

Puppet of History: Panama's Manuel Noriega

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*"Bush appeared on television to praise the invading troops and to say his cowardly vision – all that a wimp with an inferiority complex could be capable of." **Manuel Noriega** on **George H. W. Bush***

The late **General Manuel Antonio Noriega** has done more to demonstrate the bipolar nature of US foreign policy in the Americas than any single, historically anointed individual. In its tendency to veer between outraged morality and cynical cold steel Realpolitik, US foreign policy found in Noriega a thermometer of sorts, though the temperature readings were often confused.

When it suited Washington, Noriega was the CIA's man in Panama, a glorified errand boy who got above his station. Then, the winds turned, leaving Noriega high and dry. It was not that he wasn't a serial human rights abuser, though this was used against him in due course. (The role of the US School of the Americas, located in Panama till 1984, remains a memorably disturbing stain behind various Latin American death squads.)

What mattered was his cultivation, in time, of a network of power interests and influences across Latin America, including Havana. His lukewarm response to assisting Washington in that dirty conflict against Nicaragua with the aid of the Contra army sounded another nail into coffin. Then came the drugs and the dance with the Colombian cartels.



Col. Oliver North, a key figure in the Iran/Contra Affair during the Reagan and Bush years. (Source: Independence Day)

Noriega would subsequently claim in his memoirs that **Colonel Oliver L. North** had requested he mine Nicaraguan harbours as a willing servant of Washington's interests. The General preferred to ignore him. He was no longer in favour in the morally weary halls of Washington. He had to be gotten rid off.

The US invasion of Panama in December 1989 was typically imperial: brute force masquerading as moral mission. The ground had been softened by a massive campaign singling out Noriega's human rights abuses, and the threat to American lives. Provocations by US soldiers were initiated. Few media outlets in the United States bothered to question the accounts, humming to the sound of government press releases.

Noriega, and Panama, had become symbols of convenient outrage and props for the projection of US power in the closing chapters of the Cold War. (The previous month, the

Berlin Wall had fallen, the Iron Curtain rapidly parting.)

In purely power terms, the General had stepped out of turn, having helped himself to the largesse of US interests and Latin American favour. He would simultaneously supply secrets about Cuba to US authorities while happily selling Fidel Castro thousands of Panamanian passports to be used by Cuban agents.[1]

Murray Kempton captured this predicament well:

“To feed off the United States is to subject yourself to all sorts of inconveniences from a Senate where **Jesse Helms** arraigns your friendship with **Fidel Castro** one day and **Christopher Dodd** your human records the next.”

These subtleties evaporate before the decision to transact with the Medellín and Cali cartels, liberating the subject “from even the lightest chains of ideology.”[2]

Would this caricatured, cartoon villain be able to withstand the US? Initial suggestions were made that Noriega might manage to bring about another quagmire for US forces. The “Dignity Battalions” were taken as representatives of genuine patriotic worth. But there was little getting away from the fact that an Uncle was providing some stern discipline for a pygmy relation. The invasion resulted in a good deal of slaughter.

The Medellín temptation was powerful, assuming a galloping temptation that supplied Noriega with cash and power broking prestige. The Senate subcommittee on narcotics and terrorism fielded material about Noriega’s conversion to the narcotics market in the late 1980s. The tainted **Ramon Lillian Rodriguez** was a source of ratting inspiration, explaining to the Committee chaired by **Senator John Kerry** that Noriega had assumed money laundering responsibilities while also supplying Panamanian security forces to the cartels. The golem had gotten out hand.

The more astute operatives would have worked out that he was never controllable in the least. Furtive sexual encounters do not necessarily suggest understanding, let alone influence. Links forged in 1976 with **George H. W. Bush**, who was then the director of Central Intelligence, were not blood insured covenants, but understandings of interest. But no US leadership can keep unctuousness out for long. There is always an understanding about who sets the terms.



Archbishop Jose Sebastian Laboa (Source: Times of Malta)

After the invasion commenced, Noriega fled to the Apostolic Nunciature of the Holy See. A reluctant **Monsignor Jose Sebastian Laboa** relented to the imposition, having had next to no time to consult the higher-ups in the Vatican. US special forces, in the meantime, were charged with the task of capturing the diminished, fleeing figure.

What followed was an ignominious effort to force Laboa's hand. The State Department hectorred him for granting refuge to a criminal; military operatives rained psychological warfare upon the compound. Laboa, in time, decided that the church's promise of sanctuary needed to be reneged - by dissimulation if necessary. Surrender was a foregone, bitter conclusion.

Noriega would subsequently face a farcical and poorly conducted trial. (Resorting to 40 convicted drug traffickers as witnesses for the prosecution is treacherous ground indeed.) In 1992, he was sentenced to 40 years in Florida as prisoner No. 41586, convicted on cocaine trafficking charges, racketeering and money laundering.

Subsequent in absentia trials took place in Panama (the execution of soldiers in the 1989 coup attempt) and France (money-laundering). His early release in the US led to extradition battles that landed him first in France, then back in Panama.

The moral in all of this? No sadistic showman is ever indispensable when dealing with hegemony and the exercise of cynical foreign policy interests. Ultimately, the puppet can never be permitted to be the puppet master.

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Notes

[1]

https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/30/world/americas/manuel-antonio-noriega-dead-panama.html?_r=0

[2] <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1989/06/15/why-noriega-wins/>

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