

The Panama Invasion Revisited: Lessons for the Use of Force in the Post Cold War Era

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The 1989 U.S. invasion of Panama was the first American use of force since 1945 that was unrelated to the cold war. It was also the first large-scale use of American troops abroad since Vietnam and the most violent event in Panamanian history. It ended with the unusual capture of Manuel Antonio Noriega, Panama's head of state, who was then brought to the United States and tried for criminal drug operations. Despite the end of the cold war, dictators such as Noriega, Saddam Hussein, and Serbian leaders Slobodan Milošević and Radovan Karadžić will continue to exist and to challenge the international order. How should the United States, the only remaining superpower, deal with these kinds of authoritarian leaders? What lessons can we learn from the Noriega challenge and the means employed by the United States to handle him?

Noriega was a corrupt dictator heading an efficient narcomilitaristic regime in Panama. He was involved in drug trafficking, arms smuggling, money laundering, and the ruthless oppression of his people. He also systematically violated the American-Panamanian Canal treaties and harassed U.S. forces and institutions in Panama. But were all these violations sufficient to justify a massive military intervention to remove Noriega from power? In the last forty years, the United States intervened in Latin American countries but always in connection with perceived communist threats and the cold war. Noriega was not a communist and did not plan to move Panama into the Soviet sphere of influence. On the contrary, he played a key role in American efforts to contain the spread of

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communism in Central America. Historically, Panama was strategically important to the United States because of the Panama Canal. By the mid-1980s, however, the canal had lost much of its strategic value.¹ In 1978 President Jimmy Carter recognized this change and negotiated an agreement to transfer control of the canal to Panama by the end of the century.²

Why then, in the absence of cold war considerations, did the United States consider a relatively insignificant dictator a major challenge whose removal from power required full-scale military intervention? To answer this question, one must examine a combination of factors: escalation in the conflict, domestic priorities including the war on drugs, George Bush's leadership difficulties, and America's new global responsibilities as the sole remaining superpower.

The Noriega problem began in 1985 as an internal Panamanian affair. Between 1985 and the 1989 U.S. invasion, it went through a series of five minicrises. A turning point occurred in February 1988, when the United States declared drugs to be the major threat to American society at the same time that Noriega was indicted in Florida for drug trafficking and money laundering. Following the indictments, the United States sought to remove Noriega from power. The Reagan and Bush administrations hoped for and preferred a Panamanian solution, like a coup d'état, an election that would end Noriega's rule, or a popular uprising of the kind that removed from power dictators such as Anastasio Somoza of Nicaragua and Ferdinand Marcos of the Philippines.

The two administrations used overt and covert operations to help start popular uprisings and coups and also assisted the opposition in the 1989 Panamanian elections. None of these efforts were successful, and the United States decided to use other measures to remove Noriega such as negotiations, economic and diplomatic sanctions, and military threats. These measures also failed, mainly due to underestimation of Noriega's ability to survive, bureaucratic infighting, mixed messages, congressional-White House feuds, operational restrictions, and incompetent American implementation of policies and plans. The failure of these measures strengthened Noriega's position in Panama, as he defiantly withstood superpower pressure. Thus, as his political position became stronger, it became more important to the United States to remove him from power.

Throughout the confrontation, Noriega felt immune to American reprisals or punishment. One author claimed that "the United States sent clear signals, which if evaluated correctly, could have provided warning [to Noriega] of a U.S. attack."³ But even hours before the actual attack, Noriega did not believe the

¹ David Parker, "The Panama Canal Is No Longer Crucial to U.S. Security," *Armed Forces Journal* 125 (December 1987): 54-60.

² Walter LaFeber, *The Panama Canal: The Crisis in Historical Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); Michael J. Hogan, *The Panama Canal in American Politics: Domestic Advocacy and the Evolution of Policy* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986).

³ Susan Horwitz, "Indications and Warning Factors" in Bruce Watson and Peter Tsouras, eds. *Operation Just Cause: The U.S. Intervention in Panama* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1991), 49.

United States would use force to capture him.⁴ His failure was not only the result of faulty evaluation. The evidence presented in this article shows that over a long period of time, the United States sent him mixed and confusing signals. Thus, a tougher and more unified U.S. policy that was clearly articulated and communicated from the beginning could have obviated the need for the Panama invasion.

THE EARLY U.S. MESSAGES

Noriega had been an intelligence officer under General Omar Torrijos before he became the commander of the Panamanian Defense Forces (PDF).⁵ He had been a corrupt official involved with illegal smuggling of drugs and arms.⁶ Yet he was considered a close ally of various American governmental agencies. He cooperated with the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), had allies in the Department of Defense (DOD), and was on and off the CIA payroll as early as 1971.⁷ In addition, he was a source of intelligence for and a channel of communication between the United States and Fidel Castro. Most importantly, however, during the civil war in Nicaragua, he provided access and assistance to the contra campaign against the Sandinistas.

Despite his involvement with drugs, at least until his indictment in 1988, Noriega was considered by the United States both as an asset and a liability. When he committed crimes and abused his power, Washington looked the other way. In 1979, for example, senior officials in the Carter administration blocked federal prosecutors from bringing drug-trafficking and arms-smuggling indictments against Noriega, because they preferred to continue receiving the intelligence information he was providing them. Following the conclusion of the canal treaties, they did not want to upset the political situation in Panama.⁸ With the United States continually ignoring his abuses, Noriega may have been encouraged to continue or even increase his drug-related activities.

Washington also looked the other way during the 1984 elections in Panama. In May 1984, Panama held its first free elections in sixteen years. The official vote count showed Noriega's hand-picked candidate, Nicolas Barletta, winning

⁴ Margaret Scranton, *The Noriega Years* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1991), 202.

⁵ Noriega created the PDF in 1983 by merging the National Guard, the police, and the immigration forces.

⁶ R. M. Koster and Guillermo Sanchez, *In the Time of the Tyrants, Panama 1968-1990* (New York: Norton, 1990).

⁷ George P. Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph: My Years as Secretary of State* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1993), 1052; Frederick Kempe, *Divorcing the Dictator: America's Bungled Affair with Noriega* (New York: G. P. Putnam's, 1990), 83; Kevin Buckley, *Panama: The Whole Story* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991), 14; Scranton, *The Noriega Years*, 13-14.

⁸ Linda Robinson, *Intervention or Neglect: The United States and Central America Beyond the 1980s* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1991), 111; and Jim McGee and Bob Woodward, "Noriega Arms Indictment Stalled in '80," *Washington Post*, 20 March 1988.

by 1,713 votes. But rumors of fraud appeared on election day and persisted in subsequent days. Eventually it became clear that the PDF had doctored the election results in order to produce a victory for Noriega's candidate.⁹

The fraudulent May 1984 elections set back the chances for democracy in Panama and demonstrated Noriega's ability to undermine the political process. They might have also served as a warning to the United States about Noriega. But instead of viewing Noriega's manipulations as a threat to democracy in Panama, Washington chose to ignore them. Barletta was well known in Washington and had good connections with several senior officials. He had studied economics at the University of Chicago when Secretary of State George Shultz was a professor there, was a former vice president of the World Bank and ex-director of the Department of Economic Affairs at the Organization of American States (OAS). Shultz legitimized the elections by attending Barletta's inauguration as president of Panama.

Finally, American actions in an undercover drug operation sent Noriega a message that his involvement in drug trafficking would be overlooked if he assisted the United States in the battle against the Sandinistas. In 1984, the DEA conducted a major undercover operation in Colombia designed to arrest and convict druglords, including Pablo Escobar.¹⁰ In June, Barry Seal, a DEA agent, took a rare picture of Escobar and Sandinista officers loading cocaine into an airplane. A few weeks later Oliver North, on the staff of the U.S. National Security Council, leaked the photo to American newspapers, hoping that the evidence on links between the drug cartel and the Sandinistas would encourage Congress to vote in favor of aid to the contras. The disclosure of the photo ruined the covert operation and the chance to indict Escobar and his allies. Noriega thus understood that the United States cared more about fighting the contras than about waging war against drugs.

Thus, during the first two years of Noriega's rule, the United States ignored his criminal activities and abuses of the political process in Panama. The U.S. messages may have shaped a belief system that encouraged Noriega to continue the same policies and may have distorted his ability to correctly interpret further U.S. reactions to his behavior. This phenomenon was clearly visible in five American-Panamanian crises.

CRISIS 1: THE MURDER OF HUGO SPADAFORA

Dr. Hugo Spadafora was a physician but also a romantic revolutionary, a guerrilla fighter, and a political activist. He first confronted Noriega and accused him of illegal activities when both were serving in General Torrijos's government. In September 1985, Spadafora announced that he would expose Noriega's involve-

⁹ Scranton, *The Noriega Years*, 75-77; Buckley, *Panama: the Whole Story*, 74.

¹⁰ Details about the operation appeared in Buckley, *Panama: the Whole Story*, 59-60.

ment in drug trafficking and arms smuggling.¹¹ But before he could reveal his evidence, he was captured, severely tortured, and murdered in a manner intended to send a message to Noriega's opponents. His body was found decapitated, a punishment reserved for traitors.¹²

The brutal murder of Spadafora created a crisis in Panama. The media, the Spadafora family, and leaders of the opposition demanded an immediate investigation and punishment of the murderers. Noriega and the PDF were the obvious prime suspects, but they had the power to block any attempt to discover the truth about the murder. President Barletta condemned the murder and insisted on investigating the case, but Noriega forced him to resign. Elliot Abrams, the new assistant secretary of state for Inter-American Affairs, encouraged Barletta to stand firm.¹³ Despite his effort, Barletta announced his resignation and was replaced by Vice President Eric Delvalle.

Spadafora's murder and Barletta's dismissal concerned the State Department, but Abrams thought that a tough American message would modify Noriega's behavior. Therefore, U.S. embassy officials visited the offices of *La Prensa*, the local newspaper that had implicated Noriega and the PDF in the murder, and received members of the Spadafora family. The U.S. ambassador in Panama, Everett Briggs, also declared in a public speech that true democracy requires supremacy of civilian authority over the military.¹⁴ Later, in a highly symbolic measure, the Department of State diverted \$14 million in aid from Panama to Guatemala, where a new civilian president had just taken office.¹⁵

At the same time, however, the CIA and the DEA continued to view Noriega as a vital asset and sent him the opposite message. CIA Director William Casey summoned Noriega, still on the CIA payroll, to a meeting on 1 November 1985 in the CIA headquarters. The State Department expected Casey, whom Noriega highly respected, to warn him. Casey, however, did not raise any of the disturbing questions about the Spadafora murder and the forced resignation of Barletta, and even assured Noriega that the Reagan administration would continue to support him.¹⁶ The DEA also continued to send Noriega thank-you letters for his cooperation in drug enforcement efforts.¹⁷

A few weeks later, the White House and the State Department attempted to correct the positive messages the CIA and the DEA had delivered to Noriega. In mid-December, new National Security Adviser, Admiral John Poindexter, Elliot Abrams, and other U.S. officials met Noriega in Panama. Poindexter criticized Noriega for his illegal activities and "PDF brutality," a coded reference to the murder of Spadafora. Noriega denied all the charges, however. Poindexter

¹¹ Kempe, *Divorcing the Dictator*, 126–142.

¹² Buckley, *Panama: The Whole Story*, 27.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁴ Scranton, *The Noriega Years*, 89–91.

¹⁵ Buckley, *Panama: The Whole Story*, 46.

¹⁶ Kempe, *Divorcing the Dictator*, 169–170.

¹⁷ David N. Miller, "Panama and U.S. Policy," *Global Affairs* 4 (Summer 1989): 139.

did not press him any further and chose not to warn him.¹⁸ Noriega manipulated the meeting, and the State Department plan to send him a tough message did not materialize.

Bureaucratic infighting, mainly among the State Department, CIA, and DEA, produced a mixed message. This allowed Noriega to conclude that his status in Washington was well protected. He believed that he had only a few opponents in the State Department who did not realize the valuable contributions he had made to U.S. interests and that his friends in the CIA and DOD would defend and protect him against these opponents.

CRISIS 2: THE HERRERA CONFESSIONS

According to an internal secret plan signed after the death of Torrijos, Noriega was supposed to retire in 1987, when his deputy, Colonel Roberto Diaz Herrera, was supposed to replace him as PDF commander. However on 5 June 1987, Noriega announced that he would remain PDF commander for another five years and assigned Diaz Herrera to an unattractive diplomatic position, leaving him bitter and frustrated. The next day Diaz Herrera retaliated against Noriega by publicly revealing details about Noriega's crimes.¹⁹ He accused him of orchestrating the murder of Spadafora and rigging the 1984 elections. He even blamed Noriega for the death of Torrijos in a 1981 mysterious plane crash, claiming that Noriega had placed a bomb in his plane.

Herrera's charges inspired massive protests against the government. On 8 June 1987, nearly 100,000 people, close to a fourth of the population of Panama City, demonstrated against Noriega. The opposition formed a new coalition and demanded the immediate resignation of Noriega and other individuals named by Diaz Herrera. Demonstrations and strikes continued for several weeks in both cities and rural areas. Noriega responded by charging Diaz Herrera with treason and by cracking down hard on the demonstrators, destroying and damaging property belonging to political opponents and shutting down the media.

On 26 June 1987, the U.S. Senate approved a nonbinding resolution by an overwhelming vote of 84 to 2 (S. Res. 239) calling upon Noriega and his principal officers to step down pending a "public accounting" of Herrera's charges. Noriega struck back by sending government workers to demonstrate near the American Embassy. The demonstration turned into a riot, with workers throwing rocks,

¹⁸ Seymour Hersh, "Panama Strongman Said to Trade in Drugs, Arms and Illicit Money," *New York Times*, 12 June 1986; Buckley, *Panama: The Whole Story*, 46. According to one source, at this meeting Poindexter may have tried to convince Noriega to train the contras in Panama. This could explain Poindexter's reluctance to deliver Noriega a tougher message. John Weeks and Andrew Zimbalist, "The Failure of Intervention in Panama: Humiliation in the Backyard," *Third World Quarterly* 11 (January 1989): 14.

¹⁹ John Dinges, *Our Man in Panama, The Shrewd Rise and Brutal Fall of Manuel Noriega* (New York: Random House, 1991), 265; Scranton, *The Noriega Years*, 107-108; Kempe, *Divorcing the Dictator*, 212.

smashing windows, and overturning and damaging employees' cars. This incident reminded Shultz of the 1979 Iranian attack on the American Embassy in Teheran, and it led him to tell Arthur Davis, the U.S. ambassador in Panama: "If that's the kind of relationship they [Noriega and the PDF] want, that's the kind of relationship they'll get."²⁰ Shultz quickly clarified what he meant by a new kind of relationship. The State Department suspended military aid to Panama, the DOD reduced military contacts between the U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) and the PDF, and, most importantly, the CIA removed Noriega from its payroll. The real U.S. goal, however, was to remove Noriega from power either by negotiating his resignation or by encouraging a PDF coup against him.

In a speech given to the World Affairs Council in Washington on 30 June 1987, Elliot Abrams called on the PDF leaders to "remove their institution from politics, end any appearance of corruption, and modernize their forces to carry out their large and important military tasks." Abrams's aides explained to reporters beforehand that "corruption" referred to Noriega's involvement in drug trafficking and that the rest of the statement was intended to encourage the PDF to remove Noriega from its ranks.²¹ On 2 July the *Washington Post* reported on the speech with the explanations and clarifications of the code terms and the intended messages.

Between August and December 1987, the United States also used three negotiating channels to present Noriega with several plans and deals for his resignation. The first channel involved Jose Blandon, the Panamanian consul general in New York, who was a close associate of Noriega. The second channel was initiated by Noriega, who invited retired Admiral Daniel J. Murphy to meet with him in Panama in August and November 1987. Finally, on 30 December 1987, Richard Armitage, assistant secretary of defense for International Security Affairs, met with Noriega in Panama.

The first channel produced the Blandon Plan, which called for the retirement of Noriega and his inner circle of PDF officers by April 1988 at the latest, the establishment of a transition regime under President Delvalle that would rule the state until the May 1989 elections, an independent media, and the resumption of U.S. aid.²² The circumstances behind the Murphy mission are still in dispute. Prior to his retirement in 1985, Murphy held important governmental positions including chief of staff to Vice President George Bush. It is not yet clear whether this was a private mission or another unofficial channel for communications and negotiations.²³ In any case, Noriega acted as if Murphy represented the official American position. Murphy repeated the Blandon terms but revised one critical component—the time-table. Murphy told Noriega he had until the May 1989 elections to resign. Noriega concluded that the American timetable was not as

²⁰ Cited in Kempe, *Divorcing the Dictator*, 223. Also see Miller, "Panama and U.S. Policy," 140.

²¹ Buckley, *Panama: The Whole Story*, 90.

²² Scranton, *The Noriega Years*, 118–119.

²³ Buckley, *Panama: The Whole Story*, 106–108.

tough as Blandon had originally presented. On 21 December 1987, Noriega rejected the Blandon Plan and a few weeks later fired Blandon.²⁴ Blandon then accused Murphy of undermining his plan by giving Noriega extra time to depart.

On 30 December 1987, Armitage went to Panama to send Noriega a “tough” message and to tell him that all the branches of the Reagan administration had adopted a unified position seeking his departure. Armitage may have offered Noriega an incentive to resign, such as agreeing to stop the investigation into his drug trafficking activities.²⁵ It is not clear, however, whether Armitage carried out this mission. The press briefings in Washington on the meeting conveyed a tough American stand, but according to one source, “Armitage never asked Noriega to leave.”²⁶ Even if he did, the message became blurred when Noriega and Armitage appeared before PDF officers laughing and drinking Old Parr scotch together.²⁷

Why did all these negotiating channels between the United States and Noriega fail to resolve the crisis? The main problem was that there were too many different channels transmitting too many confusing messages, causing Noriega to believe there was a split in the Reagan administration over his removal. He may also have thought that as the U.S. terms got better for him, time was on his side. He may have rejected deals offered to him, hoping at every point in time that a new deal would provide him with more concessions and better conditions. However, it is also probable that he only wanted to confuse and frustrate the United States and never had any intention of negotiating a settlement. The United States should have taken such motivation into consideration and should have used more aggressive bargaining techniques to uncover Noriega’s real intentions.

CRISIS 3: THE FLORIDA INDICTMENTS

The next major crisis in the continuing saga erupted in February 1988, when Noriega was indicted by two federal grand juries in Miami and Tampa.²⁸ The Miami indictment included twelve counts of racketeering, drug trafficking, and money laundering. More specifically, it accused Noriega of assisting the Colombian Medellin cartel in transporting more than two tons of cocaine to the United States via Panama in return for a payment of about \$4.5 million. He was also accused of allowing the cartel to build a cocaine processing plant in Panama and of providing shelter for drug traffickers. The Tampa grand jury charged Noriega on three counts of assisting American-based operatives to smuggle 1.4 million

²⁴ See “Panamanian Chief Dismisses Aide Seeking Political Deal,” *New York Times*, 19 January 1988.

²⁵ Robinson, *Intervention or Neglect*, 114; Scranton, *The Noriega Years*, 126–127.

²⁶ Buckley, *Panama: The Whole Story*, 112.

²⁷ Dinges, *Our Man in Panama*, 288; Kempe, *Divorcing the Dictator*, 233.

²⁸ See Philip Shenon, “Noriega Indicted by U.S. for Links to Illegal Drugs,” *New York Times*, 6 February 1988.

pounds of marijuana into the United States in return for a payment of more than \$1 million.

The indictments exposed a major breakdown in Reagan's foreign policy making. Clearly, indicting any foreign leader, especially indicting the leader of a close ally for drug trafficking, should have been carried out in close consultation with the White House and the State Department. The Justice Department, however, acted as if this was a domestic case. Despite the obvious significance of the indictments, Reagan and Shultz learned about them only after the fact.²⁹ It was clear that the indictments would create an entirely new situation in the Noriega continuing crisis, but the administration was surprised and unprepared to deal with this situation.

The public disclosure of Noriega's involvement in drug trafficking was an embarrassment for the United States. It became clear that U.S. officials had tolerated these activities at a time when antidrug sentiment was at an all time high.³⁰ Because public concern about drugs was so prominent, "the [U.S.] Government could not afford to be seen as coddling a dictator-druglord after its own courts called for his prosecution."³¹

The indictments created a new crisis in Panama. After days of hesitating, President Delvalle finally fired Noriega on 25 February 1988 and appointed Colonel Marcos Justines as the new PDF commander. But the attempt to dismiss Noriega failed. Immediately after he was fired, Noriega restricted Delvalle to his home, cut his telephone lines, closed the independent print and electronic media, and ordered the PDF to disperse demonstrators. Justines remained loyal to Noriega and refused to assume the commander position. Under Noriega's instructions, the National Assembly voted to oust Delvalle and replace him with the education minister.

The United States had hoped a popular uprising would support Delvalle over Noriega, but one never developed. The administration denounced the ouster of Delvalle, recognized him as Panama's legitimate leader, and brought him to the United States. But this was not enough; the Reagan administration had to devise alternative means to remove Noriega. Throughout 1988 the Reagan administration encouraged a PDF coup, offered Noriega deals in return for his resignation, imposed sanctions on Panama, authorized covert actions against him, dispatched additional forces to the U.S. bases in Panama, and debated a military intervention to capture Noriega.

On 16 March 1988, Panamanian Chief of Police, Colonel Leonidas Macias, organized a coup against Noriega. The coup failed, however, either because of bad planning or because some coup participants double-crossed their leaders and

²⁹ Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 1052; Kempe, *Divorcing the Dictator*, 250.

³⁰ In July 1988, 27 percent of the respondents to a Gallup poll named drugs as the most important problem facing the country — greater than the percentage of respondents who cited all economic problems combined (24 percent).

³¹ Linda Robinson, "Dwindling Options in Panama," *Foreign Affairs* 68 (Winter 1989–1990): 192.

informed Noriega of the plot. Despite this outcome, the Reagan administration continued to encourage the PDF to topple Noriega. On 22 March 1988, the White House issued the following statement: "The United States favors the integrity of the PDF as a professional military institution, and we look forward to the PDF playing an important and constructive role under a civilian regime."³² In this statement, the United States distinguished again between the PDF and Noriega, promising to preserve the PDF if it removed Noriega and obeyed civilian authority.

Because of Macias's failure, it was unlikely that another PDF coup would be attempted in the near future. Since other means had been unsuccessful in persuading Noriega to retire and congressional and public pressure to remove him was mounting, administration officials raised and debated the military option. White House spokesperson Marlin Fitzwater indirectly acknowledged this when he said on 29 March 1988 that the United States was now "willing to take a look at all the hard options."³³ On 25 April, however, Treasury Secretary Jim Baker said, "There are other things that you can do but they all involve putting our military assets into play, and we're not going to do that."³⁴

The Reagan administration was split on the military option. The State Department supported military intervention but Defense and the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) opposed it. In March 1988, Elliot Abrams suggested a limited use of force—a commando raid to capture Noriega and to bring him to trial in the United States, accompanied by 6,000 American soldiers to defend Delvalle against any PDF retaliations. But the Pentagon raised many practical and legal questions about such an operation. JCS Chairman William Crowe was concerned that the PDF might take American hostages. Others pointed to casualties and operational difficulties with any "Rambo"-type commando raid. One officer even raised legal and moral issues: "Kidnapping is a crime. Under what international law would you have us do that?" he asked.³⁵

Abrams thought that the Pentagon was doing its best to avoid using force and considered the obstacles raised by officers ridiculous.³⁶ He considered Pentagon opposition an example of the Vietnam Syndrome, namely fear of the consequences of what could become an unpopular intervention. Senior military officers also invoked the Vietnam War experience to criticize their opponent. They viewed Abrams as a civilian official who too enthusiastically suggested and advocated

³² Cited in Scranton, *The Noriega Years*, 146.

³³ Bill McAllister, "US Patience Not Unlimited Noriega Warned," *Washington Post*, 30 March 1988.

³⁴ The statement was published without specific attribution, Peter Kilborn, "U.S. Preparing to Relax Some Panama Sanctions," *New York Times*, 26 April 1988. Shultz revealed that Baker made the statement in a background briefing, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 1057.

³⁵ Buckley, *Panama: The Whole Story*, 138–139.

³⁶ Bob Woodward, *The Commanders* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991), 84–86.

violence with little understanding of the consequences.³⁷ Fearing that Reagan would somehow adopt the Abrams strategy, the Pentagon mounted a public attack on Abrams, including leaking some of his “harebrained” ideas to the press.

A similar debate over military action in Panama also took place in Congress. Speaker of the House Jim Wright, for example, said that “obviously we don’t want to go [to Panama] with the force of military arms—that’s ridiculous.”³⁸ But in a telephone conversation with Reagan’s new Secretary of Defense Frank Carlucci, Senator Alfonse D’Amato accused the Department of Defense and the JCS of being “cowards” for their lack of military decisiveness in Panama.³⁹ After Carlucci had sent him a letter of protest, D’Amato claimed he had been misunderstood, but he still continued to favor the use of force in Panama.⁴⁰ Noriega could have concluded that the split in the administration and Congress was too wide for U.S. military action to be employed.

Since Reagan rejected military intervention, his administration tried again to negotiate a deal with Noriega.⁴¹ In March 1988, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Michael Kozak offered Noriega a chance to retire on 12 August 1988, the fifth anniversary of his command, and to take a long vacation abroad, at least until after the May 1989 elections in Panama. In return, the United States would agree to drop the Florida indictments. On 11 May 1988 the White House officially announced that if Noriega retired, the indictments would be dropped.⁴² The announcement drew severe criticism from Congress and also from Vice President Bush, who publicly opposed the negotiations and the proposed deal with Noriega.⁴³ Bush was then in the middle of his presidential campaign and for him, “the prospect of letting a drug-dealing dictator out of the indictment looked like political suicide.”⁴⁴ On 17 May the Senate passed a nonbinding amendment to the 1989 Defense Authorization Bill that read: “No negotiations should be conducted, nor arrangement made by the United States Government with Noriega, which would involve the dropping of the drug-related indictments against him.” The amendment passed by a vote of 86 to 10.⁴⁵ Although Senate Minority Leader Robert Dole thought that Noriega should be removed from power, Dole

³⁷ Interesting details about the debate between Abrams and the military were revealed more than a year later in an exchange of op-ed articles Abrams and Crow published in the *New York Times*, respectively on 3 and 16 October 1989.

³⁸ Cited in Scranton, *The Noriega Years*, 147.

³⁹ Buckley, *Panama: The Whole Story*, 137.

⁴⁰ See his criticism of a *Washington Post* editorial, published in the same paper on 13 August 1988.

⁴¹ See Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 1062–1079.

⁴² Joe Pichirallo, “Noriega Given Offer to Drop Drug Charges,” *Washington Post*, 12 May 1988.

⁴³ David Hoffman, “Bush Splits with Reagan on Handling of Noriega,” *Washington Post*, 19 May 1988.

⁴⁴ Thomas Donnelly, Margaret Roth, and Caleb Baker, *Operation Just Cause, The Storming of Panama* (New York: Lexington Books, 1991), 35. Also see Michael L. Conniff, *Panama and the United States: The Forced Alliance* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1992), 158–159.

⁴⁵ Lou Canon and Helen Dewar, “Senate Opposes Ending Noriega Case,” *Washington Post*, 18 May 1988.

defended the amendment by arguing that the United States should not “send him off with a legal golden parachute.”⁴⁶

Despite this criticism, Reagan did not back off and approved the deal. In several stormy policy sessions, Reagan argued that the only alternative to get Noriega out of power was the use of force and he opposed this option.⁴⁷ The diplomatic effort, however, failed to produce an agreement. Reagan and Shultz let Noriega know that the deal must be concluded by 25 May. That was the day they were scheduled to travel to Moscow for an important summit with Mikhail Gorbachev. Hours before the expiration of the deadline, Noriega accepted the deal but wanted two weeks to persuade PDF officers to accept it as well. Shultz, who delayed his travel to Moscow, decided to withdraw the U.S. offer.

Even before the failure of this round of negotiations, the United States imposed harsh economic sanctions against Panama.⁴⁸ The sanctions consisted of freezing Panamanian assets in the United States, suspending canal payments to the Panamanian government, revoking Panama’s most favored trade status, and banning all payments from American individuals and companies. The main purpose of the sanctions was to erode Noriega’s base of support, primarily in the PDF and among government officials. The idea was to squeeze him financially to the point where he could no longer pay the salaries of his own loyalists so that they would turn against him. In addition, the sanctions were expected to hurt the Panamanian people, who would then blame Noriega for their hardship and demand his resignation. Finally, the sanctions were intended to provide the American negotiators with additional leverage against Noriega.

The sanctions did in fact succeed in damaging Panama’s economy; Noriega failed to meet his financial obligations to the PDF and government workers. Reagan’s new National Security Adviser Colin Powell said that the sanctions were having a “telling effect.”⁴⁹ Elliot Abrams declared that Noriega was “clinging to power by his fingertips.”⁵⁰ But the pressure was not strong enough to bring Noriega down. The Treasury Department made too many exceptions to the sanctions, which helped mostly Noriega and his supporters. Thus, “the sanctions were the economic equivalent of the neutron bomb: they destroyed the economy but left the leader standing.”⁵¹ Once again, the United States underestimated Noriega’s remarkable survival power.

In crisis situations, states sometimes use armed forces for political purposes. They mobilize and deploy military forces and conduct military exercises in order

⁴⁶ Helen Dewar, “Dole Warns against Dropping Noriega Case,” *Washington Post*, 17 May 1988.

⁴⁷ Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 1070–1079.

⁴⁸ Robinson, *Intervention or Neglect*, 117–119; Scranton, *The Noriega Years*, 132–140.

⁴⁹ Lou Canon, “Anti-Noriega Sanctions Are Having ‘Telling Effect,’” *Washington Post*, 6 April 1988.

⁵⁰ Robert Pear and Neil Lewis, “The Noriega Fiasco,” *New York Times*, 30 May 1988.

⁵¹ Larry Berman and Bruce Jentleson, “Bush and the Post-Cold War: New Challenges for American Leadership” in Colin Campbell and Bert Rockman, eds. *The Bush Presidency First Appraisals* (Chatham, NJ: Chatham House, 1991), 110.

to scare opponents and make them do things that they would otherwise not do.⁵² The political use of force can be effective only if an opponent understands the message and believes the threat is genuine. The United States already had bases and forces in Panama. The political use of force in this case, therefore, meant the redeploying of existing forces, dispatching additional troops, and carrying out exceptional military exercises.

In March 1988 the Reagan administration considered dispatching additional troops to bases in Panama to send a message to Noriega. SOUTHCOM chief, General Frederick Woerner, opposed this step, because he knew that Noriega would think that the United States was merely bluffing and did not intend to intervene at this time. Because he felt that Reagan did not seriously intend to launch a military action, Woerner said the policy was not credible and would not achieve its goal.⁵³ Despite Woerner's objections, Reagan decided to send approximately 1,300 troops to Panama on 6 April 1988. Woerner was right. If the purpose of the dispatch was to scare Noriega, it failed. Noriega was unmoved and did not alter his defiant behavior.

In addition to all of the preceding means, the United States conducted covert operations to remove Noriega. Very little information is available on the first two operations—Panama 1 and Panama 2.⁵⁴ In July 1988, Reagan authorized Panama 3 to help Eduardo Herrera Hassan, an exiled rival of Noriega, mount a coup. The CIA presented the plan to the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence on 26 July 1988. The next day, the *Washington Post* published an article ironically titled "Covert Action on Noriega Is Cleared." The White House accused the committee of leaking information about the plan. The committee, in turn, accused the White House of doing the same thing.⁵⁵ The White House may have wanted to discredit the committee as part of a debate over the right of Congress to receive information about any covert operation plan in advance. Regardless of who leaked the information, the publication of the story killed the operation.

All the efforts of the Reagan administration to remove Noriega failed, mainly because of bureaucratic infighting, which resulted in the United States sending confusing messages. Shultz commented that the outcome of the negotiations "could well have been different if President Reagan had been supported in his decisions and if the execution of his decisions had been firm and accelerated."⁵⁶ Credible military threats could have affected Noriega's behavior and, perhaps, even his willingness to accept one of the deals offered to him. But Reagan ruled out military intervention, and the other methods the United States used to try to remove Noriega were ineffective. However, Bush's victory in the 1988 presidential elections created an opportunity to develop new ideas to deal with Noriega.

⁵² Philip Zelikow, "The U.S. and the Use of Force: A Historical Summary" in George Osborn et al., *Democracy, Strategy and Vietnam* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1987), 31–81.

⁵³ Buckley, *Panama: The Whole Story*, 139.

⁵⁴ Scranton, *The Noriega Years*, 152–158.

⁵⁵ *Washington Post*, 29 July 1988.

⁵⁶ Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 1079.

CRISIS 4: THE ELECTIONS IN PANAMA

Reagan and Bush held different opinions about Noriega. One of Bush's main themes in the 1988 presidential campaign was the War against Drugs. Bush, therefore, strongly opposed a deal with Noriega that would result in dropping the charges against him. Thus, Bush ruled out the deal favored by Reagan. Compared to Reagan, Bush's leadership image was much weaker, and he was more vulnerable to Noriega's provocations. On the other hand, with the changes in the makeup of his cabinet, Bush had the opportunity to impose one clear strategy on the various branches of his government. From the beginning of his term when referring to Noriega, he used tough language and set the stage for a major confrontation with the Panamanian leader.

On 22 December 1988, after a meeting with Reagan and Delvalle, Bush's spokesperson said: "There must be no misunderstanding about our policy. . . . Noriega must go."⁵⁷ Bush hoped Noriega would be defeated in the May 1989 elections in Panama, as this would have been an exclusively Panamanian solution to the long conflict. However, the Bush administration was concerned with two problems: the ability of the Panamanian opposition to mount a serious campaign against Noriega and the PDF's possible falsification of the election results. Bush decided upon measures to deal with both problems. First, Bush approved a new covert plan (Panama 4) to help the Panamanian opposition; and second, he encouraged many individuals and organizations to monitor the elections in Panama.

After much deliberation and Bush's personal pleading, Congress approved Panama 4 and allocated \$10 million to cover opposition expenses for printing materials, advertisements, transportation, and communication.⁵⁸ However, the operation was hindered by failures and setbacks. About a month before the election, Noriega captured a CIA operative who was using some of this \$10 million allocation to run a clandestine anti-Noriega radio network.⁵⁹ Shortly afterward, Carlos Eleta Alamaran, a Panamanian entrusted by the CIA to distribute the rest of the \$10 million to the opposition, was arrested in the United States and charged with a conspiracy to import cocaine.⁶⁰ The case showed both deficiencies in the selection of agents and a complete lack of coordination between the CIA and drug enforcement agencies.

Recalling how Noriega rigged the 1984 elections, American officials made an effort to prevent fraud by calling for various organizations and monitoring groups to send observers to Panama. Former President Jimmy Carter led one of these teams. Yet, the monitoring teams did not deter Noriega and the PDF from rigging the elections. According to the official results, Noriega's candidate, Carlos Duque, won the elections by a 2 to 1 margin. Exit polls conducted on

⁵⁷ Bill McAllister, "Bush Vows to Press Noriega," *Washington Post*, 23 December 1988.

⁵⁸ AP Report, "Bush Directs Noriega Foes," *Washington Post*, 23 April 1989.

⁵⁹ Buckley, *Panama: The Whole Story*, 176.

⁶⁰ Scranton, *The Noriega Years*, 158.

election day, however, revealed a clear victory for the opposition: 55.1 percent for Guillermo Endara compared to 39.5 percent for Duque.⁶¹ An exit poll conducted by the Catholic Bishops Conference found an even larger margin of about 3 to 1 in favor of Endara. The PDF managed to “win” the election by seizing ballot boxes, destroying tally sheets, and manipulating the counting process. All the observer teams agreed that the elections were fraudulent. Jimmy Carter accused Noriega of “robbing the people of Panama of their legitimate rights.” Carter said he hoped there would be a “worldwide outcry of condemnation against a dictator who stole this election from his own people.”⁶²

Noriega’s response to international criticism of the election process was to nullify the elections and appoint one of his high school classmates to serve as provisional president. This led to mass protests, which were violently put down by Noriega’s paramilitary squads called Dignity Battalions. Television cameras worldwide showed Noriega’s men brutally beating up Endara and his running mates—Ricardo Arias Calderon and Guillermo “Billy” Ford. The beatings were broadcast repeatedly on American television, and “the image of the white-haired Ford, robbed of his elected post, bloodied and temporarily blinded, became an instant symbol of the state of lawlessness and chaos in Panama.”⁶³

On 11 May 1989, Bush made a major statement on the situation in Panama and announced a seven-point plan designed to remove Noriega through a combination of threats and incentives.⁶⁴ In the introduction to the plan, Bush characterized the crisis as “a conflict between Noriega and the people of Panama, with the United States siding with the people.” He indicated to the PDF that the United States hoped it would stand with the people and defend democracy. By ousting Noriega, Bush implied, the PDF “could have an important role to play in Panama’s democratic future.” This was again, not only a call for a PDF coup, but an attempt to separate Noriega from the PDF.

Then Bush announced seven specific measures:

- *Regional Diplomacy.* Supporting and cooperating with initiatives taken by OAS members to address the crisis.
- *Diplomatic Sanctions.* Recalling U.S. Ambassador Arthur Davis from Panama and reducing embassy staff to essential personnel only.
- *Safety Measures.* Relocating U.S. government employees and their dependents living outside of U.S. military bases or Panama Canal Commission housing areas, either to areas outside of Panama or to secure U.S. housing areas.
- *Safety and Preventive Measures.* Encouraging U.S. businessmen in Panama to send their dependents back to the United States.

⁶¹ Ibid., 161.

⁶² Lindsey Gruson, “Noriega Stealing Election,” *New York Times*, 9 May 1989.

⁶³ Woodward, *The Commanders*, 84.

⁶⁴ *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: George Bush, 1989*, Book 1 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1990), 536–537.

- *Economic Sanctions.* Continuing economic sanctions.
- *Panama Canal Treaties.* Affirming U.S. obligations and enforcing U.S. rights under the Panama Canal Treaties;
- *Military Actions.* Dispatching a brigade-size force (between 1,700 and 2,000 soldiers) to augment military forces already stationed in Panama.

Bush did not rule out further steps beyond these seven such as invasion, but said “an honorable solution” was still possible. The combination of a call for a PDF coup, the announcement of safety and preventive measures, and the dispatching of additional forces to Panama all raised speculations about U.S. military intervention, at least to support a coup. The administration, however, did not speak in one voice. On the same day that Bush announced his new strategy, Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney said on the *MacNeil–Lehrer Newshour* that U.S. troops would not intervene in Panama. The purpose of the troops, said Cheney, “is not to be involved with deciding who governs Panama.” Moreover, DOD dispatched the troops slowly and again confused the intended message. The State Department wanted a quick show of force and the rapid dispatch of the additional forces, but Cheney slowed down the process.⁶⁵ He may have been influenced by Pentagon and JCS officials who opposed the action on the grounds that it could endanger American civilians living in Panama.

The change from Reagan to Bush did not correct the basic flaws in U.S. policy. Although Bush was more determined than Reagan to remove Noriega and was more willing to use force to achieve this goal, the results of his policy remained the same. Noriega continued to doubt the credibility of the American military threats and felt free to pursue his domestic abuses and to challenge the United States. Again, this happened mainly because of the continuing mixed and confusing messages coming from the administration.

CRISIS 5: THE GIROLDI COUP

On 1 October 1989, the wife of Moises Giroldi, a member of Noriega’s inner circle who had crushed the 1988 Macias coup attempt, informed SOUTHCOM officers that her husband was planning a nonviolent coup against Noriega and that he wanted limited U.S. help.⁶⁶ She said her husband wanted the United States to block two roads and to provide sanctuary for her and her children. Cheney approved these requests and told SOUTHCOM they could arrest Noriega in case the rebels turned him over to the American forces in Panama.

Giroldi’s coup took place on 3 October 1989. Mrs. Giroldi and her children were given shelter, and the U.S. forces blocked the two requested roads. For a few hours Noriega was a prisoner in the hands of Giroldi, who tried unsuccessfully

⁶⁵ Richard Halloran, “U.S. Troops to Go Slowly into Panama,” *New York Times*, 12 May 1989.

⁶⁶ For details about the coup, see Scranton, *The Noriega Years*, 185–192; Buckley, *Panama: The Whole Story*, 197–218; Kempe, *Divorcing the Dictator*, 369–397.

to persuade him to retire. Apparently several rebel leaders, but not Giroldi, were then prepared to turn Noriega over to U.S. authorities. The rebels approached SOUTHCOM officers, but it was too late; Noriega was able to call for help from his special unit, Battalion 2000. This battalion used air transportation to circumvent the U.S. roadblocks and joined other Noriega loyalists in crushing the rebellion. When the original plan of blocking two roads did not work, the U.S. forces did nothing to prevent the loyalists from rescuing Noriega. Giroldi was severely tortured and killed as were several other coup leaders. Following this coup attempt, Noriega began to purge the PDF of dissident elements and to crack down even harder on civilian dissent. The PDF harassment of Americans intensified, and it became very dangerous for them to venture into downtown Panama City.

The American inaction during the coup raised a stormy debate in Washington. Congressional leaders from both parties, reporters and commentators, and even anonymous White House officials criticized the administration for missing an opportunity to capture Noriega and for failing to follow Bush's own strategy to encourage and help a PDF coup against Noriega. Senator Jesse Helms called the administration "a bunch of Keystone Kops" and bitterly predicted that, "after this, no member of the PDF can be expected to act against Noriega."⁶⁷

Representative Les Aspin, then chairman of the House Armed Services Committee and later secretary of defense, said the United States should be "ready at any opportunity to use the confusion and the uncertainty of a coup attempt . . . to do something about Mr. Noriega." Others, such as Democratic Congressman Dave McCurdy, chairman of the House Select Committee on Intelligence, went so far as to ridicule Bush: "Yesterday makes Jimmy Carter look like a man of resolve. There's a resurgence of the wimp factor." Commentator George Will called the Bush administration "an unserious presidency," and Harry G. Summers, a highly respected military expert, wrote in his syndicated column: "Our national security decision-making process . . . was revealed to be in chaos."⁶⁸

The administration countered the criticism by first denying prior knowledge of and involvement in the coup. It accused Giroldi of being as "mischievous" as Noriega and therefore did not deserve U.S. support. The administration also claimed that it did not miss an opportunity, since Giroldi had not intended to turn in Noriega anyway. And finally, senior officials used the casualty factor, suggesting that military intervention to save the coup would have been too costly. In a press conference held on 13 October 1989, Bush asserted that there was no inconsistency between his call for a PDF coup and his inaction during the Giroldi coup. He said he wanted to see Noriega thrown out of office and brought to

⁶⁷ David Hoffman and Ann Devroy, "U.S. Was Caught off Guard by Coup Attempt" and Molly Moore and Joe Pichirallo, "Cheney," *Washington Post*, 6 October 1989.

⁶⁸ David Hoffman and William Branigin, "Key Queries Never Put to Bush," *Washington Post*, 7 October 1989.

justice, but that did not mean the United States would support every coup against him.⁶⁹

The official explanations for the U.S. inaction were quite confusing. The argument that Giroldi was no better than Noriega was particularly strange. Whom did the Bush administration think could or would strike against Noriega? The PDF leadership was brutal and corrupt, but Giroldi was relatively less corrupt than the others. If administration officials thought that he was unlikely to serve American interests in Panama, why then did they promise him assistance. And when the coup did occur, why did they give shelter to Giroldi's family and block certain roads?

American policy towards the Giroldi coup was chaotic and inconsistent. One of the main reasons for the confusion was a simultaneous change in two top military positions. Shortly before the coup, the JCS Chairman and the SOUTHCOM chief were replaced. On 30 September 1989, three days before the coup, General Maxwell Thurman replaced Woerner as SOUTHCOM chief. One day later, General Colin Powell took over the JCS chairmanship from Admiral Crowe. Crowe and Woerner opposed the use of American troops to solve the Noriega crisis.⁷⁰ Powell and Thurman were willing to use force under certain conditions, but felt that these conditions did not characterize the Giroldi coup.

Thurman suspected that Noriega was using Giroldi to set up a trap to undermine and destroy his credibility during his first days as SOUTHCOM Chief.⁷¹ He knew Giroldi had been very loyal to Noriega, and he thought the coup operational plan was too simplistic with too many details left out.⁷² In addition, the execution of the coup had been delayed twice. Thurman communicated his concerns to Powell, who reportedly said "getting rid of Noriega was something that had to be done on a U.S. timetable." Powell said he did not like the idea of "a half-baked coup with a half-baked coup leader."⁷³

Powell wanted a coup with no direct American intervention, or at the most with some limited assistance such as blocking roads. He thought that if the United States decided to use force in Panama, the objective would have to change from merely capturing Noriega to destroying and replacing his entire regime.⁷⁴ Since Powell came to office only a few days before the coup, he did not have time to develop the idea and to persuade the president and the other branches of the national security bureaucracy to adopt it. The result was a highly confusing policy toward the coup.

The U.S. response to the Giroldi coup exposed a conceptual confusion in the administration's policy toward Noriega. Powell and Thurman adopted stra-

⁶⁹ David Hoffman, "Bush Attacks Critics of Response to Coup," *Washington Post*, 14 October 1989.

⁷⁰ Robinson, *Intervention or Neglect*, 126.

⁷¹ Woodward, *The Commanders*, 120; Buckley, *Panama: The Whole Story*, 199.

⁷² Donnelly, *Operation Just Cause*, 67.

⁷³ Woodward, *The Commanders*, 121.

⁷⁴ Donnelly, *Operation Just Cause*, 66; Scranton, *The Noriega Years*, 190.

tegic and tactical concepts that determined their interpretations of the coup and consequently their recommendation not to intervene. These concepts may have distorted their judgment of the coup. During the coup, Thurman did not know what was happening inside PDF headquarters. He did not check the facts on the ground, which contradicted his earlier negative perceptions of the coup and Giroldi. Senior officials in Washington, who depended on him for information and recommendations, consequently also did not know what was really happening.⁷⁵

The U.S. response to the coup also dramatically revealed an enormous gap between Bush's rhetoric and action. In the eyes of the public, Giroldi had created an opportunity to remove Noriega that Bush had failed to seize. Despite his public defense of the inaction, Bush was clearly dissatisfied with the information and policy recommendations given to him during the coup. He reportedly said "amateur hour is over" and instructed his aides to review the handling of the crisis and to prepare better for the next challenge.⁷⁶ Indeed, this was an appropriate instruction, for it did not take long for a new challenge to emerge.

AMERICAN MILITARY INTERVENTION

At the end of 1989, the Noriega crisis assumed larger and more critical proportions. The public wanted Bush to fulfill his campaign promise to combat drugs. In his first nationally televised speech from the White House, delivered on 5 September 1989, Bush said: "All of us agree that the gravest domestic threat facing our nation today is drugs" and called the drug problem "the toughest domestic challenge we've faced in decades."⁷⁷ The controversial Giroldi coup occurred just a month later.

Despite the failure of the Giroldi coup, Bush continued to encourage this option through a new covert operation. This time, however, he wanted a change in the operational rules. American covert operations against individuals were limited by an executive order banning U.S. government involvement in assassinations.⁷⁸ In October 1989, after the failure of the Giroldi coup, Bush determined that planning an assassination would still be prohibited, but U.S. officials would not be prosecuted if a coup accidentally caused the death of the coup target. Bush then authorized Panama 5, a new covert operation to topple Noriega through another PDF coup. The CIA received a budget of \$3 million and was granted greater freedom to use force, although it was still prohibited from directly assassinating Noriega.⁷⁹ However, Panama 5 was not implemented, because it was

⁷⁵ Terry Deibel, "Bush's Foreign Policy: Mastery and Inaction," *Foreign Policy* 84 (Fall 1991): 19.

⁷⁶ Woodward, *The Commanders*, 128.

⁷⁷ George Bush, "National Drug Control Strategy," *Vital Speeches of the Day*, vol. lv, no. 24 (1989): 738-740.

⁷⁸ Executive Order 12333 of the U.S. Intelligence Activities, 4 December 1981, *46 Federal Register*, 59941. Also see Mark Sullivan, "Panama: U.S. Policy After the May 1989 Elections," CRS Issue Brief IB89106 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress, 1989), 12.

⁷⁹ See Scranton, *The Noriega Years*, 195; Buckley, *Panama: The Whole Story*, 221.

leaked to the media and articles about it were published in the middle of November.⁸⁰

Noriega continued to provoke the United States and particularly to harass the American armed forces in Panama. On 15 December 1989, the Panamanian National assembly appointed Noriega chief of the government and “maximum leader of national liberation.” The assembly also declared Panama to be in a state of war with the United States. The departure of Noriega seemed to be delayed indefinitely. After the Giroidi fiasco, a PDF coup was unlikely, and Panamanians were tired and weak.

The United States interpreted the declaration of war as a license to harass Americans. Indeed, in the following days, there were several serious incidents between the PDF and the U.S. forces in Panama.⁸¹ On 15 December, PDF soldiers stopped a U.S. military patrol car and held the police officer at gunpoint. On the next day, they fired at an American vehicle in a checkpoint and killed Marine Corps Lieutenant Robert Paz. A Navy lieutenant and his wife who witnessed the shooting were arrested and beaten. The woman was also sexually assaulted. In a separate incident, other U.S. soldiers were detained at the airport and their weapons were taken. One day later, on the morning of 17 December, a U.S. officer shot a PDF policeman, thinking the Panamanian was reaching for his weapon.

Noriega’s continuing rule in Panama and the new provocations created a personal problem for Bush, because they validated his wimp image. He used tough language against Noriega and made him the number one public enemy of the United States. Still it appeared that Bush was doing little to force him out of office. The gap between words and actions became too wide and Bush’s own credibility was put on the line. This came at the worst possible time for him. The international system was on the verge of a major structural transformation. The Soviet Union was already disintegrating, and the United States was about to become the sole remaining superpower. If the United States could not handle a low-level dictator in a country where it maintained bases and large forces, how would it be able to deal with far more serious international challenges? The stakes were high for Bush in Panama: the issue was no longer just Noriega, but Bush’s ability to conduct the war on drugs, to promote democracy in Latin America, and to lead world affairs.

In a crucial policy meeting held on 17 December 1989, Bush asked his principal advisers if a limited snatching operation would be sufficient.⁸² Powell advocated a large scale intervention whose goal would be to destroy the PDF and the entire Noriega regime and not just the capture of Noriega. His rationale was that it could be difficult to find Noriega and arrest him at the beginning of

⁸⁰ See, for example, the report published in the *Washington Post*, 17 November 1989.

⁸¹ Donnelly, *Operation Just Cause*, 94–97; Scranton, *The Noriega Years*, 198–199.

⁸² Woodward, *The Commanders*, 167–171; Donnelly, *Operation Just Cause*, 98–99; Buckley, *Panama: The Whole Story*, 228–233.

the operation, but destroying the PDF would ensure Noriega's capture. Powell also thought that the PDF's destruction would be required to establish democracy in Panama. Bush agreed and approved the plan for large-scale military intervention in Panama.

CONCLUSIONS

Noriega's conflict with the United States escalated from one crisis to another, and each crisis ended with an actual or symbolic victory for him. Each victory strengthened his position inside Panama and motivated him to challenge the United States even further. Following each victory, the United States had to use tougher measures, ending with the most extreme one of military intervention. The United States continually redefined the Noriega problem, which finally became an issue larger than just Noriega and Panama. At stake was Bush's image as a weak president, his ability to take the lead in world affairs and to fulfill his campaign promise to combat drug abuse in the United States. During the first crisis, the Reagan administration considered Noriega's contributions valuable enough to override any liabilities. The policy was to pressure him to modify his behavior through persuasion and warnings. After the indictments in Florida, however, the United States wanted to remove Noriega from his powerful position while keeping his PDF-controlled regime intact. But Bush's decision to use force, which entailed greater political and economic costs, again changed the U.S. objectives in Panama. The new goals were to remove Noriega from power, destroy his regime, and establish democracy in the country.

Initially, the United States cultivated a relationship with an unscrupulous leader in the name of a cause ostensibly larger than his liabilities. The greater cause was helping the contras overthrow the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. But by employing Noriega, the United States compromised the long-term, more fundamental American interests of stability, security, human rights, and democracy in Panama. U.S. officials ignored Noriega's criminal activities and for a long period of time let him believe he would be protected from prosecution and retaliation. Noriega thought that only a few State Department officials wanted him removed from power, and he considered his allies in the intelligence and the national security establishments more influential than the diplomats. It was difficult for both Noriega and his supporters to change their perceptions of each other. Noriega's supporters in Washington were slow to understand his growing threat to U.S. interests, and Noriega failed to notice the transformation of his status from an ally to an enemy.

Bureaucratic infighting and mixed signals reinforced Noriega's misperceptions. This fighting, particularly inside the White House and between the State Department, CIA and DOD, was often leaked to the press and received wide attention. The internal feuds were responsible for many of the confusing signals. Reagan was unable to prevent the competing branches of his administration from supporting different strategies toward Noriega, who assumed the split would

prevent the administration from using extreme measures against him, especially the use of force. The split in Congress and congressional disagreements with the White House also reinforced Noriega's misperceptions.

U.S. policies and threats in the Noriega crisis lacked credibility, which was one of the major factors in the escalation that led to the U.S. invasion. The United States preferred a Panamanian solution to the Noriega problem—a PDF coup or a popular uprising. American officials, including Bush, encouraged PDF officers and the people to remove Noriega, implying that the United States would help the Panamanians once they initiated such an action. But when the Giroldi coup took place, the United States did very little to help. Similarly, when Noriega brutally suppressed public demonstrations, the United States did very little to support the people.

On several occasions the United States dispatched forces to Panama and conducted military exercises. The main purpose of these actions was to send Noriega a message. However, in the absence of true intention to use force against Noriega, these actions only reinforced Noriega's belief that the United States was bluffing. The growing gap between the tough rhetoric and the meager action exposed the Bush administration to charges of weakness and impotence, which eventually contributed to Bush's decision to use force.

Noriega negotiated several times with various American and OAS officials. These officials assumed that Noriega was willing to resign if he was offered appropriate incentives. It is also probable that he never intended to step down regardless of the incentives and that he was just using the negotiations to play for time and to further embarrass the United States. Resignation could have meant death for him. Out of power, he could have become a target for drug-lords and other criminals whom he had double-crossed over the years. This may have been why he rejected all the deals offered to him. American policy makers should have examined realistically the potential to achieve an agreement through negotiations and revised their strategy accordingly.

The way in which the United States handled the Noriega affair was not an isolated case in how the United States has managed international crises in recent years. Several critical issues and mistakes made in this confrontation reappeared in subsequent international crises, most noticeably in the 1990–1991 Gulf crisis and war.⁸³ Like Noriega, Iraq's Saddam Hussein did not believe the United States

⁸³ For sources on the Gulf War, see Laurie Mylroie, "Why Saddam Hussein Invaded Kuwait," *Orbis* (Winter 1993): 123–134; Woodward, *The Commanders*, Part Two; Lawrence Freedman and Efraim Karsh, *The Gulf Conflict, 1990–1991* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993); Joseph Nye, Jr. and Roger Smith, eds., *After the Storm: Lessons from the Gulf War* (Lanham, MD: Madison Books, 1992); U.S. News and World Report, *Triumph Without Victory: The Unreported History of the Persian Gulf War* (New York: Times Books, 1992); Stephen Graubard, *Mr. Bush's War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992); Robert Tucker and David Hendrickson, *The Imperial Temptation: The New World Order and America's Purpose* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 1992); Elaine Sciolino, *The Outlaw State: Saddam Hussein's Quest for Power and the Gulf Crisis* (New York: John Wiley, 1991); David Scheffer, "Use of Force After the Cold War: Panama, Iraq, and the New World Order" in Louis Henkin, et al., *Right versus Might: International Law and the Use of Force* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 1991), 109–172.

would use force against him. Like Noriega, he received mixed and confusing messages from the United States, which led him to assume that he could take aggressive actions against the Iraqi opposition and neighboring states without risking a major confrontation with the United States. Indeed, as in the Noriega case, Washington considered Saddam a valuable ally serving a larger cause, in this case the battle against Iran's effort to spread Islamic fundamentalism in the Middle East.

Saddam attacked Teheran with Scud missiles in 1988, used chemical weapons against the Kurds, threatened Israel with the same weapons, and then threatened Kuwait before he invaded the country in 1990. The U.S. response was weak and confined to a few critical statements. Before the invasion, some congressional leaders recommended that the Bush administration impose sanctions against Saddam. Bush not only opposed this recommendation but even went on to provide Iraq with substantial loan guarantees and access to advanced technology. This policy might have encouraged Saddam to believe that the United States would issue verbal denunciations of the invasion but would not use force to roll back the Iraqi forces. Following the invasion, the Bush administration used the same means to deal with Saddam that it had employed against Noriega, including dispatching forces, imposing economic and diplomatic sanctions, negotiating with Saddam's representatives, and calling upon the Iraqi army and people to rebel against Saddam. But just as in the Noriega case, all these means failed to resolve the crisis peacefully.

After the damage of bureaucratic infighting and miscommunication was evident in the Panama and the Gulf crises, one would have expected American policy makers to have learned the appropriate lessons. Also, after two decisive and highly publicized demonstrations of American determination to use force against challenging dictators, leaders in conflict areas such as Bosnia and Somalia were expected to take U.S. threats of intervention more seriously. Yet, neither American policy makers nor the dictators were able to draw the proper lessons.

In the case of Bosnia, the White House, the military, and Congress all had different attitudes towards U.S. military intervention.⁸⁴ The military opposed any intervention in the Bosnian civil war, because it feared an endless large-scale ground war in a difficult mountainous terrain. Congress was split on this issue, while President Bill Clinton made a strong statement warning the Serbians that if they did not stop the systematic shelling of cities and towns, the United States would intervene to halt the fighting. Serbian leaders Radovan Karadžić and Slobodan Milošević were aware of the contradicting messages coming from Washington, which reenforced their belief that despite its rhetoric, the United States would not use force in Bosnia. The aggressors in Bosnia have felt free to continue

⁸⁴ On the crisis in Bosnia, see William Pfaff, "Invitation to War," *Foreign Affairs* 72 (Summer 1993): 97-109; Dusko Doder, "Yugoslavia; New War, Old Hatreds," *Foreign Policy* 91 (Summer 1993): 3-23; Sabrina Petra Ramet, "War in the Balkans," *Foreign Affairs* 70 (Fall 1992): 79-98; James Goodby, "Peacekeeping in the New Europe," *Washington Quarterly* 15 (September 1992): 153-171.

their indiscriminate attacks on noncombatants, and military intervention might still be the only way to stop the fighting. As in the Noriega and Saddam crises, internal disagreements and confusing American messages led the Serbian leaders to ignore U.S. warnings.

In the case of Somalia, the United States, as well as the United Nations, sent confusing messages to clan leader Mohammed Aideed, who was fighting other clan leaders over control of Somalia. U.S. troops had originally been sent to Somalia in December 1992 to stop the civil war and protect supply routes to hunger stricken areas.⁸⁵ In May 1993 most U.S. troops were withdrawn except for 1,400 soldiers who remained under UN control. After this withdrawal, the United States sent mixed messages to Aideed, who was not sure whether the Clinton administration wanted him as a legitimate participant in Somali peace negotiations or whether it wanted him captured and his forces destroyed. Aideed felt threatened but thought he could attack American and other troops from UN command without triggering a major U.S. response. But like Noriega and Saddam, he miscalculated. In October 1993, Aideed attacked U.S. troops, killing seventeen American soldiers. Clinton then ordered a counterattack and sent thousands of American troops back to Somalia.

The United States tried hard to resolve the post cold war crises through peaceful means. However, persuasion, warnings, negotiations, sanctions, and threats, all failed to convince Noriega to resign or Saddam to withdraw from Kuwait. These same means also failed to persuade Karadžić and Milošević to end the fighting in Bosnia, or Aideed to refrain from attacking U.S. forces in Somalia. Under certain circumstances, lengthy negotiations and moderate means may send the wrong signals to ruthless authoritarian leaders who play foreign policy games by their own rules. If the United States had delivered tougher and clearer messages early enough to Noriega, Saddam, and Aideed, it might have avoided using large-scale force against them, saving both lives and resources.*

⁸⁵ On the U.S. mission in Somalia, see Henry Kissinger, "Somalia: Reservations," *Washington Post*, 13 December 1992; Jonathan Stevenson, "Hope Restored in Somalia?" *Foreign Policy* 91 (Summer 1993): 138–154; Michael Elliott, "The Making of a Fiasco," *Newsweek*, 18 October 1993, 8–11; George Church, "Anatomy of a Disaster," *Time*, 18 October 1993, 40–50.

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