

Panama Report by Carlos Wesley

Noriega's model war on drugs

George Shultz's recent call to legalize dope suggests why the U.S. turned against the Panamanian commander.

The Republic of Panama has led the way in the war on drugs, far in advance of the United States, said the head of the Panamanian Defense Forces (PDF), Gen. Manuel Noriega, in an exclusive interview published by *El Día* of Mexico on Oct. 25. Noriega, who ironically finds himself falsely accused of drug involvement—on the testimony of convicted drug traffickers he turned over to U.S. law enforcement—said that much of the success the U.S. has had in fighting drugs has been due to the assistance and example set by Panama.

"When no one else was turning over the criminals to the United States, we in Panama were the first to send the criminals back to their respective countries for trial, as proven by court records," Noriega said in the interview.

That assertion has been corroborated by U.S. law enforcement officials. In a circular to his field offices in April of 1978, then head of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration Peter Bensinger stated, "In all of Central and South America . . . Noriega is the only one who has been cooperating" with the DEA.

In his *El Día* interview, Noriega said that his collaboration with the U.S. in the war against drugs goes back to the early 1970s, when Panama's armed forces were under the leadership of Gen. Omar Torrijos. Although Panama is neither a producer nor a consumer of drugs, Noriega explained, because of its geographical location it had become a transshipment point.

"I was then in G-2 [military intelligence]. It was not our concern, but we

developed a military strategy. I went to Washington and discussed the question with very professional people, who were working on this at that time. We elevated the fight against drug trafficking and we did then what the U.S. is doing now," said Noriega.

"The United States has taken exactly the plan that we had developed since 1972-73, which is to involve the military in the repression, in controlling drug trafficking," he said. "We, and specifically I, were the ones that internationalized this thing, seeking a common doctrine to bring it under control. And we sponsored the first international conferences," he said.

"We are proud to have been the ones to unify a working doctrine to neutralize drug trafficking," said Noriega. "There was an advance with Panama. Everything that is being done now is Panamanian, and I was one of the participants.

"But what did we get? That the people who have been tried in the United States, handed over by Panamanian justice, are now precisely our prosecutors and accusers."

One such is Floyd Carlton, currently serving a drug sentence in U.S. federal prison. Carlton, a pilot working for Pablo Escobar of the Medellín cocaine cartel, was captured in 1985 as the result of a joint operation between the Panamanian Defense Forces and U.S. law enforcement. But when the U.S. decided to force out Noriega because he stood in the way of its power-sharing condominium arrangements with the Soviet Union in Central America, Carlton was offered a reduced sentence in exchange for lying against Noriega.

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Michael Palmer, also doing time in a U.S. federal prison, and Ramón Milián Rodríguez, a convicted drug money-launderer, are also typical of the "witnesses" the U.S. has trotted out against Noriega.

It should come as no surprise that Washington is working with and on behalf of the drug pushers, given the pro-drug sentiments of top U.S. government officials. George Shultz, the secretary of state under whose tenure the "get Noriega" campaign was launched, has just come out of the closet as an advocate of drug legalization. Shultz told a gathering of Stanford University alumni that the war on drugs is a waste of money. "It seems to me we're not really going to get anywhere until we can take the criminality out of the drug business," said Shultz, reported the *Wall Street Journal* on Oct. 27. "We need at least to consider and examine forms of controlled legalization of drugs."

U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger, ex-president of Kissinger Associates, attacked Noriega in a speech at the Organization of American States Aug. 31, for preventing Gen. Rubén Darío Paredes, an admitted associate of the Medellín cartel, from becoming President of Panama.

On Oct. 18-19, Juan Karamañites and Manuel Castillo Bourcy pleaded guilty in a Georgia court to drug conspiracy and drug-money laundering. The two were arrested last April in the company of their employer, Panamanian millionaire Carlos Eleta, on charges of conspiring to introduce 600 kilos of cocaine per month, worth \$300 million, into the United States. Eleta was being funded by the Bush administration to run a propaganda campaign against Noriega. Eleta, whose trial has been set for January, remains free on \$8 million bail.