

1968-1990: The invasion of Panama and US intervention



Noam Chomsky's account of the US invasion of Panama, its intervention over the previous twenty years and its backing of drug-trafficking dictator Manuel Noriega.

Panama has been traditionally controlled by its tiny European elite, less than 10% of the population. That changed in 1968, when Omar Torrijos, a populist general, led a coup that allowed the black and mestizo [mixed-race] poor to obtain at least a share of the power under his military dictatorship.

In 1981, Torrijos was killed in a plane crash. By 1983, the effective ruler was Manuel Noriega, a criminal who had been a cohort of Torrijos and US intelligence.

The US government knew that Noriega was involved in drug trafficking since at least 1972, when the Nixon administration considered assassinating him. But he stayed on the CIA payroll. In 1983, a US Senate committee concluded that Panama was a major centre for the laundering of drug funds and drug trafficking.

The US government continued to value Noriega's services. In May 1986, the Director of the Drug Enforcement Agency praised Noriega for his "vigorous anti-drug trafficking policy." A year later, the Director "welcomed our close association" with Noriega, while Attorney-General Edwin Meese stopped a US Justice Department investigation of Noriega's criminal activities. In August 1987, a Senate resolution condemning Noriega was opposed by Elliott Abrams, the State Department official in charge of US policy in Central America and Panama.

And yet, when Noriega was finally indicted in Miami in 1988, all the charges except one were related to activities that took place before 1984 - back when he was our boy, helping with the US war against Nicaragua, stealing elections with US approval and generally serving US interests satisfactorily. It had nothing to do with suddenly discovering that he was a gangster and a drug-peddler - that was known all along.

It's all quite predictable, as study after study shows. A brutal tyrant crosses the line from admirable friend to "villain" and "scum" when he commits the crime of independence. One common mistake is to go beyond robbing the poor - which is just fine - and to start interfering with the privileged, eliciting opposition from business leaders.

By the mid 1980s, Noriega was guilty of these crimes. Among other things, he seems to have been dragging his feet about helping the US in the [contra war in Nicaragua](#). His independence

also threatened our interests in the Panama Canal. On January 1, 1990, most of the administration of the Canal was due to go over to Panama - in the year 2000, it was to go completely to them. We had to make sure that Panama was in the hands of people we could control before that date.

Since we could no longer trust Noriega to do our bidding, he had to go. Washington imposed economic sanctions that virtually destroyed the economy, the main burden falling on the poor non-white majority. They too came to hate Noriega, not least because he was responsible for the economic warfare (which was illegal, if anyone cares) that was causing their children to starve.

Next a military coup was tried, but failed. Then, in December 1989, the US celebrated the fall of the Berlin wall and the end of the Cold War by invading Panama outright, killing hundreds or perhaps thousands of civilians (no one knows, and few north of the Rio Grande care enough to inquire). This restored power to the rich white elite that had been displaced by the Torrijos coup - just in time to ensure a compliant government for the administrative changeover of the Canal on January 1, 1990 (as noted by the right-wing European press).

Throughout this process, the US press followed Washington's lead, selecting villains in terms of current needs. Actions we'd formerly condoned became crimes. For example, in 1984, the Panamanian presidential election had been won by Arnulfo Arias. The election was stolen by Noriega, with considerable violence and fraud.

But Noriega hadn't yet become disobedient. He was our man in Panama, and the Arias party was considered to have dangerous elements of "ultranationalism." The Reagan administration therefore applauded the violence and fraud, and sent Secretary of State George Shultz down to legitimate the stolen election and praise Noriega's version of "democracy" as a model for the errant Nicaraguan Sandinistas.

The Washington-media alliance and the major journals refrained from criticising the fraudulent elections, but dismissed as utterly worthless the Sandinistas' far more free and honest election in the same year - because it could not be controlled.

In May 1989, Noriega again stole an election, this time from a representative of the business opposition, Guillermo Endara. Noriega used less violence than in 1984. But the Reagan administration had given the signal that it had turned against Noriega. Following the predictable script, the press expressed outrage over his failure to meet our lofty democratic standards.

The press also began passionately denouncing human rights violations that previously didn't reach the threshold of their attention. By the time we invaded Panama in December 1989, the press had demonised Noriega, turning him into the worst monster since Attila the Hun. (It was basically a replay of the demonisation of Qaddafi of Libya.) Ted Koppel was orating that "Noriega belongs to that special fraternity of international villains, men like Qaddafi, Idi Amin and the Ayatollah Khomeini, whom Americans just love to hate." Dan Rather placed him "at the top of the list of the world's drug thieves and scums." In fact, Noriega remained a very minor thug - exactly what he was when he was on the CIA payroll.

In 1988, for example, Americas Watch published a report on human rights in Panama, giving an unpleasant picture. But as their reports - and other inquiries - make clear, Noriega's human rights record was nothing remotely like that of other US clients in the region, and no worse than in the days when Noriega was still a favourite, following orders.

Take [Honduras](#), for example. Although it's not a murderous terrorist state like [El Salvador](#) or [Guatemala](#), human rights abuses were probably worse there than in Panama. In fact, there's

one CIA-trained battalion in Honduras that all by itself had carried out more atrocities than Noriega did.

Or consider US-backed dictators like Trujillo in the Dominican Republic, Somoza in Nicaragua, Marcos in the Philippines, Duvalier in Haiti and a host of Central American gangsters through the 1980s. They were all much more brutal than Noriega, but the United States supported them enthusiastically right through decades of horrifying atrocities - as long as the profits were flowing out of their countries and into the US. George Bush's administration continued to honour Mobutu, Ceausescu and Saddam Hussein, among others, all far worse criminals than Noriega. Suharto of Indonesia, arguably the worst killer of them all, remains a Washington-media "moderate."

In fact, at exactly the moment it invaded Panama because of its outrage over Noriega's abuses of human rights, the Bush administration announced new high-technology sales to China, noting that \$300 million in business for US firms was at stake and that contacts had secretly resumed a few weeks after the Tiananmen Square massacre.

On the same day - the day Panama was invaded - the White House also announced plans (and implemented them shortly afterwards) to lift a ban on loans to Iraq. The State Department explained with a straight face that this was to achieve the "goal of increasing US exports and put us in a better position to deal with Iraq regarding its human rights record...."

The Department continued with the pose as Bush rebuffed the Iraqi democratic opposition (bankers, professionals, etc.) and blocked congressional efforts to condemn the atrocious crimes of his old friend Saddam Hussein. Compared to Bush's buddies in Baghdad and Beijing, Noriega looked like Mother Teresa.

After the invasion, Bush announced a billion dollars in aid to Panama. Of this, \$400 million consisted of incentives for US business to export products to Panama, \$150 million was to pay off bank loans and \$65 million went to private sector loans and guarantees to US investors. In other words, about half the aid was a gift from the American taxpayer to American businesses.

The US put the bankers back in power after the invasion. Noriega's involvement in drug trafficking had been trivial compared to theirs. Drug trafficking there has always been conducted primarily by the banks - the banking system is virtually unregulated, so it's a natural outlet for criminal money. This has been the basis for Panama's highly artificial economy and remains so - possibly at a higher level - after the invasion. The Panamanian Defence Forces have also been reconstructed with basically the same officers.

In general, everything's pretty much the same, only now more reliable servants are in charge. The same is true of Grenada, which has become a major centre of drug money laundering since the US invasion. Nicaragua, too, has become a significant conduit for drugs to the US market, after Washington's victory in the 1990 election. The pattern is standard - as is the failure to notice it.)

From [What Uncle Sam Really Wants](#), by Noam Chomsky.

Chomsky is of course an American citizen, and so "we" and "our" refers to the US. The article has been edited slightly by libcom - US to UK spellings and a few small details have been added for the reader new to the topic.