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US policy in Panama

On 20 December 1989 came the latest US invasion of Panama. General Noriega was ousted and taken back to the US to stand trial on drugs charges and opposition leader Endara was installed by the US as president. Panama has always been treated by the US as its own private fiefdom: it was invaded on no less than eleven occasions in the nineteenth century, and no less than five times between 1908 and 1925. Since Panama's nominal independence in 1903, it has been used not only as a virtual colony of the US, but also as a major military base, with the Canal Zone itself under direct US military jurisdiction.

Panama is a Black nation.* Of its 2.2 million population, around 12 per cent are Indigenous (Indian), 13 per cent African, 65 per cent Mestizo and 8 per cent European or white. Whites comprise less than 10 per cent of Panama's population, yet own most of the country's land and economic resources. This oligarchy, with its ruling families, entrenched and supported by the US, has dominated Panamanian politics for most of this century. Endara, a corporate lawyer, is one of its offshoots. In the May 1989 elections, his party, the Alianza Democratica Civilistas, was financed by the US to the tune of \$10m. The Civilistas were described by one Mestiza woman activist, Isabel de Del Resonio, as 'white with money, with cradles of silver. They don't want to see us [Black people]'.¹

A form of apartheid was practised by the US military in the Canal Zone until the late 1960s. Panama, dominated by European ruling

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*Black is used here as a political term denoting 'people of colour' – Indigenous, African and Mestizo Panamanians.

families and the US military, mirrored the racism of the US. 'Whites only' signs dominated the Canal Zone. Panamanian nationalism and resistance also mirrored the civil rights struggles in the US. In January 1964, for example, there were major confrontations when Panamanian students attempted to display the Panamanian flag alongside that of the US outside a High School in the Canal Zone. Canal Zone residents, accompanied by Canal Zone police, attacked the students. In the days that followed, Black students who attempted to place Panamanian flags in the zone were attacked and shot by white zonians. The US military joined the attack as Panamanians fought back: twenty-one people were killed and 450 wounded, the overwhelming majority Panamanian youths.

Today, 'white' and 'coloured' signs are no longer displayed on entrances, swimming pools and drinking fountains; but Panamanians still remember them and point out the gates and doorways that displayed the apartheid laws. The extent to which racial codes have changed in Panama largely depends upon one's wealth. According to Isabel: 'Before, the [private] schools were all white; today, if you have money, even if your child is Black he can attend.' Nonetheless, in the US-controlled Canal Zone, Black Panamanians still face economic and racial discrimination from the US Southern Command. They also confront discrimination from the Civilistas/oligarchy.

A war against drugs?

One strand in this latest attempt to re-establish undisputed US control over Panama can be traced back almost twenty years – to Richard Nixon's declaration in 1971 that the 'war on drugs' was a 'national emergency'. Nixon named Manuel Noriega, then head of Panamanian security, as instrumental in the drug trade. And in May 1971, John Ingersoll, Director of the Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs, drafted a plan which included assassination for worldwide US 'clandestine law enforcement'. The subsequent White House plan to assassinate both Noriega and the then Panamanian head of state, General Torrijos, was quashed, however: the Watergate scandal had begun to break. But the rhetoric of the Nixon administration was to be invoked nearly two decades later in the Bush administration's rationalisations for 'Operation Just Cause', the State Department code name for the invasion of Panama, and the inauguration of the current regime.

Yet does this rationale for the invasion (that it was a law enforcement response to drug trafficking), necessary though it was to mobilise congressional and popular support, really stand up to scrutiny? First, it should be noted that Noriega had, in fact, worked with the CIA since 1960, when, as a cadet at a Peruvian military

academy, he had provided information to the US Defence Intelligence Agency on left-wing students. For nearly three decades he regularly provided information to the US government and the CIA. He became, too, a 'key asset' in the US war against Nicaragua, allowing the contras to train on Coiba Island off Panama when direct US military support to them was prohibited.²

Moreover, US government agencies had been involved with organised crime in drug trafficking since just after the Second World War.³ More recently, the Iran-Contragate hearings have shown how intertwined covert operations to fund the contras were with drug trafficking on a large scale.⁴ As Senator Kerry put it in one session of the hearings: 'It is clear that there is a networking of drug trafficking through the contras . . . [and] in the name of national security, we can produce specific law enforcement officials who will tell you that they have been called off drug trafficking investigations because the CIA is involved . . .'.⁵

Such promotion of the drug trade and the failure to prosecute any US agencies or agents involved in drug trafficking effectively discredits the rationale of 'law enforcement' for the invasion of Panama. What the US government was seeking to enforce under cover of its anti-drugs rhetoric was adherence to US regional policy for Central America.

US control of Panama had begun to unravel with the 1968 coup that brought Torrijos to power and ousted Arnulfo Arias Madrid, Endara's mentor and a member of the oligarchy. Madrid had dominated Panamanian politics up to that time with, in the words of a *New York Times* report, a 'mix of socialism, fascism, racism, mysticism and nationalism'.⁶

Torrijos's domestic policies of economic and land reforms dismantled the hegemony of the Panamanian white oligarchy. Indigenous, African and Mestizo Panamanians began to make impressive gains in education, health, housing and employment. New hospitals, health centres, houses, schools and universities were built. More doctors, nurses and teachers were trained. In just under two decades, infant mortality declined from 40 per cent to 19.4 per cent and life expectancy increased by over nine years.⁷ Indigenous communities were granted autonomy and protection for their traditional lands.⁸

Foreign policy under Torrijos was just as radical a break with the past. His policies of Panamanian sovereignty over the Canal and military bases, of regular contacts and exchange of information with the Cuban government, directly threatened US hegemony in Central America and contradicted its regional policy. Increasing Panamanian nationalism and protest, including Torrijos' threat to blow up the Canal locks if the US did not comply, led to the signing of the Panama Canal Treaty in Washington DC on 7 September 1977 by President

Carter, under which the Canal and all military bases were to be transferred to Panama by the year 2000. The treaty was deeply unpopular with the American Right.

What placed Torrijos and later Noriega on US assassination lists was not the alleged criminality of their governments, but their circumvention of US policy in Panama and the region. Anti-communism, racism and intervention were the elements of US policy in Panama and the region, but under the guise of a 'war on drugs'.

When Omar Torrijos died in 1981 in a 'mysterious' plane crash, which a former Panamanian army officer later attributed to the CIA,* the reforms of the 'people's power movements' which had developed during the Torrijos regime were blocked. Noriega, who had worked for the US for over two decades, eventually became the de facto head of state. With the untimely death of Torrijos and the change in Panamanian government, the progressive reforms of the 1970s began to come to a halt; yet, despite the corruption of the Noriega government, a number of Torrijos' policies were allowed to continue.

Economic destabilisation: the erosion of Black life

The invasion, however, was only the culmination of an economic war the US had been waging against Panama. The standard of living for the majority of Panamanians had already begun to drop from the mid-1980s onwards as a result of the IMF austerity programmes implemented by President Bartletta (elected in 1984).

Government revenues before the invasion were down by 45 per cent because of the US economic war against Panama. The US paid neither its assessments for using the Canal (the treaty called for US\$10m each year for services) nor fees garnered by the Canal. US businesses were prohibited from paying Panamanian taxes and ships bearing the Panamanian flag were denied access to US ports. From 1987 economic sanctions and the embargo caused great hardship. Malnutrition began to develop among children, particularly in the countryside where land distribution programmes were rendered ineffectual. Panamanian working-class people who had acquired land in the 1960s and 1970s lacked the resources to cultivate it. In the Canal Zone, where Panamanians employed by the US are presumably more financially secure, racial discrimination means that most of the Panamanian workers do low-paying maintenance jobs.

* According to Amnesty International, in June 1987, Colonel Roberto Diaz Herrera, PDF second in command and a close relative of Torrijos, accused Noriega of electoral fraud and political murder, and of plotting with the CIA to assassinate Torrijos.⁹

The two years of sanctions meant a 25 per cent drop in economic production, and rising unemployment. According to the 60,000 strong Federation of Workers of the Republic of Panama (30 per cent of unionised workers are in its ranks), unemployment rose from 10-11 per cent in 1987 to 11-16 per cent in 1988, and was projected at 17.5 per cent for 1989. Poverty has risen steeply: while before 1987, 33 per cent of the population lived below the poverty line, in 1988 this rose to 40.2 per cent and was 44 per cent by 1989. And trade unionists have to deal not only with growing unemployment but also with union busting. According to the Federation, as the embargo took effect and unemployment grew, unions were weakened or destroyed. Collective bargaining was suspended and campaigns were initiated against trade union officials.* Before the invasion, national labour organisers were being laid off. Afterwards, union leaders and organisers were searched for and detained by the new US/Panamanian government and police forces.

By 1989, production was down 50 per cent in the rural areas. Agricultural workers lacked farm machinery, fertilisers and resources derived from petroleum: Panama has no petroleum. The US embargo and economic sanctions prohibited the import of fertilisers from the US and Europe and the sale of Panamanian agricultural products like beef and sugar to the US. Panamanian small farmers faced increasing hardships with the US embargo, as did rural indigenous communities. Indigenous rights to autonomous control of their land and special government assistance had been granted under Torrijos and continued 'to greater or lesser degrees under . . . Paredes and . . . Noriega . . . Political turmoil and fiscal restraints in Panama since mid-1987 . . . stalled government efforts to improve conditions in rural Indian lands.'¹¹ Before the US embargo, Indigenous workers moved to Panama City in search of jobs; in the aftermath of the war, urban Indigenous populations are returning to their traditional land for economic self-sufficiency. However, that economic autonomy is being threatened by militarists and 'developers' and encroachment by the current government upon Indigenous land and land rights.¹²

Black women and the crisis

The Panamanian economic crisis, whether in the urban or rural areas, has been borne most heavily by Black women. Panamanian women

* Until recently the AFL-CIO financially supported the Federation's Institute of Free Labor Development. According to the Federation, as the crisis developed, the Panamanian Union was told to protest in the streets against Noriega and that if it did not support US policy in Panama, its economic support would be ended. The AFL-CIO is now trying to organise a parallel organisation to the Federation and the Institute of Free Labor has been closed.¹⁰

workers, as in the US, are primarily segregated in low-paying service sector jobs: as domestics, cleaners, store-shop clerks, manual workers and office workers. US sanctions aggravated the situation of thousands of female-headed households. Malnutrition and starvation have been steadily increasing among the Panamanian poor.

El Frente Unido Mujeres Contra Aggression (FUMCA) was formed in July 1987 in response to the US economic attack on Panama. FUMCA is composed of twenty-two community-based women's organisations or groups. At its last national congress in Panama City, on 8 March 1989, International Women's Day, 3,000 women were addressed by the then Commander-in-Chief Noriega. Most FUMCA women are members of the Partido de Revolucionario Democrática (PRD), the party of Torrijos and Noriega. FUMCA leadership has described the organisation as the 'Feminina Frente' of the PRD. The PRD is a party of the military, workers, feminists, students and intellectuals. As the party of progressive and conservative nationalists with different economic and political agendas, it was held together by the external threat of US intervention.

Women, states FUMCA, had the most to lose under a 'yanqui military pact' which militarised Panamanian resources and placed them under foreign management. FUMCA reported the minimum wage at 75 cents per hour, with women earning on an average \$250 a month (US currency is the paper currency in Panama), with a maximum of \$450. Milk costs 65 cents a carton, a loaf of bread 45 cents. Because of the embargo and sanctions, construction virtually stopped. The resulting housing shortage means rising rents, overcrowded housing and increasing rents migration – all disruptions of family life.

Before the invasion, FUMCA had organised around Panamanian 'national defence' as entailing the political and economic rights of women. It had also attempted, without success, to establish contact with women in the opposition and the Canal Zone. But none answered the call (via FUMCA's national radio programme) to form a women's front against foreign intervention – the race and class privileges of Civilista women obviously destroying any form of sisterhood with Black Panamanian women struggling against poverty. FUMCA also opposed the hierarchy of the Catholic Church which, according to Isabel de Del Resonio, FUMCA treasurer, aligned itself with the oligarchy, urging women to demonstrate against the then government by banging pots in the streets as middle-class women did in the CIA-orchestrated overthrow of Allende in Chile. Prior to the invasion, FUMCA collected and delivered clothes, food and medicine to poor women and offered classes for women in physical and psychological self-defence in case of a military attack.

The US military presence in Panama – some 13,000 troops were

routinely stationed there – also led to violence against and the exploitation of women. US troops provided the base for the prostitution industry in Panama. According to FUMCA, the sexual, racist violence against Indigenous women by US soldiers is particularly severe. As Isabel de Del Resonio put it, ‘Gringos would rape and kill women, but the US army would just ship them out rather than allow them to be tried in Panamanian courts’. For decades the US, although maintaining the right to jurisdiction and extradition over Panamanians, never allowed Panama jurisdiction over US troops stationed within Panama. For Isabel, if the US military never turned over any US troops accused of raping or murdering Panamanian women, why should Panamanian women have wanted to turn Noriega over to the US?

Among the difficulties facing women, FUMCA identified the large percentage of female-headed households and adolescents without jobs; ‘nourishment pensions’ (*‘las pensiones alimenticias’*) as the only subsistence for large numbers of children; women’s exploitation in the labour market, and the fact that the weight of the crisis was borne most heavily by women. All this led to specific demands made on the former government by FUMCA, including social security as a right for women and men and the abolition of work codes that undermined workers’ rights and wages. It also advocated the expansion and development of family laws with community input; publicly supported programmes for the rising numbers of children and pregnant women in poverty; full health rights; the adjustment to new economic conditions without cutting services to women workers and collective decision-making between government agencies and community groups; and increasing the role of women in government leadership.

Not surprisingly, FUMCA’s policy proposals have not been well received by the US/Endara government. Many FUMCA women were fired from their jobs following the invasion, and driven ‘underground’ or into detention camps, according to Esmeralda Brown, co-ordinator of the New York-based sister organisation, Women’s Workshop in the Americas. FUMCA had also begun to develop into a forum on national and international policies, as witnessed by its affiliation with the GDR-based Women’s International Democratic Federation and the Cuban-based Frente Continental de Mujeres Contra Intervención (Continental Women’s Front Against Intervention). This implied a regional and international perspective not shared by the conservative US/Endara government – in particular, FUMCA’s stand against US intervention in Latin America.

US militarism in Central America

US domination of Panama and a continuing military presence there is

seen by US policy-makers as crucial for its domination of the region. Within one month of the passing of the Torrijos-Carter treaty, which would have ultimately ceded the Canal Zone to Panamanian control and lost the US its massive military base there, president-to-be Ronald Reagan was campaigning for the treaty's abrogation, warning of the potential loss to US 'security' and 'financial interests'.

The US violated the Panama Canal Treaty routinely in acts prohibited by international law and the US constitution (which states that treaties supersede national law). The Torrijos-Carter Treaty prohibited the use of the US military outside the protection of the Canal. Yet in January of 1985, 1986 and 1987, the US military and the Panamanian Defence Forces engaged in joint military exercises unrelated to Canal security in Panama.¹³ Since 1987 no US military operation has been coordinated with the Joint Panamanian Commission, although the Torrijos-Carter treaty calls for such cooperation. Uncoordinated US military flights and sea operations jeopardised commercial flights and damaged the fishing industry. On land, US soldiers freely harassed Panamanians with military manoeuvres in neighbourhood and city districts – such manoeuvres would stop traffic in commercial districts in downtown Panama City for hours. This type of psychological warfare against the population and manoeuvre training for the invasion left an estimated twenty US troops dead before 20 December – not in confrontations with Panamanians but in US combat exercises. One FUMCA representative wryly commented that US troops 'crash and explode and no one is confronting them. Bombs explode on base . . . They fought with a coconut tree and it resulted in three deaths.'

For the US, Panama was strategically important for its war against Nicaragua – but Panama under Noriega also became a member of the Contadora group which sought a resolution of the conflict. In 1985, US National Security Advisor Poindexter met with Noriega in an unsuccessful attempt to negotiate Panama's departure from the group. Poindexter also sought – again unsuccessfully – the use of the Panamanian Defence Forces for a southern front against Nicaragua.*

Nonetheless, as the congressional hearings of Autumn 1986 on the Iran/Contra affair showed, 'the US Southern Command, located in the zone, played a major role in coordination, intelligence gathering, and delivery of supplies to the US-funded counter-revolutionaries

* Bush also sought the reinstatement of Nicolas Bartletta as president of Panama. (Late in 1985 Noriega had helped to organise the dismissal of the Panamanian president Bartletta, who was elected in 1984 amid accusations of PDF electoral fraud.) Bartletta is a personal friend and former student of former US Secretary of State George Shultz. The Panamanian government refused this and the other requests as violating Panamanian sovereignty.

attempting to overthrow the Nicaraguan government'.¹⁴ One objective of the invasion which has been obscured was perhaps the removal of Noriega for 'doublecrossing' his employers. For Noriega had not only been dragging his feet in the contra war; he was also, as a business venture, providing Panamanian free trade zones in Colon as a centre for the duty free transshipment of goods for Cuba and Nicaragua to circumvent the US trade embargo.

It was not only Nicaragua, however, that had to be brought to heel. The State Department made the US position abundantly clear in a letter to Senator J. Helms:

The State Department shares your view that when the Carter-Torrijos treaties are being renegotiated, the prolongation of the US military presence in the Panama Canal area till well after the year 2000 should be brought up for discussion. The continuing power of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, the activities of the Salvadoran insurgents* and the influence of communist Cuba in the region make it urgently necessary for the United States to strengthen its position in Central America.

The continuing polarization of the political forces in Panama may lead to a crisis in the country which would pose a serious threat to stability in the region.¹⁶

The letter went on to call for steps 'to bring about the resignation of General Noriega and to set up an interim government' which would safeguard 'US strategic interests'.

In the view of a fact-finding delegation, sponsored by the Black Veterans for Social Justice, which visited Panama in September 1989, the Bush agenda would finally turn out to be 'a swap of the Canal for long-term, guaranteed US bases in Panama' – and the crisis would be escalated 'until a Panamanian government renegotiates the Torrijos-Carter treaty, and the US presence in Panama becomes permanent'.

The invasion

Under the provisions of the Torrijos-Carter treaty, December 1989 was to be a critical month in the progress to Panamanian decolonisation. Not coincidentally, it was the month in which the US escalated the war. Under the treaty, as of 31 December 1989, the Panamanian government was to establish its own appointee as head of the Panama Canal Commission. He was then to implement plans for the 31 December 1999 transfer of the Canal and all of its property and

* Air bases and listening posts in the zone have, according to Weeks's and Zimbalist's analysis of the US military role in Panama, 'played a continuing and important role in the Salvadoran civil war'. And, in the November 1989 FMLN offensive against the Salvadoran government, hospitals administered by the US military in Panama were used to service wounded Salvadoran soldiers.¹⁵

assets (including military bases) to the Panamanian people: all US bases must be out of Panama by 1 January 2000. But on 4 December 1989, in violation of the Treaty, President George Bush appointed his own nominee as head of the Commission.

One week later, the Panamanian National Assembly declared Panama in a 'state of war' and Noriega, commander-in-chief of the armed forces, as head of state. The US State Department and major media routinely reported this as Panama having 'declared war on the US'. On 16 December 1989 a US officer was killed in a confrontation with Panamanian Defence Forces.¹⁷ Four US officers in civilian dress had entered a neighbourhood which housed the PDF command where, some months earlier, on 3 December, a coup attempt had been made¹⁸ (since that date, a US curfew prohibited its soldiers from entering Panamanian territory without authorisation from commanding officers). The US account of the shooting stated initially that the officers were unarmed. But the Panamanian government maintained that they were armed, and that the US officers had opened fire first, shooting a woman, a child and an elderly man. The compound is located in a poor, African and Indigenous neighbourhood. Two days after this incident, on 18 December, a US soldier who felt 'threatened' shot a Panamanian police officer who approached to question him in a laundermat.

Another two days later, on 20 December, the US invaded.

The invasion of Panama was the largest US military operation since the Vietnam War. It involved some 26,000 troops and entailed the largest parachute drop since the Second World War. For weeks, the US had been mobilising troops at Fort Bragg in readiness. Congress, however, was informed of the attack only hours beforehand. In one sense, the invasion was a last resort. It followed on the failure of the US-backed opposition parties, despite the millions of dollars invested in them, seriously to challenge the government, and the failure of US-backed coups (of which that of 3 October had been the most recent).

Nor was the invasion the almost bloodless walkover that the US State Department would have us believe. Civilian neighbourhoods were carpet-bombed. The Dignity Battalions, nationalist pro-government paramilitary squads developed by Noriega after the 3 October coup attempt, put up a strong resistance. While the State Department claimed (some three weeks after the invasion) that civilian casualties numbered just 200, the Spanish-language press both within and outside the US (Inter Press Service, Echo of Mexico) cited over 2,000 civilian deaths and approximately 70,000 casualties. Only the Spanish Press (*El Diario*), the African-American Press (*Amsterdam News*, *City Sun*) and alternative media (WBAI-NY Public Radio) bothered to report Panamanian civilian casualties. New York City's *El Diario* carried photos and reportage of mass graves dug by the US

army to conceal the actual death count. The National Lawyer's Guild, returning from a fact-finding mission in Panama in early February, also reported the presence of mass graves.

The possibility of a protracted guerrilla war, which the US press began reporting two days after the invasion, and which the Pentagon and Southern Command had feared, was dispelled with the surrender of key PDF forces on 26 December. Major Ivan Gaytan, trained in the US, surrendered a vital PDF base, stating: 'I personally know the Americans quite well. They aren't going to put troops up against our guerrillas because they wouldn't put soldiers in another Vietnam. We feared they would simply bomb the hell out of our area'.¹⁹

The depiction of mostly male casualties in US media reporting obscured the reality of the large numbers of children and women civilians injured or killed in the war. The bombing of Chorillos and other poor neighbourhoods had left over 20,000 people homeless and food supplies scarce. US reporting also obscured the fact that women participated not only in the Dignity Battalions (as did some children) but in the military as well. The Base De Instruccion Femenina Rufina Alfaro, the women's military detachment or battalion, is named after Rufina Alfaro, the woman who made the first call, in 1821, for Panamanian independence and sovereignty from Spain. In the neighbourhood where Rufina Alfaro is located, US troops made several incursions in one week, pointing artillery at homes, flying low over houses in helicopters in pre-dawn manoeuvres. The women's military centre is surrounded by a high fence, across the street another fence is erected around an empty lot. On both fences and the front of the building are cloth banners in Spanish and English, put there against the US troops who come to harass them. One banner reads '*Ay Que Miedo, Gringo, Ja Ja Ja*' ('Oh What Fear Gringo, Ha, Ha, Ha'), another 'Don't Forget Vietnam'.

What the Panama invasion also revealed is a further adaptation of military technology to, and a development of, so-called 'low-intensity conflicts' against Third World countries. Although this strategy usually involves proxy soldiers, contras or mercenaries, the Panama invasion revealed the Pentagon's involvement. 'This is the first time in the new post-cold-war world there has been an operation by any country where a mixture of conventional and unconventional forces was used in a measured way against the type of threat the US will face in the future. The Panama operation outlined the rationale for the type of forces we will require', General Edward Meyer, former chief of staff of the army, is quoted as saying in *US News*.

Revealing an obsession with high tech, the Pentagon used eight \$50 million F-117A Stealth fighters to drop two 2,000-pound bombs on a communications site near Rio Hato.²⁰ The Pentagon reported originally that the bombs were dropped in an open field with no

injuries; weeks later, new reports stated that the Stealths bombed communications centres in Panama City. To patrol the cities, the Army's Seventh Light Infantry Division, trained in urban warfare, used nightvision equipment developed in the 1980s. This allows soldiers to see and shoot in the dark; stun guns were also used. In the words of General Frederick Woerner, former chief of the Southern Command: 'Low intensity conflict does not mean simplistic equipment. In Third World conflicts, the importance of sophistication increases, rather than decreases, since you're dependent on a more precise, not massive, application of force.'

Panama is now a state policed by the US Southern Command. The US government and major media report that 5,300 Panamanians are being detained 'for questioning' in camps. Esmeralda Brown, of the Women's Workshop in the Americas, and the Center for Constitutional Rights (CCR) in New York City report over 7,000. An article in the *New York Times*, headed 'US is releasing invasion captives (19 January), failed to note that the US, after releasing Panamanians, has also rearrested or detained them. Detainees are held without charge and the names of prisoners have not been released. Americas Watch, a human rights organisation, reports US violations of Geneva Convention accords on the treatment of prisoners and the denial of the basic rights of due process in preventative detention. Since the US has never declared war on Panama, those incarcerated are not referred to as prisoners of war but as detainees. If someone's name appears on a list (the US had already developed a list of some 6,000 government employees, civilians, educators and nationalists who were prohibited entry into the US), then he or she can be picked up and detained without charge. Recently, one Panamanian doctor received a telephone call at home to go to the local police station for questioning. On arrival, he was arrested by US troops, placed aboard an army helicopter and flown to the Empire Range, a US detention camp.²¹

The media

US media coverage of the invasion signified overwhelming approval. Bush's dramatic rise in the opinion polls* as a result was signified by ABC on 31 January under the title 'From a wimp to a world-class leader'. One of the most frightening assumptions promoted in major media coverage was the 'right' of assassination. Most reporting of the invasion by the major networks, unquestioningly reiterated that assassinations are legitimate government operations and invasion a

*It is not always certain who *New York Times*/CBS/Gallup were polling. For example, a poll taken in January by CBS News stated that 92 per cent of Panamanians interviewed approved of the invasion; what many news sources failed to report was that the interviews were conducted in affluent (largely white) neighbourhoods.

mechanism for their implementation. Throughout the five hours of 'live' coverage on 20 December, ABC news anchorman Peter Jennings took the position that the problem was not the invasion of a sovereign nation to 'eliminate' its head of state and the bombing of a civilian population (the public had after all been prepared for this with the invasion of Libya), but that the US had not 'got' him yet and that the 'hunt' was not successful.

Control over the coverage was tight. US journalists in the Pentagon 'pool' – those flown into Panama by the Bush administration to cover the invasion – were restricted to the US military bases during the first hours of the invasion, thus ensuring there would be no coverage of civilian casualties and bombings. No other US press outside the Pentagon pool of journalists were allowed into Panama, and a Spanish photographer who sent photos of casualties to US Spanish-language papers was killed by US troops in crossfire outside a tourist hotel.

US media coverage of the invasion failed to question the US assumption of international jurisdiction over drug law enforcement as a pretext for violating its 1977 Panama Canal Treaty and Panamanian sovereignty. Nor was the use of Panama as a military base for US intervention in Central America examined critically.

The racism in US reporting on the invasion was rampant. *Newsweek's* 15 January issue described Noriega at the time of his surrender and arrest as 'a whipped and beaten little man' and 'a mere shadow of the machete-waving gringo-hating dictator'. And the sexism of the invasion 'hype' was revealed in Bush's pronouncements that the US invaded to save American lives and American womanhood, or, as Secretary of Defence Dick Cheney phrased it, the PDF had also sexually threatened a 'military wife'. The US has not invaded El Salvador or Guatemala or attacked the contras to safeguard 'American lives', although those governments and the contras have been responsible for deaths of US citizens, as well as sexual assaults on and the political torture of US women religious and peace activists.

Perhaps no writing reveals the convergence of classism, racism and sexism that shaped the US invasion better than the piece by Frederick Kempe in the popular weekly *Newsweek*.²² Kempe describes Noriega as a 'two-bit intelligence chief from a Banana and Banking Republic'. His description of Bush's December 1976 meeting with Noriega, subtitled 'Bully vs. Brahmin', is particularly revealing.

The two intelligence chiefs contrasted in style and substance. Bush was lanky and refined, raised by a Brahmin New England family. He towered over the five-foot five-inch Noriega. Noriega was mean-streets Mestizo, the bastard son of his father's domestic. Noriega offered his usual damp, limp handshake to Bush's firm grip. They were clearly uncomfortable with each other.

Noriega's continued survival blemished Bush's anti-drug efforts and underlined increased American impotence in the region.

Sensationalised like a safari hunt, with international policy and law treated as no more than a game between the romanticised 'hunter' and the animalised 'hunted', the devastating effects of the invasion on Panamanian people, on law and democratic policies was submerged.

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The invasion of Panama and seizure of Noriega were carried out under the pretext of the US war, both national and international, against drugs. And it is worth looking, a little more clearly, at the nature of that 'war'. The effectiveness of measures to reduce consumption at home, the military-style nature of the campaign – only one-third of funding is directed at rehabilitation, compared to two-thirds for policing – have been criticised in the media. (What is not examined, however, is whether the programme is intended to discourage drug use.)

Similarly, the success of drug wars abroad is also questioned. The US is attempting to organise the militaries in Peru, Bolivia and Colombia into a force armed and directed by the US, ostensibly for drug enforcement. Yet, according to senior US officials in Lima, quoted in one mid-Western paper, the *Dayton Daily News*, 'US supported interdiction efforts in Huallaga Valley in central Peru were unsuccessful and the drug war was not winnable in Latin America.' But such criticisms miss the point. These forces are, in fact, being used in counter-insurgency wars.²³ For example, the anti-communist nature of the drug wars in the Andean countries has led to attacks on M19 in Colombia and Shining Path in Peru which have provided assistance to peasants growing coca leaves. The US military has routed out guerrillas who have been providing protection to peasants from drug lords, thus allowing the local military to take over as 'protection'.

The US is currently, under the guise of the eradication of drugs, consolidating its political, military and economic hegemony through destruction of progressive movements with counterinsurgency wars; it also seeks control of the 'informal economy' of narcotrafficking. US covert policy does not seek to destroy the drug trade; it attempts to control it. US media play a significant role in shaping popular perceptions and understanding about the 'war on drugs'. Such disinformation set the stage for the invasion of Panama; US nationalism and racism allowed the invasion to be implemented without significant domestic resistance.

What the 'communist threat' or 'red menace' did for interventionists and fascists in the 1950s and 1960s, what terrorism and anti-Arab

racism permitted racists and militarists in the 1980s, 'narcoterrorism' – a drug war hysteria that legitimises state violence and vigilante violence against African and Latin people – will condone in the 1990s. The ignorance of the US public about the nature of drug trafficking fuels the circumvention of law and the enactment of repressive and racist policies in US domestic and foreign politics. The war on drugs ensures the continued militarisation of US domestic and foreign policy into the twenty-first century. That the consumers and 'pushers' have been depicted in mass media as African and Latin, both within and outside the US, ensures that the war on drugs will be a racial war. That the majority of the profits from the drug trade accrue to the wealthy (or government agencies) reveals its class nature.²⁴ And, as always, women and children will bear much of its brunt. Before the invasion, FUMCA, in its organising pamphlet, 'Porque Las Mujeres Somos Parte de Esta Lucha', showed how defending national sovereignty was part of women's political history in Panama (citing among other things Rufina Alfaro and women's leadership in the 'popular power movements' in the 1960s and 1970s). FUMCA has stressed repeatedly that the conditions of women's lives demand activism: 'Women, half of the population, realise that foreign aggression threatens the stability of their homes and their children's futures.' And, at the conference last November, Panamanian women warned how deadly US policy was to Panama. In Isabel de Del Resonio's words:

There are many [US] women whose children are here and they do not know what they are doing or what the US government is doing . . . We're trying to bring about a rebirth of our culture . . . and they [the US government] are thinking about killing our people.

References

- 1 This article is a response to a visit to Panama in November 1989 and much of it is based on interviews and information gathered at that time. The Center for International Political Studies, an independent research organisation affiliated to the University of Panama, had sponsored an International Conference Against Aggression in Central America: the case of Panama (26-28 November 1989). Topics included 'Low-intensity conflict', 'Narco-trafficking and money laundering'; 'Political and economic effect of US sanctions against Panama', 'Human rights'; and 'Violation of the Torrijos-Carter treaties'. Over 100 US citizens, including elected state and city representatives, university professors, trade unionists, clergy and activists, participated.
- 2 See US Foreign Relations Subcommittee report, 'Drugs, Law Enforcement and Foreign Policy', (December 1988) which described the US employment of

- Noriega as 'one of the most serious foreign policy failures for the United States'.
- 3 See Vince Bielski and Dennis Bernstein, 'NSC, CIA and drugs: the cocaine connection', *Covert Action Information Bulletin* (No. 28, summer 1987).
- 4 See *ibid.*, and *Inside the Shadow Government*, Declaration of Plaintiffs' Counsel, filed by the Christic Institute, US District Court, Miami, Florida, 31 March 1988.
- 5 See 1986 Executive Session of the Iran/Contragate hearings and Bielski and Bernstein, *op. cit.*
- 6 See *New York Times* (28 January 1990).
- 7 Ministerio de Planificación Política Económica, 'Lo Que Ha Hecho El Proceso Revolucionario por Nuestro País' (Panama City, MPPE, 1989).
- 8 Peter H. Herlihy, 'Panama's quiet revolution: Comarca homelands and Indian rights' in *Cultural Survival Quarterly* (Vol. 13, no. 3, 1989).
- 9 See Amnesty International, *Panama: assault on human rights* (March 1988).
- 10 Interview with Panamanian labour leaders (26-28 November 1989), Panama City.
- 11 Herlihy, *op. cit.*
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 See John Weeks and Andrew Zimbalist, 'The failure of intervention in Panama: humiliation in the backyard', in *Third World Quarterly* (January 1989).
- 14 See John Weeks and Andrew Zimbalist, *op. cit.*
- 15 See John Weeks and Andrew Zimbalist, *op. cit.*
- 16 Letter from Assistant Secretary J.E. Fox of the State Department to Senator J. Helms, (26 March 1987).
- 17 Thomas L. Friedman, 'Panama shooting condemned by US' in *New York Times* (18 December 1989).
- 18 See Hugh Hamilton, 'Lack of popular support thwarted coup against Noriega' in *The City Sun* (11-17 October 1989).
- 19 *Wall Street Journal* (27 December 1989).
- 20 See R. Harris, 'Out of the clouds: secret stealth fighter used in Panama raid gets more exposure' in *Wall Street Journal* (27 December 1989).
- 21 *New York Times* (19 January 1990).
- 22 *Newsweek* (15 January 1990).
- 23 More than \$260m was approved for 1990 drug control programmes in Colombia (\$90m), Peru (\$70m), Bolivia (\$97m). At least six US agencies are involved in drug enforcement in the Andean countries, including the CIA, DEA, and State Department. US 'advisers' led Peruvian troops in a 'frontal assault' military operation in Peru (*Los Angeles Times*). And nine US-piloted Huey UH-1 helicopters, armed with twin M-60 machine guns on the doors, ferry units of six Peruvian police officers and two US Drug Enforcement agents in raids at supposed jungle cocaine labs. DEA-fortified military bases are located in the heart of Shining Path territories, while US troops are deployed to secure areas to train the Peruvian military in its war against the Sendero Luminoso guerrillas (*Washington Post*).
- 24 See Waltraud Queiser Morales, 'The war on drugs: a new US national security doctrine?' in *Third World Quarterly* (3 July 1989). DEA place the retail value of illegal drugs at \$150billion. Most of the profits remain in the US (or banks in western Europe). Source countries in Latin America receive only 10 per cent of the drug profits, according to Morales, who writes that Colombia, which refines 75 per cent of cocaine, received \$1-2 billion in foreign exchange from drug profits in 1987.