

Fact sheet on U.S. invasion of Panama

At 7:30 on the morning of Dec. 20, 1989, President Bush delivered a short statement on nationwide television justifying the massive invasion by 25,000 U.S. troops of the nation of Panama which had begun just over six hours before. The justifications mentioned by Mr. Bush, and subsequent clarifications and additions by other top officials later during the same day, establish beyond doubt that the United States is in violation of international law, and that the cited "justifications" were no more than pretexts for undertaking a knowingly lawless act of aggression to remove the government of a foreign, sovereign nation, just because the United States government didn't happen to like that government.

The following fact sheet identifies the chief assertions—the Big Lies—by President Bush and other top officials, followed by the truth, based on the undisputed facts as published in the U.S. press, or other public record documentation.

Assertion: That Panama declared war on the United States in a Dec. 15 resolution. President George Bush's Dec. 20 early morning televised statement: "Last Friday, Noriega declared his military dictatorship to be in a state of war with the United States." Other officials referred to it as "Panama's declaration of war on the United States."

Truth: It was the United States which declared war on Panama. On April 6, 1989, President George Bush notified Congress that he had invoked the National Emergencies Act and the International Emergency Act to declare "a state of national emergency" in the United States, because of "an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the U.S.," posed by the Republic of Panama.

In his notification to Congress, Bush announced that he was renewing the harsh economic warfare measures against Panama that were initiated on March 2, 1988.

U.S. officials also announced repeatedly over the past 20 months that they would take military action to remove the lawfully constituted government of Panama, and Panamanian Defense Forces (PDF) chief Gen. Manuel Noriega, if other methods failed to accomplish that.

On May 17, 1989, the Bush administration leaked to the *Washington Times*, that it had changed the rules of engage-

ment for U.S. military forces in Panama. Henceforth, U.S. troops in Panama were to seek a confrontation, "countering earlier orders to avoid a confrontation with the PDF."

This was confirmed the very next day in an article in the May 18 *Washington Post* which reported that the U.S. military Southern Command based in Panama "was preparing to test Noriega's forces by running convoys through the outskirts" of Panama City. Bush administration officials said, "The underlying intention is to rattle Noriega's PDF and, possibly to spark a confrontation."

On July 8, 1989, the commander of U.S. Army South in Panama, Gen. Marc Cisneros, dismissed efforts by the Organization of American States (OAS) to settle the Panamanian crisis. The OAS will not act "firmly" to carry out U.S. demands to dislodge Noriega, he said. "Speaking for myself, I believe this is the moment for a military intervention in Panama," said Cisneros.

When asked how he would go about an attack, Cisneros told his interviewers that he would issue an ultimatum to the Panamanian Defense Forces saying that they had 30 minutes to surrender. "I believe most of the officers of the PDF will accept" the ultimatum, he said.

The Dec. 15 resolution of the National Assembly of Panama cited by Bush and Fitzwater, merely refers to these measures of war against Panama: "The Republic of Panama . . . has for the last two years suffered a cruel and constant harassment by the U.S. government, whose President has made use of the powers of war . . . to try to subject the will of Panamanians. . . . The Republic of Panama is living under a genuine state of war, under the permanent hounding of the U.S. government, whose soldiers not only daily violate the integrity of the Torrijos-Carter Treaties . . . but trample our sovereign rights in open, arrogant and shameless violation of the pacts and norms of international law. . . . Therefore be it resolved that the Republic of Panama be declared in a state of war, for as long as the aggression unleashed against the Panamanian people by the U.S. government continues."

The resolution was worded to state that a state of war existed, in order to legally "offer special powers to the head of government" to respond to these threats.

Moreover, the U.S. stated publicly on Dec. 16 that it did not regard the Panamanian statement as dangerous. Only when the decision was taken—for other reasons—to invade, did the U.S. make a 180-degree change the next day, Sunday, and reverse its public view of the statement. On Saturday, Dec. 16, White House spokesman Marlin Fitzwater said, "I don't think anybody here considers it [the Panamanian statement on being in a state of war] important enough in terms of impact. . . . Today's action is another hollow step in an attempt to force his [Noriega's] rule on the Panamanian people."

Assertion: That the invasion was launched to "protect

American lives." According to Secretary of State James Baker at a news conference Dec. 20, "Noriega was considering launching an urban commando attack on American citizens in a residential neighborhood."

Truth: Secretary Baker went on to concede that "I can't prove to you that this report was absolutely reliable," and also admitted that this alleged report only reached President Bush after he had made the decision to invade. Not a single piece of evidence purporting to be from this report has been released to the public in substantiation of this charge, and so far there is not a shred of evidence to back it up.

Assertion: That the invasion was ordered in response to the developments occurring several days before. President Bush on Dec. 20: "General Noriega's reckless threats and attacks upon Americans in Panama created an imminent danger to the 35,000 American citizens in Panama." Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney, asked why he had reversed his opposition to U.S. intervention, which he had expressed after the failure of an Oct. 3 coup attempt, said that "after General Noriega had had himself declared maximum leader and then indicated a state of war existed between Panama and the U.S. government . . . it was clear that General Noriega had created an environment in which his troops felt free to terrorize and brutalize Americans who had every . . . right to be in Panama."

Truth: The invasion plans were made many months ago, and were activated when desired by President Bush, using whatever pretext was available.

1) It has been an open secret that most U.S. officials have wanted a U.S. military invasion against Panama for a long time. The administration was so desirous of a pretext for an invasion that it was all set to accuse Noriega of stockpiling weapons and equipment for kidnaping Americans and threatening the Panama canal. During the Thanksgiving holiday, the FBI and CIA sent a crack special team to Panama to "confirm" that this charge was true. The team went to the warehouse, where they had been tipped, the stockpile was hidden, only to find it empty.

Brian Ross of NBC News said that had they found what they were "looking for," the invasion was set to go then.

Gen. Marc Cisneros, commander of the U.S. Army South in Panama, told Spanish news agency EFE on July 8, "I believe this is the moment for military intervention in Panama. . . . A U.S. military intervention would pass as an event without major importance." Gen. Maxwell Thurman was reported Dec. 21 to have been pushing hard for U.S. military invasion since a failed coup attempt on Oct. 3, 1989, and to have been personally responsible for converting the Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Colin Powell, to this viewpoint.

2) The U.S. has had an operational plan for the invasion of Panama since at least last spring. Defense Secretary Dick Cheney said Dec. 20, "The order went out late on Sunday

[Dec. 17] to implement a plan that had been in existence for some time. It was one of the first items I was briefed on when I became secretary of defense last spring."

3) U.S. forces have been "practicing" maneuvers on how to take over installations inside Panama for the past five months. Beginning approximately in July 1989, United States military forces in Panama began carrying out occupation maneuvers against Panamanian civilian centers and installations, in flagrant violation of any conceivable interpretation of U.S. rights under the Panama Canal Treaties. The occupation exercises began on July 1, with the occupation of the Panamanian township of Gamboa by a U.S. infantry company. Heavily armed troops, using armored personnel carriers and Chinook helicopters, held the town for 24 hours. The following day, U.S. troops invaded the town of Chilibre, and seized control over the water purification plant that supplies Panama City and Colón.

Over the next five months, sudden, unannounced U.S. military actions against civilian areas were carried out with increasing frequency. Both the town of Gamboa and the Chilibre water purification plant were seized twice. The town of Arraijan was occupied in August, with 30 Panamanians, including the mayor, detained during the "maneuver." Panamanian courts and judicial offices were raided in August. Highways out of Panama City into outlying townships were closed repeatedly for hours at a time by U.S. troops and vehicles. Vehicle access to both the headquarters of the National Malaria Eradication and the Gorgas Hospital was closed for two to three days in November. These "dry runs" could have had no possible function except as preparation for the real thing carried out on Dec. 20, 1989.

4) It is no secret that military action was widely viewed by senior officials in the administration, including President George Bush, as the only way to erase the "wimp" image, and to remove what was often called the "symbol of the impotence" of the Bush administration, namely, the continued existence in power of Gen. Manuel Noriega.

Assertion: That the killing of an American officer who drove through a checkpoint in the vicinity of General Noriega's headquarters, and the alleged beating of another officer and the threatening of his wife, were the reasons for the invasion. President Bush, Dec. 20: "Forces under [Noriega's] command shot and killed an unarmed American serviceman, wounded another, arrested and brutally beat a third serviceman and then brutally interrogated his wife, threatening her with sexual abuse. That was enough."

Truth: These incidents were just the pretext for a long-planned operation. This regrettable death was in fact the result of a series of deliberate provocations carried out by U.S. military men under direct orders of their superior officers over a period of months which sought to create just such an "Gulf of Tonkin" incident. The climate of constant tension and challenging of the authority of Panamanian police offi-

cials by U.S. troops in violation of the Panama Canal Treaties, was intended to ensure that sooner or later a fatal incident would occur.

The incident, as even U.S. officials admitted, took place in front of the headquarters of the Panamanian Defense Forces, located in the slums of El Chorrillo in Panama City, which the dead Marine lieutenant and his three companions reached only after going through three PDF roadblocks. When they were finally stopped by PDF officers at a checkpoint in front of the headquarters, the U.S. servicemen attempted to speed off. It was at that point, while they were escaping, as even the Pentagon admits, that they were shot.

According to the Panamanian authorities, the Marines came in shooting, and three Panamanians were, in fact, wounded during the incident, including an 11-month-old girl. If, as the administration claims, the soldiers were unarmed, and they had reached the PDF headquarters by mistakenly "taking the wrong turn," then why did they run away?

According to the *Daily Express* of London Dec. 18, "Washington sources believe the four officers could have been on a spying mission. Army and CIA operatives are believed to have been mapping vital areas in preparation for a bid to overthrow Noriega." The *Daily Express* added: "The U.S. government's attitude now is that if Noriega can be only removed by his death—so be it. The Justice Department has now changed a 1976 Executive Order which forbids the assassination of foreign leaders by any U.S.-aided coup attempt."

PDF officials had no reason to assume that the men were unarmed. Quite the opposite. Incidents involving heavily armed U.S. soldiers, traveling in civilian clothing and in private vehicles through the streets of Panama City, were almost a daily occurrence. In each case, when they were stopped, the excuse was always the same: "We got lost. We took the wrong turn."

On Aug. 9 of this year, there were at least two incidents involving American soldiers in civilian clothes, in private cars, but heavily armed, traveling through Panama City. When Panama policemen tried to detain them, American uniformed troops and vehicles surrounded the police and freed the men. It should be noted that the treaty forbids American soldiers to wear their uniforms off-base or to carry weapons off-base unless previously coordinated with the PDF.

The U.S. government had previously announced that the FBI had been given the authority to kidnap Noriega. Later, the same authority was extended to the Delta Force. The lifting of the ban on CIA involvement in the assassination of foreign leaders was also announced, and it was made explicit that the chief target of all these orders was General Manuel Noriega. Thus, the PDF officials on the scene of the Dec. 16 shooting could not help but reach the obvious conclusion, that the four U.S. Marine officers were a hit team sent out to

harm their commander.

Assertion: That the U.S. action was taken "to protect the integrity of the Panama Canal Treaty," according to President Bush on Dec. 20. White House spokesman Marlin Fitzwater said that "The integrity of the Panama Canal Treaties is at risk." Secretary of State James Baker told reporters Dec. 20 that one of the objectives of the U.S. invasion was "to defend the integrity of United States' rights under the Canal Treaties." Baker cited Article IV of the Panama Canal Treaties as providing backing for the U.S. invasion.

Truth: The only threat to the treaties came from the United States, not Panama. When asked by reporters to spell out precisely what the threat to the integrity of U.S. rights under the Canal Treaties was, Secretary Baker had no answer, not one incident or instance of a violation to mention: "Well, that's very speculative other than—I mean, let me simply say with respect to that that we've said before that we anticipated that there might be problems with respect to the canal if Noriega continued to retain power illegitimately. With respect to challenges to the integrity of our rights over the past two or three years, I would simply refer you to the—over the past year or so, maybe I should back up—but, over the past year or so, I'd refer you to the continuing pattern of harassment that we've seen going on down there against Americans in the exercise of our treaty rights."

It is the U.S. that has repeatedly, and flagrantly, violated the treaties in recent months. In addition to the violations mentioned above, the U.S. specifically violated an addendum to Article IV of the treaties. Article IV states that the U.S. and Panama agree to maintain the canal's permanent neutrality. A separate statement of understanding, signed by the Presidents of both countries, Omar Torrijos for Panama and Jimmy Carter for the United States, states "that each of the two countries, shall . . . have the right to act against any aggression or threat directed against the canal. This does not mean, nor shall it be interpreted as the right of intervention of the United States in the internal affairs of Panama. Any United States action will be directed at insuring that the canal will remain open, secure and accessible, and it shall never be directed against the territorial integrity or political independence of Panama."

Assertion: That one of the reasons for the U.S. invasion, according to President Bush, was "to defend democracy in Panama."

Truth: The U.S. has been intervening in Panamanian internal affairs, in violation of explicit international law, for almost two years, in efforts to topple the legitimate government of Panama. Despite this interference, the Panamanian government went ahead and attempted to hold national elections in May 1989. The U.S. spent at least \$10 million in documentable operations to support the Panamanian opposition—the equivalent, on a per capita basis, of spending \$1.25 bil-

lion on a presidential campaign in the United States! However, in an attempt to replay the “Philippines scenario,” in which the opposition stole the ballot boxes and made it impossible for the Philippines government to count the ballots, the U.S.-funded opposition did the same, preventing the Panamanian government from being able to accurately count the vote, and raising the suspicion that votes were tampered with while in the physical possession of the opposition.

Under these circumstances, the Panamanian government had no alternative but to annul the elections. Since then, the Panamanian government offered the opposition to join in a coalition government to hold fresh elections, but on the advice of the U.S., they refused the offer.

Then, a few minutes after midnight Dec. 20, only 45 minutes before the invasion, the U.S. declared the opposition slate as the “official” government of Panama, in an act conducted on a U.S. military base. On Dec. 20.

Assertion: That one of the objectives of the U.S. invasion was “to combat drug trafficking,” according to Bush’s Dec. 20 statement, by removing General Noriega, whom the U.S. has accused of being a drug trafficker.

Truth: Who’s really involved in drug trafficking in Panama? General Noriega and the Panamanian government were routinely and frequently cited by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration for their cooperation in anti-drug operations, right up until the day the U.S. government changed policy and decided to “get” General Noriega in 1987. It was General Noriega, personally, who demanded changes in the bank secrecy laws which the drug runners—and their international bankers—used to protect their profits.

On May 27, 1987, DEA Administrator John Lawn wrote General Noriega to congratulate him on the PDF’s collaboration in seizing drug-runners’ bank accounts as part of Operation Pisces, an operation U.S. officials hailed as “the most successful undercover investigation in federal law enforcement history.” Lawn wrote: “Once again the United States DEA and the enforcement authorities of the Republic of Panama have joined efforts to strike an effective blow against the drug traffickers. . . . Your personal commitment to Operation Pisces and the competent, professional, and tireless efforts of other officials in the Republic of Panama were essential to the final positive outcome of this investigation. Drug traffickers around the world are now on notice that the proceeds and profits of their illegal ventures are not welcome in Panama.”

Not one month later, the opposition movement in Panama, with full U.S. backing, led an uprising against that government. Organizing the rebellion were some of the top drug money launderers of Panama, as documented in *Executive Intelligence Review’s* updated Special Report, *White Paper on the Panama Crisis*. Today, the U.S. Army has installed in office Guillermo Endara, a business partner of one of those money-launderers, Carlos Eleta, who was arrest-

ed in Macon, Georgia in April 1989 on charges of conspiracy to import 600 kilos a month of cocaine and launder its proceeds.

Despite the propaganda, no consensus was ever achieved that General Noriega is a drug-runner. In an interview published in *EIR* on Sept. 16, 1988, Adm. Daniel Murphy—head of the Reagan administration’s National Narcotics Border Interdiction System and, for a period of time, chief of staff to Vice President Bush—stated that “during my entire tenure at NNBS and earlier with the South Florida Task Force, I never saw any intelligence suggesting General Noriega’s involvement in the drug trade. In fact, we always held up Panama as the model in terms of cooperation with the United States in the war on drugs. Remember that a grand jury indictment in this country is not a conviction. If the case ever comes to trial, I will look at the evidence and the jury’s findings, but until that happens, I have no first-hand evidence whatsoever of the general’s involvement. My experience ran in the opposite direction.”

Assertion: That the invasion was in accord with international law. In his initial statements, President Bush made no reference to any legal basis whatsoever for the U.S. invasion of Panama. Later, Secretary of State James Baker told the press that, “The actions we have taken, in our view are fully in accordance with international law. The United States, under international law, has an inherent right of self-defense, as recognized in Article 51 of the United Nations Charter and [as recognized in] Article 21 of the Organization of American States charter.”

Truth: In international law, any claim of self-defense is supposed to be followed by a response that is both proportional to the threat, and necessary to the threatened government. An overwhelming invasion to eliminate a nation’s armed forces, overthrow its government, and install a new government, is utterly “out of proportion” to the alleged “cause,” the killing of one U.S. officer. The U.S. construction requires that an attack on a few U.S. nationals in a foreign country be misconstrued as an invasion of the United States!

Article 18 of the OAS charter leaves no room for doubt on the question. Baker cited Article 21, which prohibits members from resorting to military force except in cases of “self-defense in accordance with existing treaties.” But nothing in Article 21 can justify ignoring Article 18, which is paramount, and which states: “No state, or group of states, has the right to intervene, directly or indirectly, for any reason whatever, in the internal or external affairs of other states.” The U.S. has intervened repeatedly, and in major ways, in the internal affairs of Panama for the past 21 months, culminating in the Wednesday Dec. 20 invasion, a rather dramatic form of “intervention.”

Secretary Baker also invoked Article IV of the Panama Canal Treaties, which in fact refute the U.S. position, as indicated above.