

# U.S. vs. Noriega: a year of failures

by Carlos Wesley

The Dec. 20 invasion of Panama culminated a year-long obsession by the U.S. liberal establishment to rerun the “Marcos scenario” to topple nationalist leader General Manuel Noriega. The scenario was not working; Noriega had put down another U.S. coup attempt against him on Oct. 3, retaining control of the Panamanian Defense Forces (PDF), and in December was elected by Panama’s National Assembly of Representatives as the head of the Panamanian government.

Even before he was sworn in, George Bush said on Dec. 22, 1988, “I am as determined as President Reagan to see that Noriega not continue in his dictatorial ways there in Panama.” General Noriega was seen as a key stumblingblock to the power-sharing agreements being worked out between the United States, the Soviet Union, and the Red Chinese government. This was made clear by an article by James Chace in the Winter 1988 issue of the establishment’s mouthpiece *Foreign Affairs*. “The next President could well negotiate the terms of the post-Cold War era,” he said. “But Panama is a grave foreign political problem,” which “could derail the efforts of the new administration to explore the limits of a U.S.-Soviet rapprochement.”

From the establishment’s viewpoint, the United States has to retain its military bases in Panama, the only ones on the Ibero-American mainland—not to protect the Panama Canal, but to enforce the condominium arrangements with the Russians and ensure debt collection in the region. Under the 1977 Carter-Torrijos Panama Canal Treaties, those bases are supposed to shut down by the year 2000.

But this policy could not be implemented while Noriega, or any other nationalist government, held power in Panama. Recent accounts by eyewitnesses indicate that Washington decided to get rid of Noriega after the Panamanian leader told National Security Council staffer Adm. John Poindexter that he would not go along with the “Project Democracy” operations envisaged by the Iran-Contra principals. On Nov. 29, 1989, PDF Capt. Moises Cortizo briefed a fact-finding delegation of Americans in Panama. The translator at the Dec. 12, 1985 meeting between Poindexter and Noriega, Cortizo reported that Poindexter “opened the meeting saying: I come with precise instructions from President Reagan, to request the following: 1) The PDF has to play a leading role against the Nicaraguan Sandinista regime; 2) Panama must lower its profile in the Contadora Group [of Central American nations]; 3) [Former President Nicolás Ardito] Nicky Barletta

has to be returned to power.” Noriega “categorically rejected Poindexter’s disrespectful behavior,” said Cortizo, “and since then, we are suffering the consequences.”

Bush decided that his first all-out effort to topple Noriega and the Panamanian government would be in the context of Panama’s presidential elections last May 7. The U.S. strategy was to provoke a replay of the street demonstrations that brought down Marcos in the Philippines (leading to the weak and unstable Aquino government, which 1989 events revealed to be a strategic time-bomb in the Pacific). Months in advance, Bush proclaimed that the elections would be “fraudulent” unless the Democratic Opposition Civic Alliance (ADO-C), his favored candidates, were proclaimed the victors. “There is a lot of opportunity for turmoil,” said an administration official quoted by the London *Financial Times* April 27. The official drew “a parallel with the rigged Philippine elections in February 1986, which led to the downfall of President Ferdinand Marcos.”

But the Bushmen overplayed their hand, bragging that they had provided the ADO-C with \$10 million through the CIA. This money was employed to buy votes, suborn election officials, and pay for rent-a-crowds. On April 5, the Panamanian government arrested American CIA operative Kurt Frederick Muse (he remains in jail) and dismantled a clandestine computer, radio, and television network.

In the end, Panama’s election authorities were forced to annul the elections. The U.S. administration had hoped that this self-defense measure by the Panamanian government would spark mass opposition against Noriega, but fewer than 500 people took to the streets. Nor was the administration able to come up with a bloody shirt to wave. The closest it came was when opposition vice-presidential candidate, banker Guillermo (“Billy”) Ford, was bopped on the head while attempting to incite a riot. A blood-spattered Ford was featured prominently by U.S. media. The blood on Ford’s shirt was not even his own: It came from his bodyguard, an employee of the U.S. embassy, who was killed after shooting at security forces.

## Drug-pushers against Noriega

In any case, Panamanians were not about to get excited by what happened to Ford, a banker proven by U.S. courts to be involved in drug-money laundering. In fact, most of the top operatives employed by the U.S. against Noriega, are drug-traffickers and or drug-money launderers. On April 6, authorities in Bibb County, Georgia, arrested Panamanian millionaire Carlos Eleta Almarán along with two of his employees, on charges of conspiring to smuggle 600 kilos of cocaine per month into the United States, with a street value of \$300 million. At the time of his arrest, Eleta was being paid by the U.S. government to run a publicity campaign against Noriega. Eleta remains free on \$8 million bail.

A former banking partner of Ford’s, confessed drug-trafficker Stephen Samos, was used by Poindexter to administer

## LaRouche denounces Panama invasion

The following are excerpts from a statement made by congressional candidate Lyndon LaRouche early in the morning of Dec. 20:

"I have just reviewed over the past half-hour, the announcement of the U.S. invasion, which is virtually a de facto war launched against the 2 million population base of Panama, by the U.S. government under George Bush.

"This is a day of infamy. It will go down in history as such. It means a political backfire around the world, throughout the Hemisphere, which will lead in all probability to Mr. George Bush's resignation from office under threat of impeachment, before completing the term to which he is presently elected.

"This is an action in the spirit of Tiananmen Square. It is an action in the spirit of the shooting down—according to the British press—of 2,500 Romanians, by point-blank helicopter gunship and tank fire two days ago. It reflects the Scowcroft-Eagleburger mission to establish solidarity with the government of the Tiananmen Square butchers, most recently. It is an act of incalculable folly, demonstrating a U.S. government which seems to have completely lost its nerve and its sense.

"This is the kinder, gentler America, which had been promised.

"It must be added that this event comes on the same

day that British leading press, speaking for the Anglo-Saxon world, confess that the Great Depression of 1989-92 has begun. The United States is going into a depression, at the same time that the government of the Soviet Union has officially scrapped—from top to bottom—the policy known as perestroika. That policy, perestroika, and Mr. Bush's promise, implicitly or otherwise, that there would be no depression under George Bush, means that the two planks of the Bush administration's policy and authority have been destroyed. At the same moment that the *entire* program—Mr. Bush's program, to which he has been committed since the time of his election—has been scrapped by history, the U.S. government launches an insane act of desperation, sending soldiers to turn themselves into body-bags in Panama.

"That means that we in the Democratic Party, and those who are inclined to support the Democratic Party, must stop the silliness, and prepare to assume the responsibilities of elected political leadership. . . . Let's go back to policies of scientific and technological progress, and a commitment to provide the kind of opportunities and security for every individual in this country, and to the degree possible, around the world, of which we can be proud before the imagined eyes of our grandchildren to come.

"So, if Colombia's fighting a War on Drugs, maybe the United States should begin. But instead of beginning, it went down and tried to shoot down Manuel Noriega, whose files from the U.S. government admit he is the best anti-drug fighter in Central America, and the United States put into power, at the point of a bayonet, in Panama City, a puppet government which represents the drug-pushers of Panama."

the Contra resupply operations, according to the *Wall Street Journal* of Jan. 8, 1987. And the U.S. administration's chief spokeswoman in Panama, Mercedes Morris of the U.S. Southern Command, was arrested in 1988 by Panamanian authorities on drug possession charges.

Because of Bush's economic warfare measures, in 1988 Panama's economy experienced a precipitous 17% drop in its Gross National Product, the largest in modern history for a nation not at war.

But the sanctions also hurt the opposition. In a statement issued Dec. 7, the main opposition group, the Christian Democratic Party, part of the CIA-financed Democratic Opposition Civic Alliance (ADO-C), called for a dialogue with the PDF and stressed the need for "national unity" to force the United States to rescind its sanctions against Panama. The communiqué did not include the opposition's oft-repeated demand for Noriega's resignation. The Panamanian Catholic

Church hierarchy, which effectively functions as part of the U.S.-spawned opposition, also called for national reconciliation in a statement published on Dec. 3. The Church leaders said, "Once again, with added vigor, we condemn the unjust, immoral, and coercive economic measures against Panama, mainly coming from the United States of America."

The decision the U.S. took in May to send in additional combat troops into Panama and to change their rules of engagement "countermanding earlier orders to avoid a confrontation," also lost the U.S. significant support. Those troops, as President Francisco Rodríguez said in a speech Nov. 27, in violation of the 1977 treaties, were deployed to occupy a water purification plant that serves three-fourths of "the metropolitan population, including tens of thousands of U.S. citizens," hospitals, and even the office in charge of eradicating malaria, hence endangering "the health of the 50,000 U.S. citizens living in Panama."