

Panama Report by Carlos Wesley

U.S. puts out contract on Noriega

Spitting on the OAS, the White House is acting like a player in a bad Hollywood "western."

The U.S. government has put out a \$5 million contract on Gen. Manuel Noriega, the commander of Panama's Defense Forces, according to a front-page story in the *Washington Times* June 14. The bounty is reportedly the brainchild of Customs Service Commissioner William Von Raab, who "dubbed [the plan] Operation Paladin after the bounty hunter in the old television series 'Have Gun, Will Travel,'" officials report. One way the mercenaries to kidnap (or kill) Noriega are to be recruited, is through want ads announcing the bounty, which are to be placed in stores and *Soldier of Fortune* and *People* magazine, once the official go-ahead is given!

The plan is trumpeted as the latest innovation in a flagging war on drugs. But officials bluntly told the *Times* that it is Noriega "who would probably be the number-one target right now," with such Medellín cartel chiefs as Pablo Escobar and Robert Vesco relegated to also-rans, whose capture brings a lower price. And while the State Department's nominee to head the International Narcotics Affairs Office, Melvyn Levitsky, approves of the scheme, Drug Enforcement Administration officials are adamant that not only is the idea nutty, but it may well be unconstitutional.

Further confirmation that its obsession to get Noriega has driven the Bush administration "bonkers," came when Vice President Dan Quayle sought to convince the wartorn nations of Central America that the biggest danger they face is not the communist guerrillas, but Panama.

This is particularly true in the case of El Salvador, where the newly sworn-in government of President Alfredo Cristiani is fighting for survival against a communist guerrilla offensive. On June 9, just one week after Cristiani's inauguration, his principal aide, Minister of the Presidency Antonio Rodríguez Porth, and two of his bodyguards were machine-gunned down by the communist Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front.

But instead of discussing measures to suppress this terrorist threat, Quayle conducted his whirlwind four-nation Central American tour "primarily to seek to rally the region's support against Panama," according to U.S. officials. "If the Noriega precedent continues, you will not only have Panama as an enemy of democracy, but it will be joining forces with Nicaragua and Cuba," said Quayle.

He justified that claim on the fact that Panama's militias, the Dignity Battalions, are equipped with Soviet-bloc manufactured AK-47 rifles and other weapons, which the U.S. alleges were supplied by Nicaragua, which got them from Cuba. The truth is that Panama obtained those weapons, not from Nicaragua, but from Ollie North's Contra supply operation. The weapons fell into Panama's hands with the June 14, 1986 capture of the vessel *Pia Vesta*, which the Iran-Contra gang was using to illegally resupply the Contras.

In yet another display of petulance, on June 13, U.S. planes buzzed the site of a scheduled meeting in Panama between Noriega and an Organi-

zation of American States (OAS) commission attempting to mediate a solution to the Panamanian crisis.

That incident was staged on orders from the Bush administration, miffed because the OAS is reportedly no longer strictly adhering to the administration's game plan for ousting Noriega. Asked June 12 if the commission would push Noriega to leave, commission member Diego Cordovez, the foreign minister of Ecuador, replied: "That is the only topic I will not deal with."

U.S. officials said that the OAS "would make a serious mistake" if it sought to solve the crisis without first insisting on Noriega's departure. Quayle threatened during his tour of Central America that "time is running out," and the U.S. plans further economic and political sanctions against Panama if Noriega does not leave.

But having witnessed the U.S. appeasement of the Chinese Communist government following the Tiananmen Square massacre, many of the nations of Ibero-America are reluctant to take stronger measures against Panama just to please the administration.

Panamanian President Manuel Solís Palma made clear June 12 that the U.S. economic sanctions must be lifted and other warfare measures cease before the crisis can be solved. In a televised interview the same day, Noriega issued a similar message. "Until you remove the foreign substance from the body," he said, "you will not be able to break the fever. That is the same thing that is happening here. The [U.S.] economic aggression, military interference, and psychological pressure represent the foreign body, and you cannot hold elections if this foreign body is still present. You cannot hope to have political harmony if you do not remove the meddling judge first."