

THE BUSH ADVENTURE IN PANAMA

Guillermo Castro Herrera

Since the U.S. invasion of Panama last December, much has been written on the violation of national and human rights of Panamanians. In the following article, Guillermo Castro examines the historic causes, the internal political interests, the separation between the people and the political forces of the nation, as well as other factors which, together, helped propitiate the military success of the Bush "adventure", but which will surely lead eventually to a moral and historical defeat. In his analysis of the Panamanian situation, Guillermo Castro points out that "new forces and realities are now taking shape in Panama".

Seen as an isolated event, the invasion and occupation of the Republic of Panama last December by U.S. troops, would appear to be just one more episode in the already long chain of North American interventions in the Caribbean zone, which goes back at least to the Spanish-Cuban-American War of 1895-1898.

However, the significance and implications of the recent invasion for Panama change if we examine it in the context of the history of that nation during the second half of the 20th century, and in the wider context of the general crisis which the Latin American region has been suffering since the beginning of the decade of the 1980's.

From this double perspective, it is evident that what happened in Panama was the use of armed foreign troops to resolve an internal political conflict - a conflict which was worsened by the U.S. in pursuit of its own interests - by a coup d'etat which has subjected the country to a dictatorship of an oligarchic minority which is totally committed to the interests of transnational financial capital.

On the other hand, the political conflict to which we refer has important links with similar conflicts which affect all Latin America: Panama is suffering a severe structural crisis which is manifested politically in an extreme social

polarization and instability which has existed over nearly six years, and whose resolution does not yet appear to be in sight.

Within this general context, what is specific in the case of Panama is the combination of a series of events with various historic implications. In the first place, of course, is the direct military presence of the U.S. in the country, and the concordance of interests of U.S. power circles with those of the Panamanian oligarchy to preserve and prolong North American hegemony in the Isthmus. This element has a long history, it has been present as a cause of conflicts throughout the entire process of formation of the nation of Panama since 1903.

An element of more immediate importance is that the Latin American crisis is expressed in Panama by an exhaustion of populist national liberation processes led by General Omar Torrijos during the 1970's. This exhaustion is also that of an entire epoch of national history which began around the end of the 1940's with the emergence of nationalist and reformist middle classes in Panama's political life, and which ended with their defeat as a leading factor of that national liberation process at the hands of the local oligarchy, between June 1987 and September 1989.

This political defeat, which precedes and explains the military defeat and coup d'etat of December 1989, cannot

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by any means be attributed exclusively to the campaign of aggression and intervention unleashed by the U.S. against Panama since the middle of 1987. On the contrary, that campaign took advantage of, and worsened - in a really perverse manner - conflicts and problems which existed in Panama since at least 1983, as a result of the deterioration of the model of economic growth which reigned in the nation throughout the century, and also because of a lack of political will on the part of the political-military regime in Panama to undertake structural reforms which were indispensable for the creation of a national consensus which would legitimize its power and save it from its profound national and international isolation.

The Nation

In order to understand the above, it is useful to recall that Panama is a country of 77,000 square kilometers, with 2,200,000 inhabitants and a Gross Internal Product (GNP) of some four billion dollars annually. Panama's economically active population consists of some 750,000 people; 600,000 of these are employees, of whom more than half lack any meaningful union organization. There are 150,000 owners of the means of production, but a group of only 121 managers control - through a close network

of banks and monopolies in commerce and industry - three of every four dollars of the GNP. Meanwhile, 80% of those dollars are generated in services linked with the transit of merchandise, capital and people - a dominant factor in the national economy since the sixteenth century - associated with the Panama Canal, the International Financial Center and the Free Trade Zone of Colón, all of which are located in less than 10% of the national territory, in the central part of the country.

This extremely open and fragile economic situation, with its excessive concentration of political and economic power, combines and is further complicated with the distorting effects of the process of national formation resulting from the North American hegemony in the Isthmus. These factors mean that, throughout the entire history of Panama, and in this crisis in particular, social conflicts are expressed in close relation to the national problem, to the point that they seem to fuse into one sole problem.

But in reality the social conflict has preceded and triggered the struggle for an independent national state during the history of Panama. Thus, every national victory - however big, however small - in the confrontation with the U.S. has been preceded by, and has consisted of processes of popular mobilizations which have threatened the political power of the oligarchy, which is



U.S. soldiers in the streets of Panama City. Photo by Luis Humberto González

THE PANAMA CANAL

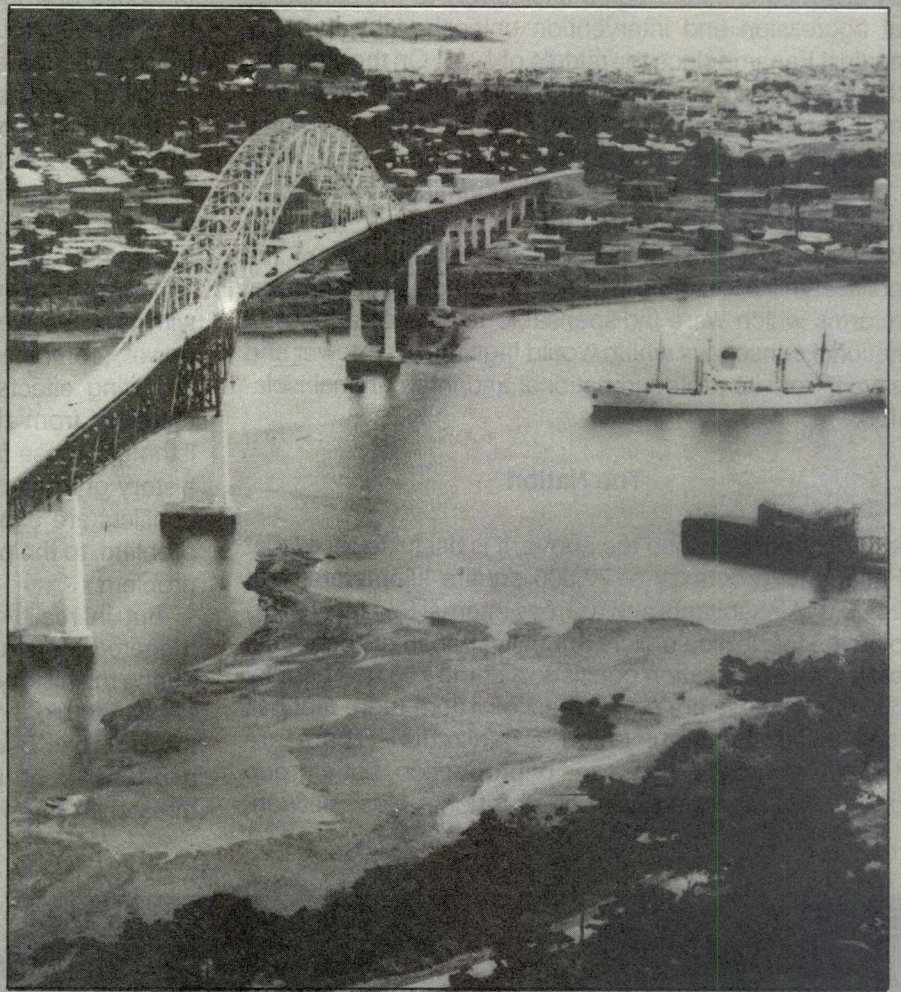
The passage between the two oceans was an obsession of the Spanish conquerors. They searched for it arduously, and found it too far to the south, there by the remote and frozen Tierra del Fuego. And when somebody had the idea of opening a pass at the narrow waist of Central America, King Phillip II ordered a halt: he forbade the excavation of the Canal, on pain of death, **because man should not separate what God united.**

Three centuries later, a French enterprise, the Universal Inter-oceanic Canal Company, began working in Panama. The project advanced thirty-three kilometers and fell resoundingly into bankruptcy.

Since then, the United States decided to finish building the Canal and to own it. There is one inconvenience: Colombia does not agree, and Panama is a province of Colombia. In Washington, Senator Hanna advises waiting, **due to the nature of the animals we are dealing with**, but President Teddy Roosevelt does not believe in patience. Roosevelt sends a few marines and makes Panama independent. And thus this province is converted into a separate country, by the grace of the United States and its warships.

Eduardo Galeano: **Memoria del fuego III: El siglo del viento.**

(Memory of Fire III: The Century of Wind)
Siglo XXI Editores, Mexico. 1986.



The Canal has never really belonged to Panamanians. Photo from Novedades archives

allied with and dependent on imperialism. At the same time, all the defeats suffered by the Panamanian nation in this confrontation, have been preceded by set-backs of the national grass roots movement at the hands of that oligarchy. This is also true of the case of December 20, 1989.

The Crisis

In reality, the creation of the circumstances which led to the invasion and coup d'etat goes back at least to 1984, when two events of great importance for the nation occurred. On the one hand, this was the first time that Panama paid, in services on its foreign debt, more than the amount received in fresh finance from the transnational banks. On the other hand, this was the year when leading political-military organizations of nationalist-Torrijist tendencies, decided to conduct the flow of popular support accumulated for General Torrijos during the 1970's into an electoral alliance with the financial faction of the national oligarchy, which resulted in the election of Nicolás Barletta as President, and later, of Eric del Valle.

These events marked a turning point in relations between Torrijist nationalism and the national populist movement. In fact, given the choice of confronting the

crisis by widening, deepening and consolidating the program of reforms initiated by General Torrijos - and thus confronting the resistance of the oligarchy and the pressures of imperialism - or of gradually undoing what had been achieved by that program within a strategy of conciliation with the traditional adversaries of Torrijism, the second option was chosen.

The political consequences were immediate. By the end of 1984, the middle classes had broken with the regime, and by the middle of 1985, Barletta had lost his power, due to the unpopularity of his economic policies; by March 1986, these policies were approved as laws by the Legislative Assembly, while trade union organizations held a general strike in protest. The repression of this strike provoked a rupture between the organized grass roots movement and the government of del Valle. By the end of that year, the armed forces and the political-bureaucratic apparatus were the only bases of support for the regime: this was the moment chosen by the Reagan administration to ask for General Noriega's help in the aggression against Nicaragua. The refusal to cooperate in this served as the starting point for the series of aggressions which began during the second half of the following year.

Perspectives

That process of aggression, on the other hand, encountered an ideological vacuum and a vacuum in political leadership due to the rupture between the government and its allies of the previous decade. This vacuum was filled by the National Civic Crusade which is composed of business organizations, endorsed by the Catholic Church and advised in political matters by the U.S. Embassy and political parties of the oligarchic right. This group would finally take power after the deaths of 5,000 people and damages estimated in 2 billion dollars to the national economy on December 20, 1989. They also came into power as a native administration installed by a foreign occupation army.

The stage of Panamanian history that closes with the invasion and the coup d'état in December of 1989 saw the reformist middle classes take over the political and ideological leadership of the process of Panamanian national formation. They did this in alliance with the business sectors interested in broadening the internal market and modernizing national public administration and the economy. In the exercise of this leadership, the middle strata have made important contributions by incorporating grass-root sectors into national life, sectors that only had a nominal participation under the previous oligarchic regimes.

U.S. INTERVENTIONS IN LATIN AMERICA

"The United States is directly or indirectly responsible for the installation of the worst military dictatorships in Latin America, with the complicity of the local oligarchies and bourgeoisie", says Gregorio Selser, Argentinian journalist living in Mexico.

Selser, who is also Professor and researcher in the Latin American Studies Center in the Political Science Faculty of the UNAM, recalls a commentary made by Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes: that most of the armed interventions made by the U.S. over the last few years, have been aggressions against countries with a population of less than five million people.

"The U.S. is prepared to negotiate with major powers such as the Soviet Union", says Selser, "but it just wants to impose its will in small countries which it considers its backyard".

Mr. Selser enumerated the most important military interventions made by the U.S. against Latin America and the Caribbean this century:

October 1909: U.S. marines overthrow President José Santos Zelaya in Nicaragua.

July-October 1912: full-scale invasion of Nicaragua, imposition of puppet governments: U.S. troops remain in Nicaragua until October 1925.

February 1913: Complot in the U.S. Embassy in Mexico led by Ambassador Henry Lane Wilson. Following the "Embassy Pact", Mexican President Francisco I. Madero and vice-president José María Pino Suárez are assassinated by dictator Victoriano Huerta.

Early 1914, troops disembark in the port of Tampico, Tamaulipas. This is followed by an invasion and permanence of troops in Veracruz until 1914, by order of President Woodrow Wilson. U.S. troops again invade Mexico in 1916, in pursuit of the "bandit" Pancho Villa. The troops returned home in

1917, without having captured Villa.

1915: Invasion of Haiti and occupation of that country until 1934.

1916: Invasion of the Dominican Republic, occupation until 1924.

December 1926: U.S. troops disembark in Nicaragua; occupation until January 1, 1933. Popular resistance against this invasion is led by Augusto César Sandino, with widespread support from Latin America and from public opinion in the U.S.

1924: Occupation during several months of the Honduran Republic.

1904-1930: Seven disembarkments of troops in the Republic of Panama.

1906-1933: Three disembarkments of troops and temporary occupation of Cuba.

August 1933: Following the fall of Cuban dictator Gerardo Machado, U.S. ships patrol Cuban coasts.

The "big stick policy", (expression coined by Theodor Roosevelt at the beginning of this century), was replaced by Franklin D. Roosevelt's "good neighbor policy" during the rest of the 1930's and a good part of the 1940's, when there were no U.S. interventions in Latin America. However, in 1945-46, the U.S. tried to intervene against the electoral victory of Juan Domingo Perón in Argentina, but failed in these attempts, as Perón won the elections in February 1946.

June 1954: Overthrow of constitutional President of Guatemala, Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán. This was the first intervention of the C.I.A. in the preparation and launching of such an operation. The effects of this action are still being felt today in Guatemala, where more than half a million people have been disappeared and murdered by various regimes.

April 1961: The "Bay of Pigs" invasion of Cuba, which failed to overthrow President Fidel Castro.

April 1965: Intervention and occupation of the Dominican Republic, assassination of popular leaders of a nationalist rebellion.

1970-73: Interventions against the democratic and constitutional government of Salvador Allende in Chile, resulting in Allende's overthrow in September 1973.

Presidents Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon and Ford supported all the military dictatorships which were installed in Brazil, Bolivia, Uruguay, Argentina and Chile, in the name of "anti-communism". While President Carter brought some changes in U.S. foreign policy, it was James Carter who authorized the first shipment of arms and financial support to maintain the regime in El Salvador, in January 1981, just three days before his mandate ended. This marked the beginning of the civil war which is still being fought in that nation.

December 1981: Beginning of the armed, diplomatic, political, economic and financial intervention against the Sandinista government in Nicaragua.

October 1983: Invasion and occupation of the island state of Grenada, aimed at exterminating the New Jewel Movement led by social democrat Maurice Bishop.

June 1987: Intervention in internal affairs of Panama.

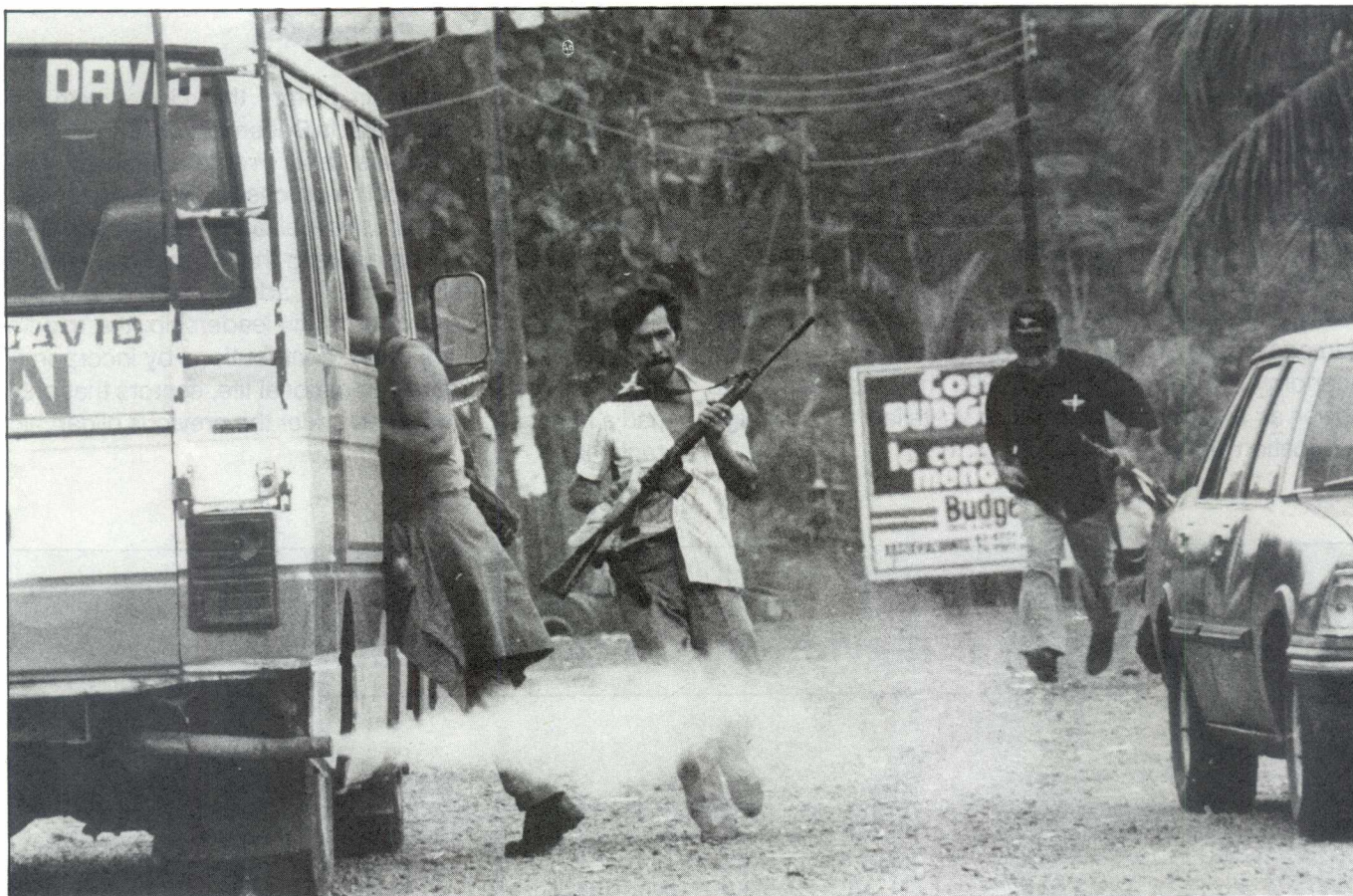
February 1988: Economic and financial embargo against Panama.

December 20, 1989: Invasion and occupation of Panama.

Mr. Selser summarizes: "Since last century, all of Latin America, from Mexico to Argentina and Chile, have suffered military interventions by the United States.

"The countries which have been invaded most are: Mexico, Nicaragua, Haiti, Dominican Republic, Cuba and Panama, in that order."

Jackie Buswell



The "Dignity Battalions" tried to resist the U.S. invasion. Photo by Luis Humberto González

As we have seen, this alliance broke apart piece by piece under the impact of the crisis during the past decade. If this crisis had not followed the course of events determined by the United States' intervention and invasion, the country could have waited for the split to produce a national leadership that would have been of a more grass-roots and democratic orientation. This course of events, which in other circumstances could have looked "natural", was frustrated in Panama due to the militarization of national political life.

It is significant, however, that even with all the unpopularity of this regime, its internal oligarchic adversaries never really posed a real threat to the government's political survival and these adversaries turned out to be the employees of the foreign power that help them to take over. The real moving force in Panamanian history is found and remains for the time being, in the grass-roots sectors that Torrijism incorporated into national life and then tried to demobilize afterwards. In this sense we can say that the coup of December 20 destroyed what remained of the mediating apparatus. It therefore created the basic conditions so that the social polarization created by the crisis began to be transformed into political polarization destined to show itself in new ways within the fundamental conflict of Panamanian history.

In this way we can say that the United States has been able to consolidate its hegemony on the Isthmus through

a division of the Panamanian society that, in all probability, will become deeper and broader up to the point that this hegemony will again be placed in check but in much more complex and dangerous terms for U.S. interests in Panama. In effect, the social cost of the program of consolidating Panamanian dependency carried out by the government formed by the invasion, is such that it can only be implemented by dictatorial measures. But, at the same time, the internal isolation of the oligarchy represented in this government is so great that it can only carry out this dictatorship with the support of U.S. armed forces.

Thus, we can say that the Bush Administration has opted - knowingly or not - for a political failure in Panama. It loses, if it has to take charge permanently of the government of the country and it also loses, if it opts for withdrawing its support for the government it has imposed on the country. Meanwhile, new forces and political realities - that mean new challenges for the United States and its allies - are taking shape in Panama. The quickness with which these new forces arise and the degree to which they are really an alternative for the political leadership of the country are two very important points that will show how quickly Panama will overcome the crisis that it has been going through for almost a decade. And for the United States, as an editorial in *The New York Times* pointed out in January, the capture of Noriega is just the beginning of this country's new adventure in Panama. ■