

Bush flees Panama in tears, tour called 'a disaster'

by Carlos Wesley

Stung by the setback to his reelection campaign when he was forced to leave Panama in tears during his first foreign trip since he vomited on Japanese Prime Minister Kiichi Miyazawa, U.S. President George Bush ordered the U.S. military to take reprisals against Panamanian nationalists. On June 16, soldiers of the U.S. Southern Command broke into the home of Panamanian Cong. Gerardo González, ransacked the place, and removed family documents, including the passport of one of his sons.

The raid against Congressman González, a leader of the opposition PRD party and a former vice president of the country, was condemned by leading Panamanians from all sides of the political spectrum as a violation of Panama's national sovereignty. The U.S. government was also condemned for violating González's parliamentary immunity by carrying out the illegal raid.

"If they can do that to him despite his prominence and his parliamentary immunity, what about the rest of us, how can anyone be secure in their homes and property?" was the question on the mind of many Panamanians, said one. The timing of the raid, exactly one day after the U.S. Supreme Court under Chief Justice William Rehnquist affirmed that the United States has the right to kidnap, torture, and even murder foreign nationals anywhere in the world under the Thornburgh Doctrine, also did not go unnoticed. The Thornburgh Doctrine, which was used against Panamanian Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega, was developed by current U.S. Attorney General William Barr. The first application of the doctrine was during the 1989 invasion of Panama ordered by George Bush over the Christmas holidays, in which an estimated 4,000 Panamanians, mostly civilians, were killed.

A 'Roman conqueror'

The incident for which the soldiers are now taking reprisals occurred on June 11, when police used tear gas against demonstrators protesting Bush's presence and turned a rally at Panama's Plaza Porras that was intended to shore up his sagging reelection campaign in the United States—by showing Panamanians happily acclaiming the triumphant Bush for having ordered the bombings which wiped whole neighborhoods out of existence and killed their relatives, friends, and countrymen during the invasion—into a fiasco.

Instead, voters back home and people all over the world saw Bush driven to tears, when, just as Panama City Mayor Omaira ("Mayín") Correa called on the hand-picked crowd in the plaza to give the U.S. President a "warm welcome," clouds of tear gas reached the podium and overwhelmed President Bush, Barbara Bush, and other dignitaries, forcing him to cancel his speech. As U.S. Secret Service agents, pointing Uzis and handguns indiscriminately at the crowd, escorted Bush in a chaotic escape to the U.S. military installation at Albrook, gunshots were also heard.

Bush told "the Panamanian people"—an all-American audience of U.S. servicemen and their families gathered at Albrook—that "no tiny left-wing demonstration is going to set your democracy back." He bragged about the millions the United States has given to shore up "democracy" in Panama. But a report from the General Accounting Office shows that most of that money went to shore up banks and pay interest on Panama's foreign debt, and that 70% of aid earmarked for the poor hasn't yet been disbursed, the *Washington Post* reported.

The U.S.-installed government of Guillermo "Honeybuns" Endara blamed the disturbances on supporters of General Noriega. But, in an exclusive interview with Cable

News Network (CNN) on June 12, Noriega said that Bush himself provoked the protests by going "to my country in an arrogant manner, as the Roman conquerors used to visit their colonies, in a way insulting to a country that has still not found all its dead." Noriega said that the bodies of those killed in the invasion were "thrown into common graves," and "mutilated with flame throwers." Parents are still searching for their children, he said.

Americans have been fooled

"I am here because of a lie," said Noriega, who was convicted on trumped-up federal drug charges in Miami, Florida after he was made a prisoner of war by the United States. "I am a political prisoner. My trial was a political trial and my punishment will be a political punishment."

He said it was good that the scenes of the tear gas incident were televised in the United States. Americans "have been fooled" about Panama. "Both the Reagan and Bush administrations distorted the truth."

Bush's visit to Panama was condemned by the international media as a blatant election ploy. It was "a cynical, disgraceful act which, in the best of cases, was devoid of political and human sensitivity," commented Mexico's *Unomasuno* in a June 12 editorial. "Did he expect the relatives of the dead and disappeared in the Dec. 20, 1989 invasion to come and welcome him with songs and flowers, as did the beneficiaries of that interventionist act?"

Even *La Prensa*, an anti-Noriega mouthpiece for the U.S. State Department's "Project Democracy" crowd in Panama, had warned in an editorial that Bush's trip needed to be handled "with great respect for the sentiments of those who lost their loved ones."

The White House brushed aside "strong recommendations" from the U.S. military in Panama that Bush not hold a public rally in Panama, according to the June 15 *Wall Street Journal*. A military expert said that the U.S. Southern Command was "deeply worried" about the possibility of uncontrollable demonstrations. "The one question that was most asked at Southcom was: 'Why in hell is he doing this? Why is he coming down?'"

According to the June 14 *Los Angeles Times*, a week before the trip, U.S. security officials warned that Bush "faced serious danger." But "Bush's political advisers ignored the risk," reported the *Times*. "They wanted television pictures showing Bush speaking to cheering Panamanians about returning democracy to Panama."

The day before his arrival, two American soldiers were shot. One of them, Cpl. Zak Hernandez of Puerto Rico, died on the spot. The other, Sgt. Ronald Marshall of Arkansas, was gravely wounded. Bush was undeterred.

In fact, just moments before the tear gas fiasco, Bush told Endara not to worry about "the tiny, tiny handful of people that are protesting." Joking about the recent bloody California riots in which scores of Americans lost their lives, Bush

said Panamanians "ought to go up to San Francisco and get an idea of what a real protest is like."

Brazilians call Bush 'the sterilizer'

The Panama tear-jerker occurred as Bush was on his way to the Earth Summit in Brazil, where he found the going just as rough, if not as dramatic, as in Panama. Days before his arrival, Rio de Janeiro was flooded with leaflets declaring, "Bush out of Brazil! The Amazon is Ours!" The leaflets, signed by Brazil's General Confederation of Workers, the Brazilian Confederation of Women, the National Union of Students, the National Confederation of Tenant Associations, and other organizations, attacked the "sell-out government of [President] Collor de Mello" for laying the "red carpet for Bush and company, who have come to Brazil to try to steal our Amazon" with the excuse of protecting the environment. "Besides that, they want to impose birth control, to sterilize our women en masse, and to dismantle our Armed Forces to ease their getting control of our resources," said the leaflet.

Putting the lie to Bush's claim that the opposition to him comes from the "left-wing," Brazilian "leftist" organizations were notably absent from among those protesting his visit. Neither Brazil's CUT labor federation, nor the Workers Party, with which it is affiliated, two of the most prominent groupings in Brazil's "left," voiced any notable opposition to Bush.

At the Earth Summit itself, President Bush found himself at odds with nearly every other country in the world and isolated from the main U.S. allies. As if that were not enough, Bush had to settle for inferior accommodations because the Emir of Kuwait got the presidential suite at the hotel first, and wasn't about to give it up to the leader of the allied forces that "liberated" his country from Iraq during the Gulf war. Meanwhile, some in the Bush entourage, including Secret Service agents and reporters, had to bed down in warehouses—"hourly rate hotels," as one report daintily called them—equipped with water beds, ceiling mirrors, porno movies, and hot tubs.

It has been "a tough, weird political year at home," Bush told reporters at a news conference in Rio. If anyone "senses anxiety" about politics on my part, he said, "they may be right." Bush whined that he is the victim of "witchhunts" by U.S. congressional committees that are investigating his relationship with Iraq before the Gulf war, and his alleged role in delaying the release of the Iranian hostages in 1980 to improve the election chances of the Reagan-Bush ticket.

The whole trip was "a disaster," admitted White House officials. A stopover in Venezuela that, according to the press there, was to give a boost to embattled President Carlos Andrés Pérez, was scratched. While Bush was still in Ibero-America, his top campaign strategist, Charles Black, was telling the viewers of the CNN Evans and Novak program that "we realize we could lose the election."