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Trading on Tyranny:

Machinating the Political Narratives for the U.S. Militarization of Panama, 1972-1989

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL SATISFACTION OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE BACHELOR OF ARTS IN HISTORY

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ABSTRACT

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Military rule in Panama (1972-1989) has been intrinsically linked to its role training counterinsurgency groups on behalf of the United States in Central America during the Cold War. Less has been said, however, about Panamanians' own interests in supporting the U.S., as scholarship has tended to see them –both military and civilian elites– as mere pawns of their neighbor to the north. In this thesis I will argue that these Panamanian actors had much more agency in deciding the political outcomes both in their relationship with the U.S. and their own country, as they often used U.S. interests as leverage. More specifically, I will highlight that the military actors were not the only important ones, and that the civilian elites played a major role in the rise and fall of the dictatorships that ruled over Panama in this period, those of General Torrijos (1972-1981) and General Manuel Noriega (1983-1989). Looking through the eyes of U.S. intelligence and some of the key players in this history, it is seen how in Panama, the civilian elite was necessary for the military to work with to give a veneer of legitimacy to military rule in the country, which could then sell military training as diplomacy to the U.S. and countries in Central America. This dynamic did not last long,

however, and compared to doing the U.S.'s bidding, the civilian elite had its own agenda that outlived military rule in Panama to solidify its power. This is only exemplified through documentary and oral evidence I have gathered from a member of Panama's military during this time frame. The testimony from these sources reveals the persecution this ex-military member faced just from his participation in the military, and reflects the larger effort by the elites to become the sole oligarchy of Panama to this day. By balancing political narratives with impartial analysis, this thesis recounts the story of military rule in Panama as an evolving relationship amongst Panama's actors that use ties to the U.S. to pursue their own interests, rather than the U.S. imposing its own.

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ABBREVIATIONS

CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
OAS	Organization of American States
FFDD	Fuerzas de Defensa de Panamá
FDP	Fuerzas de Defensa de Panamá
PDF	Panamanian Defense Forces
FMLN	Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional
PRD	Partido Revolucionario Democratico
U.S.	United States of America
UNSC	United Nations Security Council

Introduction:

Militarizing Panama Without Exception

On December 20, 1989, the United States of America invaded the sovereign nation of Panama, ending a two-decade-period of military rule that they helped establish. Panama was one of the first countries during the Cold War that the U.S. directly invaded, but less is known about Panama's key role as a site of military training on behalf of U.S. interests. Military training was integral to U.S. goals in the region in this period, characterized by turbulent civil wars and insurgency across Central America. The U.S. already controlled an enclave called the Panama Canal since Panama's independence in 1903, so the U.S. had a greater incentive to negotiate with Panama, even if it meant dealing with dictators no differently than it did throughout Central America. Why did Panama repeat this same fate of militarization in the region when the U.S. was in close proximity? Inevitably, the U.S. was confronted with the morally ambiguous choice of supporting the rise of the Guardia Nacional, the name of Panama's military institution that began Panama's first dictatorship in 1968, when the alternative was a presidency quickly losing legitimacy.

A lack of legitimacy is a natural response for Panamanian President Arnulfo Arias and his party as they were accused of rampant corruption to the point that left-wing sentiment was rapidly growing, so the Guardia Nacional had to act. Although the implications of a coup were less than democratic, there was the fear that Arias' corruption in Panamanian politics

degraded any trust in democracy that would compel communist leaders to react with insurgence. Thus, met with little U.S. opposition, the Guardia Nacional overthrew Arias in a military coup days after he was "elected" to the presidency of Panama. The U.S. would still try and oppose the National Guard where it could, especially concerning developments around the Canal, but was less able to when the Panamanian military would claim to exercise its political legitimacy. This legitimacy wasn't necessarily the diplomatic affirmation among other countries that Panama was democratic and fair, but rather the reflection of Panama's good relations with them. The U.S. deemed Panama exempt from its democratic prerequisites when Panama followed U.S. interests, but such a reliance could be problematic for Panama and reinforce itself by ostracizing Panama from other countries. Thus, the strategy for the Panamanian dictators Omar Torrijos and Manuel Noriega was to try to balance U.S. demands and Panama's relations with other nations to obtain validity where it could, and a major influence came notably from the harmony between Panamanian civilian elites and the military leadership.

By working with civilian elites, Panama's military leadership could export its military functions as diplomacy, which would allow the dictatorships to assist the U.S. with its Cold War mission of stopping communist insurgents from gaining traction in Central America. The U.S. needed this assistance as it could not intervene in Central America itself, so it needed to train the anticommunist militaries of these countries in counterinsurgency, a ripe military function in Panama's jungle background. Over time, Panama's senior military officers developed the expertise needed to train counterinsurgents on the U.S.'s behalf, but this fact was exactly what Panama used as leverage to support groups that were not U.S. approved, as there was little other alternatives for training these counterinsurgents without

risking the confidentiality and safety of the trainees. Depending on the type of events covered, the analysis of these dynamics may even challenge the idea in the historiography that the Panamanian civilian elite were co-opted, which leads me to these central questions: Were Panama's dictatorships able to undermine their role as a U.S. proxy by co-opting the Panamanian civilian elite? How did Panama's civilian elite play a part in the U.S. Invasion of Panama? This thesis will argue that while Panama's dictatorships co-opted the civilian elite by relying on their diplomatic capabilities, this position allowed them to undermine the regimes as they saw fit. Just as the degree to which Panama had assisted the U.S. is debatable among historians, the amount of influence the civilian elite had on certain military developments is put into question when considering the ideological constraints of the scholars at the time that they wrote these histories.

Historiography

Research on Panama's role in supporting military groups in Central America has been documented mostly only in Panamanian historiography, and as many of the works were journalistic narratives written during the dictatorship yet published in the 90s after the dictatorship fell, they can be classified as primary sources. For example, Margaret Scranton's connection to academia allowed her to record a timeline of perspectives from the Department of State that affirm the U.S. 's justification for delegating the task of supporting Central American counterinsurgents to the Panamanians. Frederick Kempe and John Dinges, however, were journalists who utilized sources directly from the Department of National Intelligence, which revealed how U.S. foreign policy agents knew about and approved Panama's actions. Thus, the historiography on Panama has seen its fair share of nuance concerning each of its authors' different focuses that stem from their expertise like how

Kempe and Dinges' journalistic backgrounds gave them more neutral perspectives, while Scranton's job as a political scientist compelled her to take a more concrete position on American policy as the object of her policy, rather than Panamanian sources. None of these scholars, however, focus on sources directly from the Panamanian military, and for good reason. According to CUNY Law Librarian and Associate Professor Douglas Cox,

> During U.S. operations in Panama, the U.S. military seized significant quantities of documents from installations of Noriega's Panamanian Defense Forces, including its massive headquarters called the Commandancia, Noriega's offices, and government facilities throughout Panama. [1]

Furthermore, these documents are locked away in a military warehouse in Georgia, which has resulted in a continued gap in the history of Panama's dictatorships. Without these documents, there would be little information to resort to for further elaboration, especially public, that specifies the nuanced perspectives of the military. Hence, due to this absence of documentation, there is value in contextualizing Panamanian history under the scope of the Cold War U.S. strategy. Although the U.S. was in a good position militarily to dominate most countries in the world, the Department of State grew reluctant to its usual interventionist tendencies during the 70s and 80s, as covered in an analysis of this strategic reluctance by Walter LeFeber.

> In a reversal of the usual textbook version of how bureaucratic politics are supposed to work, the State Department argued for a military approach (even a blockade) in Central America, while the military leaders in the Pentagon opposed it. The Pentagon's reasoning was not complex. Reagan had promised the largest peacetime military budget in history. The generals and admirals did not want to lose those billions by sinking into an unpopular war. Because of this internal opposition, the administration's policy did not go decisively in any new direction. It was unable to move ahead militarily and in-capable of moving politically.[2]

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[1] Cox, Douglas, *The Lost Archives of Noriega*, Boston University International Law Journal [Vol 32:55], Pgs.57-89, (2014), Page 59

[2] LaFeber, Walter, *The Reagan Administration and Revolutions in Central America*, Page 5

Walter LeFeber is known for his work in Cold War studies of Latin America, and his book *Inevitable Revolutions* is essential to contextualizing U.S. policy in Panama as a result of key developments in Central America; however, he does not focus on Panama.

Through a methodological focus on Panamanian perspectives and recently declassified documents concerning the U.S.'s relationship with Panama, I will not only add to LaFeber's work on the Cold War in Central America but argue that it is better understood when focusing on Panama's role of supporting counterinsurgents in Central America. This thesis will substantiate the idea that the Cold War context of U.S. counterinsurgency efforts in Central America greatly maintained Panama's dictatorships by directly creating a need to train soldiers in Panama. To unearth such a muted part of Panama's history of dictatorship, I found it necessary to do research in Panama as there are almost no Panamanian primary sources catalogued online, having been consolidated into the country's institutions, or the memories of its people.

Methodology and Sources

On December 20, 2024, 35 years after the U.S. invasion of Panama, I arrived at Tocumen International Airport in Panama in search of documents that may have remained from those stolen in the invasion. I read about the possibility of there being internal documents directly from the military in the Archivos Nacionales de Panama, and although this had not proved to be the case, I took the gracious opportunity to conduct an oral history interview of a living member of the Guardia Nacional, which he was more than willing to help me with as his grandson. As a sublieutenant of the Guardia Nacional that worked from the inception of the Panamanian dictatorship in 1972 to its end in 1989, it is doubtless that he would be biased, or might lie to avoid accountability, but the same could be argued for any

journalist with connections to the U.S. government. From the simple fact that there are virtually no recorded testimonies or arguments from members of the Panamanian military, biased or not, this interview is a valuable asset to the Panamanian historiography and this thesis that rejects this historiography's assertion that that the Panamanian military was somehow capable enough to co-opt the civilian elites. As a former sublieutenant, my grandfather remembers the situation differently from the U.S.'s narratives of the Guardia's history, as he details the professionalization of Panama's military training of Central American soldiers that shows how the rudimentary capabilities of the military made it necessary for the majority to do legitimate work rather than be involved in controversy. Additionally, I was permitted to consult with the court documents and others associated with my grandfather's arrest and persecution as a result of his involvement with the regime and a harmful narrative condemning everyone to judgment, which reveals much about the fate of the military after the invasion. In addition to this oral What I did obtain from the Archivos Nacionales and Biblioteca Nacional was media propaganda that presented the narrative of the Panamanian regime's perspective in lockstep with anti-interventionism that was more opportunistic than ideological. What is more ideological, I contend, is the collection of sources from the U.S. Department of State and the C.I.A., which state justifications and communications that are heavily biased against Panama, yet their significance is seen when analyzed in juxtaposition with declassified documents.

The Department of State's Office of the Historian has been the central source for the prepared and justified, though its sizable compilations represent a chronological transition of Panama's role. This shows that from the nascency of U.S.-Panamanian relations in which the U.S. controlled the Canal, Panama's only leverage was its military expertise, resulting in

Panamanian dictator Omar Torrijos's inability to escalate any conflicts without threatening the power of the U.S. Southern Command. With this bias in mind, the scholarship produced on Panama's military regime has had a higher propensity to rely on journalistic narratives and political analyses, despite the difficulty in obtaining sources associated with their anonymity in both Panamanian and American accounts. When oppressive dictatorships are concerned, there is a propensity to keep information sources anonymous, even after the regime falls, to protect the authors from persecution, regardless of their country of origin. Not only did they have to look out for despots as key witnesses to their activities but evaded U.S. agents belonging to the C.I.A. and other government organizations. These agents of freedom would waste no time enlisting their help against their will, even if it put them into dangerous situations or exposed their dissidence to the regime. Thus, this type of source makes up the majority of primary source accounts during the regime, at least from ordinary people, which is the focal point for why there is a greater need to rely on government sources and declassified information for this analysis.

Thesis Structure

To understand the complex interplay between Panama's maintenance of its military and the civilian elites, this thesis will survey the history of Panama's military from the legitimation of their rule in 1972 to its end in 1989 and the consequences that followed. There are three timeframes that make up this timeline, the first being Panama's accumulation of agency within its role s a U.S. proxy during the Torrijos dictatorship, Panama's shifting attention towards covert policy rather than public policy, and the civilian elite left unchecked allowed it to compete with the Guardia Nacional as a better proxy of U.S. interests in a bid to secure their power. Even after the invasion, persecutions of the former military class and

investigations into the Invasion reveal the larger extent to which the civilian elites had an active role in undermining the Panamanian regime. Through a chronological account of the common narratives of these accounts substantiated with revised sources, this thesis will be assessed through the following order of chapters:

Chapter one will cover how Panama's successful politicization of military interests during the Torrijos dictatorship was on account of the co-optation of its civilian elite, specifically under Torrijos' rule. This relationship was strongest under Torrijos' leadership as his prowess in diplomacy over the Canal Treaty issue had utilized the U.S. 's language of sovereignty against them in what facilitated his collaboration with the Panamanian government on efforts such as the Nonalignment movement. This style of dictatorship was successful in earning Torrijos enough political clout to get away with normalizing relations and even supporting the U.S.'s enemies to legitimize military rule.

The second chapter will cover the difference in Panama's proxy role after Torrijos died in 1981, which maintained his strong precedent only long enough to continue representing themselves well on the world stage with initiatives such as the Contadora Group. As the second Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega assumed command by focusing more on benefitting the military rather than appeasing the U.S. covertly and its people, it eventually lost the support of the civilian elite. Without this legitimate front of support, the regime lost legitimacy both in the eyes of the people and the U.S. government, as the Panamanian military started fracturing internally over this insecurity of Noriega's capability of maintaining Panamanian militarism.

Chapter three is crucial in capturing the U.S.'s decision to invade after deliberations over the Panamanian military's instability that interpreted it as an unpredictable threat to the

Canal. This narrative would quickly prove not to be the case, as the U.S.'s true intentions are revealed through its brutality described in the testimony of its victims in the Independent Commission of Inquiry of the Invasion of Panama, and the subsequent inconsistency of reincorporating most of the military into the national police while heavily pursuing its leaders. The invasion's true calling ties back to the civilian elite's role in helping maintain the regime in the first place, in which it now sought to be co-opted by the U.S. to launch a different tyranny in which the wealthy elite rules. In the end, the only sovereignty the elites wanted was the freedom to profit and abuse the people, but the foundation they set at the beginning of Panama's dictatorship had no semblance to these aims, which will be investigated thoroughly in the first chapter.

Chapter 1: Sovereignty Over Steel

The Role of Autonomy in the Militarization of Panama

Introduction

To understand the role that Panama was given to advocate for U.S. policy by proxy, covering its military dynamics is imperative despite its only role at the beginning being the training of U.S. allies for regional security. From this small beginning, the Panamanian military would grow from being a small military company to a major player in Central American relations. Rather than abandoning its original military functions, the Guardia Nacional began to learn from the United States' policy to export military expertise as legitimate diplomacy, which was only possible with the direct involvement of its government.

This government was not an empty shell, as it had many regular functions, offices, and even a sitting President. Panama essentially posed as a democracy, to the extent that the military oligarchs had the final say in things. This might beg the question as to why the Guardia Nacional would bother putting up this act, but in reality, this dynamic was very methodological with the Guardia allowing the government concessions that made it look like a negotiable country, which was needed to maintain relations with the U.S. that supported its existence in Panama. With the Canal as the central issue between both countries, Panama's

military leaders needed to legitimize its case and defeat the notion that it was a barbaric dictatorship that could not be trusted with the Canal.

Even with the potential to possibly ally with the U.S. in an attempt to overthrow the dictatorship from what little autonomy the Panamanian government had, these civilian elites of Panama's government resolved to throw their weight behind the Guardia Nacional. This support was blemished as nationalistic fervor as fellow Panamanians, as the cause for sovereignty was a uniting force for these people whose country was dominated by U.S. imperialism. With this background, the Monroe Doctrine preachings of the U.S. about securing sovereignty and autonomy for the people of Latin America could not apply to Panama.

In general, the U.S. expected these entirely different countries of Latin America to understand their goals and their concreteness, even when they contradicted each other, as in the context of the Cold War, these political exceptions were routine under the belief that democracy was won by playing the long game. Place your bets on the far-right insurgency group, give it weapons and clearance to take over an entire country, and surely, they will transition to democracy. With the instability that spread across Central America as a result of this policy, many were aware of these schemes and joined the larger non-alignment movement of countries around the world that were on the same page. By this point, the U.S.'s playbook was overplayed, and Panama would take advantage of the U.S.'s inconsistent standards of democracy through its fight for sovereignty. This fight took form in many different stages, yet by the end of the Canal treaty deliberations, its role as a U.S. proxy would evolve with the ability to defy U.S. interests, a crucial skill needed to avoid democratization and maintain the military dictatorship.

Dictatorship and Diplomacy: The Guardia Nacional, the U.S., and an Unfaithful Marriage

> The Panama Canal constitutes an inalienable patrimony of the Panamanian Nation; it shall remain open to peaceful and uninterrupted transit of vessels from all Nations and its use shall be subject to requirements, and conditions established by this Constitution, the Law, and its Administration.[3]

Born from a ruling military dictatorship, the Panamanian Constitution of 1972 was the central convention by which the U.S. chose to begin relations with Panama again and officiate their proxy relationship. Solidifying in legal language the Canal as an "inalienable patrimony of the Panamanian Nation," Article 315 of the 1972 Panamanian Constitution is a notable reflection of Panama's priority which it carries over into its relationship with the U.S. This acknowledgment of Panama's intentions for the Canal to "remain open to peaceful and uninterrupted transit of vessels from all nations" fulfilled a prime concern of the U.S., so Panama's marriage of this requisite with its desire for Canal ownership would prove to be a sound strategy for selling Panamanian sovereignty as beneficial to U.S. interests. This diplomatic pursuit of Canal ownership gained political capital for Panama as it justified its plight with Canal Sovereignty on the world stage and built alliances. Such a politicization of the Canal would not only discourage U.S. opposition but gain favor with the U.S. In continuing to entertain these talks over the Canal that concerned this new proxy relationship, Panama's initial purpose of military training would transform the country into being a working outpost for U.S. interests in the region. The assignment of Panamanian government ambassadors to diplomatic posts outlasting Torrijos's rule over Panama would satisfy these initial prerequisites, and on top of being allowed to continue working with the military, these Panamanian elites would even find new clientele for their interests.

[3] Republic of Panama, *1972 Panamanian Constitution*: TITLE XIV. The Panama Canal, Article 315

For the U.S., the choice of Panama as a proxy was nonpareil to any other country in the region for the geopolitical benefits only Panama possessed. Throughout the Cold War, the U.S.'s main regional goal in Central America was to support anti-communists against the insurgency of leftist groups as much as possible, since Cuba and the USSR were helping fund them. Military assistance and training were sent to some of these countries directly, such as Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador, but the 70s during the Cold War marked a period of transition in this strategy. In the wake of the Vietnam War and opposition around the world and even at home, the U.S. was being put in a position where it could no longer support countries directly without facing consequences at home.[4] A bigger role then was given to military training, but as many of the countries aforementioned became dangerous war zones, the only countries with a tropical landscape that troops could be trained in were Panama and Costa Rica. Costa Rica was closer to Nicaragua, but it also had its movement of demilitarization that complicated U.S. involvement. Panama also had the benefit of possessing military expertise in tropical warfare that rivaled the U.S., which is elaborated on in my interview with my grandfather, a living sublieutenant of Panama's military, then called the National Guard.

On December 21, 2024, I interviewed my grandfather, who during his time as a sublieutenant in the Guardia Nacional went by many names, from "Ego" to "El Diablo," which translates to "the Devil", as this nickname was not given to him lightly. During the dichotomy of Panamanian military society, he was notorious for his difficult training and can attest to the many aspects of the Guardia's military functions and the degree to which he was complicit from its official beginning in 1972 to its overthrow in 1989. One of the first

[4] LaFeber, Walter, *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America*, W.W. Norton & Company (1993), Page 213

functions Ego was a part of was training a combat company called the Crocodiles, a group of American soldiers whom he took to a site along the Chagres River named San Jose de Madurono, a training camp for soldiers to prepare for a promotion to infantry.[5] Littered with various gigs and posts, the importance of this dynamic in Ego's career was still not lost on him 35 years later, as Ego could attest to the usefulness of the Guardia Nacional, stating, "…the Americans knew the power that the Panamanian military had. And they gave them that role in training soldiers. When the American arrived here to train, he felt that he was being trained."[6] When considering the geopolitical implication as a strategic asset to the U.S.'s interests in Central America, this aspect of military training was worth exploring as Panama clearly had potential, and although this would be discussed during the treaty negotiations, Torrijos sought to add pressure with the help of his civilian elites in government.

Compared to other works in the historiography of Panama, Jonathan Brown's *The Weak and the Powerful: Omar Torrijos* is by far the most recent addition released last year in 2024, and the only comprehensive history of Omar Torrijos' diplomatic efforts. This is especially significant for its deeper focus on the political players that made it happen. Brown's account of Juan Antonio Tack represents a notable figure who was not traditionally a civilian elite, having earned his role as the vice minister of foreign relations irregardless of his avid support of Torrijos. Tack's performance earned the respect of Panamanians everywhere for his performance, which helped legitimize Panama's case over the Canal. [7]

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[5] Sublieutenant "Ego", *A Conversation with the Devil: A Former Sublieutenant Recalls His Military Service in the Panamanian Defense Forces,* (2024), Transcript of Audio Interview Conducted and Edited by Jermaine Smith, 2:26-3:07

[6] Sublieutenant "Ego", *A Conversation with the Devil,* 18:20-18:39

[7] Brown, Jonathan C., *The Weak and the Powerful: Omar Torrijos, Panama, and the Non-Aligned Movement in the World*, (2024), University of Pittsburgh Press, Page 145

During Panama's 1972 meeting at the UN Security Council (UNSC), Tack participated in talks with Henry Kissinger and Ellsworth Bunker over the fate of the Canal that resulted in a successful resolution called the Tack-Kissinger agreement. This agreement laid out 8 vague yet thought-out guidelines, which notably included, "A phased withdrawal of U.S. civil and military assets, a phased takeover of canal administration by Panama, and the Republic of Panama assuming a greater burden of the canal's defense."[8] Tack had proven then that it was possible for Panama's dictatorship to be civil and negotiate with the Americans., and his popularity among the Panamanian people only promoted further cooperation between the overall civilian elite and Torrijos.

From the inception of the 1972 Panama Constitution, it was then possible for Panama's so-called despotic brutes to speak the language of politics and respectability that the United States would accept. This did not mean, however, that Panama would forget its talents in military expertise, especially when it was the U.S. that funded the military into existence and taught them enough for the Guardia Nacional to begin training other armies on its own. The dictator Omar Torrijos himself was the frontrunner of this effort, as when it became clear that the U.S. would not deliberate the treaties with ease, he resorted to publicizing the injustice on the world stage. Although this strategy would pressure the U.S. into agreeing to negotiate, their requisites of Panama's offices as a proxy would both further its capacity for dictatorial rule, and make it dependent on this role.

Dead Man's Hand: The Deception Behind the Canal Defense Argument

Through the foundation of military outreach in Panama, the Guardia Nacional secured its existence against the U.S. 's condition in the canal treaty to democratize by leveraging its

[8] Brown, Jonathan C., *The Weak and the Powerful,* Page 146

newfound political legitimacy. By repurposing its military role for also supporting U.S. enemies, Panama's military reveled in its newfound friendships which compelled the U.S. to give theirs with Panama another try, or else it might get pushed onto its communist allies. After much deliberation, the Carter-Torrijos Treaties were signed on September 7, 1977, relinquishing control over the Panama Canal to Panama by 2000. This event is canonical for the United States' economic and geopolitical investment into Panama in a gambit to perpetuate positive perceptions of their influence abroad. Just as he argued in the United Nations Security Council, the winning argument in these treaty negotiations was the insistence of Panamanian dictator Omar Torrijos that the U.S. did not need to continue its presence in the Canal Zone if Panama could develop its military enough to protect it. To best increase their successes in the Cold War, it would be majorly beneficial for America to spend fewer of its resources, which could be used towards bigger geopolitical problems instead, and Panama could claim its sovereignty, which would be able to de-escalate the boiling nationalist politics at home.

For Panama, this would be a double-edged sword, as the military would succeed in securing the Canal, but at the cost of its rule over Panama, as the main condition from the U.S. was to democratize the country and hold free elections. To understand how Panama got to that point, consulting sources from American foreign policy through *Volume XXIX: Panama*, from the *Foreign Relations of the United States* series, would prove fruitful in detailing the complex interplay of the U.S. trying to concede its part of the deal while trying to assert authority in this new "friendship" with dictator Omar Torrijos. Part of exemplifying this complexity is pairing these documents' analysis with other classified documents to see how much the narratives differed between agencies and more Panamanian military insights.

On April 20, 1978, President Carter received a memorandum from the Acting Secretary of State Warren Christopher, detailing the next steps the United States planned to carry out regarding the Panama treaties, including their role in the buildup of Panama's military. He restated for Carter, "We would use our best efforts to make available to Panama up to $295 million over five years in loans and FMS credits over ten years to prepare the Panama National Guard for its defense role." [9] This decision came as a response to Torrijos' promise to take over the U.S. 's role in defending the Canal so long as it returned to Panamanian control. The memorandum itself was important as it showed the extent of advice that President Carter's aides developed for him, at least as a template for fulfilling the treaties, as it could deviate from expectations in countless ways. In this case, they were disadvantaged by Panamanians' continued skepticism, though Torrijos had good intentions, as David Patton observes in a meeting together.

They were a national guard in name only. As in a briefing memorandum sent from the assistant secretary of state for congressional relations to the secretary of state on May 1, 1979, someone interviewing questions whether the Guardia Nacional is even the equivalent of an American National Guard. He affirms that as true that they have "...very, very minimal military or defense capabilities. But I see them restructuring this force and I see them making a very modest enlargement of the force to create, perhaps a couple of battalions".[10] Thus it's by sheer number that the GN could have had a good chance to assert its role as Panama's defense force, though not the best. General McAuliffe elaborated more on his answer to

[9] Christopher, Warren, *Memorandum From Acting Secretary of State Christopher to President Carter,* Washington, April 20, 1978, Kolar, Laura R., Howard, Adam M., *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977-1980,* Volume XXIX, Panama, Department of State, Washington, Page 424
[10] Bennett, William Tapley Jr., *Briefing Memorandum from the Assistant Secretary of State for Congressional Relations (Bennet) to Secretary of State Vance,* Washington, May 1, 1979, Page 545

emphasize that while these are good improvements, the U.S. is likely to and "should," per his words, continue to have a military presence in Panama. For the assistant secretary of state, this interview was likely an important metric of Panamanian military capability that he felt was necessary to share with the secretary of state to push the overall U.S. interest to further militarize Panama as stipulated in the treaty conditions. For a general such as McAuliffe, and especially one whose input is being forwarded around important people like the secretary of state, his answer couldn't possibly have been anything different unless it aligned with U.S. interests, which by this point in 1979 was influenced largely by the Cold War. Thus, although the prospect of building up the Panamanian forces to protect the canal was one of the main factors that led to the signing of the 1977 Carter-Torrijos treaties, there was U.S. skepticism that this could be accomplished, especially under the methods proposed by Panama that looked more like military domination of the country than the safeguarding of its canal.

There were also reports of Torrijos' involvement with the Sandinistas in Nicaragua that undermined this friendship with the U.S., which it worked so hard to foment, and is significant in light of how U.S. foreign policy efforts during this time only emboldened this type of autonomy. These efforts reached a culmination shortly, as on May 24, 1979, the Department of State sent a telegram to the Embassy in Panama to update them with the developments that followed a bombshell Miami arms case in which questioning had alleged Panamanian involvement in arms delivering to the Sandinistas.[11] In it, it was indicated how Torrijos had reciprocated U.S. objectives for peace in Nicaragua, which, as soon as June 4, would be backpedaled in a memorandum from Secretary of State Vance to President Carter, as even the Panamanian foreign ambassador to the U.S., Gabriel Lewis Galindo, was asking

[11] Christopher, Warren, *Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Panama*, Washington, May 24, 1979, Page 560

for somebody to come down and "calm down" Torrijos.[12] This revelation was that Torrijos was indeed trafficking arms to the Sandinistas daily in a wager to build a good relationship early with a Sandinista government that was sure to take power. This reasoning is supported in a memorandum from Robert Pastor of the National Security Council Staff to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs Brzezinski, who was sent to Panama to talk Torrijos out of these dealings. According to Pastor, "Torrijos began by saying that he regretted that because the U.S. always seemed so slow to recognize new realities we hadn't bothered to 'buy a share' of Sandinista stock." Pastor remarked that they "had come to Panama not to buy Sandinista stock but to try to get Panama to sell its stock", and to his party, "Panama seemed to be doing everything to jeopardize the treaties".[13] Although the U.S. was getting briefed on Torrijos' dealing with the Sandinistas before he could react, this was a direct result of U.S. policy that not only legitimized the Panamanian dictatorship with promises to further militarize it and dominate national politics but conceded enough autonomy to where the GN felt it could meddle in the politics of other countries.

The fact that Panama ended up training Sandinista soldiers on top of trafficking weapons to them only reinforces Panama's geopolitical reality at this point to where they could choose exactly which of the U.S.'s interests to support and even which ones to directly go against. The U.S. was no less aware of this, as a declassified document by the CIA shows how they suspected the U.S. of providing them with passports, as they had done in Nicaragua, but were willing to look past it.[14] Instead, the U.S. utilized Panama's help with

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[12] Vance, Cyrus, *Memorandum From Secretary of State Vance to President Carter*, Washington, June 4, 1979, Page 561

[13] Pastor, Robert, *Memorandum from Robert Pastor of the National Security Council Staff to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Brzezinski)*, Washington, June 5, 1979, Page 563

[14] Anonymous Correspondent, *U.S. Policy to El Salvador and Central America*, (Janurary 28, 1980), Special Coordination Committee Meeting, White House Situation Room, Page 5

training Salvadorian army members against the FLMN just after the Salvadorian civil war broke out in 1980. According to an article in the *Washington Post*, "The United States is in the process of training as many 300 Salvadoran military officers at its Panama Canal area military schools in how to deal with suspected guerrillas in their country while observing human rights." There are even,

> allegations of secret graveyards all kinds of exotic, brutal skills being taught. There is no substantiation to any of this, but the entire status of the Panama Canal Area Military Schools during the transition from the United States to Panamanian control over the canal area has been brought into question.[15]

As Panama's newspapers have been less likely to cover controversial stories such as this one, American newspapers can often give an idea not just about what's happening, but what could be still unclear or rumored. Panama's military role becomes clear when considering the direct communications between Panama and Costa Rica around arms dealing.

During the Cold War in Central America, the civil war in Nicaragua led to Costa Rica becoming a buffer state for Contra Rebels to train and hide out from Nicaraguan soldiers, but the potential this had for conflict couldn't be ignored. Looking directly from the Costa Rican perspective by analyzing their foreign policy documents, this Costa Rican anxiety is exemplified no better than Panama's complicity in this regional interplay. In a letter from the Minister of Public Security of Costa Rica, it's shown how Panama loaned Costa Rica, "four MACK machine guns, two mounts, four boxes for ammunition, two collection boxes from 1979-1981.[16] On July 31, 1979, not only was Costa Rica responded to with diligence over what they had received back so far, but it was specifically Colonel Manuel Noriega who

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[15] Dickey, Christopher, *Salvadorans Training at U.S. Sites in Panama*, (October 8, 1890), The Washington Post, Para. 31

[16] Morales, Roberto, Castellon, Rodolfo, *Aeropuerto Internacional Juan Santamaria, Ministro de Seguridad Publica: San Jose-Costa Rica*, 29 de mayo de 1980, Echevarria, Jose Juan Brealey, *La Guerra no Declarada*, (2006), Editorial Universidad Estatal a Distancia, Page 242

oversaw this communication, reflecting how the military often directly took up diplomatic posts.[17] This involvement still did not ostracize the role of professionals, though, as two years later in 1981, not only did the Panamanian Minister of Government and Justice, Jorge Eduardo Ritter, report on the successful loan of their weaponry, but he also legitimized this form of military diplomacy. Ritter states,

> We note, for the historical effects of the problem, that the Republic of Panama obtained weapons in foreign countries to be able to assist the people and the democratic government in Costa Rica in this emergency, which our government considered appropriate and irreplaceable, as a testimony of solidarity towards a friendly country.[18]

Through instances like these, it is evident how the Guardia Nacional had co-opted Panama's government to its interests. By justifying this trade as a token of diplomatic respect, Panama asserted its stance on opposing the Somozas in Nicaragua while affirming its support for the Sandinistas and its solidarity for the security of its Central American neighbors. Implicitly, however, Panama was looking for new clientele according to its political strategy that co-opted the Panamanian elites to military interests while opposing the U.S. that supported the Sandinistas, which would take a dramatic turn in policy after the death of Omar Torrijos, which would indeed trigger a dead hand.

Conclusion

Although it wasn't immediate or outright, Panama's evolving relationship with the United States didn't make it any less of a dictatorship. As such, Panama's greatest currency has been its military capacity for teaching and perpetrating war, even when it came time to learn diplomacy and start practicing democracy to appear friendly. Through this focus on

[17] Tte. Crnl. Manuel A. Noriega, Inteligencia Military G-2 de Estado Mayor de la Guardia Nacional, Panama 31 de Julio de 1979, Page 243

[18] Ritter, Jorge Eduardo, Ministro de Gobierno y Justicia, Despacho del Ministro, Ministerio de Gobierno y Justicia, Republica de Panama, 8 de mayo de 1981, Jose Juan Brealey, *La Guerra no Declarada,* Page 245

diplomacy, Panama marketed itself both to the greatest self-proclaimed arbiter of freedom in the hemisphere and to a global body of government that was the only chance at legitimizing Panama's governance as rational and untainted by despotism. Although Panama's leaders and foreign affairs office had the trappings of effective public policy and suave delivery of its arguments, these characteristics were surface level, with more selfish concerns of enrichment and co-optation being better able to influence events than anything.

Chapter 2: Silencing Statecraft:

The Noriega Strategy and its Oversights

Introduction

July 31, 1981, Brigadier General Omar Torrijos died in a helicopter crash in Coclesito, near Penonome. To this day, it is debated as to whether this was a simple miscalculation of weather conditions or an assassination plot by either the CIA, Manuel Noriega, or both of them. In light of Omar Torrijos' successes in furthering the Panama Canal debate and successfully negotiating the Americans' relinquishing of the Canal back to full Panamanian control, there's no doubt that his death would be beneficial for Washington, especially considering Manuel Noriega was already on the CIA's payroll. Long since the Panamanian National Guard was established, Noriega had been helping the Americans hold their influence in Panama, which would eventually incubate and grow through the military.

Compared to Noriega, Torrijos had considerably distanced Panama from this role, so even after his death, his impact on the Panamanian military, both domestically and regionally, was unmistakable. Now a country capable of maintaining its alliances to the point of supporting other countries militarily, Panama was in a better position to make fair deals with the U.S., which it could not deny as a significant proxy of its geopolitical interests in Central America. Noriega broke from this trend, however, as he focused more on increasing the military's power and grip on society by leveraging its relationship with the U.S. Rather than

follow formal diplomatic objectives, it feigned antagonism publicly while increasing compliance with covert operations that sought to help U.S. allies in Central America. The U.S. had no other choice but to accept this relationship, as scholars such as Frederick Kempe and his *Divorcing the Dictator* maintain how Noriega leveraged a power imbalance to concentrate its power in Panama and subvert democracy while helping the U.S. with its pursuits.

The first section of this chapter covers the initial stage from 1981 to 1983 after Omar Torrijos died and the Guardia Nacional underwent a political transition that saw Manuel Noriega rise to power. It will also capture how paying attention to political legitimacy was essential to this officiation of rule for both Panama and the U.S. The second section sees Noriega's gradual transition in geopolitical strategy from 1983-1987, which contradicted both his commitments to democratization and the foreign ministry's to gain favor with the U.S., yet ignored its impact on its alliances. The third section captures the scale of this diplomatic impact as Panama's loss of legitimacy compelled the radicalization of its alliances, which ostracized and arguably threatened the U.S. and Panamanian civilian elites into allying, and this can be seen when looking into the military's perspectives. Through this analytical structure, this chapter will show how the failure in Noreiga's covert diplomatic strategy is proof of a larger historical trend of political co-optation that was central to Panama's abuse of its role as a U.S. proxy, as the military capabilities developed through this role can be legitimized and repurposed as military diplomacy.

A Deal with the Devil: The Role of Internal Dynamics in Noriega's Succession to Power

In light of the death of Brigadier General Omar Torrijos, the political situation of the country suffered little from the resultant power vacuum, as it was an authoritarian dictatorship that concentrated political power in the military, and infighting would only lead to the delegitimization of their control. Torrijos' legacy of democratization was in the hands of the Guardia Nacional, and it made its way to Manuel Noriega, the next dictator of Panama who would eventually be ousted in a U.S. Invasion that was more than just U.S. dissatisfaction. As per the historiography, Noriega's rule would succeed Torrijos' legacy in name only as his cooperation with the U.S. saw a greater emphasis on problematic covert operations than diplomacy and exemplified how much political legitimacy had a major role in legitimizing the dictatorship as its absence of development gave the U.S. a pretext for meddling in their affairs. Ironically, Noriega's appeal to ethos and democratization during his bid for power created a deal with the devil for his comrades, as it allowed Noreiga to usurp the military uncontested by the U.S. To understand what made the Panamanian political establishment and the U.S. both approve of Noriega despite an illegitimate rise to power and sheer differences, it is imperative to focus on military perspectives during this timeline, as their deeper analysis proves that Panama did not and could not pose a threat that warranted U.S. invasion unless the invasion was for other reasons.

Through my interview with ex-Sublieuteant Ego of the Guardia Nacional, his insights into the inner functions show how even after the Canal Treaties were signed, these functions of the National Guard had not deviated far from its initial capabilities of training soldiers. Of course, the GN had become a much different military after the treaties were signed, as according to the official handbook from the Fuerzas de Defensa, they established three

military schools by 1980, and many more by 1985.[19] One of these schools, Panajungla, was founded right after the treaties were signed in 1977, and it focused on teaching foreign military personnel and national soldiers war tactics in the rainforest to prepare them for any jungle operation.[20] Ego personally worked as an instructor at Panajungla and testified to how Americans would train at this school in Bocas Del Toro, in Terribe.[21] As more schools were founded in the years that followed, the Guardia Nacional began to professionalize itself as a legitimate defense force, but what exactly was this Legitimate defense force for?

Many scholars maintain the real purpose of the Guardia Nacional was to suit the Americans' needs, who supported the growth of the Guardia Nacional as they sought to foster a defense force capable of defending the canal as well as training their allies. When focusing on Panamanian intentions, however, they reveal how this distinction was a lot grayer, and the Guardia Nacional did not discriminate against any of its customers, as they trained the U.S.'s greatest threat in the region, the Sandinistas. As the Sublieutenant recalls,

> What role did the Panamanian military play in training them, the Somozas and the Sandinistas? I was [with the] Sandinistas. I trained those people in [using] the cannon 75'…they came to train here in Panama.[22]

From this recollection, it is clear that training soldiers to use the "cannon 75" represents one of many types of specialized warfare available in Panama that was valuable to U.S. policy. As I followed up to ask how this training was given, Sublietuenant Ego responded, "Specialized yes…basic, not so much, but tactical and urban warfare, that's it. Yes, and was it

[19] Fuerzas de Defensa, *Fuerzas de Defensa: Fuerzas Armadas de Panama*, Editorial Sipimex Ltda, 1987, Pages 98-109
[20] Fuerzas de Defensa, *Fuerzas de Defensa,* Page 102
[21] Ex-Sublieutenant "Ego", *A Conversation with the Devil,* 1:50-2:26
[22] Ex-Sublieutenant "Ego", *A Conversation with the Devil,* 38:02-39:37

directed by the Machos de Monte? Yes."[23] As newer programs developed in response to the Canal negotiations, the Machos del Monte continued to play a major role in training since their founding in 1973, since they were one of the only places in Central America that offered specialized training in jungle guerilla warfare and were so proficient that U.S. soldiers themselves opted to be trained by Panamanians. Under the context of joint training in the Canal Zone, this military expertise began to see a vital role in protecting the Canal as well as helping the U.S.'s war efforts in Nicaragua.

The latter of these benefits was the most valuable as it allowed Panama to both support the U.S. mission to support anti-communist guerrillas as well as directly oppose it by training its enemies such as the Sandinistas and the FLMN, and considering they let their soldiers train with them, their expertise was too valuable to risk losing by opposing them. Panama, during its power vacuum, was still a cohesive nation, whether, through the military's standing with the country's political groups or the very internal stability of the FDDD that allowed it to keep managing the country, the U.S. would be opposed on all fronts.[24] However, even this unified opposition would be dwarfed by the size and capabilities of U.S. forces, so this only further decentralized intervention as Panama posed no threat, and there were bigger concerns at hand.

Past the defense of the Canal, these regional concerns would take precedence in determining the U.S.'s proxy goals for Panama, and their smooth continuity after Panama chooses a successor to Torrijos. Noriega could already foresee this change as a major confidant for U.S intelligence, so he knew best how to pitch himself as the best salesman of

[23] Ex-Sublieutenant "Ego", *A Conversation with the Devil,* 39:37-39:57
[24] Kempe, Frederick, *Divorcing the Dictator, America's Bundled Affair with Noriega*, G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1990, Page 115

U.S. objectives compared to his comrades.[25] Leveraging the U.S.'s wishes for democratization in Panama, Noriega put this at the front and center of his approach to military affairs, and through Panamanian terms of continuing Omar Torrijos' legacy that won over Panama's political groups as well as the U.S. Through an egalitarian process, Noriega pretended to play along with the FFDD's plan to divvy up its leadership between himself and other Senior military officers in the foreseeable future. This pact would be called the "Historic Pledge of the Guardia Nacional for Patriotic, Ethical, Orderly, Natural, and Peaceful Institutional Organization," which, per Guillermo Sanchez's *In the Time of the Tyrants*, lays out the future of leadership accordingly:

> [Ruben] Paredes - February 1982 till March 1983
> [Armando] Contreras - March 1983 till March 1984
> [Manuel] Noriega - March 1984 till July 31, 1987
> [Robert] Diaz Herrera - July 31, 1987 till July 31, 1988.[26]

Through this precision of planning that sought out a seamless implementation of each officer, the military had set its foundation to branch out the military into the political scene, though it quickly became a power grab. These officers soon betrayed Contreras as they sought Paredes' transition into the presidential candidacy for the military's political party, the Revolutionary Democratic Party.[27] The CIA was not clueless about this scheme, though, and managed to acquire a complete transcription of Paredes' resignation speech, as per a later declassified document entailing the following:

> We have discovered that some political parties, unfortunately, with the support of a high-ranking official who has resigned – refer to former attorney general Rafael Rodriguez (does not complete sentence – fbis)) we uncovered an attempt to subvert

[25] Kempe, Frederick, *Divorcing the Dictator,* Page 116-118
[26] Koster, R.M., Sanchez, Guillermo, *In the Time of the Tyrants (1990)*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, Page 237
[27] Kempe, Frederick, *Divorcing the Dictator,* Page 114

> order, to destabilize the nation, and to interrupt the democratizing process we are trying to carry out through peaceful (ilan and honest elections). (Paredes)[28]

This is about the military's opposition to Attorney General Rafael Rodriguez, who accepted his post in 1982 to investigate government corruption until he dug too deep and realized how much the military was pulling the strings. More importantly, it represents the conscious effort by the FFDD to tie every major event back to democratization to legitimize its regime and the reaction by U.S. intelligence would prove why this front of legitimacy was necessary.

Compared to Torrijos, Noriega was much more receptive to cooperation with the U.S. and knew well what they were seeking in Panama's government. When Paredes resigned and the rest of the officers followed through on their part of the plan, Colonel Noriega made his assumption of power an opportunity to make democratization a central promise of the Guardia Nacional, and through a telegram by U.S. intelligence, their interest was piqued by this deliberate strategy:

> The new commander delivered a major address touching on the future of the political process in Panama, the role of the National Guard, and the Relationship between them…A strong commitment to the realization of free and honest elections in 1984, and to the maintenance of public tranquillity to permit an orderly electoral process. What appeared to be a more positive and constructive approach to relations with the U.S. and the conflicts in Central America.[29]

These commitments would prove to be contradictory as Noriega worked to subvert democratization in Panama throughout his regime, but even with these prospects, Noriega's later memoir reveals just how pleased the CIA was to see him rise to power given their past together. Knowing directly what stakes the U.S. had in Panama's proxy role in Central America, he made his strategy clear of distancing Panama away from being "a pawn in that

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[28] Anonymous Correspondent, *Speech by Brigadier General Ruben Dario Paredes*, (July 31, 1983), Declassified U.S. Department of State, Para. 6

[29] FM AMER EMBASSY PANAMA, *Declassified Telegram: Noriega Takes Command*, (Aug 83) U.S. Department of State, Page 1

game."[30] One of Noriega's first steps toward this new diplomatic strategy for Panama would be to rechristen the name of the Guardia Nacional into the Fuerzas de Defensa de Panama, reflecting its evolution as a military institution. In line with this new objective, Noriega saw less benefits in aiding the U.S. and building the case for further military support, but his attempt to try and seek a balanced style of diplomacy that can both develop relations in Central America as well as find a clientele to sell their military expertise to would never strike. As the next section will prove, Noriega's focus on covert operations would contradict the civilian elites' diplomatic efforts abroad, losing legitimacy both in U.S. and Panamanian politics.

The Enemy of my Enemy is my Friend: To Trade Diplomacy for Conspiracy

Just as the successful co-optation of skilled civilian elites of the Panamanian government to the Guardia Nacional's interests was vital to legitimizing Torrijos' military rule as well-meaning and neutral, it would decline thereafter as Noriega would change strategy. Rather than focus so much on playing politics on a diplomatic scale, Noriega sought to win U.S. approval through covert means. The U.S. could not keep playing the game of peace that Central American governments preferred, as it was better skilled in warfare and training, but as was true before, many countries were against this interventionism and Cold War logic that weaponized and ravaged nations around the world. Noriega and the U.S. were on the same page then, and so fruitful was this relationship that the U.S. let Noriega get away with many crimes and abuses, which was what Noriega intended. Rather than play politics and attempt to appease all parties to maintain their hold on power, Noriega sought to maintain the military institution through repression and secrecy. These secrets could not be

[30] Eisner, Peter, *America's Prisoner: The Memoirs of Manuel Noriega* (1997, Random House), Page 100

kept as reports of drug trafficking, arms trafficking, and the rigging of political parties would continually expose Panama's efforts at seeming neutral and diplomatic as a facade. As the jobs of the civilian elites at maintaining these lies would only become harder as a result, they begin to be pushed into supporting the enemy of their enemy, the United States. For the political actors of the Contadora talks, however, this influence had barely made its mark, as Noriega had barely taken power by the end of these negotiations.

Tasked with finding solutions to the Central American conflict, Panama, Mexico, Colombia, and Venezuela formed the Contadora Group, a regional discussion inviting Central American countries to represent themselves to best help them. The result of these discussions was the creation of the Document of Objectives, a draft resolution that detailed a strategic foundation of basic interests for restoring peace to the region that could be built off of in later discussions, the following of which are significant for their contradiction to Panama's covert interests.

> Commitment to freezing the level of existing offensive weapons…to prohibit the existence of military installations of other countries in its territory…to establish internal control mechanisms to prevent the transfer of weapons from the territory of any country in the region to the territory of another.[31]

This hypocrisy could be seen as intentional to throw attention on Panama's secret operations, but if anything, its connection to American interests would soon be the biggest premise for this perception. Although kept classified, the position of the U.S. was obvious to all of Central America, so this internal document from the Department of State only reinforces the notion that it seeks to intervene and not let Central American nations take matters into their own hands.

[31] Grupo Contadora, *Documento de Objetivos*, (1983) Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores de Panama, Page 162

> We can be helpful by holding Central Americans' and Contadora Group's feet to fire regarding concrete arrangements in consultations. Whether successful or not, however, the Contadora process is highly useful to us because it focuses on Nicaragua as a regional problem. On the other hand, it also contains an unhelpful "wild card": solo actions by the Contadora Group participants themselves.[32]

This wildcard was Panama, as the U.S. still tried to negotiate Panama's departure from the group, and although this could be seen as a front to put on a tough face, the covert nature by which this was done represents this negotiation much more seriously. Not only did National Security Advisor Poindexter mastermind this effort, but he even sought the use of the FFDD for a southern front against Nicaragua.

As Panama was drawing closer to Nicaragua and Cuba, there is a layer of irony in the fact that the U.S. considered transitioning some of Panama's proxy status to Costa Rica instead to survey the situation in both its neighboring countries. By 1985, an analysis by the CIA stated,

> Panama played a key role in providing military support to the Sandinistas in 1978 and 1979. After the Sandinistas came to power, however, they rejected Panama's advice and offers of assistance. Recently, General Manuel Noriega, Commander of Panama's Defense Force, told the editors of Costa Rica's principal newspaper, La Nacion, that the Sandinistas' arms escalation posed a danger to the entire region.[33]

By this point, even Panama could not see Nicaragua as such a pivotal ally, as it was in Panama's best interest for Nicaragua to be destabilized enough for it to benefit from supporting either side. Additionally, as Costa Rica supported Sandinista Nicaragua, it was a fruitless endeavor for the U.S. to divert its support of Panama to Costa Rica with ease and would have to make greater attempts to transition Costa Rica away from this policy. In terms of Costa Rica's support for Panama, it had the benefit of being neutral, however, the U.S.

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[32] FM AMER Embassy San Jose, *Stone Mission: Salvadoran and Costa Rican Read-Out on May 28-30 Contadora Meeting*, (Jun 83), White House Situation Room, Pages 9-10

[33] Anonymous Correspondent, *The Soviet-Cuban Connection in Central America and the Caribbean*, Central Intelligence Agency, Edited 27 Februrary 1985, Sanitized Copy Approved For Release 2009/11/25, Page 12

could foresee how Noriega's subversion of democracy and ramp-up of its military forces could scare Costa Rica into allying further with the U.S.

For Noriega, these efforts to "democratize" are deliberate as he could argue that because the military was the ruling institution and foundation of stability, they were the arbiters of what is "truly" democracy. Thus, any political party with a specific policy that undermines "Panamanian interests" can fit this definition of subversive, so of course, this was a narrative that left out the fact that the Fuerzas de Defensa negotiated with and benefitted from allying with the U.S. and these political groups. According to *Panama, a country study,* from the year 1990, " the fiscal year 1986 alone had three times more foreign military sales at 12,488 than the last 6 years combined which sum up to 3,852.[34] Simultaneously, the Noriega indictment on drug charges brought up a larger drug narrative within U.S. intelligence circles that contributed to the paper trail of evidence that would be needed for the U.S. to warrant invading Panama, they were careful about questioning the events before making assumptions. Through a telegram to the Department of State from the U.S. embassy.

> The abrupt firing and house arrest of Lt. Col. Julian Melo Borbua on drug-related charges raise many questions. Was he working alone, or simply the front man for other Senior Panama Defense Forces (PDF) officers? Did Noriega set him up to take the fall, or was he set up by others whose real target is Noriega?[35]

Thus, even the U.S. was shy about taking action just yet, despite how clear it was that Noriega's rule would not be the successor to Torrijismo that many leaders thought he would be. Noriega's increasing reliance on covert affairs would be contentious for Panama to keep

[34] Federal Research Division of the Library of Congress, *Panama, a country study*, (1989), Country Studies–Area Handbook Program, United States Government, Fourth Edition, Page 243
[35] FM AMER EMBASSY, *The Drug Bust of a Senior PDF Officer: Many Questions But Few Answers*, (Jul 84), U.S. Department of State, Page 1

up a pretty face publicly, and the next few scandals would be the last blows to this political legitimacy.

Coup de Grace: Building the Paper Trail for U.S. Intervention

By the year 1987, Panama's focus on covert affairs had devastated the political legitimacy of the Fuerzas de Defensa, forcing them to rely on its relations with Cuba and Nicaragua to a greater extent, a stark change from the nonaligned and non-interventionist narrative under Torrijos' rule. Even with such a trend raising suspicions and worries for U.S. policy workers, Panama was not a communist country, nor could it be ripe for any ideological strife as Noriega's style of dictatorship was more opportunist than anything, only choosing to ally with Cuba and Nicaragua for the sake of them being U.S. enemies. Although concerning, this shift in prioritizing alliances reflected the degradation of Panama's legitimacy abroad, and although Noriega and the military would suffer a few more blows to the military's support, the U.S. needed to wait for the right moment to take action. The nuance in this interplay is best illustrated when juxtaposing the different colors of perspectives between Panamanians, U.S. actors, and even those from the military themselves, such as the expose by a high-ranking defector published through *La Prensa*.

On June 7th, 1987, one of Noriega's original cohorts, Robert Diaz, decided to officially oppose the dictatorship, taking advantage of the momentum of resistance that had taken shape. This expose reveals internal military negotiations over who rules when between Noriega, him, and Rodriguez, and the fact it was posted on *La Prensa* was doubly significant as one of the only outlets of opposition by that point. Being interviewed, Diaz had confirmed the accusations of fraud in the 1984 presidential election and remarked that "the United States never agreed that Contadora should succeed" compared to previous statements by the

C.I.A. that it would be beneficial for the U.S. position.[36] Thus, political legitimacy for the FFDD could only worsen at this point, as retaliation would only embolden even more dissidents. What the U.S. did then was stop giving military aid to Panama, which could be seen as an attempt to destabilize the military, but the argument they posed was that they only had problems with Noriega. In a quote from P. Ward Johnson's analysis in his *State Crime, the Media, and the Invasion of Panama,*

> White House Chief of Staff John H. Sununu stated, '[T]he President says our quarrel is not with the PDF, but with General Noriega' (Engelberg 10/9/89). Bush himself said that 'professional Panamanian Defense Forces can have an important role to play in Panama's democratic future.' (Smolowe 5/22/89)[37]

This narrative was key to the U.S.'s subversion of the military's hold in Panama, despite having never had a problem with it before. Compared to the beginning of Noriega's rule, when the U.S. was more satisfied with Noriega's leadership because of his connections with the CIA it would seem out of place for Noriega to all of a sudden be a critical threat to the U.S. However, as further analysis of U.S. intelligence would show, Panama was already on a path to independence from its proxy role that the U.S. still wanted to impose on Panama, so the U.S. was prepared to switch sides.

Although not widespread among the FFDD, Noriega's role in drug trafficking had been kept under watch by American intelligence, so the U.S. was well ready to document any abuses they could to undermine the FFDD's political legitimacy. One of these events in particular was the closing and/or buyout of newspaper companies, especially that of *La Prensa*, the greatest opponent to the dictatorship. One of its columnists was Guillermo Sanchez Borbon, a journalist who despite compiling what was essentially a journalist's book

[36] Aparicio, Nubia S., *El fraude fue en el 4.4 de Chiriqui y Arnulfo gano , reitera Diaz,* La Prensa, Para. 17
[37] Johns, Christina Jacqueline, Johnson, P. Ward, *State Crime, The Media, and the Invasion of Panama,* 1994, Praeger Publishers, Page 47

of eyewitness accounts and thematic truths, his *In the Time of the Tyrants* has been the most cited source in scholarly works concerning the dictatorships of Panama for its value as both a secondary and primary source.[38] With Sanchez's longstanding and personal involvement in the exposure of the dictatorships' crimes, he and *La Prensa* were made targets, as he recollects in his book, "Everything had been smashed or broken into. Documents, files, and personal belongings had been carried off. Acid had been poured into the processing unit of the main computer." Additionally, Colonel Diaz revealed alongside his expose of the FFDD that he was behind this destruction, "with a view to silencing *La Prensa* once and for all."[39] The result of such efforts was crucial in negating negative press towards the dictatorship, leaving only the narrative that the U.S. was actively subverting Panama's sovereignty and that the military was the only institution against this. This much was true, as the inner operations behind the subsequent October 3rd coup exemplify the result of the FFDD's declining legitimacy that was not helped by the fact that anti-U.S. sentiment by far was the only reason the FFDD gave Panamanians to support them.

On October 3, 1989, the FFDD's internal coup was launched by the fourth infantry under the command of Moises Giroldi in a fight to salvage a career institution that was failing to appeal to the people, and this narrative continues to be mostly uncontested among major news outlets. Giroldi's leadership was instrumental both to its planning and its successes, but the most contentious factor in this history, however, is the degree of complicity of the U.S., their intentions, and how they ultimately played into the coup's failure. In Frederick Kempe's *Divorcing the Dictator*, a timeline of the CIA's involvement paints a picture of U.S. vigilance to what was happening, yet painful incompetence towards acting

[38] Mann, Carlos Guevarra, *Panamanian Militarism*, Ohio University Press (1996), Page xiii
[39] Koster, R.M., Sanchez, Guillermo, *In the Time of the Tyrants,* Page 266

decisively to aid the rebels. With both private and then public motivations to "restore" the Torrijista era of military governance and deliver the Panamanian people from Noriega's tyranny, Kempe noted how Giroldi used his wife as a proxy to make his case to a CIA contact. [40] They couldn't agree on the exact terms however, as delivering Noriega to the U.S. to face trial would only incriminate other members of the FFDD or the institution as a whole, so the U.S. was skeptical that his coup would be anything other than regime maintenance, or better yet, a honey pot planted by Noriega to prove the U.S. was ready and planning to intervene in Panama. [41] As a result of this long deliberation, by the time a situation report was sent to the Department of State, a timeline of events was detailed to great accuracy as the coup had ended already, so it is imperative to consider why they mentioned the fact that "the Panamanian media are in the hands of Noriega loyalists."[42] This was already known to the U.S., but its restatement was likely crucial advice considering that Noriega would end up exaggerating the extent to which the U.S. was involved in the coup, straining U.S.-Panamanian tensions and feeding fire to overall U.S. resentment in the country. In an article by Panamanian periodical *La Critica*,

> The Panamanian authorities have photos of North American troops blocking the access roads to the headquarters of the Panama Defense Forces (FDP) before the start of the rebellion, the provisional president of Panama, Francisco Rodriguez, stated today at a press conference held at the UN headquarters.[43]

The references in this article are not wrong, as Giroldi had instructed the U.S. Southern Command to block two of Panama's three major roads leading to the headquarters of the

[40] Kempe, Frederick, *Divorcing the Dictator,* Page 372
[41] Kempe, Frederick, *Divorcing the Dictator,* Page 393
[42] Mussomeli, Joseph A., *Situation Report No. 1: Situation as of 1800 EDT 10/03/89*, (October 3, 1989), TFPM02 Panama Task Force, Executive Secretariat Operations Center, U.S. Department of State, Para. 5
[43] Presidente Rodriguez, *Movimiento Subversivo Fue Alentado Por EE.UU.*, La Critica, (Oct 5, 1989), Para. 1

FFDD, though they had left the airports open as part of their skepticism that the coup would happen as planned, but this mentality only denied the reality of its practicality.

Fundamentally, the U.S. still underestimated the importance of military dynamics not just in upholding the military, but also in fracturing from within. As the Sublieutenant told me how the FFDD was ripe for even more coup attempts. I asked him, "Did you know Giroldi personally?" and more about his recollection of the October 3rd coup, to which he answered,

> So the other groups also wanted a coup against Noriega? Yes, the lieutenants. They were all lieutenants. They were all lieutenants. They were all captains. There was one I knew who was going to burn Noriega's neck that day. Noriega was going to go. When the gringos told him that he was going to go, there was no problem. The conspiracy to see who wanted to be head of the defense force.[44]

Compared to the deeper intricacies of political co-optation and careful strategy, the internal structure of the FFDD had devolved into a power struggle to lead the military not to preserve its institution but to benefit from it. With these dynamics in play, what possible reason did the Machos del Monte have to back Noriega? Were they worried about the political state of the military or the degradation of its legitimacy as a career force? Ego had told me that the latter was true, as "nobody was saved" from such excessive training that "they didn't even have time to get home to fall in love with their woman," so he argues, "We who are troops are not going to see it [drug trafficking] But the people who were at the top, there they were."[45] Rather than necessarily following Noriega, the Machos mainly were devoted to their work, while those at the top of the power dynamic had their hands in more questionable affairs. A recent article had even seen the criminal prosecution of a former colonel of the Machos del Monte over a decade after the U.S. invasion, but by this moment before the invasion was

[44] Ex-Sublieutenant "Ego", *A Conversation with the Devil,* 43:13-45:04
[45] Ex-Sublieutenant "Ego", *A Conversation with the Devil,* 1:10:52-1:12:12

perpetrated, U.S. policy had not seriously considered the military itself a plausible threat. Rather, this notion was a narrative that breathed air into disobedience more than the actual capacity to harm, as Panama had refused to train Contras as a result of their strained relations. Without at least fulfilling the premise of helping train U.S. allies by proxy, the U.S. believed they were supporting Panama's military development for nothing in return, to the point that they attempted to resolve both problems by training Contras and disgruntled Panamanians in Costa Rica for infiltration into Panama for what they deemed an inevitable conflict.[46] With the U.S. shifting its eyes towards Costa Rica both politically and militarily in search of a proxy of its interests, the civilian elite of Panama could only be further disgruntled by Noriega and the Fuerzas de Defensa.

Conclusion

In this narrative, many of the events covered in the scholarship surrounding the Panamanian dictatorships have not lost their verity. Rather, they have gained a greater contextual sense of military autonomy through the implementation of Panamanian perspectives. Through this chapter, the lack of co-optation of the political establishment was disastrous for selling the Panamanian dictatorship to the world, which aroused suspicion towards Panama that no longer accepted its dismissal of U.S.-approved democratization outside of its normal proxy role. Despite the anti-oligarchy narratives and policies furthered by Omar Torrijos, his rule had a place for the civilian elites to play a role in Panama's development, so rather than be upset with dictatorship, the civilian elite was more upset about its specific disenfranchisement from Noriega's priorities. Additionally, the declining stability of the FFDD, both internally and politically, posed a threat in the eyes of the U.S.,

[46] Johns, Christina Jacqueline, Johnson, P. Ward, *State Crime,* Page 13

and as intervention loomed, the civilian elites faced two equally terrible choices. Either do nothing and still be prosecuted for even a slight connection to the dictatorship, or directly help the U.S. plan out its invasion in the hopes that they'll have a place in the new democratic regime, yet it will earn them unpopularity for siding with the invaders of their country. As these civilian elites chose the latter, the U.S. invasion was realized shortly, because just as they had great political currency in legitimizing the interests of FFDD, their opposition was equally as impactful to their dissolution, and the implications of this new relationship post-invasion will further emphasize the need for reassessing the notion of whether the military truly co-opted Panama's civilian elites or vice versa. In the next chapter's overview of post-invasion investigations of purpose and how researchers and the public have tried to make sense of the invasion historically, the role of the political establishment is invoked many times over.

Chapter 3: Baptized in Fire:

The Rebirth of Panama's Proxy Role through the U.S. Invasion

Introduction

On December 20, 1989, the U.S. invaded Panama in a formal dismission of its proxy role, but most importantly, a reflection of its true interests. Within the historiography, it is commonly asserted that the geopolitical threat posed by Panama was the driving force behind the U.S.'s decision towards invasion, but even after its shifting role as a proxy and increased militarization, it still could not pale in comparison to the U.S.'s capabilities. Rather, the invasion was a way to replace military rule over Panama with a different tyranny. The same civilian elite whose cooperation with Torrijos was vital to his diplomatic strategy had opposed Noriega, costing him and the FFDD their legitimacy. This legitimacy in politics helped build alliances within Panama and throughout Central America, which was necessary to ward off U.S. intervention, so the lack thereof led to an invasion that was quickly justified by U.S. news outlets and government personnel as necessary to U.S. policy. A deeper look into this history will prove this was not the case and that they merely wanted a regime change in Panama rather than an end to regimes.

This same invasion wiped out all evidence of military perspectives that could directly attest to its lack of capability and incentive to threaten the U.S., which has led to much of the historiography of Panama relying on narratives opposed to the dictatorship. There is much

more nuance behind the reasons why people supported certain actors, especially in this history of dictatorship, where its negative connotations lead to biases in analysis that neglect the thoughts and feelings of its participants. Through the first section of this chapter, I will focus on the experiences of these key people and compare them to the current scholarship and narratives about why the U.S. occurred. In addition to the value of a first-hand account of the Fuerzas de Defensa through my interview with Sublieutant Ego of the Fuerzas de Defensa, the second section of this chapter will focus more on court documents detailing the experiences of Ego and his family. This style of analysis will prove that the civilian elite had a greater role in the maintenance of dictatorship than is covered in the scholarship to the point that they were majorly complicit in the U.S. Invasion and persecution of former military personnel more than the U.S. had reason to.

Tyranny in a New Dress: The Consolidation of Oligarchy as a Main Motive

In the historiography of dictatorships in Panama, the U.S. invasion has been a natural stopping point for academics and journalists alike without considering the implications after. This has its merits in works like *Divorcing the Dictator* and *In the Time of the Tyrants*, which were written during the dictatorship as they were meant to cover events within the dictatorships and could not be published without risking the identity of their sources. In contrast, this section will cover sources from the *Independent Commission on the U.S. Invasion of Panama*, which is a compilation of perspectives that was meant to be public to legitimize what was seen at the time as highly charged accusations and perspectives that did not fall in line with the narratives at the time. By contextualizing these sources along this scholarship, this analysis will show how the Panamanian elites had contributed to the U.S.'s decision to invade Panama in a hypocritical rationale that opposes the military's tyranny,

even though they have been the most co-opted to their objectives, and now after the military has fallen they are quick to impose their own.

Rather than "perfectly surgically invade" through Panama, the invasion was a humanitarian failure that unnecessarily killed Panamanian citizens who posed no threat in a variety of ways, which prompted the creation of the Independent Commission of Inquiry on the U.S. Invasion to investigate these matters. This source is significant in proving the thesis because its connotation of "independent" is verified by the anti-elite perspectives it covers that do not shy away from pointing out the nuances and contradictions between the narratives argued and actions taken. Many criticized the Endara government as if it were just another tyrannical government, and although many have attributed this to the United States' aggressive approach to making Panama cater to its demands, the reality of the civilian elites' agency is clear through these reports.[47] Even in Manuel Noreiga's Memoir, *America's Prisoner*, his interviewer Peter Eisner noted the role of the civilian elites stating, "Panama's upper-class civilian elites—whose hatred for Noriega and the military ripened and increased during twenty years of military rule—had convinced the State Department, which in turn convinced Bush, that it was necessary to eliminate Noriega."[48] Furthermore, this planning of the U.S. invasion deliberately targeted the poor working-class neighborhood of El Chorillo for the U.S. to go through to get to the FFDD's headquarters and completely evade the wealthy areas. Some maintain that it was because they wanted to take over the land; others consider different motivations, but this was a feat that could only be accomplished by the United States and their efforts to control the narrative.

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[47] Johns, Christina Jacqueline, Johnson, P. Ward, *State Crime,* Page 98
[48] Eisner, Peter, *America's Prisoner*, Page xv

Just as Douglas Cox had reported on the stealing of documents from the U.S. Invasion, one of the Panamanians' grievances against the U.S. in the Independent Commission is represented through a testimony by Eusebio Marchosky, a government auditor. To Marchosky, the seizure of the 15,000 boxes of Panamanian government documents from the offices of the Fuerzas de Defensa showed how "the U.S. government and the U.S. Army have been doing things that contribute to the obstruction of Panamanian justice."[49] Not everyone in the government supported the United States, as the actions of the U.S. were majorly unpopular, so those who did were incentivized by the opportunity to decrease the power of the military. The U.S. took this opportunity no differently as General Maxwell Thurman, head of the U.S. Southern Command, announced the establishment of a military support group completely cooperative with the Panamanian government to reshape the FFDD's successor institution, the Public Forces. He stated, "with the aim of making sure that the military never becomes an independent power again."[50] This move was not necessarily opposed by the civilian population as they sought to put their military past behind them, but it was significant for its political implications that had earned the attention of opponents within the government.

As much as the notion of civilian elites can assume the complicity of everyone in politics, the speech of Mario Rognoni, former Minister of Commerce and Industry, proves that not only was it possible for people within the government to not be convinced by the main narratives around the invasion, but even be directly against them. As the opposition leader in the Panamanian National Assembly, Rognoni's insights were a crucial addition to

[49] The Independent Commission of Inquiry on the Invasion of Panama, *The U.S. Invasion of Panama: The Truth Behind Operaiton "Just Cause,"* South End Press, 1991, Page 44
[50] Johns, Christina Jacqueline, Johnson, P. Ward, *State Crime,* Page 94

the compilation of nuanced perspectives in the *Independent Commission of Inquiry on the Invasion of Panama*, having the audacity to assert the following.

> The day they swore in our new government on a military base in front of an American flag. How can that government have any respect for itself or from anybody? The day they swore in the government, they gave him [Endara] the list of what he had to do, including putting the relationship with Cuba under stress, stressing the relation with nations with whom we have been friends for years.[51]

In this speech, Rognoni notes the diplomatic threat that caving to U.S. interests posed to the Panamanian government, but compared to Noriega's affiliations with these countries, the U.S. only now saw a problem with these connections in a new age of Panamanian proxy. Of course, the new Endara government did not have the leverage of military intelligence to keep these relations like Noriega since they sought to oppose the military, so they sought to be co-opted by the U.S. despite the unpopularity of the people both in Panama and around the world. Panama's people were not convinced of these narratives, as Graciela Dixon, an attorney for the El Chorillo refugees, noted in her speech:

> I knew your question would be, how come the people of Panama applauded the invasion? It was presented to you that way, but the truth hasn't been said…Those so-called Panamanians who said welcome didn't live in El Chorillo, didn't live in San Miguelito, or in Colon, or in Rio Hato. Those people who welcomed the soldiers are from the rich, the ruling class in Panama.[52]

Not only is there a discrepancy between the realities of the invasion and the justifications being made by the U.S., but they are not lost on the people who have had to suffer them, as they see how much the civilian elites had to gain from the invasion. Politically, it is a different story, as organizations allied with the U.S. could not deny the illegality of the invasion, but could not call for a direct sanction against the U.S.

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[51] The Independent Commission of Inquiry on the Invasion of Panama, *The U.S. Invasion of Panama,* Page 76
[52] Graciela Dixon: *The People Have Been Pushed Into Concentration Camps*, *The U.S. Invasion of Panama,* Page 79

Through a resolution adopted by the Organization of the American States (OAS) two days after the invasion, items that seek "to call for the withdrawal of the foreign troops used for the military intervention," the "full respect for Panama's right to sovereignty," and "the adherence to the Torrijos-Carter Treaties" laid out the objective truth that denies that laid out by the U.S.'s narratives.[53] However, the OAS did not call out the U.S. directly by name, which shows the extent to which the complexity of Panama's military past complicates the idea of defending Panamanians. Other coalitions have been braver, though, as Raul Castro, a notable political figure in Cuba, gave a speech predicting the U.S.'s escalation of conflict at the *9th summit of Non-Aligned Countries* 3 months before the invasion. "We believe that if this Summit is going to distinguish itself for its loyalty to the original principles of the Non-Aligned Movement, it is indispensable for our voice to be raised in defense of the self-determination of the Panamanian people."[54] This quote still holds up after the invasion, given that the U.S. replaced Panama's government with another that forsakes its past alliances with Cuba, Nicaragua, and the nonalignment movement, of which it was a "worthy member." For countries that were antagonistic against the United States in the first place, this deliberation was even more obvious.

For the Middle East especially, past U.S. involvement and a future of U.S. interventionism in the region was beginning to be a stark reality, and the Invasion of Panama could only be interpreted as an omen to this prospect. Through Howard M. Hensel's G*lobal Media Perspectives on the Crisis in Panama*, a relatively newer addition to the Panamanian historiography, the Arabic media is one of many different types of news perspectives of the

[53] Organization of American States*, Resolution of the Organization of American States*, *The U.S. Invasion of Panama,* Page 125
[54] Ruz, Raul Castro, *The Essence of Our Movement is Being Tested in Panama*, *The U.S. Invasion of Panama,* Page 126

Panamanian Invasion around the world, solidifying much of what we know about its strategic implications. It is revealed through this analysis how the Arabic media did not shy away from acknowledging the reality of Noriega's problematic connections to the CIA, but they also saw themselves through Noriega. Just as the Cold War was simultaneously coming to an end, the seizure of Noriega was as symbolic as it was practical, as "arab intellectuals perceived that their region was similarly occupied by several 'Noriegas' and that it was as easy for the West to create them as to eliminate them."[55] For the Arab world, the new unipolar world that had succeeded the Cold War phase of history was a worse result, as the U.S. and its actions would now set a precedent without contestation, so the U.S. Invasion of Panama was seen as the premier litmus test for U.S. policy in the Middle East. Despite condemnation from the UN and even the non-alignment movement, its effectiveness was minimal in terms of sanctioning the U.S., which questioned whether these organizations could truly consider themselves the faces of international law.[56] With this lack of legitimacy both abroad and at home, it is clear that the invasion of Panama's ousting of the Noriega dictatorship only replaced one tyranny for another.

As the U.S. pursued democratization and regime change in Panama mainly as a pretext to install a government that would follow its interests, it is clear that this was only possible by co-opting the civilian elites, who had much more autonomy than is considered in the historiography. Although not all civilian elites saw it as beneficial to work with the U.S., the scourge of the Panamanian people, the elites had everything to gain from this as the destabilization of the military would consolidate political power into their hands only. The

[55] Hensel, Howard M., Michaud, Nelson, *The Panama Crisis on the Arabic Media, Global Media Persepctives on the Crisis in Panama*, 2011, Ashgate Publishing Limited, Page 245
[56] Hensel, Howard M., Michaud, Nelson, *The Panama Crisis on the Arabic Media*, Page 246

devolution of the military's power, however, was a process that took much more than invasion to further, so with the U.S. watching from the distance, the newly installed Endara government wasted no time in spearheading the efforts to persecute those that were part of the dictatorship that it could.

Skeletons in the Closet: The Culling of the Military Reveals Deeper Conspiracies

> The Panamanian wealthy elite made use of the ignorance of U.S. policy makers and the see-no-evil, hear-no-evil philosophy that reigned in the U.S. State Department. The rich power brokers said they were clean and we were dirty, that all corruption came from the military, that the wealthy bankers and car dealers and lawyers — men like Arias Calderon, Billy Ford and Guillermo Endara — were all as pure as mountain snow. The Americans figured it had to be so: these were their friends and dinner companions, their tennis partners. They all had so much in common, they had to be telling the truth.[57]

Just as the Independent Commission of Inquiry of the Invasion of Panama questioned the extent to which the U.S.'s narratives held up, Manuel Noriega can see its connections with the civilian elites as clear as day. Although Noriega dismisses much of the evidence and facts of his complicity with this very elite, insight like his is necessary for adding nuance to the analysis of this period of Panamanian military rule, and how big of a role Panama's civilian elite played along with U.S. intelligence agencies. Just as the right to a fair trial in the United States necessitates the testimony of the accused, this perspective of the then-criminalized Fuerzas de Defensa is what I will add to this chapter of Panamanian history. Confirming such ideas of oligarchical complicity in scholarships like *State Crime, the Media, and the Invasion*, my interview with El Diablo reveals how the persecution of former military personnel was vital to consolidating the power of the civilian elite, the major motivation for their involvement in the U.S. invasion. Not only does this interview add an

[57] Eisner, Peter, *America's Prisoner*, Page 147

in-depth, first-hand account of what the invasion was like for the FFDD, but it also connects with my family history, which suffered because of the repercussions.

My mother would tell me stories growing up about the day it happened; she still remembers the sounds. After all, she and her family lived only 15 minutes away from the Rio Hato Base of the Fuerzas de Defensa. Terrified, they hid in the basement, and they were right to fear the outside chaos as the U.S. brought it right to them by parking a tank in front of their home. They knew my mother's father, who was part of the FFDD, so it was clear they didn't only come for Noriega. Despite only being a sub-lieutenant, my grandfather was accused of the most heinous crime of killing 20 people in the October 3rd Coup by none other than his students. For the next decade, my grandfather Ego's identity as El Diablo would confine him to hell as he would fight to clear his name in an impossible legal battle and conspiracy.

During the interview, my grandfather Ego talked about where he was during the invasion, and what happened to him, as the invasion had such a short succession, it didn't take long for my grandfather and other forces to be found after retreating and disseminating within the local populace in Penonome. He was recognized pretty quickly by the Americans who not only remembered his training with negativity but singled him out because of a rumor that he killed people and chopped up their bodies, the victims of the October 3rd Coup. [58] As Ego recollected in our interview, "The saddest thing about this is that all the people I was accused of were my students. If Christ suffered, a student would suffer five or six times more from the beating I would give him."[59] Bodies would eventually be found but intact, proving his innocence, but they needed someone to arrest since very few were arrested in the first place from the invasion. As explained in the last section, few officers were charged with

[58] Ex-Sublieutenant "Ego", *A Conversation with the Devil,* 1:27:04-1:27:43
[59] Ex-Sublieutenant "Ego", *A Conversation with the Devil,* 50:55-51:39

drug-related crimes or homicides and the Independent Commission of Inquiry contended against the U.S. narrative that these crimes were happening en masse. Thus, it was a baseless claim with motives that were stronger than the actual crime. It can be deduced that these FFDD officers already chose El Diablo as a sacrificial lamb to hedge their bets ahead of the investigations that would result from the invasion. Better yet, it is possible that the U.S. and Panamanian civilian elite co-opted them into turning against El Diablo. With a firm understanding of military training, his role in the new Panamanian public forces would be priceless, and they needed to limit the reintegration of former military members to reduce their capacity to compete for power.

As part of the same brotherhood, why did mere soldiers of the FFDD accuse my grandfather like this? If it was to shift the blame of their crimes, it'd make no sense if virtually no soldiers were accused of crimes, unless there were greater motives at play. This is shown in how author P. Ward argues, "Dea officials admitted after the invasion of Panama that in the several years before the invasion, little evidence existed of large cocaine shipments through Panama."[60] Thus, after the initial arrests by the U.S. during the invasion, FFDD soldiers were released, and 7,000 were even reincorporated into the public force, as my grandfather recalls.[61] The only people who were charged and arrested were him, Manuel Noriega, and a few other people. In a court document overseeing the accusations, my grandfather is listed among these 12 people, even with the annotation "Diablo."[62] With such a stain on his reputation, my grandpa was never taken seriously or given habeas corpus, no matter how many lawyers he contacted over the years to make his case. Some even rejected

[60] Johns, Christina Jacqueline, Johnson, P. Ward, *State Crime,* Page 58
[61] Ex-Sublietenant Ego, *A Conversation with the Devil,* 1:30:13-1:30:56
[62] Segundo Tribunal Superior de Justicia Del Primer Distrito Judicial, *Summary of the Accused FFDD Members*, (August 3, 1992), Republica de Panama, Page 64

him because he could not afford their services, however, he could not even get hired as the ongoing case was viewed as a criminal record that could stain the reputation of any institution that would hire him, which was part of the Endara government's strategy to subvert the military's power.

The Endara government's new strategy did indeed seek the reincorporation of former servicemen, but it would not reconcile with any past connection to the dictatorship. Although 900 officers of the 14,000 members of the FFDD have been accused of crimes, even the Endara regime saw "a sweeping purge of the force unnecessary and impossible," seeking instead to prioritize the ostracizing of the worst offenders.[63] Almost immediately, then, my grandfather was uprooted from this institution after 18 years of service as a communique from the National Police reflects here:

> The undersigned Lt. Colonel Gerardo Garcia, Director of Personnel of the National Police, at the request of an interested party, that the man…was discharged by General Order of the Day No. 58 of March 27, 1990, for COMMITTING OFFENSES THAT AFFECT THE INSTITUTION'S PRESTIGE.[64]

It didn't help that the former members of the FFDD that were reincorporated into the National Police had already attempted a power grab in Panama, so by this point, the civilian elites ceased to even see the military as trustworthy enough to co-opt them to their interests. Even after the invasion, they continued to fight each other for scraps of power which only worsened their situation, as virtually all of them would be unemployable and have to rely on the support of family members just to survive. With few witnesses, my grandfather could rely

[63] Johns, Christina Jacqueline, Johnson, P. Ward, *State Crime,* Page 49
[64] Tte. Coronel Gerardo Garcia, Jefe de la Dirrecion de Personal, *Rejection Letter from the National Police*, (April 4, 1990), Fiscalia Tercera Superior Primer Distrito Judicial, Republica de Panama, Ministerio de Gobierno y Justicia, Policia Nacional, Para. 2

only on the logistical nature of his testimony, proving that his involvement in both the October 3rd coup and the FFDD was strictly work-related.

Through a court document, my grandfather's testimony of the events of October 3rd argued that not only was he in San Miguelito dealing with a motorcycle problem during the coup, but he and his team were specifically briefed to stay where they were to close off any necessary roads that could help the U.S. come to their aid.

> When we arrived at the Tocumen airport, around noon, I was directing a group of motorcyclists who were left behind from the 2000 battalion that at that time was passing through there, since some of our motorcycles had been damaged and I had to stay fix them, already in San Miguelito I had to leave a motorcycle and I have proof of that, then when we arrived near Patio Pinel they asked us to direct the traffic, we did not arrive at the barracks all that was clarified by the Supreme Court of Justice, during the trial carried out on the other people since I was not even called to trial at all.[65]

Despite the vast majority of the military's documents being stolen by the U.S. during the invasion, my grandfather held on to some of them and used a correspondence between Major Daniel Delgado and Captain Gonzalez of the Machos Del Monte as evidence for his case:

> Citizen Captain Gonzalo Gonzales, Head of AI, Infantry, "Macho de Monte" E. S. D., San Miguelito October 17, 1989.
> This is to send you, separately, a motorcycle belonging to that unit; which was recovered by this military zone, following the events of last October 3.
> Without further ado, from you, Sincerely, 'Everything for the country' Major Daniel Delgado D. - Head of the XI Military Zone, FF. DD. of Pma.[66]

This evidence proved to be inefficient, however, as it failed to consider what had happened afterward, as the butchering of the rebellious infantry of the October 3rd coup had begun until well after it occurred. This was expected under an Endara regime against the military, so my grandfather also tried consulting with government officials which worked to no avail.

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[65] Ex-Sublieutenant "Ego," *Letter to the Director of the Public Forces*, (October 10, 1997), Panama, Republica de Panama, Para. 2

[66] Major Delgado, Daniel D, Head of the XI Military Zone, FF. DD. of Pma, *October 3rd FFDD Motorcycle Request*, (October 17, 1989), Fuerzas de Defensa de Panama, Para. 1

Amid the Endara regime's decline in legitimacy, the PRD's simultaneous rise to power presented a possible remedy to his case and other former members of the military. As the direct party of the former Fuerzas de Defensa, veteran members had confidence that the PRD's assumption of power would help them clear their name or be restored to their past or similar offices, but this would prove to be surface level.

Considering Endara's own declining popularity on all fronts, the 1994 election of PRD candidate Ernesto Perez-Balladares Gonzales-Revilla was realized in an upset, but it quickly became clear that no differently than Endara, the military base of support would be forsaken. Panamanian workers in general argued that the Endara government was "traitorous, illegal, and representative of the rich oligarchy," so despite being part of that same oligarchy, the PRD capitalized on this turmoil to garner support.[67] Even with my grandmother's affiliation with the FFDD, my grandmother's letter to the president to alleviate her husband's case was ignored.

> He is still waiting for his situation to be fixed, we have neither a house nor a job, and everywhere you apply nothing, my husband worked during politics with Mr. ALFREDO (MELLO) ALEMAN, he hoped something would be fixed for him but nothing, I worked in optics behind all the people of the P.R.D., even you when you were on tour in the fields, I filled out an application in the Treasury and Treasury, but it is just for pleasure "Let them fix the situation for him, I have all the papers.[68]

Still, this letter shows how even despite prior affiliations with them, like many civilian elites, the PRD forgot about their military base of support in ambitions for the elites to solidify political power. Additionally, it's arguable that my family's political background combined with my grandfather's military capabilities had significant prospects if they ever chose to run for office, which posed a potential threat to the party's image. As the trend of opposition

[67] Johns, Christina Jacqueline, Johnson, P. Ward, *State Crime,* Page 97
[68] Ego's Wife (Unnamed), *Letter to President Balladares*, (March 6, 1995), Page 2

against militarism in Panama led the PRD to sanitize itself from the controversies of its dictatorship past, the PRD genuinely had no reason to help people like my grandfather and his family.[69]

By the year 2001, more than a decade after my grandfather had been accused of the worst crimes, he finally obtained a response from a lawyer just to deny him help for the same reason that the national police had. According to the *Procuradora of the Administration*, Alma Montenegro de Fletcher, the report from the National Police held its weight, detailing the complication of my grandfather's "administrative offenses" and "criminal actions" as well as the fact that his "application was submitted outside the time stipulated by law."[70] Although my grandfather had been cleared by this point through a different lawyer who finally took his case, this response shows how he would have been out of luck otherwise. At what cost did this belated resolution come? As many years were spent fighting a case that destroyed his family financially, he still had trouble finding employment that would see his experiences in the dictatorship and his subsequent arrest as an indication of possible subversion. From the Endara administration's war on former FFDD servicemen, this was the legacy for many of these members, many of whom have resigned to living in Chepo, a community of former FFDD members on the periphery of the capital of Panama City. With the sheer effectiveness of the civilian elites' disenfranchisement of the military persisting to such lengths, it is clear how essential their assistance was to the maintenance of military rule, which they now use for their tyranny.

Conclusion

[69] Perez, Orlando J., *Post-Invasion Panama*, Page 23
[70] Montenegro, Alma, *A Lawyer's Letter to Ego*, (October 5, 2001), Procuradoria de la Administracion, Republica de Panama, Page 1

Among the past scholarship and direct sources noting the influence of different narratives at stake in the perpetration of the U.S. Invasion of Panama, none consider the direct perspectives of military members. The nature of this source acquisition stems from the fact that these people were persecuted and still are for their involvement in the dictatorship. From civilian elites to other military members, their insights are nonexistent in any work of media. With how close these events are to the present, the practice of interviewing and working with living history has come to be vital in filling this gap and substantiating these narratives in their appropriate context. Through this analysis, the civilian elites' role in the invasion of Panama is emphasized through their clear motivation to solidify their power not just because the motivation of U.S. support outweighed the controversies that would arise, but because the military itself continued to be fractured in more individualistic pursuits to the point that they could no longer seek a base of legitimacy from their political party.

Conclusion: What is Truly Tyranny?

Summary of Key Findings:

From 1972-1989, Panama's period of military rule was officiated and reinforced not just by American support but by cooperation with the political actors at home. Having key roles in establishing Panama's role as both a proxy of the U.S. and a friend of Latin America, the civilian elite could not simply be killed off or persecuted. Not only would the military regime lose legitimacy abroad from harshly opposing the civilian elites, but this was a time when their teamwork was ever so essential to negotiate treaties with the U.S. to win the Canal. Although much of the historiography of Panama gives much of the credit to the dictator Omar Torrijos for his work in these treaties, it is imperative to consider the role that members from the civilian elite such as Juan Antonio Tack and Gabriel Lewis Galindo played in giving the dictatorship an official and sanitized mouthpiece for their interests. Even by the time Manuel Noriega rose to power and began rigging elections, he could not completely persecute opponents such as Roberto Diaz and Gabriel Lewis Galindo who would come to represent the growing disenfranchisement within both the civilian elite and the military. This would be Noriega's downfall that culminated in the U.S. invasion, yet the exploration of the fate of the Fuerzas de Defensa and other critics of the invasion the extent to which the civilian elites maintained power during the dictatorship and were prepared to reestablish their pre-dictatorship oligarchy. Throughout this period, it is clear that the military

dictatorship was not a unilateral regime, but merely the entrenchment of oligarchy that only continued after the dictatorship fell.

Significance and Contributions

Compared to widespread conceptions in the historiography that paint the Panamanian dictatorship as a dominant and consistent regime, my research asserts instead that Panama was not this all power, nor could afford to do so. Diplomacy was a key feature of Panamanian politics, and to export its interests of military assistance abroad, the military rulers needed to convince the political actors most capable of diplomatic work that they had a common goal. Although the books published on Panama's dictatorships throughout the 80s and 90s touch on it, Panama's diplomatic role hadn't been comprehensively researched and assessed until just last year through Jonathan C. Brown's *The Weak and the Powerful: Omar Torrijos, Panama, and the Non-Aligned Movement in the World*. This book consults with some notable historians of Panama and people connected with some of the events in the chronology of Panamanian dictatorships, but to understand the implications of the events under the Torrijos dictatorship, it has been the object of my thesis to explore Panamanian militarism in its entirety.

Regarding the three timeframes of this thesis, Panama's specific role as a U.S. proxy of the U.S. under Torrijos' rule over Panama, the dictatorship to succeed him, and the perpetration of the U.S. Invasion help complete Panama's story of oligarchy between the military and civilian elites. Many political and military actors have been involved throughout this timeline, like Gabriel Lewis Galindo who was involved throughout the entire dictatorship but his changing role helps reinforce ideas from the scholarship on that single period of history. From supporting Torrijos to opposing Noriega, Galindo's shifting alliance

with the Panamanian military not only confirms the idea in Brown's work that Torrijos had co-opted the civilian elite to his interests but that these elites had enough autonomy to choose to be co-opted, as they were able to oppose Noriega near the end of his rule. By covering the aftermath and the invasion, it can be seen how quickly the civilian elite can grab power from the FFDD, which questions whether the FFDD ever truly was a dictatorship, or whether the requisites for being a dictatorship is different for despots that have wealth and influence. Through the implementation of my grandfather's recollection of FFDD internal dynamics at the center of this thesis, it is clear that the oligarchy is best defined by those who can survive.

Even before the initial coup that overthrew the political oligarchy, they were able to survive 21 years of dictatorship by leveraging their skills where they could, and opposing the dictatorship where it was necessary. In comparison, the dictatorship did not have a precedent and was a rather new invention of U.S. regional policy that funded and militarized them for their purposes. Thus, the succession battle in the FFDD after Torrijos died proved not to be a permanent solution, as from the beginning of Noriega's rule, he made enemies with civilian elites and military personnel alike which only amassed over time. As journalistic works that were produced and published during the dictatorship, *In the Time of the Tyrants* and *Divorcing the Dictator* argued that Noriega's unique hubris led to his end, but by considering the bigger picture of Torrijos' diplomatic strategy and the aftermath of the Invasion, this thesis highlights the continuity of the civilian elites' involvement as contributory to both the maintenance and dissolution of military dictatorial rule in Panama.

Unanswered Questions and Future Research

In my attempts to remedy the gap of military perspectives in historiography, I have grappled with a plethora of opportunities and limitations that were just as prevalent. Through

learning about my grandfather's history and his experiences, I knew immediately the value that there was in interviewing him and finding out more about my family history, but I only had one chance to do so. With the help of the $1000 award allotted to me through the Parker-Tiampo Family Scholarship, I was able to visit Panama from the 20th of December to the fourth of January, which was the only window of time during the winter break from classes. I also had not completely learned about all the different nuances of this history, involving the diplomatic aspect and deeper connection between civilian elites and the regional diplomatic structure they helped foment. Even without the complete understanding of this history, I knew enough to be able to conduct my research, prioritizing sources from the archives I visited that were not available anywhere else, as well as focusing my questions only on my grandpa's specific role.

As an interviewer, I hadn't merely obtained material for the sake of compiling what was convenient for my narrative, but I am contributing a new source that can be used to substantiate research succeeding mine, and even inspire more studies implementing methodology like mine. The value of interviewing even one person in such a military group is a wealth of knowledge, as not only does it give a general idea of what anyone from that background would experience, but it would filter it through a perspective pertinent to their specific role. As my grandfather trained soldiers and military expertise for example, his knowledge could be assumed to be limited to those capabilities, so I focused much of the discussion on the dynamics in the military, and compared it to many sources at the time that made biased claims against the regime. Although Ego had not known much about the plans of the military's inner circle and the exact complicity in their crimes, his experiences alone

spoke for much more than this unsuspecting premise of ignorance, as he was still dragged into their controversies through the accusations of other former officers.

When looking back at the historiography and even certain news articles, there is a consistent theme of deliberation that makes the intentions behind the accusations more ubiquitous. Were these former officers merely trying to deflect the blame for their complicity or avoid being accused themselves? If so, what does this imply about the state of unity between the members of the Fuerzas de Defensa after the invasion, or even before it? Were they set up to do this? By who? By the civilian elites to prevent them from running for the PRD and tarnishing their image? Although I was not able to expand much on these questions, I believe this methodology of interviewing the surviving members of this military is ripe with answers, who very much still survived their persecution in the community of Chepo, Panama, and even regularly attend an annual reunion for the military branch of the Machos del Monte. As I yielded no internal military documents whatsoever from the Archivos Nacionales, Biblioteca Nacional, or any conventional archival institution, consulting with the living history is a treasure trove of knowledge that can attest to what at least some members of the military truly thought, and how much this contests the official narratives of the dictatorship in Panama.

Final Reflection

In the coming future, there might also be developments toward solving the legal limbo that the documents of the Fuerzas de Defensa have been in since the Invasion, which will either introduce an entirely new revision of the historiography for a much more comprehensive analysis of this history. For a historiography that focuses much on journalistic contributions and anonymous informants, the narratives that have been produced lack a

nuanced glance of who truly was complicit in Panama's maintenance of tyranny as no one complicit would ever reveal their connections and risk their safety. If they do, it's worth questioning the deliberation behind such exposure that may purposefully leave out information in their favor. Through the research of this chapter of Panamanian history, it has become clear that despite the different actors involved and their opposition against each other, they often came together to oppose the U.S.'s influence, despite being prime beneficiaries. The ability for such a diverse ecosystem of political connections and leverage to exist contests the idea that Panama harbored true dictatorships as the U.S. maintained.

The true tyranny of Panama is its predisposition for oligarchical control, regardless of who wields it, yet the narratives dominant in this historiography paint the military in a negative light that dismisses the complicity of Panama's civilian elites. As a result, Panama's dictatorship, despite its inception to dethrone the political oligarchy, only maintained the infrastructure that allowed the civilian elites to wield power and eventually solidify their control over Panama without the previous military institution to oppose them. After decades of U.S. policy towards Panama to further their interests by proxy, the U.S. had failed to understand this complex interplay, tweaking their methodology for defining Panama as a definition as a tyranny, no matter which actors were involved, so long as it benefited them. This inconsistency of narratives and its implications are well documented, but less addressed is the applicability of this historiography towards studies about other dictatorships around the same time period. Realizing the building confidence towards the decision of invasion that the U.S. was building towards Panama could have helped prevent further developments of U.S. interventionism in the Arab world, as factors such as connections to U.S. intelligence and military support could predict any response to the U.S. if certain interests are threatened.

Still, the U.S. Invasion of Panama and the timeline of militarism that led up to it is but an afterthought in any survey of Latin American or Cold War history, despite the major impacts it has had on American intervention worldwide and the industrial military complex that continues to this day.

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