

# Panama crisis: State Department backing U.S. into New Vietnam

by Gretchen Small

U.S. military chiefs may have so far rejected proposals for a full-scale invasion of Panama, but Secretary of State George Shultz and his boys continue undeterred, plunging the United States, step-by-step, into strategic disaster in Central America.

Reports of Pentagon opposition to State Department demands that the United States launch a large-scale invasion, have appeared in every major U.S. newspaper. Military representatives spent one meeting reminding the cabinet that "anytime there is a commitment of military force, there must be a reason," the *Los Angeles Times* reported April 2—the proverbial "bottom line" of strategy, for sure. Others have suggested that while an invasion could remove General Noriega, it might also lose the United States every ally it ever had in Ibero-America.

"Panama has Tarbaby written all over it, Lebanon revisited; military intervention could bring us the wrong war, at the wrong place, in Central America," conservative Patrick Buchanan wrote in a April 13 column in the *Washington Times*. The generals are right, and Foggy Bottom wrong, he argued. The liberal politicians playing hawk against Panama, are the ones same who refuse to give the green light to U.S. policemen to run a shooting war against drug-traffickers inside the United States, he warned, and will be the first to scream "bring the boys home" when any shooting starts.

"Why should the bravery of American soldiers be squandered, simply because of the timidity and cowardice of American politicians? . . . One does not correct a diplomatic mistake by committing a military blunder," Buchanan stated.

An invasion of Panama would create "a disaster and a wasps' nest" for the U.S. military—and the Pentagon knows it, the head of Panama's Center for Higher Political and Military Studies, Renato Pereira, pointed out in an interview with Mexico's *Unomásuno* April 9. The Panamanian Defense Forces has plans to continue a guerrilla war, if the United States invades, he added. That would pit U.S. regular troops against some 20,000 Defense Force members, operating in their home territory.

"The U.S. Army could take Panama City in a few days, but the majority of the population and the rest of the country would be hostile to the troops, who would then face an armed conflict for a long time," he warned. The PDF officer corps

is composed of men who are not only nationalists, but are among the world's best trained in counterinsurgency, he noted; they were trained by the United States.

But 1,300 more U.S. troops were sent to Panama. Their mission? Publicly, to "scare" Panama's government and military into throwing General Noriega out of the country.

The troop deployment was combined with an escalation of economic warfare against Panama—and U.S. businesses operating in Panama. On April 8, President Reagan signed an order, prohibiting all American companies, subsidiaries, and citizens from making payments to the government of Panama for any reason, whether that be taxes or fees for any service—such as electricity—government may provide.

Companies which do not pay, cannot expect to continue to operate, yet any business which violates the prohibition can have its officers sentenced to 10 years in prison, and a \$50,000 fine. That measure, too, had been hotly debated in cabinet meetings, with reports that Treasury Secretary James Baker resisted this one, warning that with the world monetary system in the shape it's in, to shut down the offshore banking center in Panama, as the measure finalizes, might trigger a new collapse.

The State Department won out. Reagan declared that he took these measures, using powers granted him under the International Economic Emergency Powers Act, because "the policies and actions in Panama of Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega and Manuel Solís Palma constitute an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security, foreign policy, and economy of the United States," and thus constitute "a national emergency."

The decree makes an international laughing stock of the Reagan administration. What is the "unusual and extraordinary threat"? The U.S. portrayal of the Defense Forces as crazed, dictatorial "narco-militarists" threatening U.S. security, has been severely discredited by the PDF's performance under fire: Only one Panamanian has been killed in months of crisis, and the only attacks on Americans have been inflicted by Americans themselves!

The military-civilian alliance which President Manuel Solís Palma and General Noriega head, has similarly won grudging respect from increasing numbers of governments around the world, who have been forced to acknowledge that

the alliance enjoys popular support.

What then, is the threat which Panama represents to Reagan administration foreign policy? Perhaps the answer was best provided in a *Christian Science Monitor* article of April 1. In all areas where the United States and the Soviet Union control the respective players, such as Nicaragua and Afghanistan, regional accords by the Reagan administration and the Soviets are going forward. The problem for the U.S. in Panama, the Monitor noted, is that General Noriega is neither a U.S. nor a Soviet asset, and thus remains an independent factor in the region!

### **Sent to provoke an invasion?**

Shultz and company now desperately need a pretext of U.S.-Panamanian conflict, to justify an escalation. The problem is, Panama has refused to give them one.

Somebody giving orders in Washington assumes that if the U.S. military deploys in as colonialist a manner as possible, "hot Latin tempers" will react. So, U.S. soldiers have been sent out of their bases onto Panamanian territory, without prior advisement as is required by the treaties, picking fights with PDF patrols, asserting their "right" to travel anywhere in Panama City, in some cases even attempting to set up a military garrison in a residential area.

American troops themselves are skittish. The first U.S. casualty was Cpl. Ricardo M. Villahermosa, age 25, killed on April 11 by fellow guards, who fired at him when he tripped over a flare, setting off a sound much like gunfire. The same day, eight others were wounded when two Blackhawk helicopters collided during training exercises.

On April 13, Marines engaged in a two-hour shoot-out with alleged intruders. No intruders were caught, wounded, or killed. PDF spokesmen suggested that the U.S. troops had been spooked by palm trees swaying at night. Asked if he could rule out the possibility that the Marines had been shooting at shadows, U.S. Southern Command spokesman Col. Ronald Sconyers answered, "At this point in time, we don't categorically rule out anything."

One Panamanian opposition leader moaned to the *Christian Science Monitor*, "It's odd and awkward that U.S. troops would come all this way to foul it up. It's like the Iran affair . . . helicopters colliding, casualties due to mistaken identities. It doesn't do much for their reputation."

Panamanian Defense Force Maj. Daniel Delgado identified the U.S. problem in Panama. "This lamentable incident demonstrates the lack of professionalism of these soldiers who are in the Republic of Panama on a mission which they do not understand . . . in a country which is not theirs, in fulfillment of an irrational policy of aggression against our territory."

The U.S. psychological warfare was aimed at "terrorizing our people, [but] they have succeeded in creating nervousness in the U.S. soldiers," he added.

But State Department outlets in the United States are still

screaming for invasion. "With each day that Washington hesitates to do what it has no responsible choice but to do, the risk of inaction increases. President Reagan must . . . send U.S. troops to oust and arrest General Noriega," the *Miami Herald* cried on April 8. There exists a "growing sense . . . that the U.S. cannot afford to lose in Panama, and that military intervention may be the only way to win," the *Washington Post* alleged April 12.

The *New York Times* described the Marines' two-hour fight with shadows, as a demonstration of "the readiness of the American military to use force and the potential for a confrontation, perhaps inadvertent."

The charges of PDF involvement in the incidents are "reckless and irresponsible . . . provocations whose aim is to justify aggression against our people and our territory," a PDF spokesman answered. On April 12, the government issued a communiqué "categorically denying, as false and tendentious, U.S. government insinuations of supposed participation of PDF units, or intruders dressed in our military uniform, in the incidents." The charge "only seeks to justify these events to the anguished parents of these youth who have been sent to expose their lives unnecessarily, solely to demonstrate U.S. superiority over one of the smallest countries in the world."

### **The Contra factor**

If the Panamanians will not give the State Department the provocation they seek, it appears Elliott Abrams's pet Central American mercenary force, the Nicaraguan Contras, may be used to carry out the job.

On April 11, Panama's Defense Forces announced that they had arrested one Fabio Wallis Caballero, a man who had served as a contract agent for the Contras since he fought with the ARDE Southern Front in 1982-83. The story Wallis told was revealing.

He was working for two U.S. military counterintelligence agents, Sgts. Thomas Gray and Jake Jacobs, based at the Fort Albruc Air Force base. Caballero provided their telephone numbers at the base. He was picked up, as he prepared to travel to Chiriqui Province to photograph PDF installations, with camera equipment and jungle wear provided by his American military contacts, for whom he had been working for nine months.

He reported that his main assignment, however, was to recruit a group of 30 mercenaries, to be trained in weapons handling, explosives, and urban terrorist tactics. The group was to be trained by U.S. military personnel, and then, he specified, deployed in attacks against U.S. installations in the Canal Zone.

The Panamanian military charged that the Contra mercenary apparatus was being deployed to set up the excuse for an invasion. Pentagon spokesmen called Wallis's report "a fabrication," except that they had to admit that Wallis was, indeed, one of their intelligence sources in Panama.