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A Thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of
Bachelor of Arts in Liberal Studies

By

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My thesis is an examination of the U.S. invasion of Panama in 1989 and the media’s performance in covering it. In order to put the invasion in perspective, I reviewed the history of U.S.-Latin American relations with an eye toward U.S. interventions in the region. This survey revealed a pattern of U.S. aggression against anti-American regimes. Whether by direct military intervention or through support of surrogates, the United States repeatedly has sought to oust Latin American governments it considers threatening. By its actions, the United States has shown a disregard for the sovereignty of Latin American nations.

This pattern of U.S. aggression in Latin America exposes what I believe is the underlying premise of U.S. policy in the region: that Latin America is a sphere of influence of the United States and therefore rightfully subject to meddling by U.S. policymakers. As the hemisphere’s hegemonic power, the United States believes it can act with impunity to further the U.S. agenda. This premise has guided U.S. policy since the turn of the century.

The U.S. invasion of Panama is an example of this premise at work. Gen. Manuel Noriega’s hold on power challenged U.S. hegemony in the region and made the United States and George Bush seem impotent. President Bush gave specific justifications for the invasion, none of which hold
up under scrutiny. The real reason for the invasion was Bush’s concern over the perception of weakness, both at home and abroad, that Noriega came to symbolize.

As a journalist, I was interested in examining the media’s performance in reporting the invasion. In order to narrow the study, I focused on four sources: The Washington Post, The New York Times, Newsweek and Time magazine.

I have concluded that the media failed to provide the reader with enough historical information on U.S. intervention in the region. As a result, the invasion of Panama was seen as an isolated incident and not part of a pattern of U.S. aggression in Latin America. The media also failed to challenge the Bush administration’s justifications for the invasion. The media’s coverage of the invasion made it seem as though the United States didn’t undertake that sort of action very often, when in fact the opposite was true.
INTRODUCTION

On December 20, 1989, the United States invaded the small Central American nation of Panama with a force of some 24,000 troops. The battle between Panamanian troops and American forces left more than 300 civilians dead and thousands homeless. After a 10-day standoff with U.S. troops surrounding the Vatican embassy, Panamanian dictator Gen. Manuel Noriega left the embassy and surrendered to American forces.

The invasion was the culmination of two-and-one-half-years of angry rhetoric between Noriega and presidents Ronald Reagan and George Bush. Noriega, once valued as a Central Intelligence Agency asset and supporter of the Nicaraguan Contras, had fallen into disfavor during the Reagan administration after allegations of drug trafficking and political murder became public, making support for him an embarrassment. Reagan administration efforts to convince Noriega to step down failed and George Bush inherited the problem.

According to the Bush administration, the invasion was triggered by the shooting death of an off-duty American serviceman and the harassment of a U.S. Navy couple by Panamanian troops. Bush said these incidents coupled with a declaration of a state of war by the Panamanian National Assembly led him to believe Americans in Panama were in
danger. In addition to protecting American lives, Bush cited protection of the Panama Canal, restoration of democracy and capturing Noriega as goals of the invasion.

The American public and the print media overwhelmingly supported the invasion. Editorials in the New York Times and the Washington Post gave the president high marks for ordering the invasion. A Newsweek poll found 80 percent of Americans believed the invasion was justified.

The invasion of Panama is part of a long history of U.S. intervention in the region. Since the declaration of the Monroe Doctrine in 1823, the United States has shown a willingness to influence the internal politics of other nations in the hemisphere. Not until the turn of this century was the United States capable of projecting its power over the region and becoming its self-appointed policeman. Once the United States became the hegemonic power in the region, it acted with impunity.

Between 1898 and 1933, the United States intervened in seven nations in Central America and the Caribbean. In each case the United States was confronted with an anti-American regime that it felt compelled to oust. The interventions were often justified by concern over the safety of Americans, although the truth had more to do with maintaining hegemony in the region.

The Cold War and fear of communism provided U.S. policymakers with a new excuse to intervene in the internal
affairs of Latin America. A number of interventions were undertaken supposedly to prevent the spread of communism to the region. In Guatemala in 1954 and the Dominican Republic in 1965, the United States intervened to prevent nationalistic, anti-American regimes from retaining power. Presidents Eisenhower and Johnson justified their actions by playing on American fears of communist expansion in the region. In neither case was the real threat from communism.

The invasion of Panama is particularly interesting because it is the first post-Cold War intervention by the United States. With the communist threat evaporating, the United States found itself as the premier military power in the world. As the world's hegemonic power it was unchallenged, except in its own backyard. For more than two years prior to the invasion, Noriega had defied the efforts of two presidents to oust him. President Bush undoubtedly would have preferred to get rid of Noriega without a military invasion, but nothing else worked.

History shows that the United States believes Central America and the Caribbean to be in its sphere of influence, a region where its hegemony is unchallenged and its right to intervene implicit. The invasion of Panama is another example of this hegemonic presumption in action.

In this paper, I will examine the performance of the print media during the invasion. Lacking in the media's coverage of the invasion was an historical perspective on
the intervention. The invasion was treated as an isolated incident. The pattern of American aggression in the region was never discussed. The media also failed to challenge the Bush administration's justifications for the invasion. These justifications do not hold up under scrutiny. A more plausible explanation for the invasion is Bush's concern over the political implications, both domestic and international, of allowing a man like Noriega to remain in power in Panama. Noriega's hold on power challenged U.S. hegemony in the region and made the United States and George Bush seem impotent. Had the invasion been put in an historical context and President Bush's justifications adequately scrutinized, the public's support might not have been so forthcoming. Popular support for the Panama invasion may give Bush and future U.S. presidents the confidence to undertake future interventions in Latin America. The media's failure to uncover the true motivations of the Bush administration and its failure to describe the sad history of U.S. aggression in the region, make future interventions more likely.

In examining the print media's performance during the invasion of Panama, I have restricted the study to the preeminent daily and weekly publications: The Washington Post, The New York Times, Time magazine and Newsweek. Although others may have done a better job, these four publications have a greater impact on public opinion.
This paper is divided into three main sections:

I. The Historical Context of U.S. Intervention in the Region

II. The Bush Administration's Questionable Justifications for the Invasion

III. The Print Media's Performance

I. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The history of U.S. intervention in Latin America is a major area the media failed to cover in its reporting of the invasion of Panama. By not providing an historical context for the invasion, the publications studied in this paper left the reader with the impression that U.S. intervention in the region is rare. That is a false impression.

In this section, I will discuss four examples of U.S. intervention in the region: Panama in 1903, Nicaragua in 1909, Guatemala in 1954 and the Dominican Republic in 1965.

The United States formally announced its interest in the region in 1823 with the Monroe Doctrine, which sought to exclude European colonialism from the Western Hemisphere. "The United States has issued a strong warning to the Europeans to keep their hands off the Western Hemisphere and that any attempt to intervene to recolonize would be viewed as a threat to the United States itself."

(1) At the time of
the doctrine, the United States had to rely on the British navy to enforce the doctrine. The British were committed to non-intervention in the region and wanted open access to Latin America for trade and investment.

One result of the Monroe Doctrine was the creation of a paternalistic attitude in the United States toward Latin America. "It was this role as self-appointed protector that led to a more aggressive and interventionist U.S. policy at the turn of the century."(2) As the turn of the century neared and the prospects of European re-colonization of the hemisphere diminished, the United States used the doctrine as an expression of its dominance in the region.

The Roosevelt corollary to the Monroe Doctrine clearly defined U.S. hegemony in Latin America. Unlike President Monroe, Theodore Roosevelt was able to back up his words with military muscle. Although ostensibly aimed at the Europeans, the corollary had a greater effect on U.S.-Latin American relations. It established the United States as a self-appointed "international police power" over the region. "The corollary continues in force however, not because it is right or lawful, but because, as Roosevelt himself implied, it is a necessary extension of U.S. power."(3) The corollary clearly stated that U.S. policy in Latin America would not be governed by international law, but would be defined by unequal distribution of power between the United States and Latin America.
As the weaker neighbor, Latin America may be regarded as a sphere of influence of the United States.

A sphere of influence is a region in which a major power has hegemony or preeminence, and from which other major power are excluded. A common form of control in a sphere of influence is major power intervention, especially when a small country shows independence.(4)

This approach to international affairs stresses the primacy of national self-interest as the motivator of policy and action. Adherence to the Organization of American States Charter or other proscriptions against intervention are secondary to national security concerns. As the region's dominant power, the United States has the ability to pursue its national interest without regard to the protestations of its neighbors. "This status is recognized not because it is 'right' or 'good,' but because it is a predictable and usually unstoppable outgrowth of national power."(5) This approach to international relations has always characterized U.S. policy in Central America and the Caribbean.

While policymakers may pursue a "realist" foreign policy, their rhetoric tends to avoid blatant references to self-interest. Instead, more grandiose goals are established like defeating communism or stopping drugs. "Such a stance relieves the United States of guilt for behaving as a traditional major power."(6) It is important, then, to look beyond the stated reasons for American intervention in Latin America and uncover the darker side of U.S. foreign policy.

U.S. interventions between 1898 and 1933 in Central
America and the Caribbean occurred in Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Haiti, Mexico, Nicaragua and Panama. These interventions "established a habit of treating the region as an arena where there were no restraints on U.S. power, and where, by virtue of superior military force and economic leverage, the United States could presume the right to control the internal developments of those states."(7)

**PANAMA 1903**

The history of U.S. intervention in Panama began in 1903 when America supported the province's independence from Colombia. Colombia had been negotiating with the United States over the price America would pay to obtain a canal route through Panama. The Colombian senate rejected a treaty giving the United States right over a canal passage for $10 million and sought further negotiations to boost the price. President Roosevelt was unwilling to pay a higher price. Instead, he let it be known that the United States would look favorably on a revolt by Panamanians against their Colombian rulers. The revolt occurred on November 3, 1903, and the United States recognized Panama's independence four days later.(8)

The revolt was successful partly because Roosevelt sent the U.S. warship Nashville just off Panama's shore. This show of force intimidated the Colombians, who did little to put down the uprising. Panama had been agitating for its
independence for 60 years but it took American intervention to make it succeed. After independence, the United States negotiated a treaty with the French-owned Panama Canal Company, which had been authorized by the Panamanian junta to act as its representative. No Panamanian was present at the negotiations, which produced an agreement doubling the size of the canal zone over the previous treaty for the same $10 million payment. The new treaty also gave the United States the right to act as if it were sovereign in the canal zone. "For seventy years, a treaty neither negotiated nor signed by any Panamanian governed the operation of Panama’s principal economic resource and granted the United States virtually absolute power over a vast strip of Panama’s most vital territory."(9) The treaty is basis for the so-called "special relationship" that American policymakers have used as an excuse to dominate Panama and by extension all of Central America and the Caribbean. "The acquisition of the Panama Canal Zone and the building of the canal epitomize the U.S. rise to power and the assertion of quasi-imperialism in Latin America."(10)

**NICARAGUA 1909-1933**

U.S. intervention in Nicaragua began in 1909. That year President Taft ordered the marines into Nicaragua ostensibly to protect American citizens. The real reason had more to do with aiding a conservative rebellion against nationalistic
President Jose Santos Zelaya. The United States was concerned that Zelaya would sell an Atlantic-Pacific canal route to the Japanese or the Germans. Zelaya was forced to flee the country and a pro-American politician took his place. American bankers subsequently came to control 51 percent of Nicaragua's national bank and retain the right to manage government expenditures. (11)

In the 1920s, Augusto Sandino led a rebel movement that opposed U.S. intervention in Nicaragua and called for a withdrawal of the marines. Faced with criticism at home over the marine deployment, President Hoover ordered a phased withdrawal in 1929. When the marines finally left in 1933 they turned over the command of the National Guard to Anastasio Somoza, who would three years later overthrow the government and establish a dictatorship that lasted until 1979. In 1934, Sandino was murdered by the National Guard after he agreed to a cease fire pact with the government. (12)

Using the safety of American citizens as a pretext to invade has been a popular excuse for U.S. interventions in Latin America. In Nicaragua, as with other U.S. interventions, the real reason for marine invasion was that a nationalist Latin American leader was pursuing an agenda that conflicted with the wishes of the United States.

The Cold War presented the United States with a new
threat to its hegemony in the region: communism. Two U.S. interventions, in Guatemala in 1954 and the Dominican Republic in 1965, are examples of how U.S. policymakers used the communist threat to justify ousting anti-American leaders.

GUATEMALA 1954

Jacobo Arbenz was elected president of Guatemala in March 1951. The election was tainted by charges of fraud but Arbenz did enjoy significant popular support. Upon assuming office, Arbenz immediately began a land reform program. The United Fruit Company lost nearly half of its vast landholding to government expropriation. The American conglomerate also held monopoly control over the country’s railroad and shipping network, which allowed it to set excessive freight rates. Another U.S. company ran a power plant that was the primary source of electric power in Guatemala City.

Arbenz began construction of highways, ports and power facilities to break the U.S. monopolies. Arbenz’s efforts to end Guatemala’s dependence on U.S. companies "created grave friction with powerful private interests in the United States.(13)

He also angered the State Department by refusing to send troops to fight in the Korean War. Arbenz said Guatemala should concentrate its resources on furthering its
own development. The State Department charged that the Arbenz government was part of an international Communist movement. Although communists were allowed to organize in Guatemala under Arbenz, none of his cabinet members and less than 10 percent of the members of Congress were communist. (14) At its height in 1954, the Guatemalan Communist Party had only 4,000 members. Arbenz relied on their support but was never controlled by them as the United States charged. Even if the communists did hold a measure of influence in the Arbenz government, there is no evidence to suggest that the Soviet Union had any degree of control in Guatemala. (15)

Arbenz was overthrown in a coup in 1954. The coup was prompted by the threat posed by the insurgency of a Guatemalan army officer, Carlos Castillo Armas. Castillo, who failed in a coup attempt against Arbenz in 1951, also received money and guns from Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza, the United Fruit Company and the Central Intelligence Agency. "Although there has never been explicit official acknowledgement of the CIA's support for Castillo, the evidence is overwhelming and virtually irrefutable." (16) Castillo's insurgency was outnumbered but successful because it had airplanes supplied by the United States.

Under Castillo, the right to vote was restricted to literate citizens, thereby disenfranchising the vast majority of the population. He also returned the land
expropriated from the United Fruit Company.

Eisenhower administration policy in Guatemala was partly motivated by domestic politics. Eisenhower played on the concerns of the American public about an international Communist conspiracy. Guatemala was an easy target for conspiracy theorists because Arbenz didn’t crack down on communists. Eisenhower knew he couldn’t roll back communism in Eastern Europe, but he could eliminate a "communist beachhead" in Latin America. Eisenhower "regarded this 'victory' as one of the major constructive achievements of his administration and used it as a rallying cry in the 1954 and 1956 elections."(17)

The intervention in Guatemala, like other examples of American aggression during the Cold War, was motivated by a combination of overinflated concerns about communist expansion and the resulting worry over the political fallout if a Latin American country was "lost" to communism. "Popular views about the responsibilities of the United States to check the advance of communism caused U.S. leaders to fear heavy political penalties against revolutionary movements associated with international communism."(18) The Eisenhower administration knew that the Arbenz government wasn’t a Soviet beachhead, but they played on public fears of communist expansion because in Latin America, unlike Europe, they could do something about it.
DOMINICAN REPUBLIC 1965

For 25 years the United States supported the authoritarian rule of Gen. Rafael Trujillo, but in 1960 Eisenhower turned on Trujillo fearing that the regime's brutality might lead to another Cuba. On May 31, 1961, Trujillo was assassinated by a group supported by the United States. Elections were held in December of 1962 supervised by the OAS and the U.S. Embassy. Social Democrat Juan Bosch won the presidential election and Washington applauded the return to democracy in the Dominican Republic.

Washington quickly became disenchanted with Bosch, who sought to undertake political and economic reform. The U.S. attitude may have fueled a coup that overthrew Bosch seven months after he took power. The United States broke diplomatic relations with the military junta briefly, but in general, Washington was glad to see a stable, pro-U.S. regime in power.

Reformist army officers defected from the junta and led a movement to return Bosch to the presidency. The resulting civil war in 1965 pitted pro-Bosch "constitutionalists" versus the conservative junta forces. President Lyndon Johnson ordered 4,000 marines to the Dominican Republic ostensibly to protect American lives. During the next few days, the United States trumped up charges that the constitutionalists were actually communists directed from Cuba. This smokescreen allowed LBJ to send additional troops
into the country to prevent a "communist takeover." In all, 22,000 U.S. troops occupied the country.(19)

The United States accomplished its objective: Juan Bosch was not returned to power. "The intervention reaffirmed U.S. hegemony in the region and it kindled a fear and resentment that undermined U.S. credibility throughout the region."(20) The decision to send American troops was made even though there was no real basis for the U.S. contention that the rebels were capable of turning the revolution towards Marxism. "Labeling the constitutionalist camp as heavily infiltrated by communist sympathizers bolstered the administration’s claim that intervention was a necessity."(21) As with the intervention in Guatemala, the United States used the communist threat as an excuse to defeat anti-American forces in Latin America.

MULTILATERAL AGREEMENTS AGAINST INTERVENTION

The United States has repeatedly signed and violated non-intervention agreements with Latin America. The first of these agreements came in 1907 with the General Treaty of Peace and Amity. Although this agreement was signed only by Central American nations and not the United States, it was the result of a peace conference initiated by Washington. In addition to banning intervention, the treaty established a Central American Court of Justice to settle disputes. It is ironic that the United States in its quest for stability in
the region would have the Central American nations sign a non-intervention agreement and not participate itself. This treaty was reaffirmed at another Washington conference in 1923.(22)

President Franklin Roosevelt repudiated more than 30 years of military and political interference in Latin America by announcing a "good neighbor" policy in 1933. The U.S. withdrew troops from Nicaragua and signed non-intervention agreements in 1933 in Montevideo and in 1936 in Buenos Aires.(23)

The Charter of the Organization of American States was signed in 1948. Article 15 states: "No state of group of states has the right to intervene directly or indirectly, for any reason whatever, in the internal and external affairs of any other state."(24) The interventions on the Dominican Republic and Guatemala are both examples of the numerous violations of Article 15 by the United States.

The invasion of Panama too is an example of the blatant disregard the United States has for the OAS Charter and the agreements signed by Franklin Roosevelt. "By any standard of independent judgment, the invasion grossly violated U.S. treaty commitments."(25)

II. JUSTIFICATIONS FOR THE INVASION

President Bush gave four justifications for the
invasion: to protect American lives; restore the democratic process; protect the integrity of the Panama Canal treaties; and to apprehend Gen. Manuel Noriega. These justifications do not hold up under careful scrutiny, a task the media failed to undertake.

1. To protect American lives.

President Bush said that actions just prior to the invasion led him to believe that the 35,000 Americans in Panama were in danger. Bush cited two incidents that happened several days before the invasion. One involved the killing of an American soldier and the other was the brutalization of a Navy couple by Panamanian Defense Force soldiers. These incidents followed a declaration by Panama’s National Assembly that the country was "in a state of war" with the United States. Bush said those incidents plus the state of war declaration led him to believe that American citizens were in "imminent danger." According to Bush, "That was enough."

The danger to American lives was not a sufficient justification for invading Panama. The "state of war" declaration issued by Panama’s National Assembly was not meant as a declaration of war against the United States. It was issued in reaction to U.S. economic sanctions that had crippled Panama’s economy. Panama’s Gross National Product had fallen 17 percent in 1988 and unemployment had risen to
25 percent. The freezing of Panama's deposits in U.S. banks caused a collapse in Panama's banking industry, a mainstay of the economy. The U.S. government also terminated the quota of sugar Panama could sell in the United States and placed the revenues owed from the canal in an escrow account. (26) In light of the collapse of Panama's economy, the declaration of "a state of war" was "intended to dramatize the economic warfare being waged by the U.S. government." (27) Since the sanctions had been imposed in April of 1988, the National Assembly had issued a number of resolutions calling the U.S. action tantamount to a state of war. "The description of U.S. sanctions and other actions against the government as 'war' had been the staple of the regime's rhetoric for months." (28)

Initially, the Bush administration dismissed the declaration, which was issued at the same time the assembly appointed Noriega as Panama's "Maximum Leader." "Over the weekend, administration officials had called the shooting death an isolated incident and were reluctant to link it to any pattern or to the Friday government declaration." (29) After Bush made the decision to invade, White House spokesman Marlin Fitzwater gave a new appraisal of the declaration: "When you put all these together you begin to discern a certain climate of aggression that is very disturbing." (30) After the decision to invade had been made, the White House needed to put a new spin on the
declaration and the weekend incidents. All of a sudden, these incidents became a "pattern of harassment" personally directed by Noriega.

When examined from a Panamanian point of view, it is clear there was no pattern. Both incidents occurred at the same military checkpoint near PDF headquarters on the same Saturday night and the first incident may have triggered the second. The first occurred when four American soldiers got lost in the neighborhood near PDF headquarters and were stopped at a PDF checkpoint. When a hostile civilian crowd appeared, the servicemen decided to drive through the checkpoint. The PDF soldiers fired on the car, killing one American serviceman and injuring another. A Navy couple who had been stopped at the same checkpoint and saw the shooting were driven away and brutally interrogated. President Bush was particularly incensed by the sexual threats against the Navy wife by PDF soldiers. Panamanian soldiers had been told to expect spies posing as off-duty U.S. servicemen. The carload of U.S. servicemen who just happened to get lost near PDF headquarters must have seemed like prime suspects. The harassment of the Navy couple may have been triggered by the running of the checkpoint by the carload of U.S. servicemen. According to an administration official, the Panamanian military "tried to reassure us that the Saturday night shooting was an accident, an isolated incident that was unintended." (31) The White House refused to accept the
Panamanian explanation because it would have undermined Bush's prime reason for the invasion.

Another aspect of this justification that doesn't ring true is that the military plan failed to protect American civilians from being taken hostage. The U.S. military knew that American civilians would be prime hostage targets but failed to incorporate this into the invasion plan.

The safety of American civilians was one of the reasons for the invasion, but many remained unprotected throughout the action. At one time or another, nearly a dozen were taken prisoner and three were killed. (32)

The White House cited the threat to American citizens and the right of self-defense as the legal basis of the invasion. "It is quite clear under international law that self-defense provisions in the OAS and U.N. charters are limited to an actual threat to a country itself, rather than some rhetorical threat by a military leader or some incident in which an American citizen is harmed abroad," according to David Cole of the Center for Constitutional Rights. (33)

If there was a threat to Americans in Panama, the White House response should have been proportional to the threat. The invasion caused the death of 300 Panamanian civilians and the wounding of some 3,000. (34) That is not a proportionate response to the killing of one American soldier and sexual threats against a Navy wife.

2. Restore the democratic process.
This is the least defensible justification for the invasion. There has never been a democracy in Panama. "The notion that Panama, a country governed since its inception by a corrupt oligarchy and a succession of dictatorial leaders, had a democracy to begin with is itself ludicrous." (35) Using this as a justification for the invasion makes it seem as though the United States has always cared about democracy in Panama. In fact, the United States has a history of undermining democracy in Panama and supporting the oligarchy.

In 1984, the United States recognized Noriega's handpicked presidential candidate, Nicolas Barletta, as the winner of an obviously rigged election. The real winner, Arnulfo Arias, who had been elected president four other times but was thrown out early in each term by the oligarchy, was not considered a friend of the United States because he was a populist. "Arias would have made it more difficult for the United States to operate in Panama." (36) The frustrated career of Arnulfo Arias is a testament to the undemocratic policies of past U.S. administrations.

According to President Bush, one of the invasion's goals was to install the government of Guillermo Endara, who was elected president of Panama in May of 1988. Endara was never able to assume power because Noriega nullified the elections and installed his own man as president.

Only after Noriega became an embarrassment in 1987 did
the Reagan administration decide not to recognize his handpicked presidents. In fact, the United States continued to recognize Arturo Delvalle as president of Panama after he had been ousted by Noriega. Delvalle was never democratically elected. He assumed power after Noriega sacked Barletta, who was ousted after he refused to back down from investigating the murder of Noriega opponent Hugo Spadafora.

The Reagan administration's concern that the Spadafora incident might affect Panama's covert support for the Nicaragua Contras led it to downplay links between Noriega and the murder. In testimony before a Senate subcommittee investigating Noriega, Assistant Secretary of State Eliot Abrams "appeared to accept the findings of Panamanian authorities that there was insufficient evidence connecting [Spadafora's murder] to the PDF. He made his remarks despite abundant evidence to the contrary, evidence available to him and other officials."(37) Only when Noriega became more of a liability than an asset did the U.S. administration turn on him and realize there was no democracy in Panama.

Had democracy been uppermost in President Bush's mind, then he might have asked President Endara, the man the United States recognized as the rightful leader of Panama, whether he wanted the invasion. Endara and his two vice presidents were told of the invasion only a few hours before it began. Endara was never asked. In fact, he was quoted
after the invasion as saying he would have opposed it had he been asked. "We were not really consulted...I would have been happier without an intervention."(38)

3. To protect the integrity of the Panama Canal treaties.

President Bush never elaborated on this justification other than to say that turning over full sovereignty over the canal to Panama in the year 2000 would be impossible with Noriega in power.

Under terms of the treaty, the Panamanian government was to appoint on Jan. 1, 1990, the new canal administrator, the first Panamanian to hold the post. The White House indicated that it wouldn't accept Noriega's nominee because the United States didn't recognize the Noriega regime. The commonly accepted norm of international law with regard to recognition of another country has two tests:

It must effectively control the national territory and must be willing and capable of meeting its international obligations. The means by which a government takes power and maintains itself in power are irrelevant...(39)

The Panamanian government met both of these tests. The United States has always recognized pro-American regimes that have taken power through illegal means or maintained control through repression.

Noriega never threatened to close the canal or impede the movement of ships through its locks. Had he done so,
under the terms of the treaty, the United States would have had a basis for taking action. "The Solis-Palma-Noriega regime continued to scrupulously avoid any interference with the operation of the Panama Canal..."(40) In fact, the canal was closed for two days during the invasion, the first time in the canal's 75-year history that it was closed for reasons other than a landslide.

4. To apprehend Noriega.

Noriega's downfall began in June 1986 with articles in the New York Times by Seymour Hersh and in the Washington Post by Bob Woodward detailing his involvement with the Medellin drug cartel and the murder of Hugo Spadafora. With this public disclosure began a slow process of Noriega becoming a liability instead of an asset in the minds of Reagan administration officials. Noriega's downfall had little to do with what he had done in terms of drugs and political murder. It was the fact that these charges became public that doomed him. There was nothing in the June 1986 articles that administration officials didn't already know. It took the administration another year -- a year of very public events including mass protests in Panama, the passage of a Senate resolution against Noriega and news of impending drug indictments -- before it turned on Noriega.

The Senate resolution was passed in June 1987 and called for Noriega's removal pending an independent
investigation into charges of murder, election fraud and corruption leveled by a former Noriega deputy. The Panamanian opposition cheered the Senate action as a sign that the United States was finally severing its ties with Noriega. The resolution was passed over the objections of the Reagan administration.(41)

Until his cover was blown, Noriega had been a valued asset of the U.S. intelligence community. Noriega had been receiving payoffs from the CIA since the late 1950s. He was especially helpful in the Reagan administration’s efforts to keep the Contras armed in the face of congressional prohibitions on funding. The administration overlooked his drug connections as long as he could continue to supply the Contras. Assistant Secretary of State Abrams, who was in deep trouble with Congress over his lack of candor in testimony on administration support for the Contras, saw Noriega as a convenient vehicle to resurrect his tarnished reputation. Abrams attacked Noriega, a man he had praised as a cooperative ally only a year earlier, calling him a narco-trafficker.(42)

President Bush has said that he didn’t know anything about the charges against Noriega until the indictments were handed down in Tampa and Miami in February of 1988. This is almost impossible to believe considering Bush was briefed on Noriega’s drug activities in 1985 by U.S. Ambassador Everett Ellis Briggs. Around the same time, two editions of the
National Intelligence Daily, a top-secret intelligence report available to top U.S. officials, reported Noriega's meeting with leaders of the Medellin drug cartel.(43)

One of the legal justifications for the invasion was based on the indictments against Noriega. According to the Bush administration, the United States had a legal right to carry out the indictments. "In so asserting, Bush has elevated a U.S. law-enforcement instrument, a local federal grand jury, to the status of a secular holy office whose mere accusation is sufficient to unleash a posse of 24,000 soldiers to seize a foreign leader in his own capital."(44)

The apprehension of Noriega was undertaken as part of the larger "War on Drugs" effort that had captured the nation's attention in the late 1980s. Noriega was a symbol of evil drug traffickers who were poisoning America's youth. A demonization campaign against Noriega was unleashed by the Reagan and Bush administrations. The man who had been such a valued asset to the Contra effort was now portrayed by administration officials as a paranoid, drug-addicted practitioner of witchcraft. "The U.S. through two administrations built Noriega into a menacing monster - instead of what he was, the tin-pot dictator of a not very important country."(45)

The demonization effort reached its zenith when Noriega was holed up in the Vatican embassy trying to evade capture by U.S. forces. On December 26, the commander of U.S. forces
in Panama, Gen. Maxwell Thurman, released a document asserting that Noriega was a "truly evil man" who wore red underwear to "ward off the evil eye."(46)

The demonization campaign also included the announcement that the U.S. soldiers had seized over a hundred pounds of cocaine belonging to Noriega. The cocaine find was duly reported in all the media. It was later learned that the "cocaine" was in actually tamale flour. The news reports of the cocaine served to make Noriega appear to be an out-of-control drug addict who was capable of anything. "At the end, Noriega was reviled as if the United States had never had a greater enemy, communist, fascist or criminal."(47)

If President Bush didn’t invade Panama to protect American lives, restore democracy, protect the canal or bring a criminal to justice, then why did he do it? I believe there are two reasons: domestic politics and America’s image abroad. Both of these reasons are related to the theme of this paper: The United States believes that Panama, like the rest of Central America and the Caribbean, is within its sphere of influence and this gives it license to intervene.

1. Domestic politics

Noriega was a major problem in George Bush’s campaign
for the presidency. The inability of the Reagan-Bush team to get rid of Noriega reinforced the wimp label that had become attached to Bush. It also made Bush seem incapable of waging the war on drugs, which had arisen as a significant issue in the campaign.

Early February 1988 was a pivotal moment in U.S. politics. All the barometers of the voting public confirmed that, for the first time, most Americans believed drugs a greater threat than communism. Noriega had become the ugly symbol of the reigning evil. (48)

Bush won the campaign but couldn’t lose either Noriega or the wimp label.

As Bush began his presidency, the Noriega problem loomed large with no end in sight. As long as Noriega was in power, Bush would appear to be a less than effective commander-in-chief.

The pressure to act built after the failure of a coup to oust Noriega in October 1989. Bush was roundly criticized for not helping the coup plotters. The White House tried to cover its tracks by saying it didn’t have prior knowledge of the coup. This was a lie. The White House was told of the coup two days before it was launched. (49) Defense Secretary Dick Cheney, who was point man on the administration’s post-coup spin patrol, gave a thoroughly ironic defense of Bush’s inaction: "We are not in the business of willy-nilly running around the hemisphere toppling government we don’t like. How many dead Americans is Noriega worth." (50) Bush’s performance during the coup added to the perception of him
as too cautious and restrained.

Bush lost the wimp label and assailed concerns about his decisiveness with the invasion. The media noted that Bush had much to gain politically from the invasion. The wimp label was mentioned repeatedly. This didn’t stop the media from acting as a cheerleader for the invasion and especially for Bush, who was hailed in a New York Times story "as a man capable of bold action."(51)

2. America’s image abroad.

For more than two years, Noriega was able to remain in power even though the United States wanted him out. This damaged the image of the United States abroad at an especially delicate time. With the end of the Cold War, the United States has emerged as the world’s lone superpower. It would be difficult for the United States to maintain order while its hegemonic position was challenged by a neighborhood punk like Noriega.

The urge to retain control is further strengthened by the calculus of international prestige. U.S. officials do not want the United States to be perceived abroad as unable to maintain dominance so close to home.(52)

In order to establish itself as leader of the "new world order," the United States had to eliminate the Noriega problem.
III. THE PRINT MEDIA'S PERFORMANCE

In a number of areas, the four publications studied for this paper failed in their coverage of the invasion. The most notable shortcoming was the lack of historical perspective. Their coverage left the reader with the impression that the United States has rarely intervened in Latin America. They also did not adequately challenge the Bush administration's justifications for the intervention, leaving the reader to assume that the invasion was justified.

The legacy of U.S. intervention in the region was not given sufficient space in the media as part of its coverage of the invasion. The media failed to give the reader an understanding of the continuity of U.S. policy in Central America and the Caribbean since the turn of the century. The one constant in U.S.-Latin American relations has been intervention by the United States to oust anti-American regimes. By not giving the invasion an historical context, the nearly unanimous denunciation by Latin Americans of the invasion of Panama was less intelligible.

In fact, during the invasion there were no stories about the history of U.S. intervention in the region in the four publications studied for this paper. The invasion was treated as an isolated incident unconnected with previous examples of American intervention. This approach gives the reader the sense that the United States does not undertake
this kind of action often.

Had the media given even a brief history of U.S. intervention since the turn of the century the reader would have had a better understanding of the reaction by Latin Americans, which was dismissed a predictable and therefore without merit. From Newsweek:

As expected, the reaction from Latin America was mostly negative. Diatribes from the likes of Cuba and Nicaragua arrived on schedule. Other, more moderate nations deplored the invasion...Many Americans were not inclined to take such complaints seriously.(53)

A headline in the New York Times shows the condescending approach the media took with Latin America's reaction. "U.S. Denounced by Nations Touchy About Intervention."(54) The accompanying story mentions nothing about past U.S. interventions. As a result, Latin American denunciations come off as inappropriate. The word "touchy" leads the reader to think the Latin American condemnation can be dismissed as an emotional reaction out of touch with reality.

The only history that crept into media stories centered on the canal and the supposed "special relationship" between Panama and the United States. The media accepted without challenge the idea that the so-called "special relationship" gave the United States license to intervene in Panama's internal affairs. This "special relationship" was cited, along with hatred for Noriega, as the reason the invasion was so popular with the American people.
While newspapers and magazines can't be expected to assume the function of history books, the obvious connection between past U.S. interventions and the invasion of Panama should have been noted. Like the other interventions mentioned in this paper, the ostensible reason for the Panama invasion was to protect American lives. Also like the other past U.S. interventions, the real reasons for the invasion of Panama were less noble.

The media's treatment of U.N. and OAS agreements against intervention reflects the contempt America demonstrates for such pacts, especially when applied to Latin America. The Washington Post and the New York Times mentioned the violation of the OAS Charter in sidebar stories on the legal justification for the invasion, but nothing was mentioned in the lead stories. Both Newsweek and Time mentioned the violation of U.N. Article 15, but in no way did this detract from their blatant cheerleading.

The two magazines were especially guilty of acting as cheerleaders instead of objective observers. Their coverage of the invasion was long on military details and short on the long-term consequences of violating the sovereignty of another nation. By focusing on details of the military deployment to the exclusion of a broader perspective, the magazines left little room for the reader to develop a balanced understanding of the invasion. Both magazines read more like "Rambo" movie scripts: filled with heroic deeds by
Special Forces units but little explanation of the big picture.

The treatment Time and Newsweek gave George Bush was equally one-sided. Time gave him high marks for "showing muscle" and backing up U.S. foreign policy with military force. (55) Newsweek said the invasion made Bush seem "bold and decisive," transforming him "from meekness to macho." (56) Both said that the "wimp" label would no longer apply to George Bush.

All four publications failed to examine thoroughly the administration's justifications for the invasion.

The media failed to explain the circumstances of the death of the American serviceman and the harassment of the Navy wife, the events President Bush said triggered the invasion. Never was the Panamanian point of view considered. This was especially true of the Washington Post and New York Times, which reduced the incidents to background paragraphs once the invasion had begun.

All four publications failed to distinguish between the Panamanian declaration of a "state of war" and the last declaration of war Americans are familiar with, the declaration of war against the Japanese in World War II. By not putting the Panamanian declaration in context, the media fell into the administration's trap. It made the administration's contention that Americans were in imminent danger more believable.
By not putting either the "state of war" declaration or the weekend incidents in their proper context, the media made it seem as though Panama declared war on the United States and promptly began killing Americans. Given this perspective, it is easy to see why the invasion was so popular with Americans.

The media accepted without challenge Bush's contention that one reason to invade Panama was to restore democracy. The history of U.S. recognition and support for thoroughly undemocratic regimes in Latin America was not sufficiently discussed in the four publications.

The media also ignored the fact that Noriega never threatened to close the canal. The administration's contention that the Noriega regime posed a threat to the canal was accepted without challenge. The media failed to pick up on the irony that the invasion closed the canal for the first time since a landslide early in the century.

The one aspect of the invasion that did receive sufficient space was Noriega's CIA ties. All four publications produced a number of stories detailing Noriega's involvement as a CIA spy and supporter of the Nicaraguan Contras. This preoccupation with Noriega may have reduced the space available for thoughtful consideration of the consequences of U.S. intervention in the region.

While the vast majority of the invasion coverage missed the mark, there where hints of thoughtful analysis buried in
the pages. Time magazine came closest as it analyzed the Soviet Union's response to the invasion: "The unspoken message seemed to be that Moscow would recognize a sphere of influence in which the U.S. could operate with a free hand so long as Washington returned the favor."(57)
Unfortunately, no more was mentioned of Latin America as a sphere of influence or U.S. action as a product of that unequal relationship.

CONCLUSION

The four publications examined in this paper failed to give their readers a complete picture of the invasion of Panama and its implications. Instead, the media concentrated on the "sexier" aspects of the story: Noriega's personality and his ties to the CIA; and the military details of the invasion itself. These stories seemed to crowd out a more thoughtful examination of U.S. intervention.

The media's failure to put the invasion in an historical perspective or to challenge the administration's justifications for the invasion undoubtedly contributed to the overwhelming support for Operation Just Cause expressed by the American public. President Bush emerged from the invasion shorn of the "wimp" label and with high overall approval ratings. Without public condemnation of the invasion, it is likely that U.S. intervention in Latin
America will continue in the future. Military missions tend to receive public support, especially in the beginning. The president can expect the benefit of the doubt from the American public. He shouldn’t expect it from the media.

The media has a duty in a democracy to challenge the government’s policies and practices. It must seek the truth that government propaganda often tries to hide. A democracy cannot function properly if the government is allowed to give half-truths and lies without challenge from the media. The invasion of Panama is an example of the government getting away with lying to the American public about the reasons for intervention.

Throughout its history, the United States has expressed support for democracy and self-determination in the rest of the world. The history of U.S. intervention in Latin America shows that the United States tends only to support these principles when the beneficiaries are pro-American. This hypocrisy is as much as theme of U.S. foreign policy as is the promotion of American values. The overwhelmingly negative reaction of Latin Americans to the invasion of Panama is a result of this history.

Until the media stands up to the job of uncovering the reasons behind U.S. intervention in Latin America, it is likely American aggression will continue in the future. As it is, a U.S. president can expect that intervention in Latin America will result in political gains at home and
reinforce America's position abroad as the world's self-appointed policeman.

NOTES


2 Ibid., 19.

3 Ibid., 41.

4 Ibid., 36.

5 Ibid., 37.

6 Ibid., 39.

7 Ibid., 48.


10 Molineau, 43.

11 Leonard, 61-69.


14 Ibid., 154.

15 Ibid., 203.

16 Ibid., 161.

17 Ibid., 229.

18 Ibid., 232.
19 Molineau, 73-80.
20 Ibid., 80.
22 Leonard, 51-81.
23 Molineau, 22.
24 Ibid., 27.
26 Maechling, 114-117.
27 Ibid., 121.
31 Ibid., p. A31
34 Dinges, 313.
35 Maechling, 123.
36 Buckley, 20.
37 Buckley, 51.
39 Maechling, 119.
40 Maechling, 120.
41 Dinges, 270.
42 Buckley, 90.
43 Ibid., 148-149.
44 Maechling, 124.
45 *Time*, 1 January 1990, p. 23.
46 Buckley, 248.
47 Dinges, 316.
48 Buckley, 117.
49 Ibid., 208.
50 Ibid., 216.
52 Martz, 274.
53 *Newsweek*, 1 January 1990, p. 22.
57 *Time*, 1 January 1990, p. 22.

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