Panama and Noriega: “Our SOB”

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On December 20, 1989, approximately twenty seven thousand American troops invaded Panama with the goals of apprehending Panama’s military dictator and de facto leader General Manuel Noriega and restoring democracy throughout the country. The invasion occurred a year and a half after two Florida grand juries indicted General Noriega on federal drug trafficking charges and after he had survived months of economic sanctions and back-channel tactics aimed at forcing him out. The morning following the invasion, President George H.W. Bush addressed the nation and described the objectives and reasons for “Operation Just Cause,” revealing that “the goals of the United States have been to safeguard the lives of Americans, to defend democracy in Panama, to combat drug trafficking, and to protect the integrity of the Panama Canal treaty.”¹ In retrospect, however, it appears clear that the United States could have rightly used the same justifications six years earlier, shortly after General Noriega assumed power in 1981.

Why did the U.S. government wait so long, and what finally prompted it to invade and forcibly oust him in 1989? Historians have argued that Noriega’s drug trafficking and election tampering forced the United States’ hand, but I believe that it was his arrogance and utter lack of responsiveness to U.S. demands that eventually sealed his fate. Noriega had been involved in the international narcotics trade for years,² and began installing puppet Panamanian presidents through election fraud as early as 1984, but the United States was willing to accept this activity because of his cooperation with what was perceived to be greater U.S. interests. Once Noriega ceased to respond to U.S. requests while simultaneously ruling with a heavier hand, the U.S. finally forcibly removed him.

Historians disagree on precisely what drove the United States to invade in 1989. Some, such as Dr. William M. Leogrande, Dean of the School of Public Affairs at American University, assert that the invasion was primarily prompted by the threat of communism, despite its relative global weakness by the late 1980’s. Others, such as Anthony D’Amato, Leighton Professor of Law at Northwestern University School of Law, believe that the United States invasion was altruistic in nature, with the goal of protecting Panamanian citizens and democracy, while setting aside possible ulterior motivations. The largest group, including Panama scholar Dr. Richard L. Millet, concurs that Noriega’s drug trafficking and ignorance of international agreements eventually prompted the intervention, overcoming the United States’ long history with the dictator.

Despite having knowledge of General Noriega’s illegal activities, including subversion of Panamanian democracy, election fraud, and illegal drug trafficking into the United States, I believe that the U.S. government neglected to act until the general became uncontrollable and directly threatened North American lives and economic interests in Panama, jeopardizing the continued operation of the Panama Canal. In an era characterized by a desire to snuff out global communism, the United States acted not simply altruistically to defend democracy in Panama, but rather to preserve its own influence over one of the most important trading routes and strategic positions in the western hemisphere.

Historians agree that in any international situation “resort[ing] to force [is] the final option, the most costly and least desirable, to be employed only when all else fail[s].”iii Obviously, Presidents debate tirelessly over risking American lives, regardless of necessity or apparent ease of mission. It took a catastrophic attack on Pearl Harbor to finally force the United States into World War II, and American reluctance to use force continued throughout the twentieth century. Presidents Reagan and Bush were no exception regarding Panama. Invasion was suggested numerous times over Noriega’s nine-year reign, but was rejected each time until the 1989 military action. On the other hand, how does one balance American lives against the citizens in an imperiled nation? President Bush announced and celebrated the Panamanian peoples’ upcoming freedom during his nationwide post-invasion address.

Of course, the President made no mention of alternate motivations in his speech, but that was to be expected. The United States had numerous unpublicized connections with Noriega, including his long relationship as an “asset”iv of the CIA, as a controllable force within the Panamanian Defense Forces (PDF), and as a trusted ally in the covert operations against the Nicaraguan Sandinistas.v Meanwhile, Noriega was playing both sides: “he was involved in drug trafficking, arms smuggling, money laundering, and the ruthless oppression of his people. He also systematically violated the America-Panamanian Canal treaties and harassed U.S. forces and institutions in Panama.”vi Time and again the United States judged that Noriega was more valuable in his current position, and continued to publicly support him and ignore significant evidence of his illegal actions.

The United States’ honeymoon with Noriega ended in 1985 when Noriega was widely suspected of ordering the brutal murder of one of his long-time political opponents.vii From that point on, tensions between the United States and Noriega gradually escalated to the point where Noriega declared war against the United States. In December, 1989, the PDF murdered an American serviceman stationed in Panama. With the American public demanding action and the U.S.
government demanding an end to Noriega, the President was backed into a corner and had no choice but to invade.

Panama’s Significance

Since its completion in 1914, the Panama Canal has been a vital waterway for the United States. Snaking a path through the center of the country, the Panama Canal Zone essentially cut Panama in two and permanently infused American influence into the country. The Canal bolstered a significant portion of the American economy, and by 1992, “the amount of U.S. foreign trade passing through the Canal exceeded 100 million tons, or 14% of all United States international seaborne trade.”

Needless to say, the Panama Canal remained crucial for continued U.S. economic stability and superiority, and the U.S. went to great lengths to protect its investment. Some contend that preserving the Canal alone remained sufficient justification for repeated interventions in Panama.

Often, when one nation prospers, another suffers. In fact, “the whole era of the Republic of Panama, which began in 1903, has been associated with and colored by the country’s struggle to recover the Panama Canal and, perhaps more importantly, its sovereignty over the Canal Zone, which had been ceded by treaty—“as if it were sovereign”—to the United States.”

The United States made its presence felt in order to protect its great political and economic investment in Panama. Panamanian leaders relied on U.S. support and money, and were often regarded as pawns for U.S. interests in the region. Panamanian leaders frequently contended with the fact that the Canal was sovereign property of another nation, and that the Canal Zone was protected and inhabited by a foreign military. Decisions regarding the Canal Zone were often made in Washington, with little or no consultation with Panama City. “For nearly one century, U.S. policy makers have carried out policies that have greatly enhanced and protected vital U.S. interests in the Panamanian Isthmus at the expense of Panamanian interests,” and the Panamanians became increasingly frustrated with this situation as the century wore on.

Further, “from the commencement of its undertaking the United States government has regarded the Panama Canal as an instrument of national defense,” and its surrounding territory, the Canal Zone, housed several U.S. military bases and was protected continuously by American servicemen. After World War II, the Cold War pitted the United States against the forces of global communism driven by the Soviet Union. Panama provided a unique strategic position for the United States, extending its direct influence into Central and South America without departing U.S. soil. During the volatile Cold War period, the U.S. focused on protecting this key strategic position. Some historians,

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Sanchez, 61.
b Sanche, 61.
Ibid, 58.
xiii Sanchez, 64.
including Fulbright Scholar Dr. Peter M. Sanchez, contend that preserving this strategic stronghold dominated U.S. policy throughout the region through the Noriega years. While this position proved useful during the 1980’s when the United States used Panama as its base for operations against leftist organizations in Nicaragua and El Salvador, however, Panama’s strategic value could not be used as lone justification for an invasion. Of course, the U.S. lease on the land was subject to the 1903 Panama Canal Treaty, and by the mid 1960’s Panama was understandably anxious to recover both the land and profits from the Canal Zone.

In 1959, resentment against the U.S. heightened and Panamanian students protested in the streets of Panama City, demanding that the Panamanian flag be flown alongside the U.S. flag in the Canal Zone. A riot ensued, and American troops were deployed to protect the Canal Zone while the Panamanian National Guard quelled the riot. Afterwards, the U.S. flag continued to fly alone. After this incident, Panamanians became increasingly angered that their own government did little to rectify the injustice. In 1964, the same situation repeated itself after Americans refused to comply with late President John F. Kennedy’s order to fly the two flags together. When Panamanian students entered the Canal Zone and attempted to raise the Panamanian flag alongside that of the U.S., American civilians resisted and a scuffle broke out in which the Panamanian flag was torn. Riots again ensued and American businesses in Panama City were attacked and destroyed. In addition, there was continued antagonism along the Canal Zone line. In the end, two dozen Panamanian high school students were killed and some 300 wounded by the Panamanian National Guard supported by American Canal Zone troops.

I believe that Panamanians had reached their breaking point, and in a telephone call to President Johnson immediately after the outbreak of violence, Panamanian President Rodolfo Chiari asked for a complete revision of all the treaties which affect Panamanian-US relations because “what we have at the present time is nothing but a source of dissatisfaction.” With the communist situation in Vietnam worsening, and the United States starring into the face of a major conflict in Southeast Asia, the U.S. sought a peaceful and non-contentious resolution to the Panamanian problem. The wheels were set in motion for significant changes in U.S.-Panamanian relations.

The tradition of democratically elected Panamanian presidents was broken when General Omar Torrijos Herrera, commander of the Panamanian National Guard, assumed control over Panama in 1968. President Carter’s willingness to deal with an unelected dictator greatly bolstered Torrijos’ legitimacy and solidified future U.S. policy toward Panamanian dictators. It would take thirteen years after the original push by President Chiari, but eventually negotiations yielded the 1977 Torrijos-Carter Treaties. The first treaty abolished the Canal Zone, restoring it to Panamanian sovereignty (while still allowing the U.S. to lease its military facilities from the Panamanian

xiv Manfredo, 109.
xvi Ibid.
xvii Ibid.
xviii Raymont.
government), and set the stage for a gradual transfer of Canal operations to Panama to be completed by December 31, 1999. The second treaty ensured the Canal’s neutrality in times of war. Despite restoring the Canal Zone to Panamanian sovereignty, “the Canal Treaties served the important role of legitimizing U.S. military bases in Panama that were vital to U.S. strategic interests in the hemisphere,” which allowed the U.S. to retain its military presence indefinitely.

These treaties marked a milestone for Panama and drastically changed the nature of U.S. involvement in Panamanian affairs. No longer could the U.S. military continue to act unabated in its dealings with the Canal. It now had to work hand in hand with Panamanian rulers to facilitate a smooth transition period. The treaties also required new methods of flexing U.S. muscle in the region and ensuring favorable conditions for American ships passing through the Canal, as well as for Americans still residing in the Canal Zone. Thus, the main avenue for future U.S. influence would shift focus from the Canal Zone itself to Panamanian leaders.

Noriega’s Rise

After General Torrijos died in a suspicious plane crash in 1981, his second in command, General Manuel Noriega assumed control over the military and, consequently, the country. By this time, the U.S. was thoroughly entrenched in the Cold War and President Reagan had committed to fighting global communism, focusing energy on the communist revolutions in Nicaragua and El Salvador. When Noriega assumed control, “the chief concerns of the U.S. government were, as they had been for the entire century, U.S. prestige, U.S. security interests in the region, and the efficient and safe operation of the Panama Canal for both economic and military reasons.” The United States knew that Noriega was not a communist, but rather an ambitious and self-serving general with ties throughout the region who would not threaten the unimpeded operation and transition of the Canal. While some suggest that the U.S. was fighting for democracy, I suggest that for the Reagan administration in the 1981 Central American political climate “it was preferable to have someone in power like Noriega with no discernable principles than to have such posts filled by leftists.” Noriega appeared to be a Torrijos reincarnate, and that was acceptable for the U.S. As a top U.S. official put it: “he was an SOB, but he was “our” SOB.”

Therefore, the U.S. counted on the obedient Panamanian ruler to maintain continuity as the U.S. used its Panamanian bases for its operations throughout Central America. It recognized that “instability in Panama would complicate efforts to calm the region, divert attention and resources away from the ongoing

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xx Hogan and Smith, 5.
xxi Sanchez, 72.
xxiii Sanchez, 78.
xxv Sanchez, 77.
conflicts in El Salvador and Nicaragua, and jeopardize U.S. use of Panamanian bases in support of the Nicaraguan rebels, the Contras.”xxvi So, the U.S. success throughout Central America rested heavily on the cooperation of the new Panamanian dictator, Noriega.

Noriega’s confidence was bolstered by the contacts he made during his service in the Panamanian armed forces. Beginning as early as 1971, Noriega had significant ties with the CIA, the U.S. Department of Defense, and the U.S. National Security Council. xxvii He often managed to appease the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration by feeding them information about minor drug smugglers. xxviii By the time Noriega came to power, the U.S. intelligence community was hearing loud whispers about Noriega’s own involvement in the narcotics trade, but they “considered Noriega to be an “asset” whose usefulness to U.S. intelligence-gathering operations outweighed the threat which his involvement in drug trafficking posed to the American populace.”xxix So, instead of removing the relatively weak leader at the onset of his reign, the U.S. took this information with a smile and turned a deaf ear to the strong rumors they were hearing about his own narcotics activities.

Both the U.S. and Noriega knew Panama’s strategic value to the U.S. Once President Reagan took office in January, 1981, he gave top priority to the fight against the communist Sandinistas in Nicaragua. The CIA was using American bases in Panama to supply and train the Contras, and relied on Noriega’s support to continue their operations. Signaling they were wise to Noriega’s illegal activities, American actions in an undercover drug operation sent Noriega a message that “his involvement in drug trafficking would be overlooked if he assisted the United States in the battle against the Sandinistas.”xxx So, as of that time, Noriega did as he was told. By assisting the Americans in their fight against the Sandinistas, Noriega earned himself significant political capital. It soon became clear, both in Washington and in Panama City, that the fight against the Contras was more important to the U.S. than curtailing Noriega’s narcotics trafficking activities.

The early 1980’s under Noriega proceeded much as they had under his predecessor. Noriega began to mold the PDF into his personal organization that “had a definite plan for the year 2000 (when Panama would be ceded the Canal), and that date was transformed into a goal which pervaded all its initiatives. Any object in its path which might have constituted an obstacle had to be removed.”xxxi For Noriega, those potential obstacles included members of the opposition who were elected president and any rivals who threatened his ascent. Noriega cajoled, bribed, intimidated, and threatened his opponents. “While [U.S.] State Department officials were less sanguine about Noriega’s value and reliability, they shared with the Defense Department a pronounced fear of his chief rival within the PDF, its Chief of Staff, Colonel Roberto Diaz Herrera,”xxxii so they supported the lesser of two evils: Noriega. The U.S. provided Noriega

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xxviii Gilboa, 541.
xxix Bagely, 192.
xxx Gilboa, 542.
xxx Gandasegui, 11.
with the necessary political support because it believed that they could control Noriega and limit his autonomy, making him a useful force in Panama. However, had the U.S. government known that Noriega’s increased power (largely attributed to the unwavering support provided by the U.S.) would soon make him more brazen and his illegal actions more ruthless, they might have thought twice about supporting him so publicly.

In 1984, Nicolas Barletta, Noriega’s hand-picked presidential candidate, won Panama’s first free elections in sixteen years. xxxiii Despite the widespread rumors of election fraud by the PDF, and the incredibly small margin of victory, the United States looked the other way. At this point, the United States could have intervened and forced new, fair elections, or recommended some form of United Nations oversight. However, since their interests appeared to remain intact, unfortunately the U.S. stayed clear. The election demonstrated Noriega’s ability to manipulate the political process, but Washington ignored the warning and legitimized Noriega’s fraud by sending a representative to Barletta’s swearing-in.xxxiv As a final insult to legitimate democracy, Noriega later forced Barletta to resign merely a year after taking office, leaving Noriega with complete military and political control over his own country and now feeling beyond U.S. pressure.

The Tides Turn

The turning point in the relationship between the U.S. and Noriega came in September 1985, after the brutal torture and decapitation of Dr. Hugo Spadafora, “a veteran of armed combat against the Sandanistas and a long-time political foe of Noriega who had declared his intention to return to Panama with evidence of Noriega’s narcotics trafficking.”xxxv The murder was intended to send a message to Noriega’s opponents, but it also caught the attention of top U.S. officials who believed Noriega was getting too reckless and powerful; a conclusion that should have been reached years earlier had the U.S. paid more attention to intelligence information coming out of Panama instead of focusing on Nicaragua and El Salvador. The murder was the beginning of a series of escalating events during which Noriega ignored warnings from Washington and acted against U.S. desires.

By early 1986, “Noriega’s supporters in Washington were slow to understand his growing threat to U.S. interests, and Noriega failed to notice the transformation of his status from an ally to an enemy.”xxxvi So, to generate significant sentiment against Noriega, the U.S. began a campaign to undermine the general. Initially, “various articles began to appear in the U.S. print media disclosing information that linked Noriega and his closest associates to the traffic in illegal drugs. This was the U.S. way of manifesting its dissatisfaction with the turn of events in Panama,”xxxvii and also its first public signal to Noriega that it was time to retire. Furthering the impact of the stories, the U.S.

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xxxiii Gilboa, 542.
xxxiv Ibid, 542.
xxxvi Gilboa, 559.
xxxvii Gandasegui, 12.
government did not deny the information that was published and thereby opened the eyes of the American public to the dictator’s dealings. Within Panama, “accusations by a former PDF colonel of Noriega’s involvement in a particularly revolting political killing [of Dr. Spadafora] and in electoral fraud set off street riots in June 1987.”xxxviii The U.S. hoped that accusations from within Noriega’s own organization would spark popular uprisings in Panama that would overrun Noriega, or at least turn public opinion against him. However, the PDF quelled the rioters before too much physical or perceived damage was done, and Noriega remained secure.

The U.S. followed the media campaign with direct overtures to Noriega insinuating that if he stepped down, a military confrontation could be avoided. Noriega, however, recalled previous U.S. attitudes during his first five years and viewed these overtures as empty threats. He felt secure enough in his position to ignore repeated warnings from Washington and act unilaterally. Next, the U.S. offered money and enticed anti-Noriega factions within the PDF to assume control and remove the dictator.xxxix In response, some military commanders spoke out against the general and staged unsuccessful attempts to depose him. However, Noriega consolidated and reorganized the PDF to maximize his control, and the rebel factions withered. The United States influence over Noriega had long since evaporated, and he was now beyond American control.

Noriega’s Last Years

Frustrated by the lack of success of all previous attempts to remove the dictator, the U.S. finally acted to oust Noriega. In February, 1988, two Florida grand juries, acting independent of the U.S. State Department,xl indicted General Noriega on federal drug charges. “This step, unprecedented in legal history, achieved the desired publicity effect of converting the head of the military of a supposedly allied country into a fugitive from U.S. justice,”xli and awakened the American public to Noriega’s true character. This step by the Justice Department brought Noriega’s illegal activities into focus, and represented a decisive step by the U.S. to end his tenure as dictator.

At this point, the U.S. could have used the drug charges to justify the forcible removal of Noriega, but

...up [until] mid 1989, there was a general consensus within the government that using military force would boost the cost well above the level of any benefits provided. Instead, the U.S. sought cheaper solutions: imposing economic sanctions, promoting coups within the PDF, and employing threats and bluffs.xlii

However, it was not a lack of desire that prevented Americans from forcibly removing Noriega, but a lack of justification. The government felt it needed more than narcotics charges against Noriega in order to justify to the American public a widespread military intervention in Panama, the. Although President Bush

xxxix Gandasegui, 12.
xli Gandasegui, 12-13.
would ultimately use Noriega’s involvement in drug trafficking as an eventual explanation for the U.S. invasion, it would not come until several years later.

Additionally, “because Noriega gained an intimate knowledge of U.S. military and intelligence operations, he would be a formidable adversary. The United States was understandably reluctant to confront him until it had no other option.” The United States did not want to suffer another defeat like Vietnam, or another embarrassment like its continued failures against the Sandinistas. The judgment was made that since Noriega posed no imminent threat to American lives, or the safety of the Canal, the use of force should be reserved.

Noriega’s removal of the democratically elected President Eric Arturo Delvalle in 1988 further inflamed tensions. This marked the second time in five years that Noriega had subverted the Panamanian political process and installed his own puppet to lead the government. The Panamanian people were systematically being denied their democratic leaders and rights, but the international community, including the U.S., neglected to respond decisively. Again, President Bush would use subversion of Panamanian democracy as a reason for forcibly removing Noriega, but not yet.

As Noriega continued to rule Panama unabated, the U.S. faced a public relations problem. If it had no immediate intention of invading, then “declaring that Noriega constituted a major menace to national security, while being unwilling or unable to utilize the means necessary to respond to such a threat, set the United States up for a series of defeats and humiliations.” With military action still on shaky ground and Vice President Bush campaigning on the issue of the war on drugs the U.S. needed to take some form of action against the dictator to preserve its own image.

So, the U.S. imposed significant economic sanctions on Panama, and “between March 1988 and December 1989 the United States brought every kind of political pressure to bear on Panama and other Latin American states to force Noriega’s departure.” The sanctions were heavy, with foreign aid to Panama suspended, its sugar quota terminated, U.S. bank accounts frozen, and Panama’s revenues from the Panama Canal (amounting to $7 million a month) confiscated. However, Noriega remained defiant, largely because “it was money from U.S. consumers of narcotics which [initially] accelerated the corruption of the PDF and which helped sustain Noriega’s power during the prolonged period of U.S. economic sanctions.” The sanctions affected the most vulnerable Panamanians the worst, forcing businesses to close and discouraging foreign investment, while leaving Noriega relatively unscathed. Noriega continued to line his pockets with drug money as Panama crumbled around him. In effect, U.S. drug consumers enabled Noriega to remain in power.

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xliii Robinson, 190.
xliv Maechling, 116.
xlv Maechling, 118.
xlvi” Ibid, 117.
After President George H.W. Bush took office in 1989, “the public wanted Bush to fulfill his campaign promise to combat drugs.” However, the Bush policy toward Panama was to do nothing until after the May 1989 Panamanian Presidential elections. The new President realized that President Reagan had exhausted American patience with Noriega, and had many Americans wondering whether the U.S. would ever do something about him. But, should Noriega voluntarily step down after the elections, it would save President Bush considerable time, energy, and resources, not to mention the political advantages that would ensue from presiding over a peaceful settlement that had been in the works for two years. Predictably, however, Noriega ignored the May election results and ordered the two winning candidates to be physically beaten while he invalidated the election returns. In response, the U.S. increased the troop presence in the Canal Zone from ten thousand to thirteen thousand—an event which marked the first significant U.S. demonstration of force against the Noriega regime.

Meanwhile, in the American press, it became increasingly clear that “U.S. officials had tolerated these activities at a time when anti drug sentiment was at an all time high. Because public concern about drugs was so prominent, ‘the U.S. Government could not afford to be seen as coddling a dictator-drug lord after its own courts called for his prosecution.’” In his 1988 campaign, President Bush had stated a desire to reduce the amount of drugs entering the U.S. and entering circulation. With his determination in the war on drugs, President Bush had significant political cover if he chose to invade. However, despite changing public perceptions about the dangers of drugs, the same rationale of combating drugs could have been used to oust Noriega five years earlier. The bottom line remained that there was still no direct threat to American institutions, and the President’s renewed vigilance against illegal drugs remained insufficient to justify invasion.

So, the President, feeling the pressure to take action, encouraged a PDF coup to remove Noriega in October of 1989. “The United States preferred a Panamanian solution to the Noriega problem—a PDF coup or popular uprising.” That way the United States could protect its own troops and preserve Panamanian sovereignty over its own political affairs. Unfortunately, despite receiving help from U.S. troops, the coup failed, and Noriega, feeling the pressure all around him, tightened his grip over both the PDF and the country. As economic sanctions took their toll on Panama, Noriega’s drugs continued to permeate U.S. borders in record numbers, and Panamanians seemed incapable of unseating Noriega. While not noted by any commentators, in my opinion President Bush was running out of options, and he was waiting for a final spark that would justify an invasion.

In an act of desperation, General Noriega declared Panama to be in a state of war with the U.S. This marked the general’s final act of defiance against the U.S. Up until this point, Noriega had only mildly harassed the Canal and left the Americans residing there unharmed. On December 16th, 1989, an American

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serviceman was killed, two witnesses brutalized, and several American servicemen harassed in and around the Canal Zone under Noriega’s orders.\textsuperscript{lv}

These events came just after U.S. intelligence received reports of a plan by Noriega to terrorize U.S. citizens, and therefore seemed to form part of a broader pattern. Still smarting from Congressional criticism over his handling of the October coup attempt, President Bush decided that these assaults on U.S. citizens were a casus belli.\textsuperscript{lv}

With American lives in danger, the President finally had viable justification for forcibly unseating Noriega. Citing all of Noriega’s past offenses, plus his new threat on American lives, President “Bush justified the invasion on the grounds that it was intended to bring Noriega to justice on the drugs charges, restore democracy in Panama, defend U.S. citizens and safeguard the Panama Canal.”\textsuperscript{lvii} Noriega provided President Bush the strongest circumstance acceptable for exercising force American history as of that date: directly threatening the United States, its citizens, or its allies. Had Noriega exercised restraint, remaining indifferent toward U.S. forces in the Canal Zone while continuing his patterns of drug smuggling and democratic oppression, it’s anyone’s guess as to how long he could have remained in power.

\textit{Conclusions}

The pattern for American intervention, established after the 1989 Panama crisis, required a direct threat to American lives and/or U.S. national security before utilizing U.S. troops. This pattern looked to have far reaching consequences in the twenty first century...up until September 11\textsuperscript{th}, 2001. If nations examined the actions of General Noriega in Panama, they could have discovered the threshold for American intervention. Short of significant human rights violations, such as Somalia or Kosovo in the 1990’s, foreign leaders could have anticipated how far they could push the envelope before the United States would intervene. What remains unclear is whether President George W. Bush’s invasion of Iraq (without U.S. citizens being directly threatened) signals that America’s threshold of tolerance has been lowered. If so, the world community will find it more difficult to anticipate how much the U.S. will tolerate before initiating military action.

Of course, the devastating results of the War in Iraq may return America to its previous standard. In the future, the American people may not tolerate military intervention without incontrovertible proof of a genocide or direct threat to the United States. In terms of foreign policy, the lack of U.S. action to quell the current genocide in Darfur is deviant. However, this refusal to intervene seems more likely a result of having available military forces spread too thin (fighting two simultaneous wars in Iraq and Afghanistan) rather than a permanent change in American tolerance of human rights violations. While each new administration brings a different set of standards and priorities, I believe that it remains predictable that resorting to force will remain America’s final option. In General Noriega’s case, despite federal indictments and economic sanctions, it

\textsuperscript{lv} Leogrande, 618.

\textsuperscript{lv} Leogrande, 618.

\textsuperscript{lvii} Ibid, 618.
still took over two and a half years of intense American scrutiny before the U.S. launched the invasion.

The United States had multiple opportunities to overthrow Noriega, but it was only after General Noriega directly threatened American lives, and acted on those threats, that President Bush ordered the invasion of Panama. By repeatedly tossing aside democratically elected presidents, General Noriega demonstrated for years that democracy in Panama was merely symbolic, yet the United States remained at arms length. I believe the United States continued to exercise restraint throughout the early and mid 1980’s, all the while having knowledge of Noriega’s drug trafficking. On balance, the United States determined that he was of more value to them than an unknown leader. Only after President Reagan, and subsequently President Bush raised the issue of fighting a war on drugs did the government seem troubled by Noriega’s narcotics activity. Further, up until hours before the invasion, Noriega continually refused to believe that America would actually invade.

However, with the swift and successful military action, the U.S. demonstrated that it was still capable of utilizing military force when necessary. The end of the Cold War left the United States as the sole remaining superpower; but along with this new status came increased responsibility and international scrutiny. So now, more than ever, I believe that military force will and must remain America’s last resort in the post 9/11 world.

References


