

Panama—The Enduring Crisis 1985–1989

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Prologue

On 20 December 1989, the United States launched its largest military operation since the Vietnam War against Panama. Operation Just Cause employed over twenty-six thousand servicemen, including the largest parachute drop since WWII, to depose and capture Panama's military dictator, Manuel Antonio Noriega and to restore a democratic government to the country.¹ In his address to the American people the next day, President George Bush stated the reasons for the invasion were: "to safeguard the lives of Americans, to defend democracy in Panama, to combat drug trafficking and to protect the integrity of the Panama Canal treaty."² While the operation was generally a success, a greater question arises. Why did the United States find it necessary to employ overwhelming military force to remove the leader of a sovereign country that was ostensibly one of America's strongest allies in Central America?

1968 - 1984: NORIEGA, THE NECESSARY EVIL

Noriega was the product of a military junta led by General Omar Torrijos that overthrew the Panamanian government in 1968. He was instrumental in helping Torrijos survive his own coup in 1969. His loyalty was rewarded and he eventually rose to command of the Panamanian military forces in 1983. Shortly after assuming command, he illegally influenced the 1984 national elections in a move to strengthen the military's influence over the Panamanian government. He engineered the election of President Nicolas Barletta, the military's candidate and one who was considered personally loyal and subservient to Noriega. Some observers believe that the United States turned a blind eye to Noriega's election fraud because it put in place a government that was considered sympathetic to American interests.³ While Panama had an elected government, real power rested in the hands of the military, and Noriega was the man in charge.

Noriega was long known to the U.S. government as an unsavory character whose excesses included drug trafficking, money laundering, and murder. However, the United States ignored his transgressions in order to secure national interests considered more vital than policing his corrupt practices in Panama. American foreign policy was focused instead on two strategic threats emanating from the region: Communist inspired insurgencies against U.S. backed governments in Central America and drug trafficking that was causing serious domestic concern.

During the 1980's, Nicaragua and Communist encroachment dominated U.S. regional focus. Although secondary to those interests, the United States recognized it also had critical security interests in Panama, including: access to U.S. bases and facilities in Panama, implementation of the Panama Canal treaties, support for the Contras (anti-Communist military forces) operating in Nicaragua and El Salvador, and continued operation of intelligence gathering facilities targeted against Cuba and other Latin American countries.⁴ Noriega was considered an essential asset in securing those interests. He was used by several U.S. agencies including the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) and later by the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) to further American interests.⁵

1985 - 1987: YEARS OF LIVING DANGEROUSLY

Serious problems with Noriega began for the United States in 1985 when a well respected political opponent of Noriega, Dr. Hugh Spadafora, was brutally tortured and murdered by the Panamanian Defense Force (PDF). Spadafora had made credible and extensive accusations that had drawn significant international attention to Noriega's involvement in drug trafficking and other illegal activity. Spadafora was well known and highly regarded by most Panamanians. When his death was discovered, Panamanian outrage was immediate and extensive. With the public's outcry too loud to ignore, Panama's President Barletta called for Noriega to step aside as the PDF commander while the crime was investigated. Noriega responded by forcing Barletta to resign, repressing all attempts to investigate or report the crime, and installing a more reliable puppet as president.

The murder of a popular anti-Noriega figure and the ousting of an elected president elicited significant press coverage of Noriega for the first time in America. The U.S. media portrayed Noriega as a corrupt dictator who was sending drugs into America, protecting drug cartel leaders, supporting terrorists, laundering illicit drug profits, and brutally suppressing democracy in his homeland. These accusations led to congressional hearings where the administration, and the DEA in particular, were forced to defend its continued, albeit reluctant, support of Noriega citing greater American security interests in the region.⁶

Senator Jesse Helms, an arch conservative who had resisted the return of the canal to Panama, was especially critical of the administration's support of Noriega. He felt strongly that Noriega was too corrupt to be entrusted with the Panama Canal.⁷ As a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Helms tried to build support for a harder look at Noriega, but his stance against relinquishing control of the canal left him with little or no support for his position against Noriega. The administration's point man on Central America, Assistant Secretary of State Elliot Abrams, was also able to blunt much of the criticism by emphasizing the benefits of continued American support of Noriega. Senator Helms found little public interest in Panama and, lacking congressional support for his anti-Noriega position, U.S. criticism of Noriega quickly died away.⁸

The press, however, did begin to take greater interest in Noriega and his involvement in drug trafficking in 1986. The *New York Times* ran an investigative series detailing his extensive connections to drug traffickers and to the CIA. These accusations struck a resonant

note in an America starting to come to grips with its serious and growing drug problems. The *New York Times* revelations precipitated further coverage by other news agencies which began to raise American public sentiment against Noriega.⁹ Those concerns were further heightened in early 1987 when Noriega's second in command, Colonel Diaz Herrera, went public with numerous charges of corruption against Noriega. Herrera was motivated by Noriega's refusal to step down in 1986 and pass the reins of the PDF on to him as previously agreed. His charges led to large public demonstrations as Panamanians took to the streets to vent their anger against Noriega and his reign of PDF brutality and corruption. As calls for Noriega's removal continued into the spring of 1987, he struck out against his opposition by brutally crushing demonstrations using special riot police and declaring a state of emergency that precluded further public demonstrations.¹⁰

As the Panamanian situation grew worse, command of the U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) changed in June 1987. SOUTHCOM, whose headquarters was inside Panama, was responsible for all military matters that affected Panama. General Frederick F. Woerner, Jr., the incoming commander, had extensive experience in Latin America, was fluent in Spanish, knew Noriega, and understood the issues that afflicted Panama. In his remarks upon assuming command of SOUTHCOM, he made it clear that Noriega needed to return governance of Panama back to civilian control. Noriega was incensed by General Woerner's remarks and responded by stepping up the harassment of U.S. servicemen and women in Panama. It did not take Woerner long to realize that Noriega would never step aside of his own will and that force likely would be necessary. He directed his staff to begin planning for a U.S. military intervention.¹¹

The U.S. Congress also had become energized about Panama by mid-1987 as their Iran-Contra hearings revealed details of illicit U.S. activity in Panama. It learned that members of the National Security Council (Admiral Poindexter and Lieutenant Colonel North) had used Noriega to circumvent congressional restrictions on aid to Nicaraguan Contras imposed in 1983. Noriega had been used to help the administration purchase and deliver arms to the Contras using drug profits from various schemes including transport and sale of cocaine from Panama into the United States.¹² These revelations, and continued negative press about Noriega himself, forced a review of U.S. policy in Panama, and led the Senate to pass overwhelmingly a resolution calling on Noriega and his senior advisors to step down immediately. Noriega angrily reacted by accusing the United States of interfering in Panama's internal affairs and instigated mob attacks on U.S. installations and the U.S. embassy itself. Noriega stepped up his brutal crackdown on domestic demonstrations and suspended the free press.¹³ The United States responded by suspending all military aid to Panama and curtailing all contact between the U.S. military and the PDF. Significantly, the CIA cut its ties with Noriega, severing a relationship that had lasted over twenty years.¹⁴

By this time, the Reagan administration had reached the conclusion that Noriega had to be removed. There was, however, no consensus about how to achieve that goal. President Ronald Reagan was known for his reluctance to resolve policy disputes among his senior advisors and the means and manner of Noriega's removal were no exception. The State

Department, led by Elliot Abrams, and the NSC staff wanted Noriega out immediately and were prepared to use strong diplomatic pressure to force Noriega into a corner while supporting a coup from within the ranks of the PDF to depose him.¹⁵ The Department of Defense and the CIA did not support a rapid overthrow of Noriega. They did not see a capable replacement that could keep the PDF in check and hold the country together while a democratic leader could be elected. They also feared that Noriega would react violently to any hard push to remove him, which endangered approximately fifty thousand Americans living in Panama.¹⁶ In the DoD's and CIA's view, while Noriega had his drawbacks, there were no real alternatives to him. They felt any U.S. action should wait for the Panamanians to take serious steps to oust Noriega.

In 1987, the American media was not forcing the administration's hand on Noriega either. It was focused on the Iran-Contra hearings and the roles that senior administration officials had played in that situation.

Absent any clear consensus among his senior advisors, President Reagan was persuaded to attempt to cajole Noriega to step down. Those efforts proved unsuccessful due to a lack of a clear and strong message to Noriega that he had to go. During late 1987 and early 1988, no fewer than three senior emissaries were sent, but each communicated a slightly different spin on when, or even if, he had to leave. As a result, Noriega gained the impression that there was no consensus within the administration that he had to leave.¹⁷ Absent forceful U.S. intervention, Noriega saw no compelling reason to abandon his lucrative situation.

1988: RUNNING OUT OF OPTIONS

In February 1988, the Reagan administration's predicament with Noriega grew even worse, when the U.S. Justice Department indicted Noriega in Florida for drug trafficking and money laundering. Those indictments linked him directly with the drug cartels that were smuggling cocaine into the United States. They were also a distinct source of embarrassment to the U.S. government and the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), which considered Noriega to be one of its best assets in its war on drugs. Noriega had always complied with DEA requests, and nurtured an appearance that he was a strong advocate of America's war on drugs, but it was clear that he had used that cooperation to his personal advantage.¹⁸

To the even greater embarrassment of the administration, however, was the total lack of coordination between the Department of Justice, the Department of State, and the administration on the issuance of the indictments. The Justice Department has a culture of operating independently and staying clear of political considerations in the pursuit of bringing criminals to justice. As a result, neither President Reagan nor Secretary of State George Shultz were advised in advance that the leader of a sovereign nation was to be indicted on charges of drug trafficking.¹⁹ The Florida indictments, coupled with the administration's failed attempts to get Noriega to step aside voluntarily, made it clear that more forceful action was now required to remove Noriega. Matters were only made worse when polls revealed Reagan's declining approval figures, showing that less than thirty percent approved

of his handling of the Panama situation in July 1988.²⁰ Something needed to be done, but once again, the administration was split on how to accomplish that goal.

The Department of State became the earliest proponent of using military force to remove Noriega from power in Panama. Elliot Abrams, the assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs, largely shaped that policy. Abrams was a personal favorite of Secretary of State George Shultz, but his abrasive and arrogant manner caused him to be disliked by most other senior presidential advisors. Shultz, however, was content to let Abrams set State Department policy towards Panama and Central America, since his attention was focused on more pressing problems in the Soviet Union and the Middle East.²¹

Abrams attention to Panama came late. His initial focus in Central America had been squarely on Nicaragua and its Communist inspired Sandinista government that had taken power in 1979. Many felt that Abrams had been obsessed with the overthrow of the Sandinista government. When illegal U.S. operations there were exposed and stopped as a result of the Iran-Contra scandal, his personal role came under severe criticism. His reputation and credibility with the Congress were badly damaged by his lack of veracity during testimony before them about the administration's support of the Contras.²² Critics charged that his focus on Panama and Noriega was an attempt to rebuild his standing with the Congress and others.²³ As Noriega demonstrated obstinate resiliency in staying in power, Abrams became convinced that U.S. military power was the best, perhaps the only, instrument to push the troublesome Noriega aside. He convinced Secretary Shultz that military intervention was the best course of action.

The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS), Admiral William Crowe, solidly opposed Abrams and Shultz in the use of military force in Panama. His reasons were compelling.

- Military action staged from U.S. bases inside Panama to remove the ruling regime would jeopardize the U.S. basing rights in other countries where the United States had sensitive issues with the host.
- Fifty thousand Americans lived in Panama, and all would be at risk to Noriega if the United States started military action.
- Use of military force against Panama would reinforce the perception of "Yanqui" abuse of power at a time when Communist ideologues were making strong inroads into the region.²⁴

Among the stronger reasons for Crowe's reluctance was the fact that Noriega permitted the U.S. military to use its bases in Panama to spy on neighboring countries, and to train other regional military forces, all in direct violation of the Canal treaties. Another leader may not be so passive in permitting such operations.²⁵

When the State Department and Abrams proposed any form of military action, Crowe and the JCS countered with details of the costs, risks, and obstacles inherent in such action. One telling example was the questionable defense estimate that evacuation of noncombatants

from Panama preparatory to U.S. military action would cost of over \$100 million and take at least seven months to complete. Crowe's position was further strengthened by the elevation of the chairman's role under the 1986 Goldwater-Nichols DoD Reorganization Act. He was now the principal military adviser to the president and no longer had to build a consensus for his personal opinions from among the other service chiefs or the secretary of defense. Crowe held strong reservations about getting involved militarily in Panama and regularly clashed with Abrams. He purportedly considered him "a dangerous man pursuing perilous policy . . . an ideologue out of control."²⁶ Abrams, for his part, considered Crowe's reluctance to use military force as "ill-guided, post-Vietnam military caution."²⁷

The Reagan administration remained split over employing a military option throughout 1988 to resolve the Panamanian problem. State, led by Elliot Abrams, argued for at least a limited use of force to capture Noriega and bring him to justice in the United States. Defense, however, pointed out practical problems of such an operations and raised the issue that the PDF might respond by taking American hostages to recover Noriega.²⁸ The CIA was also reluctant to support any military operation against Noriega having just endured the fallout of its dealings in the Iran-Contra scandal. Its new director had little interest in or knowledge of Panama and wasn't interested in getting involved in any potentially controversial action that would bring further discredit or attention to the agency.²⁹ President Reagan's national security advisor, Frank Carlucci, who had replaced the disgraced Admiral Poindexter, also opposed State's desire to use military force in Panama. The Tower Commission investigation of the Iran-Contra affair had just reported its findings and had severely chastised the National Security Council for violating normal national security decision making processes. As a result, Carlucci was not willing to support another military adventure in Central America.³⁰ When General Colin Powell replaced Carlucci, who moved across the Potomac to become the secretary of defense, the Pentagon was effectively in a position to block any presidential support for military action throughout 1988.

Any desire by Washington to take strong action against Noriega was mitigated by the presidential elections of 1988. The Republican administration needed to put a lid on Panama so that it did not become an issue that could be used by the Democrats against Vice President Bush. Although the military option was ruled out, President Reagan recognized that he had to take some action against Noriega. As a consequence, economic sanctions were authorized against Panama.

Panama was highly susceptible to U.S. economic pressure. Its economy was closely tied to the U.S. economy and it used the American dollar as its currency. Unable to win support for military action, the State Department argued for invoking the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA) in order to economically isolate Panama. By blocking the transfer of funds into and out of the country, the United States could deny Noriega the money he needed to pay his military and civil servants, the last vestiges of his support. Without that support, the theory went, Noriega would be forced to leave by the Panamanians themselves.

The administration was sharply divided over the use of stringent economic sanctions. Secretary of the Treasury James Baker was adamantly opposed to employing economic sanctions in Panama. He described the use of the IEEPA as “using an atomic bomb to kill a fly.” Baker was further influenced by his concerns for the numerous American banks and businesses that operated in Panama and which would bear the brunt of the sanctions. Even Secretary of State Shultz personally doubted the effectiveness of economic sanctions characterizing them as difficult to enforce and rarely effective. Those Panamanians who opposed Noriega were also reluctant to embrace economic sanctions, noting Noriega and his associates got most of their money illegally and weren’t dependent on the local economy.³¹ Secretary of Defense Carlucci argued that IEEPA would only serve to stiffen Noriega’s resolve to remain in power. He was joined by General Powell and White House Chief of Staff Howard Baker, both of whom argued for less drastic measures.³²

Despite the many reservations voiced, President Reagan forged ahead with sanctions, but permitted a modified plan to be implemented. Sanctions were initially delayed as the bureaucracy struggled with the many practical problems of implementing a complete economic sanction of Panama. First, there was the issue of how to pay several thousand American and Panamanian employees of the Panama Canal. To stop paying them would risk shutting down the canal. Further, there were numerous American government offices and facilities (the embassy and SOUTHCOM to name two) that had to pay utility bills or be shut-down. And finally, as Baker had feared, numerous American businesses and banks lobbied hard for exceptions to avoid the huge expected losses that would be felt by the banks if full-blown economic sanctions were put in place. In the end, the sanctions were delayed for over two months and not fully employed as the bureaucracy waded through numerous requests for exceptions. The net result was that the sanctions had much less effect than they might have had.³³

As the last days of the Reagan administration drew to a close, it was determined that the United States needed to wait for a Panamanian solution such as a popular uprising like the one which had forced Marcos from power in the Philippines or a coup d’état. Some held out hope that the 1989 Panamanian elections would force Noriega from power.³⁴

1989: BAD GETS WORSE

In 1989, after George Bush’s election as president, CINCSOUTH was summoned to Washington to testify before the House Appropriations Committee regarding the defense budget. General Woerner had grown increasingly frustrated as he was forced to sit back and avoid confrontation with Noriega at all costs. The PDF had grown increasingly brazen as it illegally detained U.S. servicemen, physically assaulted others, stopped mail deliveries, and stole U.S. material including diplomatic dispatches. During nine months in 1988, over one thousand incidents of harassment by Panamanian forces against Americans were documented.³⁵ The decision to go slowly with Noriega had exacted a heavy toll on the morale of U.S. troops in Panama. While adhering to the administration’s desires, General Woerner became the target of their frustrations and SOUTHCOM became known “WIMPCOM.”³⁶

During his testimony before the House, and in a subsequent visit to Washington, Woerner publicly aired his concerns and frustrations regarding the lack of a clear and comprehensive U.S. policy in Panama. Woerner had never served in Washington and his candor showed his political naiveté. His criticisms were widely reported and provoked a strong response by President Bush who admonished Admiral Crowe for Woerner's remarks.³⁷ Despite his first-hand knowledge of how bad the situation was in Panama, his remarks won him little support in Washington and numbered his days in Panama.

As matters continued to deteriorate in Panama, the Bush administration, like its predecessor, continued to look for a nonmilitary way to depose Noriega. The last viable option was to use the May 1989 Panamanian presidential elections. The United States funneled ten million dollars to the opposition party in an effort to install a democratic government that would throw Noriega out of his position as PDF commander.³⁸ Despite significant U.S. assistance to opposition parties and the presence of distinguished election observers (including several from the United States), those hopes disappeared when Noriega seized ballot boxes and manipulated the returns to give victory to his candidate. The press immediately reported the widespread fraud to the waiting world. Noriega attempted to prevent former President Jimmy Carter, the leading U.S. election observer, from conducting a press conference to raise his objections to the handling of the election. Outraged Panamanians took to the streets, but they were brutally repressed by the PDF and Noriega's paramilitary Dignity Battalions. When the opposition candidates dared lead demonstrations in protest, they were beaten and arrested in front of the international media.³⁹

These last acts removed all doubt in the Bush administration's mind that it could find a peaceful solution to the Noriega problem. President Bush recalled the American ambassador to Panama, reduced embassy staff, ordered an evacuation of American dependents, and placed the remainder inside secure American compounds. Further, he announced that the United States would enforce its rights under its treaties with Panama including the free and unfettered movement of U.S. troops through Panamanian territory, and sent a brigade-sized force to augment U.S. troops in Panama.⁴⁰

The Organization of American States (OAS) was drawn into the conflict as it watched events in Panama and Noriega's handling of the presidential elections. It had conflicting interests at stake - its desire to let Panama handle its own internal affairs juxtaposed with its duty to support free elections and the democratic process which Noriega had just trampled. Yet any intervention in Panama risked intervention in the future elections of other countries in the region. OAS was not prepared to censure Noriega, but it sent a delegation to Panama try to mediate a peaceful transfer of power from Noriega.

Between June and September 1989, Noriega received various OAS delegations, but as time passed it became clear that he no intention of stepping down.⁴¹ The reasons for Noriega's refusal to step aside, which escaped OAS and U.S. government officials at the time, were quite simple. He could not relinquish power without signing his own death warrant. His intimate knowledge of drug cartel operations, coupled with a long list of enemies made through a lifetime of crime, made him far too dangerous to be left alive.⁴²

The United States and Panama embarked on a war of words and nerves between the May 1989 elections and October 1989. On 3 October 1989, that tension was wound even tighter by a coup attempt led by a small group of officers in Noriega's inner circle. Despite U.S. hopes that a coup d'état would occur, the United States was caught woefully off-guard and poorly prepared to help the plotters. The plotting officers' request for U.S. support, which was minimal, came at a most inopportune time for the United States. General Maxwell Thurman had just taken command of SOUTHCOM three days earlier. He immediately feared that the coup was a Noriega hoax designed to embarrass him and humiliate the United States.⁴³ Not only was Thurman brand new, so too was chairman of the JCS. On the same day he assumed his duties, General Colin Powell was advised of the coup that was to take place the next day.

Information about the coup and its leaders was sketchy at best. The CIA and DIA had little reliable intelligence about the plotters or their likelihood of success. The situation was made even more confusing when the plotters delayed their coup by one day. As a result, despite the plotters' capture of Noriega, the United States failed to provide the minimal assistance required by the plotters to prevent Noriega's faithful soldiers from rescuing him. As the coup attempt unfolded, American support was largely paralyzed. Conflicting information flowed to the administration from SOUTHCOM and other intelligence sources regarding the status of coup. General Thurman was unable provide any clarity to the situation because he had largely purged the experienced and knowledgeable staff officers who had served under General Woerner.⁴⁴

Thus, during the most critical hours of the coup, American soldiers in Panama waited for guidance from Washington about what assistance they were to render to the coup. Yet, Washington was paralyzed by insufficient, and, oftentimes, conflicting information from the scene, which was necessary to form a decision.⁴⁵ As a result, Noriega narrowly survived the coup and exacted immediate vengeance on the plotting officers, who were tortured and executed for their efforts.

Congressional and media criticism of the administration and the military was swift in coming. Numerous government leaks from both the State and Defense Departments revealed the magnitude of the U.S. failure to help the Panamanians get rid of Noriega. Congressional and media criticism was so extensive and detailed that the administration ordered its agency heads to stop all leaks and implicit criticism immediately.⁴⁶ The Senate Intelligence Committee criticized the administration for "talking loudly and carrying a small stick." The national security advisor, who was the target of much of the criticism, responded by accusing the Congress of withholding the president's stick.⁴⁷ Senator Jesse Helms, who had sounded the alarm about Noriega a couple of years before, revealed embarrassing details to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee of the U.S. failure to support the coup d'état and described the administration as a bunch of "Keystone Cops."⁴⁸

While the administration scrambled to deflect attention away from its failings, it recognized that the criticism was richly deserved. It took immediate steps to determine how and

why it had performed so poorly and to prepare for the next opportunity to get rid of Noriega, once and for all. President Bush irritably declared, “Amateur hour is over.”⁴⁹

DECEMBER 1989: END GAME

For his part, Noriega was not content to let America’s embarrassment go unnoticed and continued his provocations against American personnel in Panama. To add insult to injury, on 15 December 1989, the Panamanian National Assembly appointed Noriega “Maximum Leader” and head of the Panamanian government. It further declared that a state of war existed between Panama and the United States.⁵⁰ The next day, PDF soldiers fired on an American vehicle and killed a Marine Corps lieutenant. A U.S. Navy lieutenant and his wife observed the shooting and were arrested. The lieutenant was severely beaten and his wife was physically abused and threatened.⁵¹

On Sunday, 17 December, Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Powell, briefed the president and his closest advisors on the situation in Panama and the continuing risk to American lives, as evidenced by the death of the U.S. Marine Corps lieutenant. President Bush was particularly disturbed by the treatment of the Navy lieutenant and his wife.⁵² After a review of the events, General Powell made his recommendation. The time had come to use military force to remove Noriega from power and a large-scale operation was needed to do it.

President Bush inquired about the need for large forces. Powell responded that overwhelming force was necessary to reduce the risk to those involved. A smaller operation only reduced the chances of success without reducing the risk to U.S. forces involved. Secretary of State James Baker, the former secretary of the Treasury Department in the Reagan administration, who had opposed economic sanctions, voiced State’s support for the operation. He argued military force was needed to destroy the PDF so that a truly democratic civilian government could be installed.

Discussion continued for approximately two hours. Finally President Bush observed, “This guy is not going to lay off. It will only get worse.” He turned to General Powell and said, “Okay, let’s go.”⁵³

PANAMA CRISIS TIMELINE

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| | President Carter negotiates return of control of the Panama Canal to Panama to occur in the year 2000. | | permit free elections of new government. |
| 1979 | Carter administration officials block federal indictments against Noriega for drug trafficking and arms smuggling. | Feb 1988 | Federal Grand Juries in Miami and Tampa, Florida, indict Noriega for racketeering, drug trafficking, and money laundering. |
| Aug 1983 | Noriega assumes command of the Panamanian Defense Force (PDF). | | President of Panama fires Noriega, but he responds by ousting the president and replacing him with a more reliable politician. |
| May 1984 | Noriega and the PDF intervene in presidential elections and rig results to produce a victory for Noriega's candidate. | Mar 1988 | PDF officers stage unsuccessful coup d'etat against Noriega. Plotters brutally tortured and executed. |
| Sep 1985 | Dr. Hugo Spadafora, a popular critic of Noriega, is brutally tortured and murdered after making serious and credible allegations about Noriega's illicit activities. | | Noriega creates Dignity Battalions to augment PDF forces. |
| Jun 1987 | Noriega announces he will remain head of the PDF for an additional five years. The next day, his planned successor goes public with details about Noriega's crimes. Panamanians stage a general strike which causes Noriega to shut down the media. | | The Reagan administration considers military action, but the DoD and others oppose it. Economic sanctions are considered while the administration attempts to get Noriega to step down voluntarily. |
| | | Apr-June 1988 | Economic sanctions implemented against Panama. |
| | | Nov 1988 | George Bush wins U.S. presidential elections. |
| Jun 1987 | The U.S. Senate approves a nonbinding resolution calling for Noriega to step down. Noriega supporters attack the U.S. embassy with rocks and cause extensive damage. The U.S. responds by suspending military aid to Panama and cutting contacts. Noriega is removed from the CIA payroll. | May 1989 | Presidential elections held in Panama. Noriega steals election with widespread fraud. Dignity Battalions assault opposition candidates and crowds in front of world media. |
| | General Woerner assumes command of SOUTHCOM and criticizes Noriega publicly. | 30 Sep 1989 | General Max Thurman replaces General Woerner as CINCSOUTH. |
| | | 2 Oct 1989 | General Colin Powell replaces Admiral Crowe as chairman, JCS. |
| Aug-Dec 1987 | The U.S. tries to negotiate a deal with Noriega to step down and | 3 Oct 1989 | Noriega survives coup d'etat and executes plotters. |

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| 15 Dec 1989 | Noriega declares himself “Maximum Leader” and declares a state of war exists with the United States. | 17 Dec 1989 | President Bush authorizes Operation Just Cause to remove Noriega from power and to destroy the PDF. |
| 15 Dec 1989 | PDF forces kill a U.S. Marine Corps lieutenant at a PDF roadblock and then arrest and assault a U.S. Navy lieutenant and his wife who witnessed the attack. | 20 Dec 1989 | Operation Just Cause commences. Noriega escapes capture and eludes U.S. forces. |
| | | 3 Jan 1990 | Noriega surrenders to U.S. forces. |

Epilogue

The invasion of Panama received much domestic and international criticism. One day after the invasion, the Organization of American States (OAS) voted overwhelmingly to censure the United States, stating that it “deeply deplored” the U.S. invasion. It marked the first time in the forty-two year history of the OAS that it formally rebuked the United States.⁵⁴ The Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China introduced a resolution before the U.N. Security Council two days later condemning the United States. It was vetoed by the United States, but a similar resolution was passed a week later by the U.N. General Assembly by a wide margin. While there was criticism in the American press, the media was generally supportive.⁵⁵

Inside Panama, there was widespread support for the American invasion. Two weeks after the United States invaded Panama, a CBS opinion poll showed over ninety percent of the country supported the invasion.⁵⁶ Subsequent polling data gathered between 1991 and 1994 showed a decrease in support for the invasion to between 67 and 55 percent, but nearly three-quarters of those polled still supported Noriega’s ouster.⁵⁷

Notes

1. Margaret E. Scranton, *The Noriega Years*, (Lynne Rienner Publishers: Boulder, CO, 1991), 202.
2. "Transcript of the President's Speech," *New York Times*, 22 December 1989.
3. Frederick Kempe, *Divorcing the Dictator*, (New York: Putnam & Sons, 1990), 125.
4. Scranton, 3.
5. Kempe, 28.
6. *Ibid.*, 92–94.
7. *Ibid.*, 175–176.
8. Kevin Buckley, *Panama—The Whole Story*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), 51.
9. *Ibid.*, 56.
10. Scranton, 108–109.
11. Thomas Donnelly, Margaret Roth and Caleb Baker, *Operation Just Cause*, (New York: Lexington Books, 1991), 11–12.
12. R.M. Koster and Guillermo Sanchez, *In the Time of the Tyrants*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1990), 24.
13. Scranton, 113.
14. Eytan Gilboa, "The Panama Invasion Revisited: Lessons for the Use of Force in the Post Cold War Era," *Political Science Quarterly* (Vol 110, n4), 539.
15. Scranton, 116.
16. *Ibid.*, 117.
17. Gilboa, 544.
18. Scranton, 46.
19. George P. Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph: My Years as Secretary of State*, (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1993), 1052.
20. Gallup Poll, July 1988.
21. Kempe, 294.
22. William R. Farrell and Andrew E. Gibson, *The Panama Dilemma*, (NWC Press, 2000), p. 67. More than 125 House Democrats had called for his resignation after his admission that he had misled the Congress.
23. Kempe, 294–295.
24. Kempe, 297.
25. *Ibid.* 301.
26. *Ibid.*, 294.
27. *Ibid.*, 299.
28. Gilboa, 545.
29. Kempe, 297.
30. *Ibid.*, 296.
31. *Ibid.*, 307.
32. Scranton, 136.
33. *Ibid.*, 307–308.
34. *Ibid.*, 543.
35. *Ibid.*, 334.
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37. Donnelly, 42.
38. Scanton, 157.
39. *Ibid.*, 161–163.
40. *Ibid.*, 165.
41. Buckley, 185–187.
42. Gilboa, 554.
43. Kempe, 381.
44. *Ibid.*, 380.
45. *Ibid.*, 386.
46. *Ibid.*, 394.
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