

Panama Report by Carlos Wesley

Reagan 'reconsiders' canal treaties

The Establishment is maneuvering to get Bush to rip up the treaties, in another bid to oust Noriega.

Two days before leaving office, President Ronald Reagan told the press that the United States should reconsider the Carter-Torrijos canal treaties if Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega continues as commander of Panama's National Defense Forces.

"I know that is a subject we should be treating with," Reagan said Jan. 18, in a farewell interview with White House correspondents, when asked if the U.S. should comply with the treaties. "Of course, it's too late for me, but I think it is something definitely to look at, because our attempts to oust him were in line with the thinking of a great many people in Panama and there is no question about his totalitarianism," Reagan said. The President attempted to justify his repudiation of the U.S. treaty commitment by repeating the lie that Noriega is "part of the drug fraternity."

Lest it be thought that Reagan's swansong statements no longer represent U.S. policy, earlier the same day Secretary of State-designate James A. Baker III said at his Senate confirmation hearings that the United States should not designate a Panamanian as canal administrator—as the treaty requires—unless Noriega is removed from command.

Although President-elect George Bush in an interview the next day distanced himself somewhat from Reagan's call to reconsider the treaties, saying, "I am a great believer that once a treaty is entered into and ratified it ought to be kept," he did not disavow the remarks of his secretary of state on the question of the next canal administrator.

The treaties call on a Panamanian to take over as canal administrator in 1990. By treaty, the U.S. President must name the administrator from a candidate selected by the Panamanian government, and the appointment is then ratified by the U.S. Senate. Nowhere in the treaty is it stated that the implementation of this clause is subject to the United States approving of whoever is in command of Panama's armed forces.

Bush's endorsement of the principle of adherence to treaty obligations is not likely to assuage the Panamanians, who have insisted from the beginning of the crisis between the two countries that the issue is not General Noriega, but that the United States wants to disavow the treaties and extend its presence beyond noon, Dec. 31, 1999, when control of the canal and related installations is supposed to be turned over to Panama. According to the Panamanians, the United States is particularly reluctant to uproot the Southern Command, the only U.S. military installation on the Ibero-American mainland.

While Reagan's and Baker's statements are the highest-level indications that the United States may repudiate the treaty, they are by no means the first.

The U.S. Establishment's policy regarding Panama was most recently spelled out in the Winter 1988-89 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, the magazine of the New York Council on Foreign Relations, in an article by James Chace. There, the CFR sets out a number of policy options for Bush, including a military intervention into Pana-

ma. The CFR document warns Bush to act quickly to settle the Panama question, which otherwise "could derail the efforts of the new administration to explore the limit of U.S. Soviet rapprochement."

Even more important than the threats, is the fact that the U.S. has been systematically violating the canal treaties. Since April 1988, Panama has not received one cent of the canal annuities which it is entitled to, and the venue of the meetings of the governing body, the Panama Canal Commission, was unilaterally shifted from PCC headquarters in Panama, to the United States. Obstacles have been put in the way of the Panamanian commissioners to prevent them from participating in the meetings: U.S. visas were denied to their staff on one occasion; they were not notified of another meeting; and at the last meeting, held in Houston Jan. 11-12, they were forced to walk out when the U.S. invited Juan B. Sosa, who represents former President Eric Delvalle, to participate. As Panamanian commissioner Carlos Ozores explained it, Sosa's participation was an obvious attempt to politicize the meeting, which should have only been open to members of the canal board of directors.

On Jan. 13, the captains of Panama's Defense Forces issued a statement reaffirming their stance that Noriega is not the issue: "This is not the fight of one man. It is the fight of a people. This is also the cause of this generation of officers," said the statement, which was issued at the end of a training seminar. Speaking at the same ceremonies, Noriega said he would not put his post up for negotiations with the United States. "The presidency of Panama and the command of the armed forces belong to the people of Panama," he said. "And they cannot be given up."