Behind Clinton's boycott

Panama Canal handover no end to US sway

Bill Vann
22 December 1999

On December 31 US control of the Panama Canal formally comes to an end. Washington's seizure of the Canal Zone, a 51-mile swath across the Central American isthmus in 1903, and its construction of a series of locks connecting the Atlantic and Pacific oceans marked, as clearly as any event, America's rise as a major world power. It inaugurated a century of US political domination and economic exploitation of the lands to its south.

The very existence of the zone, a privileged and segregated US-controlled territory, which formed Panama's "fifth frontier," dividing it in two, has condemned the country throughout its history to the status of a dependent semi-colony.

While all but a handful of US troops have already been withdrawn from the zone and the daily functioning of the canal has been largely in Panamanian hands for years, the events surrounding the hand-over of the territory give every indication that Washington is not about to relinquish its de facto domination.

Ceremonies held in Panama December 14 marking the transition provided an indication of Washington's real intentions. The date had been moved up from December 31 at Washington's request so as not to conflict with millennium celebrations or Y2K preparations in the US. While the Panamanian government obliged, the US carried out what amounted to a calculated snubbing of the ceremony.

Clinton ignored Panamanian requests that he attend the event and, at the last moment, Washington informed the Panamanian government that US Secretary of State Albright would not be coming either.

While heads of state from several Latin American countries flew in for the ceremony, the highest-ranking US government representative was Secretary of Transportation Rodney Slater.

The reasons for Washington's virtual boycott of the hand-over ceremony are several. They involve both US strategic policy in Latin America and domestic political considerations. At the same time, they are deeply rooted in US imperialism's historical relationship with the region.

Clinton's decision not to attend the ceremony, and the absence of Vice President Gore and Albright, represented in the first instance a calculated adaptation to the most reactionary elements on the American political scene. The canal has been a touchstone for right-wing Republican politics since the 1970s, when negotiations on a transition to Panamanian control began in earnest between the Ford administration and the government of Panamanian military strongman General Omar Torrijos.

"We built it. We paid for it. It's ours and we're going to keep it," was the rallying cry of Ronald Reagan, who challenged Gerald Ford in the 1976 Republican primaries, and later made Jimmy Carter's "surrender" of the canal a campaign theme in his successful run for the presidency in 1980.

Once again the Republican right has begun beating the drums over Panama. The winning of a contract to manage two canal ports by the Hong Kong-based firm Hutchison-Whampoa Ltd. has sparked a campaign by right-wing politicians and retired military officers warning that the canal could fall into the hands of "Red China." Some of these elements have even called for the abrogation of the canal treaty signed more than 20 years ago.

Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott declared that as a result of the deal, "US naval ships will be at the mercy" of "an arm of the People's Liberation Army." Other rightists have said that the deal is part of a plot by the Chinese to expand their reach throughout the Americas and even to deploy missiles within striking distance of US soil.

Hutchison-Whampoa, a publicly traded corporation, manages 19 port facilities in Europe, Asia and around the world and is one of the leading firms in the field. Its winning of a competitive bid to run the Panama Canal ports no doubt angered US competitors, giving further fuel to these reactionary ravings.

Clinton was asked by the Panamanian government to attend the December 14 ceremonies, but he made it clear in November that he would not. Gore would have been a likely stand-in, but he had no desire to associate himself with the “surrender” of the canal in the run-up to next year's presidential election. Finally, Albright named as the head of the delegation just a week earlier, bowed out on short notice.

In his public statement on the ceremony, Clinton stressed the US government's "permanent commitment to the security of the canal."

Panamanian political figures lamented Washington's snub, which was seen throughout the country as just one more indignity at the hands of Yankee imperialism.

"In the end, are they going to send us a messenger from the White House?" asked Roberto Eisenmann, an adviser to Panamanian President Mireya Moscoso. "What a way to mess up something beautiful."

Arias Calderon, a Christian Democrat and vice president in the former administration, sounded a similar note: "It shows that the United State has lowered their estimation of us even more. And it evidently reveals the low priority not only of Panama, but Latin America."

Another possible reason for Washington giving the Panamanians the cold shoulder is their failure thus far to negotiate military treaties sought by the Pentagon to maintain the "special relationship" that made the country a base for US interventionism for more than half a century.

Washington sought to conclude a security and intelligence-sharing agreement with Panama and to keep several thousand troops on Panamanian soil under the pretext of an anti-narcotics effort. Popular political pressure has prevented the Moscoso government from

© World Socialist Web Site

concluding such a pact.

Meanwhile, the opposition Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD), founded by the late General Torrijos, has accused the government of secretly agreeing to a continuing US intelligence and military role under a "Strategic National Security Plan" that is currently being drafted. The PRD, the largest political organization in the country, organized rallies and demonstrations together with trade unions and student groups against the alleged conspiracy between Washington and the current government.

While the government has denied that any agreement has been reached, the Minister of Government and Justice Winston Spadafora declared, "We need to arrive at bilateral agreements for sharing information" because "nobody in his right mind should underestimate the challenge presented by the disappearance of the US [military presence]. It would be highly irresponsible not to utilize the security experience of those who took care of the Panama Canal for nearly a century."

Why is it that Washington is incapable of making a graceful exit from Panama? When one compares the Clinton administration's behavior to the diplomatically correct manner in which the British relinquished control of Hong Kong, for example, the US appears on the world stage as a clumsy and small-minded bully.

Unlike its European rivals, US imperialism came into being denying its own aggressive nature, proclaiming itself as an opponent of the old colonial empires, even as it established its own semi-colonial hegemony over the Western Hemisphere. It cloaked its predatory economic policies in the guise of defending "freedom" and "democracy" all over the world, and particularly in Latin America.

Nowhere was this more blatant than in Panama. The country's nominal independence was the byproduct of the US military seizure of the territory in 1903, after the legislature of Colombia failed to approve a treaty granting Washington exclusive and total control over a canal, which had been begun by a French company.

The government, installed by US troops and gunboats, quickly signed a new treaty that granted Washington unrestricted sovereignty over a territory that divided the new republic in half. The treaty guaranteed US control "in perpetuity." The rest of the country had the status of a US protectorate.

The dollar was established as the official currency, excluding any independent economic policy. Washington was given the explicit right to intervene in the country, and did so nine times between 1904 and 1936 to put down popular unrest, protect US business interests or ensure that its favored candidate emerged the victor in a national election. In 1936 another treaty was signed, formally abrogating the protectorate status. US domination and interventionism continued, unabated, even if in a somewhat less overt form.

Washington set up a string of bases on Panamanian territory during the Second World War, quartering up to 50,000 troops there. It maintained the pretense that it was doing so only as a means of defending the canal from outside—German or Japanese—aggression, as provided for in the existing treaties.

After the end of the war, however, it gave up this subterfuge, opening the School of the Americas in Panama. Known as the "school for dictators," it trained a generation of officers from throughout Latin America—including Chile's Pinochet and Videla of Argentina—in the arts of counterinsurgency, repression, torture and military overthrow of civilian governments. It was relocated to Fort Benning, Georgia in the mid-1980s.

Panama also became the headquarters of the US Army's Southern Command, the nerve center for US military interventions throughout the hemisphere.

Within Panama, Washington established a National Guard, which formed the base of the Somoza dictatorship in nearby Nicaragua. This military force, together with the US embassy, determined which governments rose and fell for most of the 20th century.

The very existence of the Canal Zone, with its manicured lawns and "American way of life" amid the grinding poverty that afflicted the masses of Panamanians, was like an open wound for the Panamanian people. Popular resentment of the US presence boiled over in 1964, with mass rioting over Washington's refusal to fly the Panamanian flag in the zone. At least 20 were killed, with hundreds more wounded and arrested. The upheavals gave the first impetus to the US seeking a negotiated settlement with Panama on the future of the canal.

Begun in the early 1970s, the negotiations led to the treaty signed by General Torrijos and Jimmy Carter in 1977 promising Panama full control of the canal at noon on December 31, 1999. The US-run Panama Canal Company was replaced with a jointly supervised Panama Canal Commission, with Panamanians taking control of this body in 1990.

However, before the US Senate would ratify the treaty in 1978, an amendment, drafted by then Congressman Dennis DeConcini, had to be added, declaring that the US had the right and "obligation" to intervene militarily if the security of the canal or its continued operation were threatened. The provision went on to state that this right did not include intervention in Panama's sovereignty or internal affairs.

A decade later, however, with the breakdown of relations between Washington and Panama's military leader, General Manuel Noriega, formerly head of the country's military intelligence and a longtime CIA "asset," the validity of this pledge was put to the test.

In December 1989 the US invaded the country with 26,000 troops, dubbing the military intervention "Operation Just Cause." President George Bush justified the invasion, at least in part, by claiming it was necessary to "protect the integrity" of the Panama Canal Treaties, invoking the clause allowing unilateral US military intervention against a perceived threat to the canal's security. Thousands of Panamanians were killed and wounded as US bombs razed the shantytowns of the Chorrillo district, near the headquarters of the country's Defense Force.

General Noriega was abducted by the US military, then tried and convicted in Miami on drug charges. A new government, sworn in at a Panama Canal Zone base, was placed in power.

There is no guarantee in the treaty to be fully enacted on December 31 that the transfer of the canal to Panama must be permanent. Just as the US fulfilled its "obligation" to secure the waterway a decade ago, it can do so again in the future.

In the final analysis, the contempt shown by official Washington for the Panamanian people by its snubbing of the December 14 ceremonies is a clear message that US imperialism is prepared once again to use its military might to ensure its control of the canal and its hegemony over its "own backyard."

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site