

Latin cowardice brings U.S. closer to 'Vietnam' disaster in Panama

by Carlos Wesley

It was a shameless display of cowardice. Ibero-American foreign ministers met in extraordinary session at the Organization of American States (OAS) May 17, and bowing to the demands of George Bush's administration, adopted a resolution of condemnation against Panama. Approved by a vote of 20 to 2, with 7 abstentions, it called on the Panamanian government to dissolve itself, and to "ensure the transfer of power," presumably to some transitional government. The delegates also appointed a commission made up of the foreign ministers of Ecuador, Guatemala, and Trinidad and Tobago, who, with the secretary general of the OAS, Brazilian Jão Baena Soraes, is to negotiate this transition with the Panamanian government.

The resolution blamed the entire Panamanian crisis on the Commander of Panama's Defense Forces, Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega, and did not make any mention of the overt and broadly publicized U.S. attempt to manipulate the May 7 Panamanian election.

In fact, what is at stake in the so-called Panama crisis, is the imposition of "limited sovereignty" upon all the nations of the continent, including the United States. This concept, pushed by the Trilateral Commission, would mean that a supranational body such as the OAS, for example, could take over Brazil's sovereign rights over the Amazon, supposedly to protect the environment. Or, as Henry Kissinger's former business partner Deputy Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger proposed, a binational commission would govern the free trade zones on the U.S.-Mexico border.

The OAS's appeasement of Washington has emboldened the Bush government to the point of dragging the United States military into an insane repetition of the Vietnam disaster. Even while the OAS meeting was going on, the administration leaked through the press that the military would be deployed to provoke a military incident, in the State Department's insane drive to rid itself of the nationalist resistance represented by Noriega.

"With the exception of armed confrontation breaking out with U.S. troops," said the *Christian Science Monitor* May 15, "a likely prognosis is that Noriega has several months to sort out his options."

On May 17, the *Washington Times* published a leak from the administration to the effect that the rules of engagement for U.S. troops in Panama had been changed, "countermand-

ing earlier orders to avoid a confrontation" with Panama's Defense Forces (PDF).

In yet another leak, on May 18 the *Washington Post* said that the U.S. Southern Command "was preparing to test Noriega's forces by running convoys through the outskirts" of Panama City. The *Post*, quoting unnamed "U.S. officials," said that "the underlying intention is to rattle Noriega's Panama Defense Forces and possibly, spark a confrontation."

A Pentagon spokeswoman denied that that was the intent. "Absolutely not," she said. The only purpose of the convoys, she said, was the need to move personnel around the 10 U.S. military installations in Panama, and "not to spark a confrontation" with Panama's army.

But, as U.S. vulnerability to the 1983 terrorist bombing of the Marines in Lebanon showed, U.S. military policy is, unfortunately, not determined by the Pentagon, but by the State Department. In Lebanon, the State Department policy prevented the U.S. military from taking adequate measures to protect the Marines from a terrorist attack, and as result, 250 young Americans lost their lives needlessly when a single terrorist drove a truck loaded with explosives into the Marine compound.

In Panama's case, the U.S. soldiers are to be used as cannon fodder to create the incident needed to justify large-scale military operations to "take out Noriega."

No quick operation

Any illusion that this could be a quick military surgical strike, such as in Grenada, will lead straight to disaster. While the United States enjoys military superiority, in the real term, this advantage will quickly be eaten up in an expanding guerrilla war, involving not only Panama, but extending into an already-convulsed Central America and to the terrorist infested Andean region of South America. The head of Panama's militia, called "Dignity Battalions," Benjamin Colamarco, said May 17, that his 7,000-man force was "ready in case U.S. troops decide to penetrate the cities of our country." Colamarco said the alert had been dubbed "Operation Sovereignty."

It is charged that by annulling the violence-torn May 7 elections, "Noriega had thwarted the will of the Panamanian people," who, supposedly, gave a landslide victory to the

Democratic Opposition Civic Alliance (ADO-C), whose electoral campaign was financed by the U.S. CIA. But, as everything else about the Panamanian situation put out by the American media, the “mass popular support” for the ADO-C is just plain Madison Avenue hype. This was shown on May 17, when the ADO-C called a general strike to coincide with the OAS meeting—and almost everybody showed up for work. The strike was such a flop, that even ADO-C presidential candidate, Guillermo Endara, the leader of the strike, kept the doors of his flour plant open.

It was the Bush administration’s blatant interference into Panama’s internal affairs, which led to the annulment of the May 7 elections. This intervention includes the economic sanctions against Panama, which, among other things, have deprived it of the canal revenue due it under the 1977 treaty. And, as a resolution by Brazilian congressmen in support of Panama noted May 17, “A fundamental condition for there to be free and sovereign elections, without outside manipulations, is for the U.S. economic blockade to cease.”

None of this was reflected in the OAS resolution of May 17.

A big brawl

The Washington meeting of the Ibero-American foreign ministers turned into a big brawl over the issue of limited sovereignty. The Venezuelans, whose socialist President Carlos Andrés Pérez, signed on to the “Get Noriega” campaign early on, proposed that the OAS declare ADO-C candidate as Endara Panama’s President. This would have allowed Endara to immediately call for a military intervention, either directly by the U.S., or under the umbrella of an OAS “Inter-American” force. But few countries wanted to surrender their sovereign rights to conduct their own elections to a supranational body such as the OAS, in so brazen a fashion as the Venezuelan proposal demanded. Peru’s President Alan García, who, like Pérez, is a member of the Socialist International, instructed his foreign minister at first to support Jimmy Carter’s proposal to have the OAS become a supranational electoral tribunal, but this proposal met with the same objections as the Venezuelan one.

Peru then came back with a so-called “compromise” resolution, which got backing from Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, and several other countries. However, the United States insisted that the resolution call for Noriega’s ouster, a stance opposed by most countries, because it violated the OAS principle of non-intervention in the internal affairs of a member country.

At this point, U.S. Secretary of State James Baker left the meeting, to return with an ultimatum: Either the Ibero-Americans agree to multilateral action, or the U.S. would intervene unilaterally in Panama. Shortly after, the resolution was amended to call for Noriega’s ouster: “The great events and abuses by Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega in the crisis and in the electoral process in Panama could unleash an escalation

of violence with consequent risks to the life and integrity of persons.”

Baker’s ultimatum was sweetened by financial incentives. As the Mexican daily *El Dia* noted in an editorial, the Mexican government of Carlos Salinas de Gortari surrendered “to the U.S. State Department” to get favorable treatment in its debt negotiations.

Sure enough, on May 18, the World Bank announced it had approved a \$1.96 billion loan to Mexico, and Mexican Finance Minister Pedro Aspe said that an agreement in principle had been reached on negotiations with the creditor banks.

That Mexico abandoned its 150-year policy of non-intervention—adopted during the government of Abraham Lincoln’s ally, Benito Juárez—for 30 promises of debt renegotiation provoked profound disgust, even within Salinas’s own ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). “What is happening to [Panama] could also happen to us,” said Mexico City legislator Jarmila Olmedo of the PRI. “To surrender in order to get better terms, sooner or later will cause us tremendous surprises.”

Elsewhere on the continent, the sell-out of the governments caused laughter. In Venezuela, where on May 18 a general strike was called against the austerity policies of Carlos Andrés Pérez. Unlike the one in Panama the day before, Venezuela’s was 100% successful. “This place looks like a one-horse town on a Sunday afternoon,” said an observer in the capital of Caracas.

Others were profoundly disgusted. Brazilian Rep. Luiz Salomão read a resolution approved by his party (PDT) on the floor of the Congress “repudiating the U.S. government’s efforts to intervene in Panama’s political process, as well as its sending troops, which has contributed to raising political tensions in the region.” His colleague, Aluizio Bezerra of the ruling PMDB party, was circulating a manifesto that was expected to get the support of some 300 congressmen, stating that “U.S. military intervention in Panama would constitute an aggression against all the countries of Latin America.” The manifesto affirmed that the canal belongs to Panama, “that the Malvinas are Argentine and that the Amazon belongs to the region’s countries.”

The Argentine President-elect, Peronist Carlos Menem, showed himself at odds with the stance of current President, Socialist Raúl Alfonsín. “I don’t say that Noriega has to go, because that is an internal affair of Panama, and we are very respectful on these matters,” Menem said May 18.

All indications are that Noriega is prepared to resist to the last any attempts against Panamanian sovereignty. “This is not one man’s struggle, but the struggle of many men and many people here at the banks of the canal,” he said in an interview May 17 with the French TV network Antenne 2. “The United States is using Panama to keep military control over the Caribbean and South America,” he said. “Today it is Panama; tomorrow it will be other countries,” he said. “Panama will not tolerate U.S. imperialism.”

Brazilian lawmakers in defense of Panama

The National Executive Committee of Brazil's Democratic Labor Party (PDT) approved the following defense of Panama, read before the Chamber of Deputies May 16 by congressman Luiz Salomão (PDT-Rio).

The PDT National Executive, at a May, 15, 1989 meeting, examined the grave political-electoral happenings observed in Panama and decided:

1) To repudiate the U.S. Government's efforts to intervene in that country's political process, as well as its sending troops, which has contributed to raising political tensions in the region and to threatening the peace of the continent.

2) To be in solidarity with the Panamanian people and their authentic political organizations, the victims of electoral fraud promoted and financed by foreign elements, and to renew hope for rapidly reestablishing a climate of democratic normality which would permit the holding of new elections.

3) To interpret the ongoing actions to destabilize the current provisional government and the political and social convulsions in Panama as initiatives aimed at creating conditions for non-compliance with the Torrijos-Carter Accords, which call for the Canal being turned over to Panamanian sovereignty in 1999.

4) To express our confidence that Brazil's diplomats will reiterate, at the May 17, 1989 special meeting of the OAS—Organization of American States—the fundamental principles of our foreign policy regarding non-intervention and self-determination of sovereign peoples.

—Rio de Janeiro, May 16, 1989, PDT National Executive.

The following manifesto in defense of Panama and against foreign intervention in that country was read May 17 in the Brazilian Senate by Sen. Aluzio Bezerra (PMDB-Acre) and is now being circulated for signatures of legislators from both houses. The following is a portion of the text as it appears in the Senate Record.

Manifesto Against Intervention in Panama:

The undersigned National Congress members hereby inform the governments of OAS member countries of their apprehension about the unfolding Panamanian crisis, espe-

cially given the repeated U.S. Government statements moot-ing the possibility of military intervention in that Central American country. The recent sending of U.S. military reinforcements to Panama confirms our fears, revealing, at the same time, the Bush administration's tendency for dealing with the Panama crisis which, as we see it, should be solved politically by the Panamanian government and people, in a sovereign way, without any kind of foreign meddling. Sending new military contingents to Panama at this moment is in itself foreign intervention.

The U.S. has repeatedly made public its intentions not to comply with the terms of the Torrijos-Carter Accords on handing over Panama Canal administration to the Panamanian government and withdrawing U.S. military bases from that country. This is the real question.

[U.S. military intervention would] be aggression against all the Latin American peoples. . . . We affirm that the Malvinas are Argentine and that the Amazon belongs to the region's countries.

The Brazilian Lawyers' Order (OAB) federal council passed the following resolution on Panama May 16. The OAB performs the equivalent of the functions of both the American Bar Association and the American Civil Liberties Union. The resolution was transmitted to the U.S. and Panamanian ambassadors May 16.

As reported by the news media, the U.S.A. sent troops to Panama, increasing the contingent of 10,000 troops already based there, on the pretext of defending the security of American citizens residing in that country, and with a direct threat of armed intervention, on the pretext of vote fraud in their elections. This fact does not justify such a threat, since it is a question only in the interests of the Panamanians.

The cause, however, of these militarist provisions is equal to that which brought France and England to try to invade Egypt, seeking to prevent the nationalization of the Suez Canal and violating the contractual clause permitting [Egypt to] rescind it, with indemnization, as the Egyptian government and people demanded, in their struggle to reduce misery in that country.

And, whereas Panama's contract with the U.S. for joint operation of the canal terminates in the coming decade and, whereas the current leaders of the Panamanian people already know that the contract is profoundly prejudicial to the interests of that country, they have taken a nationalist position in not accepting its extension.

That is the real motive for taking power away from those leaders. And, since they did not succeed in doing it democratically, they are trying to do it by force.

Therefore . . . this Council . . . repudiates the threats of disrespect for the cited principles of self-determination and non-intervention in the internal affairs of other nations, principles internationally recognized, including by Brazil.