."

Ambassador Boyd warned his audience that what is at stake is not the career of one man, Noriega, but an effort to return Panama to the status of a colony, by turning civilians against the military. There are "some misguided people" in the United States, Boyd said, "who seek to disavow what various generations of struggle for sovereignty and the independence of the country, managed to achieve in the Torrijos-Carter treaties, thanks to the union which had been produced between the people and the National Guard."

"One message I believe we have made very clear [in the United States], is not to try to destroy the Defense Forces of Panama, because the medicine could result in worse than the disease for them," he said.

In his report, José Blandón, Panama's Consul General in New York, named the "invisible government led by the group of McFarlane, Poindexter, and North" as the agency which had launched the anti-Noriega war, which he called "a campaign essentially aimed at the liquidation of the government of the Republic of Panama."

Students who have joined the opposition, should "meditate a couple of minutes" on what we have found here, Blandón urged. Do they know that they have fallen into a trap laid by this "dictatorship of three" which "hid information from the President of the United States himself?" It was Poindexter and North who initiated the campaign to destabilize General Noriega, after Noriega refused to support the Contra policy, and instead argued that the Central American militaries must participate in the search for peace in the area, Blandón charged.

Admiral Poindexter provided the "dossier of false information" which *New York Times* reporter Seymour Hersh used to write the June 12, 1986 attack against Noriega which is still used to "prove" Noriega's "corruption," he reported. Blandón named two ex-members of the National Security Council, Norman Bailey and Constantine Menges, as the sources for Poindexter's dossier, and charged that the purpose was to "create confusion against Panamanian leaders and cover up what was occurring in the Iran-Contra case."

Without a military, a colony

Panama's opposition movement has made public that it and its foreign backers, are indeed seeking the outright elimination of the military. On July 19, the opposition daily *La Prensa* ran a guest opinion column entitled "Between Utopia and Reality: Panama Does Not Need an Army." Author Gabriela Ortega was succinct: "To have a valid and true democracy, we must dismantle the misnamed Defense Forces, Civil Police, Coast Guard, and Border Police. . . . Until we do

this, we will not have democracy in Panama." If Panama is attacked, it can call on U.S. troops to defend it, she concluded.

The article held up Costa Rica, which has no army, as the example to be followed. As crazy as such an argument may seem, Ortega was merely repeating a policy outlined by the U.S. State Department in an August 1984 policy paper on "Democracy in Latin America and the Caribbean." That paper praised the Costa Rican Constitution as exemplary, precisely because it "permanently eliminated the army . . . to end any institutionalized military threat to elected civilian government."

On Aug. 12, Panama's right and necessity, as a sovereign nation, to have a national military, was the central issue addressed at the celebrations marking the third anniversary of the creation of Battalion 2000, the Defense Forces' elite corps which is preparing to take charge of the defense of the Panama Canal on Dec. 31, 1999.

Panama's history has been one long fight against "interventions and humiliations by a foreign power" which sought to prevent Panama from being a "free and independent nation," General Noriega told the military men and civilians attending the rally. The first act of Teddy Roosevelt's government, to ensure Panama did not escape from colonial status, was the elimination of its army.

"We remember that one year after the separation [from Colombia], in 1904, Gen. Esteban Huertas was sent to Europe, on the excuse of carrying out some studies of vital importance for the National Army. It was a strategy of the United States," Noriega stated, "which did not want an organized army in Panama."

"The government of that day followed orders, and dissolved this army. . . . The National Army was transformed into a police force. . . . We then had a 'whistle and nightstick' police force, without presence, unattended, and ignorant—at the orders of the domestic oligarchy and a foreign army," Noriega continued.

In 1915, the local oligarchic government followed U.S. orders again, and forced the police to turn over all heavy weaponry, leaving them only their revolvers.

In 1919, U.S. troops occupied Panama's northern province of Chiriqui, and stayed for two years, he added.

Under Noriega's command, the professional military has been reestablished, for the first time since 1904. Other speeches given by military men at the celebration, joined Noriega in their commitment to maintaining that professional army, and its commander, General Noriega.

"The PDF of today is not the Guard of yesterday," Col. Elias Castillo stated. "Our commander, Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega, embodies in the highest degree, the virtues of the Panamanian soldier, and therefore is an honor to the institution which he heads."

Both officers emphasized, as Ambassador Boyd had in the diplomats' "Report to the Nation," that Panama's military is

distinguished within the region for the support it has won from the population, as the leading institution in the country defending their economic and social betterment, through the PDF's emphasis on "civic action."

"We say to our brothers in arms in Latin America, civic action is preventive," Noriega said. "It is the identification of the uniformed man with the needy population. It is the gun converted into pick and shovel in the hand of the peasant. . . . We feel proud that our . . . Civic Action programs were taken by U.S. General Gorman to other countries as an example, and were considered by General Galvin to be the realization of peaceful coexistence."

Colonel Castillo reminded the troops that the PDF has adopted the self-conception of being "Christian knights" with the responsibility to slay "the demon of ignorance, abandonment, and backwardness." It is this commitment which has kept Panama from being pulled into "the vortex of violence which provokes desolation and death" engulfing Central America, he added. "These are the battles where sovereignty stops being a simple word, to become a sign of victory."

General Noriega warned again: The reaction to the United States' attempt to keep colonial relations to Panama has only begun. "There exists a third force, silent and on the sidelines, which will claim positions or situations. I have met with them

several times, and I want to make clear publicly before the nation . . . that they exist. These are the popular forces, which have not yet joined in at the negotiating table."

From slander to assassination threats

The U.S. State Department's "big stick" tactics seem to worsen in direct proportion to the weakening of domestic opposition inside Panama.

The opposition's Aug. 18 general strike was an acknowledged failure. Originally planned to continue indefinitely until Noriega resigned, the strike's organizers were soon forced to reduce the plan to a one-day strike. When that failed, organizers blamed government repression and threats. Nonetheless, despite large U.S. government support, the opposition has shown itself incapable of gaining support outside the offshore financial center and circles of radical left-wing university students.

On Aug. 13, the *Washington Post* identified the existence of a special Justice Department task force seeking to get Noriega charged with drug-running, and if possible, extradited to the United States to be tried. Running that "get Noriega" operation is none other than Deputy Attorney General Stephen Trott, the same official who, along with Assistant Attorney General William "Soviet Justice" Weld, suppressed any investigation into cocaine running by the Nicaraguan Contras. Trott and Weld are also the men running the Justice Department's "Get LaRouche" campaign.


According to the *Post*, on July 16, Trott called a special meeting at Justice, at which he ordered every relevant U.S. government agency to go out to "pull together" anything that existed on Noriega, to "see if it was prosecutable." Now, under Trott's direction, FBI and Drug Enforcement Administration officials are busy collecting "every snippet that they have" on Noriega—the man to whom U.S. DEA head John Lawn, only a year earlier, had expressed his "deep appreciation for the vigorous anti-drug trafficking policy that you have adopted."

Threats to assassinate Noriega have also been floated. That "option" was suggested in an editorial guest column published in the *Baltimore Sun* on Aug. 8.

Gwynne Dyer, writing from London, compared the Reagan administration's "problem" with getting Noriega to resign, to similar U.S. problems in Vietnam in the early 1960s. "The U.S. eventually found it necessary to organize the assassination of its original ally, Ngo Dinh Diem, whose corruption, inefficiency, and massive unpopularity were hampering the war effort," she wrote. Her conclusion: "General Noriega is still grimly hanging on to power, but Washington has tacitly given its assent to his removal. It will probably not be long."

When *La Estrella de Panama* reported that a plan to kill General Noriega existed, the U.S. embassy in Panama issued a protest note, and demanded a correction—from *La Estrella*, not the *Baltimore Sun*.

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