

The Bush administration's cowardly plan to keep the Panama Canal

by Carlos Wesley and Gretchen Small

A "rush" Executive Memorandum issued by the Heritage Foundation on May 16 provides hard-copy proof that the Bush administration's policy for Panama is not concerned with securing "democracy," but rather reestablishing permanent U.S. colonial rule over the nation of Panama, no matter what the cost.

The Heritage memorandum, entitled "Safeguarding U.S. Interests in the Panama Canal," makes no bones about the fact that military force will be required, and should be used, to subdue Panama. That task begins with the ouster of Panama Defense Forces Commander Gen. Manuel Noriega. "It is clear that it may be up to the U.S. to restore order to Panama. . . . What is now needed is a clear ladder of escalation that takes advantage of the current environment in Panama," it argues. It recommends "that Noriega be removed by force if all peaceful efforts fail to dislodge him from power. . . . The U.S. cannot rule out using military might if all else fails."

That much has become standard fare in Washington circles. The Heritage memo, however, insists that the time has come for the President to announce what is expected to follow Noriega's ouster: "Once Noriega is gone and civilian democracy is established, the U.S. should insist on renegotiating the Panama Canal Treaties . . . to reassert that the United States has the right to protect, by any means, including military action, the Panama Canal; and establish that to secure this right, Washington must keep troops in Panama as long as the Canal is in operation. This would revise the current treaty provisions requiring that full operation of the Canal be turned over to Panama and that U.S. troops leave on December 31, 1999."

A Teddy Roosevelt-style policy

The Heritage Foundation is run by Great Britain's socialist Fabian Society in order to repackaging liberal policies for sale to would-be "neo-conservatives." This Panama policy is a prime example of precisely that. If the United States wants to dive head-first into a vortex of escalating warfare against its allies south of the border, this is a sure-fire way to do so. In all of Ibero-America, there is no more hated clause in Teddy Roosevelt's 1904 Panama Canal Treaty than that asserting U.S. rights over Panamanian internal affairs for "as long as the Canal is in operation."

Instead, U.S. security interests in the Americas were best protected by helping to build economically and militarily strong nations south of its border. Panama, for geographic and historical reasons, should play a pivotal role in the industrial-commercial development of the hemisphere. Aiding Panama to play that role, would do more to secure U.S. security concerns for the strategic Panama Canal than any attempt to return to colonialism by force.

The Heritage memo was no mere "recommendation." Heritage Foundation employee Elliott Abrams, the former Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs (one of the principal architects of the failed anti-Panama policy of the Reagan administration) was deployed as an unofficial envoy of the Bush administration to get the governments of Ibero-America to acquiesce to the plan. Abrams visited Venezuela and then Peru, where he met May 18 for two hours with Peruvian President Alan García.

Likelihood of military intervention

Under the blind obsession with this policy, the United States is heading rapidly towards war. "U.S. military intervention in Panama is becoming more likely," a front-page article in the *Baltimore Sun* May 23 reported. "With the expected failure of a high-level diplomatic mission from the Organization of American States, Washington will have few pawns left to play in its bid to oust Gen. Manuel Noriega. . . . The stage is thus set for an armed confrontation sometime after July 1, when all military dependents will either be removed from Panama or placed in housing at one of the eight U.S. military facilities here, said Western military sources. 'The fist has already been swung, and it will be exceedingly difficult to withdraw it,' said one."

The same day, the *Financial Times* of London said that "in case a snub from Gen. Noriega awaits the OAS negotiators, the U.S. naval ship *Bellatrix* last week completed preparations for an alternative U.S. strategy. Blocking a lock in the canal for eight hours, it disgorged a stream of almost 200 armoured vehicles." One "slip" by Noriega, it added, "and the military option may be used."

Likewise, former U.N. ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick, who belongs to the same circles as Elliott Abrams and his Heritage Foundation crowd, praised Bush for his hardline

stance against Panama. In an article in the *Washington Post* May 22, Kirkpatrick wrote: "George Bush was right to send a message that he, too, understands force." She added, "Bush's barely veiled encouragement to the Panamanian National Guard to bring down Noriega is a clear indication that he understands what makes Noriega tick."

Just who is a friendly government?

But while this crowd is promoting coups, and talking up military intervention to fight the fictitious threat of a non-existent mini-"Warsaw Pact" in Panama, they are totally terrified that the Chinese people may win their fight for democracy against one of the most murderous Communist dictatorships on the face of the Earth. Even the U.S. Establishment's liberal media have noted the shameful contrast between the gung-ho sabre rattling of the Bush administration against Panama, and its lily-livered sucking up to Beijing's Communist government.

"President Counsels Restraint in China While Pushing Rebellion in Panama," noted the *New York Times* May 22. "The government in trouble in China is a friendly government with which we have had good relations," said a State Department official cited by the *Times*. "We don't wish that Government ill. There is a greater possibility of parallel interests and cooperation with China than with the Soviet Union." Secretary of State James Baker III said the United States should not be "inciting a riot" of the Chinese against their dictatorial government. Henry Kissinger, who everyone openly admits is setting policy for the administration, called the Chinese fight for democracy, "a great tragedy."

And George Bush himself warned the Chinese freedom fighters: "I think that this perhaps is a time for caution. . . . We do not exhort in a way that is going to stir up a military confrontation."

Bush has expressed no such qualms about provoking a military confrontation in Panama, even though Adm. William Crowe, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has warned him that military action in Panama means American soldiers coming home in "body bags," according to an Evans and Novak syndicated column May 19. The Pentagon has been reluctant to be dragged into such a conflict, and as Admiral Crowe and other U.S. military experts have warned, taking Panama would not be a quick military surgical strike, such as that in Grenada.

However, as the *Baltimore Sun* noted, the administration's tactic of sabre-rattling "is primarily aimed at promoting a military coup within the [Panamanian] Defense Forces." And if that does not happen, the Bush administration, which has placed its prestige on the line on the Panama issue, is likely to find itself locked into a course of inevitable military confrontation.

Noriega holds firm

"The United States is closing all civilized avenues," responded General Noriega in an interview published by the

Panamanian daily *Crítica* May 24. They are showing "an incredible blindness and inconceivable arrogance," he said. "The fact that the U.S. Commander in Chief, George Bush, made me the object of the resolution [by the OAS against Panama], simply proves a total lack of political capacity and that he is being misinformed by the political staffers who work at the U.S. embassy in Panama."

Instead of the cowardly response the administration wants from the Panamanians, Noriega said the Defense Forces are standing firm. "They are a force conscious of their mission, and when they are convinced of what has to be done, there is nothing that cowers them, there is nothing that scares them." As to the resolution against Panama adopted by the OAS May 17, he said: "We have no doubt that what has happened to Panama will happen to any other country in Latin America."

That OAS resolution blamed the current Panama crisis solely on General Noriega, and called on the government of Panama to dissolve itself, "to ensure the transfer of power" to some unknown entity. It also appointed a commission to negotiate this transition with the Panamanian government. That commission—made up of OAS General Secretary João Baena Soares, Ecuadorian Foreign Minister Diego Cordóvez, Guatemalan Foreign Minister Mario Palencia, and Errol Mahabir, a representative of Trinidad and Tobago—arrived in Panama on May 23, all set to work.

The CIA-financed Democratic Opposition Civic Alliance (ADO-C), which Bush would like to place in power, planned to make a show of force, to show how "popular" they were. They failed miserably. Since their May 17 general strike had flopped so badly, the opposition decided to avoid further embarrassment by canceling the general strike they had announced to coincide with the arrival of the OAS ministers. Instead, they called a demonstration May 24, which attracted all of 300 supporters.

Nationalist civilian and military leaders were not so cowardly, and rallied to defend their nation's sovereignty. President Manuel Solís Palma rejected out of hand the ultimatum that the OAS commission came to deliver on behalf of the Bush administration. "Their aim is simple: to overthrow Noriega, to weaken the Defense Forces, to destroy the wall of containment we have built against the ambitions of the United States," he told the Mexican daily *Uno Mas Uno* May 21. "To try to have the world believe that Panama's key problem is Noriega, is a simplistic attempt to hide the true intention of the United States: to retain U.S. military bases in the Canal Zone past the year 2000."

Panama's cabinet issued a blistering manifesto (see *Documentation*) rejecting any attempt by the OAS to constitute itself into a supranational body to determine the winners of Panama's May 7 national election, annulled because of blatant interference from the United States. The National Legislative Assembly approved a resolution May 23 also rejecting OAS intervention, and condemning "the pretensions of the U.S. internal and external allies to create a favorable climate for armed intervention against Panama."

Panama charges U.S. with 'crimes against humanity'

This statement was issued by the government of Panama on May 23.

Panama's historical experience has taught that the task of democratic organization of society and development . . . cannot be carried out when, under the pretext of vital interests based in our territory, the U.S. decides to carry out a policy of domination, submission, and intervention which damages the territorial integrity of the state and the political independence of the Panamanian nation.

In the last three years, the U.S. has shown no scruples about taking recourse to destabilizing activities and multiple coercive and interventionist measures against the Republic of Panama, which have occasioned grave and irreparable damage to the economy and society. Not even the existence of international obligations solemnly agreed on with our country has been able to brake its zeal for plunder of our national sovereignty.

Open and covert aggressions; the pressures and threats of use of force against our State and its leaders; coercive military, monetary, financial, economic, commercial, political, diplomatic and other measures, including embargo, unlawful expropriation and blockade, which has set back our development; open interference in our internal affairs; throwing obstacles to our foreign relations and activities, such as the harassment and violence employed against our consular and diplomatic personnel; constitute actions planned in the framework of a program designed to destabilize the Panamanian state.

These criminal actions of the U.S. government join psychological operations to manipulate consciences and disinformation campaigns on an international scale which falsify our national reality with the goal of discrediting, ruining, and annulling our nation in the concert of nations, and create propitious settings for worse interventions in Panama and Latin America.

The intervention by U.S. government officials in the internal political affairs of Panama was manifest, organizing popular actions of civil disobedience, participating in meetings and demonstrations, and organizing and indoctrinating the opposition forces, supplying large sums of money to change the outcome of the electoral race, declarations being made by high U.S. officials opposing the Government of Panama, including by the U.S. Secretary of State and President.

We do not hesitate to denounce before the world that the cited actions by the U.S. government constitute, without a doubt, *crimes against humanity*, and that such behavior falls within a policy of state terrorism of the power which ironically has named itself the champion of democracy and freedom.

All of this strategy has no other purpose than to prevent us from enjoying national independence, and keep our people from developing and progressing autonomously and in a dignified way compatible with our idiosyncracies, and thereby erradicating colonial and neocolonial holdovers in this current stage of development. . . .

When it says that its strategy against Panama has not yielded the expected fruits, the U.S. tried to isolate Panama and create a circle of pressure around our people in order to deepen and internationalize their axes of destabilization and to overthrow our constitutional government. . . .

The Republic of Panama held the hope that the OAS might act in a spirit of justice, equanimity, and impartiality, and would examine the events of the last 18 months as the result of the criminal acts of the U.S. against our people, that were the fundamental cause of the political crisis the Panamanian nation is undergoing. . . .

However, rather than exploring in an overall manner and with a spirit of justice the international nature of the conflict between Panama and the U.S., the OAS meeting adopted a resolution that only dealt with certain isolated facts of the May 7 elections, omitting the analysis and evaluation of other important facts and circumstances with international repercussions overshadowing the elections.

The Government of Panama maintains that the Resolution approved May 17, 1989 . . . contains criteria, affirmations, directives, and propositions that are not contemplated in the charter of the OAS, or that are irreconcilable with their principal objectives and principles; they contradict inter-American treaties in force; they are incompatible with the Charter of the U.N., and they constitute inadmissible offenses to national dignity, such as the ill-intended mention of the commander of the PDF. . . .

The Republic of Panama . . . understands that the OAS charter does not grant it either the faculty to become an international tribunal of justice, in an international electoral board, nor into an international court of appeals, much less to fulfill functions that belong exclusively to a national tribunal of justice, to a national electoral board, or to a national electoral tribunal, and that such a regional organization cannot, moreover, intervene into the domain of the national sovereignty of the Republic of Panama, nor can it contradict, invalidate, or refuse to recognize the decision of its tribunals.

Our National Government welcomes any initiative that, within the strict competence of the OAS . . . can establish the truth of the crisis as a conflict between Panama and the U.S., but the Republic of Panama will never accept any act that constitutes interference into the sphere of its national sovereignty.