

Manuel Noriega and US militarism

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Manuel Noriega, the former military strongman of Panama and longtime “asset” of the US Central Intelligence Agency, died Monday night following brain surgery in a Panamanian hospital.

He had ruled Panama as a de facto head of state following the suspicious death of the country’s former military ruler, Gen. Omar Torrijos, who had come to power in a 1968 coup. Torrijos had initiated social assistance programs for the poor and pressed for the US to cede sovereignty over the Panama Canal to Panama, which was negotiated with the Carter administration in a 1977 treaty that was bitterly opposed by the Republican Party. The cause of Torrijos’s death was widely believed to have been a bomb supplied by the CIA and planted with the collaboration of Noriega.

Noriega was toppled in a December 1989 US invasion that Washington dubbed “Operation Just Cause.” He was to spend the last 27 years of his life in prison, first in the US, then in France and finally in Panama itself, on charges relating to drug trafficking, racketeering and repression.

The death of the former Panamanian ruler received scant attention in the US corporate media. With the passage of nearly three decades, the issues surrounding Washington’s intervention to overthrow him have faded in public memory.

The events surrounding “Operation Just Cause,” however, deserve to be reviewed, as they in many ways set a pattern that would be repeated in a series of steadily escalating US wars and military interventions around the globe.

At the time, the invasion of Panama was by far the largest operation launched by the US military since the end of the Vietnam War. Some 26,000 US troops participated in the invasion. More than half of them were already in place in the US-occupied Panama Canal Zone, and they outnumbered the entire Panamanian military by five to one. Thousands of Panamanian civilians were killed or wounded in this early incarnation of “shock and awe,” which was unleashed in large measure against the shantytown district of El Chorrillo, which surrounded the Panamanian military headquarters.

The administration of President George H.W. Bush claimed that the invasion was launched to protect American lives after a US soldier was killed when the car in which he was riding sped through a Panamanian military roadblock

without stopping. In reality, this incident was merely the pretext Washington sought for an operation it had been planning for months.

Two days after the onset of the Panama invasion, the Political Committee of the Workers League, the predecessor organization of the Socialist Equality Party in the US, issued a statement denouncing the US intervention as an act of imperialist aggression.

The statement noted, “The attack on Panama shows the increasing resort of US imperialism to military force.” It continued: “Far from a sign of strength, the resort to military force is an expression of the weakness and crisis of American capitalism. With its financial system in a shambles, facing escalating trade and budget deficits, and hammered by the competition of more efficient imperialist rivals, especially Japan and West Germany, US imperialism is seeking to assert by force what it no longer has the economic resources to sustain—its domination of the nations of Latin America.”

Noting the increasing influence of European and Japanese investment in a region Washington had long regarded as its “own backyard,” the statement continued: “The US is thus flexing its muscles not merely to chase out Noriega, but to send a warning to its principal economic rivals in Europe and Asia that while in decline economically, the United States still possesses decisive military advantages.

“The combination of economic weakness and military power is an explosive mixture. But in the long run, the first factor is far more decisive, and the increasing recklessness in the use of American military power means that inevitably, US imperialism is headed for a monumental debacle.”

The Panama invasion came barely one month after the fall of the Berlin Wall and little more than a year before the first Gulf War, in which US imperialism subjected Iraq to the most intensive bombardment in military history. Washington was determined to seize upon the opportunities opened up by the Moscow Stalinist bureaucracy’s drive to restore capitalism to assert US global dominance by means of military aggression.

The US ruling establishment was also intent on “kicking the Vietnam syndrome,” as George W. Bush later put it,

erasing the legacy of US imperialist defeat under conditions of mass opposition and social struggles at home.

Military intervention in Panama, and the inevitable victory of US forces, was meant to reverse a series of international debacles, from the bloody US-backed wars in Central America to the expulsion of US Marines from Lebanon. It also served to distract from domestic economic and social crises, including 1987's "Black Monday," the largest one-day market crash in history.

The one-sided war in Panama was, to a large degree, launched as a dress rehearsal for US imperialism's first major war in the oil-rich Middle East. It provided the Pentagon with the means of testing out its weapons and command-and-control systems, as well as bloodying its troops, even if only in limited combat.

The attack on Panama created a template for the various US military interventions that were to follow in the way it was sold to the American public, based on the demonization of Noriega as the incarnation of evil.

There is no doubt that the Panamanian general headed up a corrupt and repressive regime. But the crimes of Noriega paled beside those of the other regimes in Central America that Washington backed with military aid and advisors. The victims of the death squad dictatorships in Guatemala and El Salvador numbered in the hundreds of thousands.

Moreover, Noriega's alleged crimes were carried out in close collaboration with the CIA. As William Casey, the CIA director who died two years before the intervention, said of the Panamanian ruler, "He's my boy."

Noriega had collaborated with US intelligence since his high school years, informing on fellow students. He steadily advanced to become the highest paid CIA "asset" in Latin America, reportedly given \$200,000 a year. He used his perch atop Panamanian military intelligence and then as the country's strongman to aid US imperialism's counterrevolutionary wars in Central America and provide a conduit to the Castro government in Cuba, as well as to the powerful drug cartels in Colombia.

When he was flown back to the US and tried on drug trafficking and racketeering charges in Miami, Noriega attempted to introduce in his defense documents proving that he had carried out his alleged crimes in close collaboration with the CIA. The court sided with the government's argument that allowing such documents into evidence would compromise US national security and "confuse the jury."

In fact, the US intelligence agencies and the White House utilized Noriega's drug connections in the so-called Iran-Contra affair, with the White House and the CIA overseeing the smuggling of Colombian cocaine to provide a covert means of financing and arming the contra mercenaries attacking Nicaragua.

For then-president George H.W. Bush to vilify Noriega as a "drug lord" and "murderer" was the height of hypocrisy. As CIA director in the 1970s, he had flown to Panama to meet with Noriega and was ultimately responsible for approving his paychecks.

The propaganda campaign waged against Noriega would be replicated in one war after another, from the demonization of Somali "warlord" Mohamed Farrah Hassan Aidid, to the labeling of Serbia's Slobodan Milosevic and Iraq's Saddam Hussein as modern-day "Hitlers," to the vilification of Libya's Muammar Gaddafi and Syria's Bashar al-Assad as war criminals. Like Noriega, all of them had previously been courted by and collaborated with Washington.

Panama also set a pattern in terms of the complete absence of any democratic debate over the question of war or any critical coverage by the corporate-controlled media. There was no prior notification to the American people before US troops were sent in, and no debate in Congress, much less a vote to declare war. US reporters tipped off about the impending invasion kept it to themselves, remaining loyally "embedded" with the Pentagon throughout the operation.

Finally, the record of the war on Panama gives the lie to the justification that Washington has given for the acts of military aggression it has carried out for the past 16 years: the so-called "war on terror." All of the tactics and methods employed by American militarism were already present in 1989, well before any act attributed to Islamist terrorists. Utilized then to subjugate an oppressed Central American semi-colony, they have been repeated over and over again in the drive by US imperialism to assert its global hegemony by means of war and aggression.



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