

Amb. Walters caught with his pants down

by Carlos Wesley

The U.S. government was caught in a plot to carry out military operations against the government of Panama at the end of September. The discovery of the plot by Panamanian authorities significantly set back the plan to oust the head of the Panama Defense Forces (PDF), Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega, and to install Eric Delvalle as the puppet President of Panama.

In a speech to the U.N. General Assembly Sept. 27, Panamanian President Manuel Solís Palma charged, "I categorically state that my government has abundant reason to fear direct U.S. military aggression against the Republic of Panama."

Less than two hours after Solís Palma spoke, Vernon Walters, the U.S. ambassador to the U.N.—who had boycotted the President's speech—arrived at the United Nations from a meeting with Secretary of State George Shultz and President Reagan, to read to the press a statement prepared by the State Department, denouncing Solís Palma's charges as "a litany of false accusations against the United States." The portly Walters, a life-long bachelor who lived with his mother until her recent death, told the assembled journalists that, while the United States wanted Solís Palma and Noriega out, it would not use force to gain that end. "The United States does not engage in military aggression," Walters told his astonished audience.

Weapons cache found

But Walters was exposed as a liar within 24 hours, when the Panama Defense Forces dismantled a Panamanian opposition group working in conjunction with the State Department, which was plotting to assassinate Noriega and other members of the PDF high command and overthrow the government. The PDF also intercepted on Sept. 28 a weapons shipment that is believed to have been intended for the plotters.

According to Panamanian authorities, the weapons were detected during a routine inspection of merchandise unloaded from the U.S.-registered ship *Senator 67* at the Caribbean port of Las Minas Bay, in a shipment consigned to the Panama-based U.S. Armed Forces Southern Command. Included in the shipment were a long-range cannon, munitions, and other war materiel. The State Department protested that the seizure was arbitrary and denied Panamanian accusations that the weapons were intended for the U.S.-sponsored Panama-

nian "Contras." And Panama did hand over the weapons to the Southern Command following a meeting of the Combined Command, the joint U.S.-Panama military command in charge of the defense of the Panama Canal.

What the State Department was not able to explain, however, was why the shipment was sent through the Las Minas port instead of through the ports of Cristobal or Balboa, as required by the Carter-Torrijos treaties between Panama and the United States. Arousing further suspicion was the fact that the bill of lading described the shipment as "dry goods." Since the U.S. military is authorized by treaty to transfer weapons into Panama whenever it wants, the obvious conclusion was that the weapons were not intended for the use of American troops based in Panama, but for the opponents of the current government. Lending further credence to this interpretation, was the fact that the broker for the weapons' shipment was one Willy Delvalle, brother of Eric Delvalle, the man the U.S. (and only the U.S.) still insists is the "legitimate President of Panama."

October surprise deferred?

But the biggest setback to plans to launch a military operation against Panama, came with the arrest on Sept. 29 of 26 members of the opposition who were charged with plotting a campaign of strikes, civil unrest, and chaos. This was intended to culminate in an attempt against the life of Noriega and the overthrow of the government on Oct. 20, by a U.S.-armed group armed by the United States that would invade from neighboring Costa Rica.

Among those arrested were former PDF Col. Fred Boyd and José del Carmen Serracin, leader of the youth movement of the Authentic Panamenista Party, the opposition's largest grouping. Boyd and Serracin publicly admitted that the United States had turned over to former President Delvalle \$30 million in Panamanian government funds frozen by the Reagan administration. Of that amount, they said, \$28 million has been allocated to the purchase of weapons, uniforms, helicopters, and other war materiel.

These setbacks and the U.S. presidential campaign have led some to believe that the long-expected "October surprise" military action against Panama has been deferred until after the Nov. 8 elections. In an article Oct. 3, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that President Solís Palma "fears that after the elections the administration will make another attempt." Noting that "there are indications that he could be right," the paper wrote that campaign strategists for George Bush have so far resisted such a step, in the belief that "radical action is bad policy and would be suicidal policy if the administration failed again" to oust Noriega. But, the paper added, "After the Nov. 8 election, President Reagan will have to face the difficult choice between acquiescing to his Panamanian failure or trying once again to dislodge General Noriega. The trouble is, if he opts for a new attack against the Panamanian strongman, the task will be more difficult than ever."