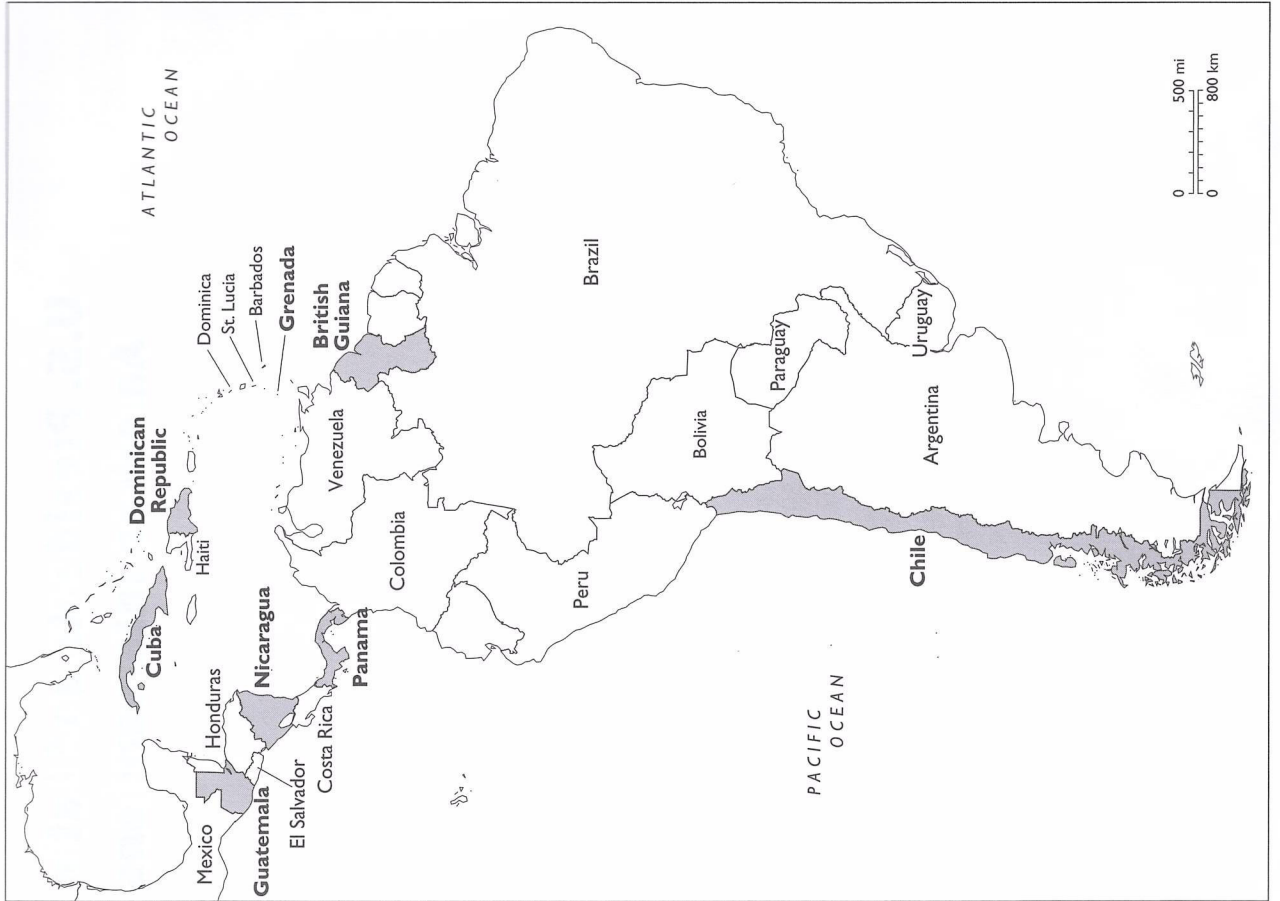


U.S. Presidents and Latin American Interventions

Pursuing Regime Change in the Cold War

Michael Grow



“When we got to Washington,” he declared at a Corpus Christi rally, “the enemies of freedom were on the move. They were encouraged by what they saw as a lack of will in the previous administration. . . . Well, I’m proud to say that . . . [i]n the last four years, not one square inch of territory has been lost to Communist aggression. And, in one case, with quick and decisive action, we protected hundreds of American medical students from a potential hostile situation and restored freedom to the people of Grenada.”⁸⁴ Three weeks later, in a flag-draped White House ceremony marking the intervention’s first anniversary, Reagan told a carefully selected group of “rescued” medical students that

using military force is . . . the most serious decision any President must make. It’s an awesome responsibility. But the evidence to me was clear. At stake was the freedom of 110,000 Grenadians, the security of the democracies of the Eastern Caribbean and, most important, the safety and well-being of you American medical students. . . . So, we approved a military operation to rescue you, to help the people of Grenada, and to prevent the spread of chaos and totalitarianism throughout the Caribbean.⁸⁵

References to Grenada in the president’s campaign speeches were usually accompanied by stirring, and implicitly self-congratulatory, proclamations that the United States’ post-Vietnam era of “paralyzing self-doubt” had ended, that “our days of weakness” were over, and that America was “back.”⁸⁶

The results were all that the president could have hoped for. Within two weeks of the invasion, public opinion polls showed that 71 percent of the American people approved of the intervention, and Reagan suddenly found himself leading his two principal Democratic presidential challengers for the first time in months. By January 1984, when he announced his intention to run for a second term, his presidential approval rating had skyrocketed from the thirties into the sixties. Ahead lay “a free ride” to his uncontested renomination—“the first for any incumbent president since Dwight Eisenhower in 1956”—and “a strong running start” toward his eventual landslide victory in November.⁸⁷ A quick and easy military victory in Grenada—a “nine-day pushover,” as one account describes it—had proven to be a healthy tonic for a faltering presidency. Skillfully exploited by a media-savvy White House, the intervention had diverted the nation’s attention away from economic recession, high unemployment, budget deficits, and a foreign-policy catastrophe in the Middle East, and allowed Reagan to refurbish his image as a strong, effective, and popular president.⁸⁸

CHAPTER EIGHT

Panama, 1989

In an early morning television address from the Oval Office on December 20, 1989, President George H. W. Bush informed the American people that he had just ordered U.S. military forces to invade Panama. Bush offered four reasons for the invasion: (1) “to safeguard the lives of . . . the 35,000 American citizens in Panama”; (2) “to combat drug trafficking” and “bring [Panamanian dictator Manuel] Noriega, . . . an indicted drug trafficker, . . . to justice”; (3) “to defend democracy in Panama”; and (4) “to protect the integrity of the [1977] Panama Canal treaty.”⁹¹ For anyone familiar with U.S.-Panamanian relations in the period leading up to the intervention, there was ample reason to question the validity of each of the president’s stated motives.

First, although members of Noriega’s Panamanian Defense Forces (PDF) had killed a U.S. Marine and roughed up a U.S. naval lieutenant and his wife on December 16, the acts of violence were precipitated by a war of nerves that the Bush administration had initiated two months earlier in an apparent effort to provoke Noriega into providing a justification for intervention. If Bush’s primary concern was the safety of U.S. citizens in Panama, he might first have terminated the U.S. campaign of provocation and stopped trying to bait Noriega into committing violent acts against Americans. A large-scale U.S. military invasion that resulted in the deaths of twenty-four Americans (along with hundreds, if not thousands, of Panamanians) seemed a rather incongruous strategy if the goal was to save lives.⁹²

Second, if Bush was seeking to stanch the massive flow of narcotics entering the United States from Latin America at the end of the 1980s, there were many more significant targets for U.S. military action than Manuel Noriega. It was true that Noriega had profited handsomely from business dealings with Colombia’s Medellín drug cartel, but his involvement consisted primarily of allowing the cartel to transport drugs and launder money in Panama in exchange for millions of dollars in kickbacks. He was never more than a minor player in the world of international narcotics trafficking, and—as U.S. officials were well aware at the time of the intervention—he had retired from active participation in the drug trade in March 1986. Paradoxically, Noriega had also worked closely with the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency, providing so much valuable assistance to its drug-interdiction operations in Panama that agency officials considered him a key ally and trusted collaborator in the U.S. war on drugs. (In fact, several agency officials were prepared to testify in Noriega’s defense when he was eventually brought to trial on drug-trafficking charges in the United States.) Consequently, Bush’s antinarcotics rationale for the 1989 intervention seemed, as Thomas Carothers puts it, “hollow” at best.⁹³

Third, the track record of U.S. policy toward Panama during Noriega's years in power made it difficult to believe that a desire to defend democracy was a decisive determinant of Bush's decision to intervene. If a democratizing impulse impelled Bush to order the December 1989 invasion, no such dedication to ideological activism had been evident five months earlier when Noriega's bloody quashing of a Panamanian presidential election elicited little more than verbal protests from the United States. A few years earlier, President Reagan and Vice President George Bush had responded to Noriega's blatant theft of a 1984 election and subsequent ouster of incumbent president Nicolás Ardito Barletta in 1985 with a policy of passive acquiescence bordering on approval. Moreover, as critics of the 1989 intervention pointed out at the time, Bush's concern with democracy in Panama seemed curiously selective; why—if democracy was the issue—did he not unleash U.S. military power on Libya's Muammar Khaddafi, Syria's Hafez Assad, Indonesia's Suharto, or the many other Third World dictators who were at least as unsavory as Manuel Noriega?⁴

Fourth, Noriega had done nothing to threaten either the Panama Canal treaties or the canal itself. No Panamanian leader of any political persuasion was likely to place in jeopardy treaties that mandated the transfer of the canal to Panamanian sovereignty by the year 2000. And as Pentagon officials privately acknowledged at the time of the intervention, the waterway itself was in no danger whatsoever. Nor had Noriega threatened U.S. access to the canal.⁵

Why, then, *did* Bush invade Panama? A more accurate and candid explanation would have required the president to discuss factors unmentioned in his December 20 television address: namely, the successful manipulation of U.S. public opinion by Noriega's Panamanian political enemies and the resulting U.S. domestic political pressures that eventually led Bush to carry out a military intervention.

The Panama invasion was a major departure from preceding U.S. interventions in the region in the sense that the target of U.S. hostility was not a Marxist leader or movement but a right-wing military officer who had worked closely with the United States for three decades. Manuel Noriega was, in fact, precisely the kind of Latin American leader the United States had so often accepted as an ally in the struggle against international communism. By virtually all accounts, he was ruthless, sadistic, utterly amoral, thoroughly corrupt, and authoritarian to his core.⁶

A career in the military had enabled Noriega to overcome unpromising origins in the slums of Panama City. As a young junior officer, he attached himself to the coattails of his politically ambitious garrison commander, Col. Omar Torrijos, and advanced rapidly—earning a notorious reputation for raping prostitutes, torturing prisoners, and killing leftists along the way. After Torrijos seized power in a 1968 coup, Noriega was promoted to high-level positions, first as a military zone commander, then in 1970 as chief of national intelligence—a position that made him

the second most powerful man in Torrijos' dictatorship, with powers equivalent to those of the directors of the CIA and FBI combined. Noriega exploited his new power to amass personal wealth from a variety of illicit activities, including arms smuggling and money laundering. After Torrijos died mysteriously in a 1981 plane crash, Noriega quickly muscled rival officers aside and became Panama's military commander in chief, giving him *de facto* control of the country. Elevated power offered him new sources of outside income, particularly in the emerging growth industry of international narcotics trafficking. A 1989 report by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee's Narcotics Subcommittee described the basic dynamics of Noriega's dictatorship: by 1983,

Noriega [had] gained control of the Customs, Immigration, and Passport Services, Civil Aeronautics, the National Bank of Panama, and the Attorney General's Office, which together represented the major Panamanian institutions with jurisdiction over the narcotics trade. Noriega pushed legislation through the National Assembly consolidating the National Guard, Air Force, Navy, police and Customs under a single command called the Panamanian Defense Forces (PDF). As head of the PDF, Noriega now controlled all elements of the Panamanian government essential to the protection of drug trafficking and money laundering, thus accomplishing two goals simultaneously: increasing his control over Panama and enriching himself. Noriega turned Panama's political system into what one [committee] witness called a "narcokleptocracy," a system in which Panamanian government became controlled by personal loyalties to Noriega, cemented by graft and corruption, and substantially funded with narcotics money.⁷

The financial rewards were impressive. Working in partnership with Colombia's newly formed Medellín drug cartel, Noriega pocketed \$100,000 to \$200,000 for each plane load of cocaine and marijuana that the cartel transhipped through Panama to the United States. For helping his Medellín partners launder their drug profits in Panamanian banks, he received monthly commissions of up to \$4 million. By the time of his ouster in 1989, his net worth was estimated at between \$200 million and \$800 million.⁸

Noriega's ties to the United States dated back to his military-cadet days in the late 1950s, when the CIA recruited him as a paid informant. During the 1960s, U.S. training at the School of the Americas, Fort Bragg, and other installations helped him develop his intelligence-gathering and counterintelligence capabilities. His value to the United States increased significantly during the 1970s, when, as Panama's chief of intelligence, he regularly supplied U.S. intelligence agencies with what they regarded as some of their best information about Cuba, Latin American guerrilla movements, and—beginning in 1979—Nicaragua's Sandinista government. As his services to the United States increased in importance, so did

his compensation: by the mid-1970s, the CIA was secretly paying him \$110,000 per year—by the early 1980s, \$200,000.⁹

The high point in Noriega's collaboration with the United States came between 1981 and 1985, when—as Panama's new military strongman—he helped the Reagan administration conduct its anticommunist crusade in the Caribbean basin. During this period, the intelligence information he provided about Castro's Cuba was considered so valuable that Reagan's CIA director, William Casey, traveled to Panama for personal briefings by the Panamanian dictator. Noriega's active support for Reagan's Contra war in Nicaragua won him even greater esteem in Washington. From the start, he worked hand in hand with Casey, Oliver North, and Reagan's other key Central American operatives—facilitating arms shipments to Contra units; providing them with money, training facilities, and safe transit through Panama; conducting espionage operations in Nicaragua on behalf of the United States; helping to blow up a major Sandinista military arsenal in 1985; and even offering at one point to assassinate the entire Sandinista leadership. So important was his support of U.S. policy in Central America and the Caribbean that by the mid-1980s CIA and Pentagon officials regarded him as an indispensable and crucial ally.¹⁰

An indispensable ally Noriega may have been, but a trustworthy friend he was not. Always the consummate opportunist, he habitually worked both sides of every street, selling his services to anyone who would pay for them. During the 1970s, while earning hefty paychecks on the CIA's payroll, he simultaneously worked for the Cuban intelligence service—supplying Fidel Castro's government with sensitive information about U.S. operations; facilitating shipments of Cuban weapons to Marxist insurgents in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Colombia and helping arm the Sandinistas in their insurrection against Somoza; helping Castro circumvent the U.S. trade embargo against Cuba by permitting Cuban companies to secretly purchase U.S. computers and other advanced technology in Panama's Colón Free Zone; and granting base rights at the Panamanian port of Vacamonte to Cuba's Pacific fishing fleet as it conducted intelligence missions and smuggled weapons to leftist forces up and down the Pacific coast of Latin America.¹¹ In 1976, in what journalist Kevin Buckley described as “one of the largest intelligence thefts against the United States in recent history,” Noriega bribed several employees of a U.S. National Security Agency electronic-eavesdropping facility in the Canal Zone to supply him with copies of the agency's communications intercepts and other top-secret documents about U.S. electronic-surveillance operations in the hemisphere—a gold mine of classified information that U.S. officials suspected ended up in Castro's hands.¹² He also worked both sides of the drug war—assisting the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency in drug busts against small-time Panamanian drug dealers he disliked while simultaneously raking in massive profits as a business partner of Colombia's drug lords.¹³

U.S. officials were well aware of their Panamanian ally's duplicity and criminality, but they valued his services too greatly to sever ties with him. After all, as Rea-

gan's national security adviser Colin Powell explained matter-of-factly, “Cold War politics sometimes made for creepy bedfellows.” Or as one CIA official put it: “[Not all our sources are people you'd take home to meet mother. You have to use them anyway.” Noriega was always regarded as useful despite his proclivity for double-dealing. His links to Cuba, for example, were known and accepted by U.S. intelligence agencies because they believed that the information he supplied them about Cuba far outweighed the information he was providing Castro about the United States. (“Sure, Noriega worked for the Cubans,” a U.S. agent later recalled, “but we calculated he belonged twenty percent to them and eighty percent to us.”) The Reagan administration continued to “coddle” Panama's dictator through the mid-1980s because it believed that his criminality and authoritarianism were far less important than his support of U.S. policy in Nicaragua. It was Reagan's CIA director Casey who perhaps best summed up the prevailing U.S. view of Noriega when he said of the Panamanian leader: “He's a bastard, but he's our bastard.”¹⁴

By the mid-1980s, Noriega's Panamanian political opponents were waging war on him—not in the streets of Panama City but in the U.S. news media and on Capitol Hill. Based mainly in the urban middle class, their ranks included civilian politicians seeking free elections, businessmen and professionals demanding commercial freedom and respect for civil liberties, and defectors from the dictatorship maneuvering to take over Noriega's authoritarian system and maintain “business as usual” without Noriega. Weak and disunited, lacking a mass base of popular support, and reluctant to physically confront the dictator's PDF troops and riot police, they turned instead to the United States for help. According to scholar Richard Millett, most members of the opposition “blamed their plight on U.S. policies. In their view, Noriega and the PDF were U.S. creations,” armed and trained by the United States, and sustained in power by U.S. economic and military assistance. Some opposition leaders were convinced that if they could change U.S. policy and persuade Washington to withdraw its support of Noriega, they would be able to overthrow the dictatorship relatively easily. Others believed that a U.S. military intervention would be needed to oust Noriega. (As one opposition leader informed a U.S. newspaper reporter: “You created the monster, so you kick him out.”)¹⁵ But they all shared one strategic goal in common: to bring Noriega down by turning the United States against him.

In June 1985, Panamanian newspaper publisher Roberto Eisenmann arrived in the United States to begin a yearlong fellowship at Harvard University's Nieman Foundation for Journalism. Eisenmann had long been a vocal critic of military rule in Panama, and his feisty opposition daily *La Prensa* had at various times been shut down and “viciously vandalized” by Noriega's troops for printing exposes of government corruption and PDF involvement in the drug trade. In 1978, he gained valuable insight into the process of influencing U.S. policy when he testified

before a U.S. congressional subcommittee that was investigating the Torrijos dictatorship's human-rights abuses. After describing Torrijos' frequent practice of forcing his political enemies into exile, Eisenmann became frustrated with the subcommittee members for failing to express sufficient concern over his revelations. When he asked the congressmen, in exasperation, if 40,000 Panamanian political refugees living in the United States would upset Congress, Representative Clarence D. Long (D-MD) replied: "If they voted in our district it would." For Eisenmann, the message was clear and the lesson obvious: the U.S. Congress was more concerned with the U.S. electorate than with human-rights violations in Panama. Political pressure from the U.S. voting public must therefore be the key to influencing U.S. policy makers.¹⁶

It was that tactical premise that guided Eisenmann's efforts when he returned to the United States in 1985. Convinced that the Reagan administration would not abandon Noriega "unless domestic politics made it unavoidable," he immediately launched a campaign to discredit the Panamanian dictator in the eyes of the U.S. public by generating negative coverage of him in the U.S. news media. From his Harvard base, he utilized the Nieman Foundation's influence networks to cultivate important U.S. media contacts. Playing on the issue of press censorship in Panama and his experience as the publisher of a victimized newspaper, he quickly gained the attention of influential East Coast journalists; with his insider's knowledge of the media, he was able to give them the "hard leads and verifiable facts" they required. His fluency in English also helped. Soon he was showing up on the *MacNeil-Lehrer NewsHour*, ABC's *Nightline*, and other television news programs, detailing Noriega's crimes before national U.S. viewing audiences, charging that the PDF had a "Made in the U.S.A." label on it, and publicly chastising U.S. policy makers for their moral bankruptcy in giving aid to a "Mafia gang" like the Noriega regime.¹⁷

In December 1985, another of Noriega's Panamanian political enemies, attorney Winston Spadafora, arrived in the United States to lobby against the dictator. Three months earlier, Spadafora's brother Hugo—a charismatic political activist and one of Noriega's harshest critics—had been savagely murdered by the dictator's PDF henchmen. When Panama's compromised Justice Ministry failed to file charges in the case, Spadafora traveled to Washington, D.C., to enlist support from the United States and the Organization of American States in a crusade to see Noriega prosecuted for murder. In January 1986, he called on Senator Jesse Helms (R-NC), the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee's Western Hemisphere subcommittee. Helms, who had fiercely opposed the 1978 Panama Canal treaties, was always looking for new evidence to back his contention that "Panama's leaders were simply too corrupt to be entrusted with the Canal." Spadafora described for the senator the gruesome details of Hugo's murder—which included lengthy torture, homosexual rape, and decapitation—and showed him grisly photographs from the autopsy. Sickened, Helms told Spadafora: "I'm

going to promise to work my hardest to get justice for your brother and to raise the issue to the level of President Reagan's agenda." True to his word, Helms quickly convened Senate subcommittee hearings in March and April to provide the Panamanian opposition with a forum. Among the witnesses was Norman Bailey, a former U.S. National Security Council staff member, who testified that drug trafficking was endemic in Panama's government and that Noriega was widely suspected of ordering Hugo Spadafora's murder. Helms' hearings produced no spectacular headlines in the United States, but they caught the attention of other influential congressmen and a few D.C.-based journalists.¹⁸

Meanwhile, Eisenmann's media campaign was about to pull off a major coup. At the Nieman Foundation, Eisenmann persuaded director Howard Simon, a former *Washington Post* managing editor, that Noriega's relationship with the United States was "a great story waiting to be told." Simon put the Panamanian publisher in contact with Seymour Hersh, the prominent investigative reporter who had won a Pulitzer Prize for uncovering the My Lai massacre in Vietnam. Hersh's interest in Noriega had already been piqued by the Helms hearings, and he was eager to talk with Eisenmann. The two men met on May 22, 1986, and afterward Eisenmann sent the reporter a note that read: "I don't want to sound dramatic, but two million freedom-loving Panamanians could be depending on your success in breaking this [Reagan administration] cover-up and support of a terrible man. . . . I'll be in touch."¹⁹ Three weeks later, an explosive Hersh article examining the U.S.-Noriega connection appeared on the front page of the *New York Times*. According to the article, U.S. officials were well aware that their longtime Panamanian ally was a drug-dealing murderer and a Cuban double agent. Citing "senior State Department, White House, Pentagon and intelligence officials" as his sources, Hersh described Noriega's deep involvement in "illicit money laundering and drug activities," his role in helping Cuba acquire "restricted American technology" and highly sensitive National Security Agency intelligence materials, and his smuggling of arms to Cuban-trained Marxist guerrillas in Colombia. The article claimed that the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency had communications intercepts "demonstrating that General Noriega ordered the killing" of Hugo Spadafora. And it reported that "officials of the Reagan administration and past administrations" admitted "in interviews" that they had deliberately "overlooked General Noriega's illegal activities" because they considered him to be "a valuable asset."²⁰

Hersh's exposé was the big break Eisenmann had been hoping for in his effort to make Noriega a public issue in the United States. The embarrassing reality of the U.S. government's long and "immoral" alliance with a corrupt, sadistic dictator had suddenly been thrust before the U.S. public eye by the nation's preeminent newspaper, as reported by a highly respected U.S. journalist and backed up, not by politically self-interested members of the Panamanian opposition, but by authoritative-sounding "senior" U.S. government sources. Better still, the article had an immediate multiplier effect in the U.S. media. Within days, three other major U.S.

news outlets—the *Washington Post*, NBC News, and the *Miami Herald*—ran independently reported stories on Noriega, and the *MacNeil-Lehrer NewsHour* aired a feature segment examining Hersh's charges in detail.²¹

Eisenmann quickly followed up with a new round of media appearances to inform the American people of the plight that Panamanians were suffering under their U.S.-supported military regime. Meanwhile, Helms' efforts were beginning to attract bipartisan interest on Capitol Hill. After sitting in on a few of Helms' subcommittee hearings in the spring, Senator John Kerry, a liberal Democrat from Massachusetts, sensed that his North Carolina colleague was "onto something." In September, the two senators co-sponsored an amendment to the Intelligence Appropriations bill requiring the CIA to report to the House and Senate intelligence committees on the PDF's involvement in criminal activities, including the Spadafora killing. The amendment passed. Four months later, Kerry's Senate Subcommittee on Terrorism, Narcotics, and International Communications launched "an exhaustive investigation" into Noriega's links to the drug world. The subcommittee hearings, which featured colorful testimony from imprisoned drug pilots and money launderers, generated substantial press coverage. By early 1987, Noriega's photograph was appearing daily in the U.S. news media, and increasing numbers of congressmen were asking why the Reagan administration was continuing to do business with such a repugnant dictator.²²

June 1987 was a particularly busy month for Panama's opposition. In a series of sensational press interviews in Panama City on the sixth and seventh, Col. Roberto Diaz Herrera—whom Noriega had forcibly retired as his second in command a week earlier—revealed inside details about PDF corruption and directly implicated Noriega in the deaths of both Spadafora and Torrijos. Diaz Herrera's revelations sparked a wave of public protests in the Panamanian capital and prompted the opposition's newly created umbrella organization, the National Civic Crusade, to organize demonstrations demanding an end to military rule. Noriega responded with a vicious crackdown, deploying his riot police—aptly named the "Dobermans"—to beat and arrest the demonstrators. The violent repression immediately became a nightly feature of U.S. television news and provided Eisenmann with new opportunities to influence U.S. public opinion. In a June 18 appearance on the *MacNeil-Lehrer NewsHour*, he charged that the Reagan administration found it easier and more efficient to achieve its policy goals in Panama by dealing with a dictator than by working with an elected government. U.S. support of Noriega, he implied, was trampling democracy in Panama. "For God's sake," he implored his American viewing audience, "get on the right side, get on the democratic side before it's too late."²³

A few days earlier, another of Noriega's Panamanian political enemies, Gabriel Lewis, arrived in Washington. A multimillionaire businessman, Lewis had served as Panama's ambassador to the United States during the Panama Canal treaty negotiations, and in the process he had acquired influential friends in the U.S. Con-

gress, including Senator Edward Kennedy (D-MA) and other Democrats who supported the treaties' ratification. After clashing repeatedly with Noriega over business matters, Lewis was forced to flee Panama in June 1987 when he suggested that the dictator should consider stepping down for the good of the country. In D.C., he immediately set up a branch office of the National Civic Crusade and launched "a vigorous lobbying campaign" aimed at pressuring the Reagan administration to reverse policy and force Noriega from power. Through his tireless efforts on Capitol Hill, he soon succeeded in welding together a strong bipartisan coalition of anti-Noriega senators led by Democrats Kennedy and Kerry and Republicans Helms and Alphonse D'Amato of New York, another of Lewis' friends. Eisenmann would later call Lewis' bipartisan base of Senate support "a vital ingredient" in the opposition's drive "to disconnect the U.S. government from Noriega. . . . We [now] had both sides of the aisle, right and left, committed to our Cause," thereby "avoiding an ideological seal on our efforts." Tangible results came quickly. Working closely with Kennedy's staff, Lewis helped draft a Senate resolution that called for a public accounting of Diaz Herrera's allegations and urged the Reagan administration to "direct the current commander of the Panama Defense Forces and any other implicated officials to relinquish their duties pending the outcome of the independent investigation." The resolution passed on June 26, by a nearly unanimous vote.²⁴

Then, in December 1987, José Blandón, one of Noriega's closest confidantes and most trusted political advisers, defected to the opposition from his post as Panama's consul in New York City. Blandón had been intimately involved in many of Noriega's secret diplomatic and business dealings, and the sordid details that he was soon divulging in congressional testimony and media interviews made Hersh's *New York Times* exposé seem bland by comparison. In one anecdote, Blandón recounted a 1984 episode in which the Medellín drug lords put out a contract to kill Noriega in the belief that he had stolen \$5 million from them, and Fidel Castro mediated the dispute, saving the dictator's life. Such fascinating new revelations provided another "bonanza for American newspapers, radio stations, and TV networks" and helped keep Noriega in the forefront of U.S. public attention.²⁵

As 1988 began, Eisenmann and his colleagues had reason to be proud of their accomplishments. Thanks to the media coverage they had generated and the bipartisan support they had mobilized in Congress, the Reagan administration was under growing pressure to "do something" about Noriega. And with a U.S. presidential election campaign about to get under way, the administration's relationship with the dictator was certain to be one of the "hot-button" issues in American politics in the months ahead. The opposition's strategy was working to perfection.

The initial spate of anti-Noriega publicity in the United States had what former U.S. ambassador to Panama Ambler Moss describes as "considerable . . . repercus-

sions" on the Reagan administration, and it quickly forced the administration to take a "new look" at its Panama policy. In June 1986, shortly after the publication of Hersh's *New York Times* exposé, the *Washington Post* reported that U.S. officials were split between "those who favored 'overlooking' the problem and those who argued that Noriega's vices could no longer be 'ignored.'" According to the *Post* story, a senior administration official admitted that "'in the past we've needed' Noriega but that Hersh's charges might force a reevaluation of the relationship."²⁶ Nevertheless, Noriega's supporters in the CIA, Defense Department, and National Security Council successfully argued that the Panamanian leader's assistance, particularly to the Nicaraguan Contras, made him too valuable an asset to lose. As a result, the administration's existing policy was reaffirmed, and as the State Department's Frank McNeil recalls: "A decision was made to put Noriega on the shelf until Nicaragua was settled."²⁷

Events soon "settled" Nicaragua, although not in the way that Reagan would have chosen. During the autumn of 1986 it was revealed that the administration had violated U.S. law by secretly supplying the Contras with funds diverted from covert arms sales to the government of Iran. The Iran-Contra scandal and the political firestorm that it ignited brought an ignominious end to the administration's counterrevolutionary operations in Nicaragua—and in the process significantly reduced Noriega's value as a U.S. ally. Concurrently, Noriega was losing two of his strongest administration supporters. In late 1986, Oliver North was forced to resign from the National Security Council because of his involvement in Iran-Contra, and CIA director Casey was hospitalized with brain cancer. Casey died five months later.²⁸

June 1987 generated new pressures on the administration to reconsider its relationship with Noriega. The dictator's violent suppression of the mass protests that followed Col. Díaz Herrera's revelations graphically heightened U.S. public awareness of Noriega's brutality. When the U.S. Senate, spurred on by Gabriel Lewis' lobbying activities, passed its resolution calling on Noriega to step down, the infuriated dictator again responded with violence. Four days after the Senate action, a pro-Noriega mob attacked the U.S. embassy in Panama City, causing extensive damage. The fact that Panamanian police assigned to guard the embassy were withdrawn shortly before the mob arrived suggested strongly that the Panamanian government had orchestrated the attack—presumably as a warning to the Senate that Noriega would not be intimidated by U.S. criticism.²⁹

The embassy attack forced the Reagan administration to conclude that a working relationship with Noriega was no longer politically sustainable. In July, the administration suspended U.S. economic and military assistance to Panama and removed Noriega from the CIA payroll. Five months later, Assistant Secretary of Defense Richard Armitage visited Panama and informed Noriega that the Reagan administration now viewed him as a problem and wanted him to resign. By the end of 1987, Washington's indispensable intelligence asset in Panama had become an embarrassing political liability.³⁰

He became even more of a liability in February 1988, when two U.S. federal grand juries, operating independently of the Reagan administration, indicted Noriega on multiple counts of narcotics trafficking. The indictments left the administration with no choice but to adopt a more aggressive anti-Noriega policy. Politically, Thomas Carothers writes, Reagan simply "could not afford to be seen tolerating" an indicted drug dealer—not at a time when the toxic political fallout from Iran-Contra was threatening to undermine his presidency, and certainly not in an election year in which his own vice president was campaigning to succeed him in the White House. A "get tough" policy toward Noriega now became "an unquestionable political necessity."³¹

Less than three weeks after the indictments were announced, Reagan told a White House press conference that he wanted to see "a return to democracy and a civilian government in Panama." Secretary of State George Shultz reinforced that message in early March when he told reporters: "We are anxious to see General Noriega get out of there." At the same time, however, the administration openly disavowed military intervention as a policy option. In March, Reagan stated publicly that the United States would not use military force to push Noriega out of power. A month later, Treasury Secretary James Baker reiterated that the administration had ruled out "putting our military assets into play" in Panama.³²

Instead, the administration opted for a combination of economic pressure and diplomatic negotiations to secure Noriega's removal. In March, Reagan imposed economic sanctions, freezing Panamanian assets in the United States and suspending U.S. payments to Noriega's government. Delays and exemptions, however, prevented the sanctions from achieving the desired result.³³ Then in May, U.S. diplomats offered the dictator a deal: the United States would drop the indictments and end its economic sanctions in exchange for Noriega's voluntary retirement and the restoration of civilian government in Panama. Noriega mulled the offer over for a while but eventually declined, telling a reporter that he enjoyed being "a pain in the rear" of the United States.³⁴

By mid-1988, Reagan's efforts to rid himself of his erstwhile Panamanian ally had gone nowhere. Worse still, his offer to lift Noriega's U.S. drug indictments had inadvertently damaged Vice President Bush's presidential election campaign. Behind the scenes of White House policy making, Panama's dictator had become a divisive issue in Republican Party campaign politics.

For the Bush campaign, Manuel Noriega was a potential Achilles' heel from the very beginning. "Noriega was one of those things that fell into the category of the less you had to say about it, the better," Craig Fuller, the vice president's chief of staff, later recalled. "We felt at all times that George Bush was vulnerable on the issue, in the sense that we thought the other side would raise it." Fuller was correct. During the Republican primaries, Senator Robert Dole of Kansas—Bush's

principal rival for the party's nomination—charged that Bush had known about, and condoned, Noriega's criminal activities both as the Ford administration's CIA director in 1976–1977 and as Reagan's vice president after 1980. According to Dole, Bush and other U.S. officials had been “playing footsie with this guy” for years even though they “knew, or . . . ought to have known” that Noriega “was up to his eyeballs in dirty drugs and anti-American politics.”³⁵

The Democrats were also quick to play the Noriega card. By April, Massachusetts governor Michael Dukakis, the Democratic front-runner, was raising questions about Bush's past ties to the Panamanian strongman. “How about telling us who in this administration was dealing with Noriega,” he asked during a party debate. “Who was paying Noriega? Who was ignoring the fact that we knew he was dealing in drugs and making millions and we're still doing business with him?” Soon, Democratic bumper stickers reading “Bush–Noriega '88—You Know They Can Work Together” were rolling off the party's printing presses.³⁶

The Bush camp responded to the attacks with what journalist Frederick Kempe describes as “a maze of . . . confusing and contradictory statements.” Initially, Bush tried to claim that he had never met Noriega. When a photograph appeared showing the two men together, his aides were forced to admit that at least two personal meetings had taken place—one in 1976 and another in 1983. Bush also maintained that he had known nothing about Noriega's involvement in the drug trade until the February 1988 indictments. Going further, he tried to take partial credit for the indictments, telling a group of Ohio high-school students in early May that “when it became demonstrably clear that Noriega was involved in drugs we moved against him, with an indictment.” “It is our administration,” Bush said, “that is trying to bring this man to justice, once we found out he had gone bad.” A few days later, however, a *New York Times* story, citing White House and State Department sources, reported that the U.S. ambassador to Panama had briefed the vice president in 1985 about Noriega's drug trafficking. Bush categorically denied the story's charges. But when his foreign-policy adviser, Donald Gregg, testified under oath that the 1985 briefing had in fact covered drugs, at least “in a general way,” Bush's staff was forced into damage-control mode. The vice president wasn't “trying to suggest that he didn't know Panama had a narcotics problem and that Noriega . . . might have some involvement,” Fuller explained. “What he was really saying is that” he had no “certain knowledge” or hard evidence linking Noriega to drugs “until after the indictments.”³⁷

By mid-May, the drug issue was threatening to derail Bush's campaign. A majority of Americans believed that narcotics were now the most dangerous security threat facing the nation—more dangerous even than communism. And, as journalist Kevin Buckley writes, “Noriega had become the ugly symbol of the reigning evil.” According to *New York Times* and *Washington Post/ABC News* polls, 58 percent of voters disapproved of the Reagan administration's Panama policies, while only 36 percent believed the administration was dealing successfully with interna-

tional narcotics trafficking; a mere 24 percent thought that Bush would conduct the U.S. war on drugs as effectively as Dukakis. Overall, the vice president trailed his Democratic rival by ten points in the race for the presidency.³⁸

Consequently, Reagan's decision on May 11 to offer to throw out Noriega's U.S. drug indictments in exchange for the dictator's retirement produced near-panic in the Bush camp. In a series of White House meetings that Secretary of State George Shultz described as “wild” and “wilder,” the vice president and his campaign advisers vehemently opposed the president's decision, arguing that it would be “political suicide in an election year” for Bush to appear to be “going soft” on Panama's “drug dictator” by letting him “go free of the drug charges.” “The Democrats will eat us up on this,” Bush's campaign manager James Baker warned. “How can we make the argument we're getting tough on drug dealers if we let this guy off?” Bush asked the president. For the next 12 days, a policy dispute that one administration official characterized as “monumental” raged inside the White House, with Reagan and Bush going “toe-to-toe” over the issue.³⁹

Reagan remained adamant, arguing that the indictments forced him to take some form of action to remove Noriega, and that the only available options were to persuade the dictator to leave power voluntarily or to intervene militarily and force him out. “There is no alternative to this deal except troops,” Reagan told Bush. “What you guys are settling for,” the president complained, “is that we have to go in there with considerable loss of life, and how does that look to the rest of Latin America?” Secretary of State Shultz energetically backed Reagan's position, warning that if “fearful” members of the administration “kill this deal [with Noriega], then we have to support tougher measures—like go in and get him.”⁴⁰

Meanwhile, press leaks about an impending deal with the dictator had set off a storm of “scathing and bipartisan” public criticism in the United States. Reporters began hounding Bush with difficult questions at every campaign stop. Smelling blood, Dukakis also criticized the reported deal, asking campaign audiences “how I and people like me can go to . . . children and their parents today and tell them to say ‘no’ to drugs when we've got an Administration in Washington that can't say ‘no’ to Noriega.” “There will be no more dealing with drug-running Panamanian dictators” in a Dukakis administration, the Democratic candidate promised.⁴¹

Soon the vice president's aides were complaining that “Bush can't make a speech these days with any credibility about drugs if we're dealing with the drug kingpin of the world.” Bush's campaign handlers now frantically urged him to break publicly with the president over the Noriega issue and to do so as quickly as possible. “We have really got to pull the plug on this one,” aide Sam Watson advised, or else “George Bush is going to be trapped by Panama.” Accordingly, in a May 19 campaign speech in Los Angeles, the vice president pointedly distanced himself from Reagan by declaring: “I won't bargain with drug dealers . . . whether they're on U.S. or foreign soil.” The following day, the Bush staff announced that the vice president was opposed to negotiations with Noriega.⁴²

The dictator's reluctance to accept the U.S. deal soon made the issue moot. But Bush had begun to paint himself into a corner. To save his political campaign, he had unequivocally rejected diplomatic negotiations as a strategy for securing Noriega's removal. If Reagan and Shultz were correct that the only alternative option was U.S. military intervention, Bush, as president, would have only two choices available: intervene militarily, or accept Noriega's continuance in power and look weak and irresolute in the process. In November, that eventuality became reality when the vice president won a massive electoral victory with a 53 percent majority and 426 electoral-college votes. "If we had known we would win the election by so much," campaign manager James Baker commented "only half-jokingly," "we would not have dug such a deep hole for ourselves."⁴³

Following the collapse of negotiations with Noriega in late May, Reagan had assisted Bush's campaign by endeavoring to keep Panama out of the headlines until the election was over. U.S. diplomats and military officers in the country were instructed to tone down their public statements and activities in order to avoid roiling the waters. The commander of U.S. military forces in the Canal Zone, General Frederick Woerner, later recalled that "before the elections, as we started to get into active campaigning, the word was out: 'Put Panama on the back burner'" and "keep it out of the news" for the remainder of the campaign. Throughout the summer and fall, according to Woerner, U.S. policy in Panama was "based blatantly on partisan politics and no other . . . consideration."⁴⁴ The strategy worked. Although Dukakis continued to raise questions about Bush's past involvement with Noriega, and although Bush was frequently confronted with chants of "What about Noriega?" at campaign appearances, the vice president successfully deflected the issue and swept to victory in November.⁴⁵

Nevertheless, as they prepared to take office, Bush and his advisers still regarded Noriega as one of their most pressing problems. Bush continued to talk tough, declaring publicly that "there must be no misunderstanding about our policy. Our policy will be that Noriega must go."⁴⁶ To that end, the new administration focused its initial efforts on Panama's upcoming May 1989 presidential election, in which an opposition coalition headed by attorney Guillermo Endara was running against one of Noriega's handpicked puppets. Bush secretly funneled \$10 million in campaign funds to the opposition and authorized the CIA to conduct clandestine anti-regime radio broadcasts inside Panama in a campaign designed to defeat the dictator at the polls. The new president also invested some of his own personal prestige in the outcome by publicly challenging Noriega to conduct an honest election and warning that his administration would not accept the "results of a fraudulent election engineered simply to keep Noriega in power." In addition, the White House dispatched a U.S. delegation headed by former presidents Carter and Ford to monitor the voting. Consequently, as the *Washington Post* noted, the

Panamanian election quickly came "to be regarded by Panamanians and the outside world as a test of whether the United States [could] end [Noriega's] defiance."⁴⁷

The result was an unmitigated disaster. When early returns on election day showed the opposition leading by a three-to-one margin, Noriega ordered Panama's Electoral Tribunal to suspend vote counting and sent his supporters out to destroy the ballots. Three days later, during an opposition-led protest march through the streets of Panama City, the dictator unleashed his newly organized paramilitary goon squads, the "Dignity Battalions," on the marchers. With the international media on hand to record the event, the Dignity Battalions beat the opposition's leaders with metal pipes, rubber hoses, and two-by-fours studded with rusty nails. Within hours, photographs of the savagery, including jarring images of Endara's vice-presidential running mate Guillermo ("Billy") Ford drenched in blood, were appearing on U.S. television screens, newspapers, and the covers of news magazines—chilling new symbols of Noriega's contempt for democracy and graphic evidence that George Bush's first attempt to oust the Panamanian strongman had ended in humiliating failure. As if to underscore the latter point, Noriega now went out of his way to taunt the new U.S. administration. "No one is going to tell me when I have to go," he declared defiantly, "much less the United States."⁴⁸

Bush responded with more tough talk but little action. He issued outraged public statements demanding that Noriega "honor the will of the people." He said that the United States would "not be intimidated by [the dictator's] bullying tactics." He called on the Organization of American States to seek a constitutional solution to Panama's political difficulties. And in a rhetorical outburst that would soon come back to haunt him, he called on the Panamanian Defense Forces to rebel against their leader and remove him from power. "They ought to do everything they can to get Mr. Noriega out of there," he told reporters on May 13. "He's one man, and they have a well-trained force." "I would love to see them get him out." But other than recalling the U.S. ambassador and reinforcing the U.S. military presence in the Canal Zone, Bush did nothing. Nor did he even seem to be considering more muscular action at this point. When asked if U.S. military forces in Panama would be prepared to assist the PDF in overthrowing Noriega, Bush's Defense Secretary, Richard Cheney, responded that the administration did not see "any role for U.S. troops" in "deciding who governs Panama."⁴⁹

Bush's less-than-forceful response to the election debacle was undoubtedly a reflection of his instinctive political caution. As he told his staff shortly after his inauguration: "I don't want to make any early term mistakes like Kennedy and the Bay of Pigs." "I don't want to do anything dumb."⁵⁰ Nevertheless, his restraint left him looking weak in the eyes of many observers. Almost immediately, reporters began bombarding him with pointed questions about the effectiveness of his foreign-policy leadership, and Bush's replies did little to inspire confidence that he had any plan in place to resolve the Noriega problem. During an interview with the White House press corps on May 9, two days after the aborted election, a reporter

asked him: "Did you put yourself in a box here by making such a public point of being upset about these elections, and if Noriega decides to stay anyhow, that it looks like the U.S. has been ineffective?" Bush rejected the suggestion that he had been boxed in but offered no indication that he had a strategy for ousting the dictator. Four days later, another journalist pressed the president on his Panama policy: "So far, you have struck out—and so did President Reagan—in trying to get [Noriega] out of power. Do you have any other options?" "[No," Bush replied. At a White House news conference in early June, he again faced harsh questioning: "Mr. President, some of your critics say that, despite your rhetoric, General Noriega can sit in Panama for as long as he wishes, in effect laughing at you, sir, laughing at the United States. Can you do anything about it?" Bush's response was that he was "not going to give up on this." The following month, a reporter again pushed him for his plan to remove the dictator: "Mr. President, Noriega is still in charge in Panama. The GAO [Government Accounting Office] says the sanctions haven't worked. Where are you going on Panama? What are you going to do? Are you going to accept the situation the way it is?" To which Bush replied: "I wish I could give you a much clearer answer, that there is some plan that is going to solve this problem."⁵¹ By midsummer of 1989, an unflattering perception of the new U.S. president was beginning to spread. During his two terms as vice president, Bush had been derided in various circles as an unassertive "yes man," Reagan's "lap dog," and a "wimp." Now, six months into his first term as president, Manuel Noriega was making him look like an ineffectual leader.⁵²

But Bush's image problem extended far beyond Panama. Throughout 1989, he often seemed almost detached and disengaged as a series of cataclysmic internal transformations destabilized the communist bloc. In the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev was implementing a far-reaching program of political and economic liberalization, calling for an end to the East-West conflict, and proposing international initiatives in Europe that would render the principal Cold War security alliances, NATO and the Warsaw Pact, obsolete. Meanwhile, in Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia, communist regimes were unraveling in the face of popular democratic revolutions. In June, Gorbachev began a unilateral withdrawal of Soviet military forces from Eastern Europe, in effect dismantling the Warsaw Pact. That same month, government forces in the People's Republic of China crushed a prodemocracy movement in Beijing's Tiananmen Square, killing hundreds. As democratic ferment swept through the communist world and the Iron Curtain crumbled, Bush remained a silent and passive spectator. From his perspective, it was only prudent to avoid any potentially inflammatory U.S. statements or actions that communist governments might interpret as internal meddling or gloating. To many observers, however, his cautious response to the remarkable changes taking place in the Eastern bloc was a further indication of weak, indecisive leadership: the West's Cold War arch-adversary—the communist bloc—was falling apart, and the president of the United States was doing nothing to encourage the process.

Soon Bush was being "vilified for his inaction." In the U.S. Senate, Democratic majority leader George Mitchell charged that the president appeared "frightened" by the uncertainties and opportunities that the unfolding world events were producing. The press was equally critical. According to *Time* magazine, Bush seemed "almost recklessly timid, unwilling to respond with the imagination and articulation that the situation requires." The *New York Times* reported that the new administration was "widely viewed as having failed so far" and indicted Bush for being "hyper-cautious by nature, a reactor rather than an initiator." Bush's national security adviser Brent Scowcroft recalls that by midsummer the White House was already worrying about how to "turn around the sharply negative image the press had drawn of the performance and even the capability of the President and the Administration in foreign policy."⁵³

Consequently, Bush's difficulties in Panama were increasingly perceived as symptomatic of a larger problem: the new president's weak leadership in foreign affairs generally. As Noriega clung stubbornly to power in the face of U.S. opposition, he became in many eyes a symbol of Bush's inadequacies in the international arena. Given the historical moment—with the communist bloc collapsing and the Cold War seemingly coming to an end—the implications were enormous; if George Bush—"the leader of the Free World"—could be "pushed around by a small-time thug" in a small country like Panama, his prospects for maintaining U.S. global leadership in the emerging post-Cold War world seemed unpromising at best.⁵⁴

Then suddenly, in early October, Bush got what he had wished for in Panama. On the third, dissident elements of the Panamanian Defense Forces led by Major Moisés Giroldi launched a coup d'état, seizing Noriega at the PDF's Comandancia headquarters in Panama City and announcing publicly that the dictator and his top commanders were being forcibly retired. Giroldi had informed the United States of his coup plans two days earlier and had asked U.S. military forces in the Canal Zone to support the operation by setting up roadblocks and disrupting air traffic in order to prevent pro-Noriega troops from coming to the dictator's defense. Bush initially agreed to the request but grew cautious when U.S. authorities in Panama warned that Giroldi might be a Noriega plant trying to lure the United States into an embarrassing display of imperialist behavior. Then, on the day of the coup, a hectic White House schedule—featuring visits by the Soviet defense minister and the president of Mexico—partially distracted the administration from events in Panama, to the extent that no National Security Council meetings were convened to monitor the situation. Consequently, when the coup got under way, U.S. military forces failed to carry out the full range of "blocking" activities that Giroldi had initially been led to expect. Within hours of Noriega's capture, loyalist PDF units from outside the capital had moved into the city and surrounded the Comandancia. In desperation, Giroldi offered to turn Noriega over to U.S. forces in the Canal Zone, but it took two hours to elicit a response from Washington, and

by the time Bush authorized U.S. officials in Panama to take custody of the dictator, it was too late—Noriega loyalists had freed their leader and forced Giroldi to surrender. Giroldi and at least ten of his co-conspirators were quickly executed.⁵⁵

Noriega immediately denounced U.S. involvement in the uprising and taunted Bush again. “The gringo piranhas want to do away with me” and “install a government of sellouts,” he told a crowd of cheering supporters two days after his rescue, but the Bush administration “left its agents in the lurch.” Laughing at how badly Bush had “screwed up,” he compared the episode to the Bay of Pigs debacle and dared the president to try again.⁵⁶

The administration’s performance in the failed coup generated a new torrent of public criticism in the United States. In Congress, Democrats excoriated the president for his handling of the affair. David Boren, chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, accused Bush of “talking tough but acting less than courageously.” “We had an insurrection of some very courageous people . . . and the United States did nothing,” Boren charged. Chairman Sam Nunn of the Senate Armed Services Committee complained that despite its “longstanding policy . . . of encouraging a coup” in Panama, the administration had “no real plans for our people on the ground on how to proceed if [such an event] occurred.” “We should anticipate that our policy might succeed,” he remarked acidly. In the House, Chairman of the Select Committee on Intelligence Dave McCurdy (D-OK) suggested that Bush’s handling of the coup made “Jimmy Carter look like a man of resolve.” The result, according to McCurdy, was “a resurgence of the wimp factor” that had long plagued Bush’s public image. “It’s hard to imagine Lyndon Johnson or Ronald Reagan hesitating,” another House Democrat with extensive foreign-policy experience noted.⁵⁷ Republicans were equally vociferous in their criticism. In the Senate, Jesse Helms labeled the administration “a bunch of Keystone Kops, bumping into each other.” “After this,” he declared, “no member of the PDF can be expected to act against Noriega.” In the House, Henry Hyde, the ranking Republican on the Intelligence Committee, also blasted the administration, complaining that “we look indecisive, vacillating, and weak.”⁵⁸

The U.S. press heaped ridicule on the administration. The *New York Times* characterized Bush’s handling of the coup as “a model of incompetence,” while the *Washington Post* described the president as “absolutely paralyzed” during the coup—“All he could do was ‘dither.’” *Newsweek* magazine, in a cover article entitled “Amateur Hour,” charged that the administration’s “management of [the] crisis smacked of inexperience and unpreparedness.” The coup had been the new president’s first “test by fire,” the article asserted, and the results were “not comforting”; the White House had managed to reap “the worst of both sides: a loss of face in a world where that matters, and Noriega still in power.” All in all, the magazine concluded, Bush’s performance “made for a poor contrast with his predecessor.” The conservative weekly *Human Events* was even more vitriolic, charging that Bush’s failure to support Giroldi revealed an “incompetence and timidity bor-

dering on appeasement.”⁵⁹ Syndicated columnists had a field day. Charles Krauthammer wrote that the failed coup reflected the administration’s “halfway-haltness—halfway policy backed by halfway measures.” A George Will column entitled “An Unserious Presidency” suggested that the symbol of Bush’s presidency “should be a wetted finger held up to the breezes,” while William Safire, in a piece entitled “A Man With No Plan,” concluded that Bush’s “fiasco quota has now been filled.” Retired colonel Harry G. Summers Jr., a former holder of the Douglas MacArthur Chair at the U.S. Army War College, detected graver issues at stake. In a syndicated column titled “Panama Coup Bumbling Is the Least of Our Worries,” he wrote that the coup had given the American people “a glimpse into the abyss. Our national security decision-making process, the very heart and soul of our national defenses, was revealed to be in chaos. It was a frightening revelation. . . . If our national leaders bungled so badly on a minor crisis like Panama, what would they do in the face of a major threat? Would they still be shuffling papers . . . while enemy missiles were inbound?”⁶⁰

The Panamanian opposition also took the president sharply to task. In a *Washington Post* op-ed headlined “You Yanquis Can’t Handle a Coup,” Roberto Eisenmann expressed his “great disillusionment” with the administration. Bush’s “bungling” response to the crisis made it “clear,” Eisenmann wrote, “that there is no coherent policy behind the presidential rhetoric, that . . . contingencies had not been contemplated, much less planned for, [and] that in the campaign to dislodge Noriega, U.S. rhetoric can safely be ignored.” “A dog that barks [had] better have a bite behind its bark,” another opposition leader warned angrily, “or otherwise it better shut up.”⁶¹

But the most damaging criticism came from administration officials themselves. For several days following the attempted coup, stories in leading U.S. newspapers quoted administration insiders “expressing criticisms or doubts regarding the White House’s handling of the affair.” In a *Washington Post* article headlined “U.S. Was Caught Off Guard by Coup Attempt,” “top Bush aides” described the “cloud of uncertainty” that hampered the president’s decision making about whether to support Giroldi. A *New York Times* story quoted “White House officials” as admitting that “the Bush Administration’s team performed badly in a major test.” Another *Times* story, citing unnamed “administration officials” as its sources, described “tension between the [White House] chief of staff and Brent Scowcroft, the national security adviser, over the fact that contingency planning . . . did not take into account the kind of fast-moving . . . events that led to the collapse of the rebellion.”⁶² By October 6, Bush had had enough. Early that morning, according to *Washington Post* reporter Ann Devroy,

an “enraged” President Bush ordered his top advisers to put a stop to internal criticism of the administration’s handling of the coup attempt. . . . [For three days] officials in many departments told reporters that the administration had

been ill-prepared for its first unexpected international crisis, had no contingency plans for dealing with it, and reacted clumsily to unfolding events. . . . Bush's anger . . . aides to senior officials said, was based on reading the morning newspapers, many of which quoted senior officials lamenting how the crisis had been mishandled, and suggesting an efficient crisis management operation was lacking and that the president was either too cautious or too hampered in information he was receiving to make informed decisions.⁶³

The October coup debacle was, in Secretary of State James Baker's words, a watershed in Bush's policy toward Panama. The administration's stumbling response to the rebellion produced a crisis of credibility for the White House, fueling public perceptions of Bush as an overcautious, vacillating "incompetent." Underlying the "frenzy" of public criticism that followed the coup, Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman Colin Powell observed, "was the question of presidential image—lingering doubts about Bush as wimp. Nine months into his presidency, Bush still had not defined himself" as an effective commander in chief, "and this failure left open a basic question" in the public mind: "Was the essential Bush indecisive and hesitant?"⁶⁴ Did he really "have the *stuff* to be President of the United States? Was he equal to the job?"⁶⁵

"Rattled by the criticism" (according to Vice President Dan Quayle) and desperate to improve his public image, Bush immediately began preparations for a show of strength that would demonstrate his capacity for bold, decisive leadership. A week after the coup, he ordered the Pentagon to initiate planning for a full-scale U.S. military invasion of Panama. "Amateur hour," he told his advisers, "is over."⁶⁶ An awkward problem immediately became apparent, however: the White House needed a legitimate reason to invade Panama. As Vice President Quayle put it, "before we could [act], we needed a pretext for moving against the dictator." "We knew that in order to implement the full [invasion] plan," chief Pentagon planner Lt. Gen. Carl Stiner later recalled, "it would take some kind of a trigger that would be acceptable as morally justifiable—like protecting lives—in the minds of the American people and the world." What the administration specifically needed, Secretary of State Baker writes, was "a blatant provocation against American citizens that would arouse public sentiment and make intervention more palatable."⁶⁷

Accordingly, to provide the requisite "pretext" for intervention, U.S. military forces in Panama proceeded to conduct a series of aggressive combat-training maneuvers deliberately designed "to raise the level of tension" and "draw Noriega into a confrontation." According to one postinvasion investigating commission, the exercises included "searching Panamanian citizens, confronting PDF forces, occupying small towns for a number of hours, buzzing Panamanian air space with military aircraft, and surrounding public buildings with troops." Two months after the Giroldi coup, the Council on Hemispheric Affairs reported that "Canal Zone-

based U.S. forces in recent weeks have been regularly trespassing on Panamanian soil, almost inviting an incident with the Panamanian Defense Force." Soon U.S. forces were carrying out "intimidation games" and "intense, high-adventure night exercises" "three or four times a week," producing an environment of "heightened open friction" and an escalating "war of nerves" between U.S. and Panamanian troops. "We had young soldiers, locked and loaded, facing PDF, also locked and loaded, where any one person on either side could easily get scared or do something wrong, and start a fight," a U.S. infantry officer later recalled. In late November, as invasion planning neared completion and dangerous confrontations with PDF forces increased in number, the commander of U.S. military forces in Panama assured the Pentagon's General Stiner that if "there's a single American killed, we're going to blow [Noriega] away."⁶⁸

Meanwhile, events on the broader world stage were exerting additional pressure on Bush to move aggressively in Panama. In early November, East German authorities responded to escalating popular unrest by opening the Berlin Wall and standing aside as tens of thousands of their countrymen fled to freedom in the West. Within days, the wall itself—"for three decades the symbol of communist enslavement of half of Europe"—was being sledge-hammered into rubble by crowds of jubilant Berliners. As the Western world celebrated the dramatic events, Bush again remained cautious and restrained. His public response—a terse, emotionless, unenthusiastic-sounding statement praising the East German communists' decision making—subjected him to more criticism for failing to provide any inspirational or visionary leadership during a period of momentous historical change. In the press, syndicated columnist William Pfaff warned that the United States appeared to be "court[ing] irrelevance," while on Capitol Hill, the House majority leader, Richard Gephardt (D-MO), complained that "even as the walls of the modern Jericho come tumbling down, we have a president who is inadequate to the moment."⁶⁹

By December, the Cold War was clearly ending and administration strategists were excitedly drafting blueprints for the U.S.-dominated "new world order" that they hoped would follow. The post-Cold War international system that they envisioned was a stable world of capitalist democracies, in which the United States, as the only remaining superpower, would utilize its overwhelming military superiority to guarantee global stability, working with cooperative allies and the United Nations to reduce international conflict, prevent aggression, and promote liberal models of national development—a world in which, as Bush would put it a year later in the run-up to the Persian Gulf War, "what we say goes." Not all Americans necessarily shared the administration's vision of a hegemonic U.S. role in the post-Cold War world, however. By late 1989, speculation was rife in U.S. intellectual circles that the nation—having exhausted itself in the victorious struggle against communism—would now share the fate of previous great powers by entering a

period of inevitable decline, in which its international power would diminish and it would lose its preeminent position in the world. From the administration's perspective, alarming early indicators of a potential "declinist" scenario were already appearing on Capitol Hill, where some members of Congress had begun to call for drastic reductions in U.S. defense spending and the allocation of the resulting "peace dividend" to domestic social programs.⁷⁰

It was no coincidence that the U.S. invasion of Panama occurred at a time when the White House was preoccupied with these broader strategic challenges. For Bush and his advisers, Manuel Noriega's successful defiance of the United States raised inconvenient questions about U.S. power at a critical moment when the nation was preparing to assume new responsibilities of global leadership. The U.S. inability to oust Noriega could easily be read as a sign of growing impotence—"the sort of foreign policy weakness exhibited by [great] powers in decline, not by vigorous world leaders." As a prominent international-relations specialist noted at the time, "The contrast between America's position in the world today and its position only a few decades ago is sobering. U.S. influence in the Western Hemisphere—so enormous in the 1950s that Washington could overthrow a left-leaning Guatemalan government with a minimal covert effort—had so diminished by the late 1980s that the Reagan administration was unable to force out of office a minor-league dictator in Panama, a country actually created by Washington and controlled by American officials for decades." If the United States was incapable of ousting a petty tyrant in its own Caribbean backyard, would it still command the deferential respect in other world capitals that effective global leadership required? Would other nations unhesitatingly follow the United States' lead as it set out to construct a new world order in its own image? Would future "rogue states" be emboldened to pursue their own aims in defiance of America's will? From the Bush administration's perspective, a demonstration of U.S. power in Panama would reassure the world that the United States was still the superpower it claimed to be. In his memoirs, Colin Powell describes a pervasive sense of outrage in the White House in late 1989 that "a third-rate [Panamanian] dictator" was "thumbing his nose at the United States." In Powell's view, "this sort of challenge" to U.S. international credibility, coming at a watershed point in global affairs, "was intolerable"—an "affront to the country" that demanded a powerful U.S. response. It was time, he advised the president, for the United States "to put a shingle outside our door saying, 'Superpower Lives Here.'" The "shingle" was Panama.⁷¹

By December, the administration's two-month campaign of military provocations in Panama had raised tensions to an explosive level. Early in the month, Noriega's courts issued arrest warrants for the two highest-ranking U.S. military commanders in the Canal Zone on charges of "constant harassment" of Panamanian citizens. Adding to the tension was the administration's announcement, also in early December, that no vessels flying the Panamanian flag would be al-

lowed to enter U.S. ports, effective February 1990. For Panama, which registered a significant proportion of the world's merchant ships and depended heavily on maritime commerce for its income, the port ban was a major economic blow—and Noriega's government reacted angrily. On December 15, the Panamanian national assembly passed a resolution calling the U.S. action tantamount to a declaration of war against Panama. In a public speech the same day, Noriega declared that "the North American scheme" of constant harassment had "created a state of war in Panama." Brandishing a machete over his head for effect, he told a crowd of cheering supporters: "We will sit by the canal and watch the bodies of our enemies float by."⁷²

A day later, the now-all-but-inevitable incident of violence occurred. On the evening of the sixteenth, an automobile carrying four U.S. Marines ran through a PDF checkpoint outside Noriega's Comandancia headquarters in a section of Panama City officially designated off-limits to U.S. military personnel. When the car approached the checkpoint, Panamanian soldiers armed with AK-47s tried to inspect the Marines' identification documents and "words were exchanged," at which point the car's driver panicked and floored the accelerator. As the car sped off, one of its occupants, Lt. Robert Paz, reportedly "gave the finger" to the PDF soldiers, who opened fire, killing Paz. The incident was witnessed by a U.S. naval officer and his wife, who were detained by the PDF and subjected to four hours of physical and psychological abuse before being released. What four U.S. Marines were doing in a sensitive off-limits area of the capital at a time of acute tension between the two countries remains a matter of controversy. The Marines claimed that they "got lost" while driving back to their base from a Panama City restaurant; investigative reports by the *Armed Forces Journal International* and *Los Angeles Times*, however, identified them as intelligence officers affiliated with a secret group of "gung-ho" Marine provocateurs called the "Hard Chargers," who may have been probing Noriega's defenses on the evening of the sixteenth. Whatever the reality, the incident sealed Noriega's fate. Although the PDF quickly sent word to U.S. officials that Paz's killing had been an unintended accident and an isolated incident, it was too late. The White House now had the "trigger event" that it had been waiting for. "They had a plan" to invade Panama, a Pentagon official told *Newsweek* magazine, "and they were just waiting for an excuse to use it."⁷³

The following day, a few hours after learning of Paz's death, Bush and his top advisers reviewed the invasion plan, code-named Operation Just Cause. After receiving assurances from Colin Powell that there would be "no repeat of the failure at Desert One," Jimmy Carter's disastrous military mission to rescue U.S. hostages in Iran nine years earlier, the president ordered the Pentagon to proceed with the operation. U.S. combat forces began parachuting into Panama in the early hours of December 20 and quickly overwhelmed the PDF. Two weeks later, Noriega surrendered to U.S. authorities. The dictator was then transported to Miami, where

in 1992, after a seven-month trial, he was convicted of cocaine trafficking, racketeering, and money laundering and sentenced to forty years in a U.S. prison.⁷⁴

Among the beneficiaries of the U.S. invasion, none had greater cause for celebration than Panama's political opposition. In a fundamental respect, the intervention was the culmination of their efforts. Four years earlier, Roberto Eisenmann and his colleagues had set out to turn the United States against Manuel Noriega. The strategy they adopted was based on an astute premise: that by galvanizing U.S. public opinion against the dictator, they could generate political pressure on the U.S. government to terminate its alliance with him. Over the course of the next two years, their skillful media campaign and energetic lobbying activities achieved precisely that result. By 1987, thanks largely to the opposition's efforts, Noriega's public image in the United States was so bad that the Reagan administration had little choice but to distance itself from him. From that point on, the downward spiral in U.S.-Panamanian relations developed a momentum of its own. But the subsequent key events—Reagan's decision to sever ties with Noriega, candidate Bush's move to rescue his presidential campaign by renouncing negotiations with the dictator, President Bush's image-driven decision to intervene—all unfolded in the context of anti-Noriega sentiment that the Panamanian opposition had fostered in U.S. domestic politics. The payoff came on December 20, 1989, when, shortly before the invasion began, U.S. forces transported Guillermo Endara and his colleagues to a U.S. base in the Canal Zone and arranged for them to be sworn in as the new leaders of the Panamanian government. Endara knew that he was assuming Panama's presidency "under occupation" by an American invasion force and that, as he later recalled, history would condemn him as a U.S. puppet. Nevertheless, the opportunity to take power and end military rule in Panama was too irresistible to turn down.⁷⁵

The invasion also enhanced the credibility of U.S. claims to the role of dominant superpower in the emerging post-Cold War international system. In its operational aspects, Kevin Buckley writes, it was designed to provide "a showcase spectacle" of U.S. military power and "a demonstration of Pentagon prowess." To assure an overwhelming victory, Bush and his advisers opted for a massive air and ground assault, deploying some 26,000 troops in the largest U.S. military combat operation since Vietnam (and the largest American paratroop drop since World War II). Reflecting Colin Powell's belief in the "disproportionate use of force," U.S. forces outnumbered PDF combatants by a ratio of six to one. The operation also provided the Pentagon with an opportunity to display (and test) many of the newest and most sophisticated items in its formidable arsenal of high-tech weaponry, including Abrams tanks, Apache attack helicopters, AC-130 "Spectre" gunships equipped with 105-mm howitzers, and the new supersonic Stealth

fighter-bomber. Some of the weapons were utilized, in Powell's words, "just for show." For example, the Stealth fighter-bomber—an aircraft uniquely engineered to evade enemy air defenses—was deployed against a PDF adversary that "lacked military radar, anti-aircraft batteries, or a true air force."⁷⁶ The end result was a military cakewalk in which the PDF was quickly routed and replaced in power by the civilian politicians who had been denied victory in Panama's May 1989 elections. The UN General Assembly condemned the invasion as a "flagrant violation" of international law, and Panama's new democratic leaders quickly proved disappointing (drug trafficking in Panama actually *increased* under Endara, while the new government soon became so unpopular that in December 1990 the Bush administration was forced to intervene militarily again to protect it from overthrow).⁷⁷ Nevertheless, the Panama invasion sent a powerful signal to the rest of the world: that after a potentially exhausting forty-year struggle against communism, U.S. power was alive and well—and that in the new world order that lay ahead the United States was fully prepared to use its overwhelming might to crush "rogue" dictators and promote democracy.⁷⁸

Finally, Operation Just Cause established George Bush's credentials as a strong, decisive president. Throughout his first year in office, Manuel Noriega had made him look ineffectual, "wimpy," and weak, damaging his domestic political credibility and raising questions about his ability to project U.S. leadership internationally at a pivotal moment in world history. By overthrowing Noriega militarily, he not only rid himself of a major foreign-policy embarrassment. He demonstrated in the process that he could be a forceful leader and an effective commander in chief—one who "had the guts to send kids into battle," in Herbert Parmet's words. Bush's supporters were elated—and relieved. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, the invasion provided Bush "with new political momentum, displaying him as decisive and tough and blunting criticism that his sense of prudence precludes bold action." In Colin Powell's view, the president's "bold political decision" to invade Panama had "vindicated" him as a leader. Even Bush's critics acknowledged that the invasion had "solidified [his] political identity at last." The *New York Times* observed that "for President Bush—a man widely criticized as recently as a month ago for his purported timidity, a man assailed on Capitol Hill and elsewhere for failing to fully support an attempted coup against General Noriega . . . in October, a man still portrayed in the Doonesbury comic strip as the invisible President—showing his steel [in Panama] had a particular significance. . . . It has shown him [to be] a man capable of bold action." As journalists Jack Germond and Jules Witcover put it: "No one will make the mistake of taking President Bush lightly again."⁷⁹ That, for Bush, was probably the crux of the matter all along. Prior to the intervention, he had confided to close friends that he would never "feel fully settled into the job" of president until he had passed his "first test as commander-in-chief of the armed forces."⁸⁰ Now, in Panama, he had a military victory under his belt.

He had passed the test. He had shown that he did in fact have “the stuff” to be a successful president—that he was not to be taken lightly. Thirteen months later, he would draw on the heightened stature that he had gained from Operation Just Cause to galvanize domestic and international support for a considerably greater challenge: a U.S.-led war in the Middle East against the “rogue” dictator of Iraq.

Conclusion

“In its relations with Latin America,” historian Fredrick Pike noted in an influential 1974 essay, “the United States has been motivated primarily by security and economic considerations.” “Such a trite observation could scarcely provoke challenge,” Pike added, “although authorities have disagreed heatedly through the years over whether it is security or economic interests that have been paramount.”²¹ Pike’s formulation undoubtedly reflected the conventional wisdom of academic scholarship at the time, but as the preceding chapters make clear, it provides an inadequate framework for explaining recent U.S. interventionism in the region.

No conclusive evidence has yet come to light to support the claim that economic self-interest played a decisive role in any of the U.S. decisions to intervene. In some cases (British Guiana, the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, Grenada), U.S. trade and investments were simply too insignificant to have exerted a decisive influence on U.S. policy. There seems little reason to doubt Ronald Reagan’s statement that it wasn’t nutmeg that was at stake in Grenada, for example, while Reagan’s alarmist warnings about the damaging impact that hoards of Central American political refugees and the loss of Caribbean sea lanes would have on the U.S. economy sound, in retrospect, more like justifications for aggressive U.S. action than articulations of policy motivation. In those cases where evidence of U.S. presidents’ economic concerns seems most substantive (Cuba and, to a much lesser extent, Panama), other factors clearly predominated in White House decision making. Eisenhower and his advisers reacted angrily to Castro’s expropriations of U.S.-owned property and worried that the Cuban revolution’s nationalist economic model would inspire a wave of attacks on U.S. investment capital throughout Latin America, but in the end they viewed Cuban economic nationalism as merely one manifestation of the broader strategic threat that the revolution posed to U.S. hegemony in the region. In Panama, Bush occasionally expressed concern for the safety of the Panama Canal as relations with Noriega deteriorated, but his concern centered primarily on the Canal’s strategic significance to the United States rather than on its commercial value. Even in the two cases where influential U.S. corporations actively lobbied for U.S. intervention (Guatemala and Chile), no hard evidence exists that the subsequent policy decisions of White House officials were made on the basis of the corporations’ interests. In Guatemala, the United Fruit Company’s appeals for U.S. intervention emphasized the security dimension rather than the company’s economic interests, and its anti-Arbenz publicity campaign was designed to generate domestic political pressure on Eisenhower to protect the United States from a Central American security threat. The CIA’s Richard Bissell,