

## Panama Report by Carlos Wesley

### Will Congress probe the invasion?

*Some legislators are asking why Bush didn't support the October coup attempt instead of invading and killing thousands.*

**T**he Dec. 20 invasion of Panama was ordered by President George Bush not to apprehend Gen. Manuel Noriega, but to destroy the Panamanian Defense Forces in order to maintain U.S. military installations in Panama beyond the year 2000.

Far from being the "splendid little war" the media have portrayed, the invasion was an incompetent military operation that has been successful, so far, only because the U.S. used overwhelming firepower in a sneak, Pearl Harbor-like attack, largely against the civilian population of a former ally. The invasion was aimed not only at Panama, but to set a pattern for aggression in Mexico, Central America, and South America, where the Bush administration intends to use force to destroy national sovereignty, and to collect the debt on behalf of the international banks.

Certainly the invasion was carried out under the umbrella of the power-sharing agreements between the United States and the Soviet Union. Secretary of State James Baker confirmed that when he said—at the height of the invasion of Panama—that the United States would not object if the Soviet Union invaded Romania to ensure the overthrow of Nicolae Ceausescu.

The Soviets signaled their acquiescence in an article penned by senior foreign policy operative Georgi Arbatov, published by the *Los Angeles Times* on Dec. 24. After a *pro forma* denunciation of the U.S. invasion, Arbatov said, "In the Soviet view, a shift to consistent realism has implied . . . an understanding that our own

interests will not be served by American difficulties, especially in the regions that are especially sensitive to the United States."

To impose the condominium agreements on the Western Hemisphere, the U.S. needs the 10 Air Force, Army, and Navy bases, and the electronic listening posts it has in Panama.

But, according to the 1977 Carter-Torrijos Panama Canal treaties, the U.S. is obligated to withdraw its troops and close those bases at midnight on Dec. 31, 1999, at the same time that control of the canal is handed over to the Republic of Panama.

However, the Panamanian Defense Forces have been dismantled on Bush's orders, by the U.S.-appointed government of Guillermo Endara. In its stead, the U.S. has created a new Public Force, limited to police functions, made up of former members of the PDF and new recruits, who are only allowed to carry handguns and shotguns.

This has created the conditions to revise the treaties to allow the U.S. to keep the bases, under the pretext of providing security to the Panama Canal. The security of the canal is "an area that now has to be rethought," said Gen. Dennis McAuliffe (ret.), the former head of the U.S. Southern Command, who just stepped down as canal administrator. According to the *Washington Post* of Jan. 10, McAuliffe "suggested that the U.S. and Panama might consider a new bilateral agreement covering security for the canal after 2000."

The same day, the Baltimore *Sun* published statements by Guillermo Endara, saying he "might be open to renting a military base to the United States after Panama gains the canal."

Washington sources report that several Congressmen may initiate inquiries as to why the United States deliberately withheld its promised assistance to the Oct. 3 coup attempt against Noriega, which was organized with the approval and complicity of the Bush White House. If the United States had not betrayed the officers who attempted the failed coup, Bush could have achieved his stated, albeit illegal aim of "getting Noriega," without killing thousands of Panamanians and without the loss of any American lives. Had the coup succeeded, it would have been a significant setback for Panamanian nationalism, but the PDF would have survived as an institution, eliminating the pretext for renegotiating the treaties.

Bush sabotaged the coup precisely because he wanted to proceed with the long-planned invasion. According to the *Washington Post* Jan. 11, U.S. soldiers in Panama "volunteered that they knew of invasion plans two months before it took place." The article added, "President Bush repeatedly said the invasion was in response to the murder of an American soldier, but the precision strike had been in the works for months, many soldiers say."

Gen. "Mad" Max Thurman, commander of the U.S. Southern Command, admitted that the aim of the invasion was to destroy the PDF. According to the Jan. 7 *Washington Post*, Thurman said he redrew the invasion plans for the attack to take place "in the middle of the night," and that he ordered "not only the capture of Noriega but destruction of his entire military command structure, through attacks on 27 different locations."