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A Devil in Panama

Michael Parenti

I shall give a propagandist reason for starting the war—never mind whether it will be plausible or not. The victor will not be asked afterwards whether he told the truth or not. In starting and waging a war it is not right that matters, but victory!

—Adolf Hitler
August 26, 1939

In 1978, the United States and Panama signed a treaty to give the latter sovereignty over the Panama Canal by 1999. The canal had diminished in importance because of technical advances in transportation. But the United States remained concerned about its fourteen military bases in Panama and its Southern Command headquarters, which was the site for U.S. military and covert operations in Latin America and the Caribbean. Washington was also uneasy about the Panamanian government under General Omar Torrijos, who, unlike most Latin American military leaders, was a populist-reformist. He maintained friendly relations with Cuba's communist government and extracted monies from banks and businesses to fund social programs, some of which really benefited the people.

In 1981, Torrijos died when his plane mysteriously blew up in midair. His place was taken by the head of Panamanian military intelligence, Colonel Manuel Noriega. Either Noriega or the CIA likely engineered the crash that killed Torrijos. Noriega blunted the progress made by the Torrijos administration. He also collaborated with Oliver North to create corporate fronts to finance the Nicaraguan contras and establish a Costa Rican airfield to supply them. Noriega received \$200,000 a year as a CIA agent—even when George Bush was the agency's director.

But there were limits to Noriega's willingness to serve Washington. He reasserted Panama's independence over the control of the Canal Zone and the leases for U.S. military bases. He reportedly refused to join an invasion against Nicaragua and maintained friendly

relations with both Managua and Havana. Before long, hostile reports about him began appearing in the U.S. media. In 1987, the Justice Department indicted Noriega for drug-smuggling. A crippling economic embargo was imposed on Panama, a country of two million people, causing a doubling of unemployment and a drastic cut-back in social benefits. Despite tough U.S. sanctions and troop buildups in the Canal Zone, Noriega refused to step down from power as Washington demanded.

In the U.S. press, our erstwhile friend and ally, Manuel Noriega, was swiftly transformed from "military leader" to "strongman dictator." A media blitz demonized the Panamanian leader as a drug dealer, thus preparing the U.S. public for the ensuing invasion. During the aborted 1989 Panamanian elections, the U.S. press widely publicized the beating of an opposition candidate by Noriega supporters. It repeatedly referred to Noriega's "goons" and "thugs." Never did it refer to "Botha's goons" in South Africa or "Duarte's goons" in El Salvador or to the other thugs who practiced torture and murder in a host of U.S.-supported client states.

In mid-December 1989, just days before Bush's invasion of Panama, ABC's Ted Koppel reported that Noriega had declared war on the United States. Others in the media made the same unsupported assertion. Instead, Noriega—who was just then making peace offers to opposition leaders—was quoted by Reuters as saying that the United States, "through constant psychological and military harassment, has created a state of war in Panama."

On December 20, 1989, President Bush ordered U.S. forces to invade Panama. Television news, the medium reaching the largest audiences, covered Operation Just Cause just like a U.S. Army recruitment film: helicopters landing, planes dive-bombing, troops trotting along foreign streets, the enemy's headquarters engulfed in flames, friendly Panamanians welcoming the invaders as liberators. No television reporter mentioned that the Panamanians interviewed were almost always well dressed, light skinned, and English speaking, in a country where most were poor, dark skinned, and Spanish speaking. Also left out of the picture were the many incidents of armed resistance by Panamanians.

Television correspondents enthusiastically or matter-of-factly reported the bombings of El Chorillo and other working-class neighborhoods, treating these aerial attacks on civilian populations as surgical strikes designed to break resistance in "Noriega strongholds." Although it admitted that the heavily populated working-class districts supported Noriega, the press kept insisting that he lacked popular support in his own country. No footage was offered of El Chorillo's

total devastation or of the many lives lost in what amounted to a saturation terror-bombing of a civilian neighborhood. (For the horrific evidence, see *Panama Deception*, a documentary film made by Barbara Trent and the Empowerment Project in Los Angeles—which no major media outlet, by the way, has chosen to air.)

As usual, the news media emphasized operational questions: Was the invasion going well? Was there much resistance? How many U.S. lives were lost? Questions of international law and critical reactions from other nations were pretty much ignored. The UN General Assembly's overwhelming condemnation of the U.S. invasion was given scant notice in the mainstream media.

The Pentagon claimed only twenty-three U.S. troops were killed. Scores of others were wounded or injured. No consideration was given by our government or media to the thousands of Panamanian soldiers and civilians killed, wounded, or in other ways harmed by the invasion. Nothing was said of the many thousands left homeless. After a studied silence, the White House offered a figure of 516 Panamanian dead, claiming most of those were military casualties.

On this, the press did little of its own investigation. It decided there was no way to verify Panamanian losses, so no losses were reported. When television correspondent Fred Francis was asked about civilian casualties, he said he did not know because he and the other journalists in the Pentagon's pool were traveling with the U.S. Army. (At that same time, however, verification problems did not deter the media from offering fantastically inflated reports of about 80,000 to 100,000 demonstrators killed by the Romanian communist government. These figures—greater than the immediate Hiroshima death toll—should have been dismissed out of hand by any sane editor.) Only months later did a few brief reports appear regarding mass graves of Panamanian dead buried hastily by U.S. Army bulldozers.

In covering the Panama invasion, many television journalists abandoned even the pretense of neutrality and independence. Network anchors used pronouns like "we" and "us" in describing the attack, as if they were members of the invading force or close advisers. NBC's Tom Brokaw exclaimed on December 20, 1989: "We haven't got [Noriega] yet." PBS announcer Judy Woodruff concluded on the following day: "Not only have we done away with the [Panamanian army], we've also done away with the police force." So much for the separation of press and state.

One NBC correspondent labeled as a "lynch mob" the Latin American diplomats at the Organization of American States who condemned the invasion. Some network correspondents could not bring themselves to call the invasion an invasion, referring to it instead as

a "military action," "intervention," "operation," "expedition," "affair," and even "insertion."

A prestigious Canadian newspaper, the *Toronto Globe and Mail*, stunned by the U.S. media's national chauvinism, ran a front-page article criticizing the United States and its press for "the peculiar jingoism of U.S. society so evident to foreigners but almost invisible for most Americans."

The demonization of Manuel Noriega continued in full force during the invasion of his country, thereby reversing the roles of victim and victimizer. Television footage of him brandishing a machete at a rally was repeatedly run, projecting the image of a violent individual. On December 20, 1989, CBS anchor Dan Rather referred to the Panamanian leader as a "wily jungle snake" and a "swamp rat," and "at the top of the list of the world's drug thieves and scums." On the same day, ABC anchor Peter Jennings called Noriega "one of the more odious creatures with whom the United States has had a relationship," and ABC's "Nightline" host, Ted Koppel, announced "Noriega's reputation as a brutal drug-dealing bully who reveled in his public contempt for the United States all but begged for strong retribution."

The Pentagon reported U.S. troops entering Noriega's headquarters and discovering pornography, a Hitler portrait, voodoo paraphernalia, and one hundred pounds of cocaine. The pornography turned out to be Spanish-language copies of *Playboy*. The Hitler picture was in a Time-Life photo history of World War II. The "voodoo" implements were San Blas Indian carvings. And the "cocaine" was nothing more than an emergency stockpile of tortilla flour. But these belated corrections received scant coverage.

The United States invaded Panama purportedly to bring a drug-dealing dictator to justice. But once Noriega was captured and jailed in Miami, U.S. forces continued to occupy the entire country. U.S. authorities installed Panama's "new democratic" leaders: President Guillermo Endara, Vice President Guillermo Ford, and Attorney General Rogelio Cruz. Jonathan Marshall reported in the *Oakland Tribune* (January 5 and 22, 1990) that all three of these rich, white oligarchs were closely linked to companies, banks, and people heavily involved in drug operations or money-laundering. Marshall's revelations received little attention from the major media.

With the U.S. military firmly controlling Panama, conditions in that country deteriorated. Unemployment, already high because of the U.S. embargo, climbed to 35 percent as drastic layoffs were im-

posed on the public sector. Pension rights and other work benefits were lost. Newspapers and radio and television stations were closed by U.S. occupation authorities. Newspaper editors and reporters critical of the invasion were jailed or detained, as were all the leftist political party leaders. Union heads were arrested by the U.S. military, and some 150 local labor leaders were removed from their elected union positions. Public employees not supporting the invasion were purged. Crime rates climbed dramatically, along with poverty and destitution. Thousands remained homeless. Corruption was more widespread than ever. More money-laundering and drug-trafficking occurred under the U.S.-sponsored Endara administration than under Noriega. Yet these facts received little play in the major media.

Bush ordered the invasion of Panama claiming U.S. lives were in danger. In fact, none of the 35,000 U.S. nationals living in Panama were at risk. So then Bush said he had to avenge the death of a U.S. Army officer killed by the Panamanian Defense Force, even though the soldier had run a Panamanian military headquarters blockade in what seemed to be a deliberate—if unintentionally deadly—provocation. Then Bush claimed the invasion would bring democracy to Panama. Yet the Endara government installed by the Eighty-second Airborne Division has imprisoned more people than the Noriega government ever did. The U.S. media uncritically accepted these White House lines and dutifully publicized them as positions worth serious consideration. The *Washington Post* (June 18, 1990) concluded—without any evidence—that human rights under the new regime had improved, and “press freedoms have been restored.” Thus did the news media hail Operation Rescue’s accomplishments.

Finally, Bush claimed the invasion would get rid of a drug-dealing dictator. But even the *New York Times* eventually questioned this motive. Forgetting that it had spent two years repeatedly calling Noriega Central America’s leading criminal, the *Times* (June 10, 1990) reached a moment of truth, admitting that Noriega’s alleged drug dealings were “relatively small scale by Latin American standards. . . . American officials strongly suspect high-ranking military officers in Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador of similar, and in some cases even greater involvement in drug dealing—yet have not taken harsh action against them.”

That the official reasons for intervention were false does not mean there were no real ones. By White House standards, the invasion was a success. It eliminated the left-oriented Panamanian Defense Force and rolled back the Torrijos “socialistic” land reforms and social programs, thereby insuring a cheap and depressed labor

market in Panama. It returned Panama to a Third World client state whose land, labor, resources, markets, and capital were again completely accessible to corporate investors on the best possible terms. Yet none of this ever saw the light of day in the news stories or commentary in the corporate-owned media. So much for a free and independent press.

Michael Parenti is the author of *Democracy for the Few* (5th edition, St. Martin's) and *The Sword and the Dollar: Imperialism, Revolution and the Arms Race* (St. Martin's). This article is adapted from his *Inventing Reality, The Politics of News Media* (2nd edition, forthcoming, St. Martin's).