

Noriega stood up to overthrow plot

by Carlos Wesley

The head of the Panamanian Defense Forces (PDF), Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega, proved he was right when he said: "I am not Ferdinand Marcos and Panama is not the Philippines." As 1988 closed, Noriega was still commander of the PDF, and Manuel Solís Palma, whose government was given at most two weeks when he assumed the presidency on Feb. 26, was still President. Project Democracy—the parallel government that runs U.S. foreign policy—had easily overthrown the governments of the Philippines and Haiti; few would have dared to predict that Panama would resist the all-out war launched against it as 1988 began.

This war has included a campaign of lies unparalleled since Joseph Goebbels was in charge of Nazi propaganda. Noriega was accused of being a drug trafficker, despite a pile of contrary evidence, including repeated testimony by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), that the PDF under Noriega's leadership is among the best allies in the war on drugs in Ibero-America.

It has included an economic war in which the U.S. government has misappropriated millions of dollars in Panama's government funds, held back millions more it owes for rents and utilities fees for the U.S. Armed Forces in Panama, and failed to pay the annuity for the Canal. Tens of thousands of Panamanians have been left jobless, scores of businesses are bankrupt, and the government has been forced to curtail health and other services, and is barely able to meet its payroll.

President Solís Palma told the U.N. General Assembly Sept. 26, "I categorically state that my government has abundant reasons to fear direct U.S. military aggression against the Republic of Panama." The U.S. sent additional troops into Panama, to reinforce the 10,000 men permanently stationed there with the U.S. Southern Command, he noted among other signs.

Project Democracy's regional point man, Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Elliott Abrams, met on April 14 in Rome with his Russian counterpart, Yuri Pavlov, and got a green light from the Soviets for the U.S. to do as it pleased in Panama.

How has Panama, surely much more vulnerable than Marcos's Philippines, managed to resist this onslaught? Besides underestimating Noriega, Project Democracy's mistake, as Henry Kissinger noted at the National Press Club in Washington, is that it failed to have a viable opposition to replace the Panamanian government.

Almost all of their recruits to lead an opposition move-

ment are either from the local oligarchy, called *rabiblanco*s ("white asses"), and/or implicated in the drug trade. Such is the case, for example, with Carlos Rodríguez and Roberto "Bobby" Eisenmann, owners of Miami's Dadeland National Bank, which has been proven in a U.S. court to be a drug-money laundering bank. Both these leaders of the "BMW revolution" spend most of their time taking care of their business interests in Miami, and they have been unable to garner any popular support. A group of PDF officers the U.S. suborned to rebel against Noriega in March, found no troops to follow them, much less support from civilians.

When then-President Eric Delvalle gave in to U.S. pressure, including the banning of sales in the American market of sugar from his mills, and attempted to fire Noriega, Panama's Congress impeached him for violating the Constitution and named Solís Palma the new President. Setting itself up as interpreters of Panama's Constitution, the Reagan administration decided that Delvalle was Panama's legal President, and refused to recognize the Solís Palma government. But soon it found itself alone. Great Britain, West Germany, and Japan all broke ranks and recognized the new government. There was no reason not to, said a spokesman for the Bonn foreign ministry, "since the Solís Palma government seems to be generally accepted by the Panamanians."

Because some Latin American governments initially buckled to State Department pressure, Panama was suspended from the so-called Group of Eight nations, which it helped found as a policy-coordinating body for Ibero-America. But this quickly changed, as it became clear that the real U.S. aim was to install a regime willing to renegotiate the Carter-Torrijos treaties, to enable the U.S. to keep its military bases and the Panama Canal past the year 2000. Mexico announced that it was challenging the U.S. embargo, and would supply Panama with 50% of its oil needs on easy credit terms. The member nations of the Latin American Economic System (SELA), held an emergency session March 29 and agreed to assist Panama to overcome "the coercive economic measures taken by the government of the United States of America against Panama."

More important, the Panamanian cause was embraced by the overwhelming majority of Ibero-Americans. On Aug. 8-11, senators, congressmen, labor leaders, historians, businessmen, clergymen, retired military officers and political leaders from every continental nation, and from all shades of the political spectrum—from Argentina's Peronist and Radical parties, to Colombia's Conservative and Liberal parties, to the Cubans and Nicaraguans—gathered in Panama to plan a Second Amphictyonic Congress, which would be a forum to unite all the continent's nations. This gathering, the first time in the history of Ibero-America that representatives from all the nations of the continent had come together, committed itself to unite the common "fatherland, from Mexico to Argentina, in defense of the integrity and sovereignty of the Panamanian people."