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George Bush on Trial: The Noriega Challenge to George Bush's Credibility and the 1989 Invasion of Panama

There is a new world of challenge and opportunities before us, and there's need for leadership that only America can provide...No one is more determined to seize from battle the real peace that can create a new world order. When this is over, the United States, its credibility and its reliability restored, will have a key leadership role.

George Bush, Inaugural Address¹

Mr. President, some of your critics say that, despite your rhetoric, General Noriega can sit in Panama for as long as he wishes, in effect laughing at you, sir, laughing at the United States. Can you do anything about it?

Reporter at Bush News Conference, June 8, 1989²

'When Colin [Powell]...said Noriega has gone over the line, everyone sat up straight,' one senior administration said yesterday. ...According to sources, he has said, 'We have to put a shingle outside our door saying, 'Superpower Lives Here.'

Washington Post, December 21, 1989³

In January 1989, newly elected President George Bush declared that "[t]oday we live in a distinctly different world than that which we were born into: a world that demands new strategies and new solutions."⁴ Six months later this statement of promise would be transformed into an ironic reflection of the bitter struggle his administration had waged to convince America and the world that it was capable of effectively managing U.S.

¹Quoted in Berman and Jentleson, p. 93.

²George Bush, "The President's News Conference, June 8 1989," PPP-CD, George Bush, 1989, p. 701.

³Woodward, *Conversion*, p. A31.

⁴"Swearing-in Ceremony of James Baker as Secretary of State, January 27 1989," PPP-CD, George Bush, 1989, p. 32.

international affairs during a transcendental moment in world politics. It wasn't until after Operation Just Cause that the widespread opinion that Bush was a foreign policy failure began to wane; for most of 1989, the administration's lack of "new strategies and new solutions" was a common criticism at home and abroad. The changing times seemed to demand visionary foreign policy leadership; the Bush administration, however, had difficulty expressing clear foreign policy goals for the United States during its first months in office.

Bush entered the White House with minimal fanfare. Expectations regarding his presidency were either very low or too high—he would either fail miserably or would need to match, and surpass, the achievements of his predecessor. He had won his election handily, but there was a sense that despite his victory Bush had come to office with no clear mandate and that his capabilities remained in doubt.⁵ He had won 53.4 percent of the popular vote, but in an election that featured a dismal 50.1 percent voter turnout—the lowest since 1924. Moreover, he faced a Congress whose Democratic majority had grown in the November elections, and a continued Executive-Congress rift on foreign policy issues inherited from Reagan.⁶

⁵See "Election Results Show Lack of a Consensus About President's Role," *The Wall Street Journal*, November 9, 1988, "Challenges for Bush," *The New York Times*, November 10, 1988, "Failure to Bolster GOP in Congress Will Make it Harder to Lead," *The Christian Science Monitor*, November 10, 1988, "What to Expect: Reaganism Without Ideology, Persistence without Brilliance—and Serious Trouble with Congress," *Time*, November 21, 1988, and Larry Martz, "Tough Tasks Ahead," *Newsweek*, November 21, 1988; Walter Shapiro, "The Election," *Time*, November 21, 1988, p. 25; Kenneth Walsh, "How Bush Will Run the Country," *U.S. News and World Report*, November 21, 1988, p. 26; James Perry and Gerald Seib, "Bush's Clear Victory, Less Than Resounding," *The Wall Street Journal*, November 9, 1988, p. A1; "Ideology, Competence, and Mr. Bush," *The New York Times*, November 10, 1988, p. A30; "A Mandate to Make Sense," *The New York Times*, November 11, 1988, p. A30; "The Great Mandate Hunt," *The Washington Post*, November 14, 1988, p. A23; Charles Krauthammer, "But He Never Asked for a Mandate," *The Washington Post*, November 11, 1988, p. A23.

⁶"Introduction: President Bush's Inaugural Address, January 20, 1989, [Historic Documents of 1989](#), (Washington D.C., Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1990), p. 41.

Indeed, *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report*, in an appraisal of the Reagan presidency, judged that as a result of the collapse of its Central America policy, “little authority accrue[d]” to the presidency. Reagan had “lost power to Congress and handed over a weakened White House to Vice President George Bush.”⁷ And as one study of the Bush presidency adds:

Bush’s standing vis a vis Congress as he took up office was the weakest of any president elected in the twentieth century, an unenviable distinction which had previously belonged to Richard Nixon. In 1969 there were 58 Democrats and 42 Republicans in the Senate, compared to 55 Democrats and 45 Republicans twenty years later. However, in the House in 1969, Nixon could claim the support of 192 Republicans whereas Bush, in 1989, had to work with 175 Republicans against 260 Democrats.⁸

From the start, unsurprisingly, the Bush administration worked to smooth out relations with Congress and put the rancor of the Reagan years behind, drawing its foreign policy staff from outside of Reagan circles and sending conciliatory signals.⁹

Yet despite the bipartisan language of his inaugural address, in which he made clear his administration’s intention to work with Congress on U.S. international interests, Bush quickly came under criticism for his perceived inaction on pressing foreign policy issues during the critical transition period to a post-Cold War world. Political observers, for example, zeroed in on the administration’s plan to conduct an extensive and lengthy review of U.S. foreign policy in light of the changing global situation. As *Time* magazine put it, “faced with a political upheaval in the Soviet Union and its spillover in Europe, Bush seems

⁷“Introduction: President Reagan’s Farewell Address, January 11, 1989,” *Historic Documents of 1989*, (Washington D.C., Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1990), p. 17.

⁸David Mervin, *George Bush and the Guardianship Presidency*, (NY: St. Martin’s Press, 1996), p. 88.

⁹Baker, p. 30-31

almost recklessly timid, unwilling to respond with the imagination and articulation that the situation requires.”¹⁰ Bush, however, stubbornly insisted that prudence was the best policy:

I’ve said and I’ll repeat to you all: I’m not going to precipitously move just to have some meeting going on out there. There’s a lot happening, and when I come forward with a proposal, I want it to be sound. I want it to have the full support of the NATO alliance, and I want it to have a credibility, an instant credibility that shows our commitment, not only to enhancing the peace but to preserving the alliance and keeping it strong.¹¹

According to his advisers, Bush was concerned that if he leapt without looking in his foreign policy, both his international and domestic political credibility could suffer. “I don’t want to make an early term mistake like Kennedy and the Bay of Pigs,” he told them during the first weeks of his presidency.¹²

Another area where Bush received particularly low marks was his plan for the war on drugs.¹³ Bush scholar Mark Rozell writes that

As a candidate, Bush frequently boasted that if he were elected, drug dealers would be captured and dealt with harshly. ‘Drug dealers,’ he intoned, ‘you’re history.’ Bush surprised many political observers by continuing to emphasize this issue once elected because the drug crisis appears to be intractable, and there is no national consensus on how to deal with the problem. Nonetheless, Bush appointed the controversial William Bennett to the newly created post of ‘Drug Czar’ and devoted his first national televised presidential address to the drug problem. Bush also proposed to Congress a program of law enforcement, prison building, drug abuse treatment, increased border patrols, and international aid. Despite these actions journalists characterized Bush’s efforts as too incremental and even ‘cheap.’¹⁴

The *New York Times* admonished that

¹⁰George J. Church, “Do Nothing Détente,” *Time*, May 15, 1989, pp. 22-23.

¹¹George Bush, “Remarks and a Question-and-Answer Session at a White House Luncheon for Journalists, March 31, 1989,” PPP-CD, George Bush, 1989, p. 339.

¹²Duffy and Goodgame, p. 71.

¹³R.W. Apple, “The Capital,” *The New York Times*, April 26, 1989, p. A24 and A.M. Rosenthal, “Will This Scourge End?” *The New York Times*, January 27, 1989, p. A31.

¹⁴Mark J. Rozell, *The Press and the Bush Presidency*, Praeger Series in Presidential Studies, (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1996), p. 38.

[I]amentably, having pointed in the right direction, Mr. Bush offers a program that would bring progress measured in inches. His words say nothing is more important. His actions say that in fact, he considers something else more important: his stubborn promise not to raise taxes...Until he puts fighting illegal drugs ahead of reading his lips, his call to arms sounds more like a whisper.¹⁵

Noriega's continued presence in Panama and the White House's inability to do anything about it fueled the debate.

The president's caution in dealing with one of the first foreign policy crises to face his regime—the June 4, 1989 massacre of student protesters by government troops in China—inspired similar critiques. The protesters had been gathered in Beijing's Tianamen Square for some months when the People's Army moved in; reporters covering the unprecedented movement captured the violent repression, which grabbed world attention. Bush opted not to come out with a strong statement regarding the massacre. At a June 8 news conference, one reporter expressed the widespread perception that Bush's silence amounted to failure when he asked the president why the U.S. was not being "more forceful in being the world's leading advocate of democracy."¹⁶

The administration's tepid response to rapidly unfolding events in East Germany was another source of criticism. For most of the Cold War, the post-war division of Germany had been rendered static by the East-West stalemate there, providing a solution to the issue of a united Germany. Now that the Cold War seemed to be winding down, European concern with finding a satisfactory question to the unresolved Germany question mounted—especially as events in the GDR unfolded. In May 1988 Hungary had removed the barrier separating it from Austria, prompting a wave of East German immigration. As the exodus

¹⁵"The President Whispers 'Charge!'" *The New York Times*, September 7, 1989, p. A26.

grew in scale, it became a symbol of East German dissatisfaction with the status quo and came to be regarded in Europe as a referendum on the Soviet model of development. On October 18, long-time GDR leader Erich Honnecker, his health suffering and his government wracked by popular unrest, was pressed to resign.¹⁷ In response to clumsy attempts by Honnecker's successors at damage control, on November 4, some 500,000 East Berliners mounted a massive protest in the streets in a popular outcry for a democratic opening that was echoed in other cities.¹⁸ Five days later the government officially lifted all travel and emigration restrictions and announced that the wall separating the two Berlins would eventually be dismantled. The reaction in the divided German capital was one of uninhibited celebration. Most of Berlin's 4 million residents rushed to the wall where an impromptu gathering somewhere between a demolition and a New Year's Eve party went on for hours. The wall came down practically overnight, and East Germany was transformed from the most unrepentant member of the Warsaw Pact to the focal point of reform in Eastern Europe.

Anyone waiting for an ebullient response from the Bush administration was disappointed, however. At a November 8, 1988 news conference, Bush resisted reporter's efforts to drag a definitive statement from him. His dry, skeptical reaction took even his worst critics by surprise: when asked by reporters why he didn't seem more elated, the

¹⁶George Bush, "The President's News Conference, June 8 1989," PPP-CD, George Bush, 1989, p. 697.

¹⁷October 6 marked the GDR's 40th anniversary. Massive pro-reform demonstrations in East Berlin, Dresden, and Leipzig on October 7 were broken up violently by state security forces. On October 9, some 50 thousand protestors marched again in Dresden. Honnecker authorized the use of deadly force to put down demonstrations, prompting State Security chief Egon Krenz to travel to Leipzig to personally countermand the instruction. This marked the beginning of the end for Honnecker. See "Chronology 1989," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 69, no. 1, (January 1990), p. 224.

¹⁸These being simply the latest in a recurring wave of simultaneous nationwide protest marches involving similar numbers. Some 50,000 East Germans are estimated to have left the country between November 2 and November 9.

President dryly replied "I am not an emotional kind of guy." The most resonant international event to have occurred in decades, the fall of the Berlin Wall convinced most observers that the Cold War was effectively over, that a new epoch of unknown possibilities awaited. The President's seemingly unenthusiastic response prompted some to charge that Bush was inflexible, unimaginative, and utterly surpassed by world events. House Majority Leader Richard Gephardt complained that "[e]ven as the walls of the modern Jericho come tumbling down, we have a president who is inadequate to the moment."¹⁹

As the Berlin Wall crumbled, the Panama imbroglio continued to plague the administration's foreign policy team. World events seem to be passing the Bush administration by; the mess in Panama and the White House's inability to do anything about it transformed Manuel Noriega into an emblem of the President's weakness as a global leader. If Bush couldn't handle the "tin horn dictator" of a "third rate country the United States created in the first place," to borrow language from former President Reagan, what kind of respect would he inspire in overseas capitals? Would he be able to bring the Cold War to a favorable close? How would he be able to demonstrate to allies that the United States could steer the world's nations toward a post-Cold War period of democratic stability? How would the White House deter rogue states from disturbing international peace or convince Latin America that the White House was serious about combating drug trafficking and corruption?

¹⁹Both Bush and Gephardt are quoted in Mervin, p. 172.

Noriega was a blemish on Bush's foreign policy rap sheet that he could ill afford. The rapid emergence of a post-Cold War international system during 1989 heralded the significant alteration of U.S. relations with the rest of the world. The bifurcation of the globe into two, hostile ideological camps during the post-World War II period had threatened to bring total annihilation but, at the same time, had created an oddly comfortable status quo and fostered unity among the nations of the West. Now, allies like the democracies of Western Europe and Japan would no longer be dependent on the United States' protection; Third World conflicts—once considered important to determining the fate of the planet—were fading back into obscurity; economic issues, not security, were gaining new unparalleled significance and the Pacific Rim threatened to surpass U.S. capacities in that regard. The globalization of labor and capital flows, vigorous competition among the world's chief economies, and the apparent decline of U.S. industry, drug trafficking, immigration to the U.S. from Third World countries, and so-called "rogue states" offered Washington new threats. So despite the change in context, new (and old) national interests overseas meant that essential questions remained pegged to the international credibility of the United States.

For whatever advances were being made in East-West relations, the brave new world of the post-Cold War era would present the United States with a number of challenges. The sense in Washington was that this new world order would require that the United States continue to demonstrate its credibility as a world leader. "There is a new world of challenge and opportunities before us," asserted President Bush in his inaugural address, "and there's need for leadership that only America can provide...No one is more determined to seize from

battle the real peace that can offer hope, that can create a new world order. When this is over, the United States, its credibility and its reliability restored, will have a key leadership role.”²⁰ Indeed, among Washington’s foreign policy elites the notion that it was the American mission to forge a stable international system was stronger than ever:

With the disintegration of the Soviet Union, U.S. leaders and other advocates of an interventionist foreign policy see the United States as the sole remaining superpower, with the opportunity to exert unprecedented influence on world affairs. U.S. dominance can be sustained, however, only if the Cold War era’s secondary powers, especially Japan and the nations of the European Community, continue to follow Washington’s leadership. Any movement on their part to adopt more independent policies and to play larger political and military roles would automatically threaten U.S. preeminence. In a genuinely multipolar international system, the United States might well be the single most powerful nation, but it would no longer enjoy hegemonic status. Preserving the U.S.-led system of alliances is crucial to smothering the ambitions of those potential rivals and perpetuating Washington’s Cold War era dominance.²¹

Moreover, as Brent Scowcroft would later write, “the President of the United States must lead the alliance.”²²

However, the inability of the United States to do anything about Panama’s Noriega was the sort of foreign policy weakness exhibited by powers in decline, not by vigorous world leaders. As one scholar has commented, “[f]or Bush, Noriega was a monster whose provocative words and acts brought discredit and ridicule upon the president. The United States appeared unable to take decisive action [while] [i]n comparison, Premier Mikhail Gorbachev had won widespread acclaim for his statesmanlike handling of Eastern Europe and for helping to end the cold war.”²³ In like manner, another account, published in *Foreign Affairs*, assessed that

²⁰Quoted in Berman and Jentleson, p. 93.

²¹Carpenter, p. 140.

²²Bush and Scowcroft, p. 67.

²³Conniff, pp. 162-163.

[t]he extraordinary developments in U.S.-Soviet relations, the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, the apparent willingness of Vietnam to pull its troops out of Cambodia, and the announced willingness of the Cuban forces to leave Angola all give many Americans a sense that their country is on a roll. But it would be unfortunate if understandable if pleasure over these developments continued to ripen into a form of national self-satisfaction, blinding Americans to longer-term issues of economic, military, and political significance. For the contrast between America's position in the world today and its position only a few decades ago is sobering. In 1960, the United States was responsible for nearly one-half of the gross national product (GNP) of the world's market economies. Today it is responsible for only about one-third...U.S. influence in the Western Hemisphere—so enormous in the 1950s that Washington could overthrow a left-leaning Guatemalan government with a minimal covert effort—had so diminished by the late 1980s that the Reagan administration was unable to force out of office a minor-league dictator in Panama, a country actually created by Washington and controlled by American officials for decades.²⁴

The *Washington Post* concurred, bemoaning “[t]he Panama fiasco” as a “classic lesson in the misuse of American power” and a

re-run of the 1982-84 Lebanon debacle: the United State faced a challenge from an intractable foe; administration hard-liners responded with aggressive military operations, but without a practical political strategy; the Pentagon, worried about the risks to U.S. forces, opposed the hard-liners. The resulting policy was a half-hearted policy that accomplished little and left America's allies hanging.²⁵

If it hoped to remain the architect of international relations, the United States needed to put the Noriega imbroglio behind it and move on to face the various (and numerous) challenges presented by the new global environment. If the White House couldn't deal with Manuel Noriega, how could it aspire to tackle the complex challenges presented by the emerging new world order?²⁶

²⁴Charles William Maynes, “Coping with the ‘90s,” *Foreign Policy* No. 74, (Spring, 1989), pp. 42-43.

²⁵William S. Malone, “The Panama Debacle,” *The Washington Post*, April 23, 1989, p. C1.

²⁶Bush felt that U.S. handling of the situation in Panama had made his administration look unprepared. Eventually he would tell his advisors that it was time to get serious, saying “amateur hour is over.” See Murillo, p. 754. Vice President Quayle noted Bush's concern that the administration's inability to do anything about Noriega imparted an image of weakness. Quayle, p. 107. According to Harold Molineu, “Noriega became an important test of strength for the Reagan and Bush administrations. Molineu, p. 245. Also see Colin Powell's comments in Woodward, *The Conversion*, p. A31.

And those challenges were legion. Chief among the foreign policy issues facing the United States in 1989 was the Kremlin's new look. On one hand, as Secretary of State Baker put it, "if reform stalled or were reversed, at a minimum, America would have to be content with a very unstable international environment. In the worst case, we could see a cold war become a hot one."²⁷ On the other hand, Gorbachev's dynamic leadership was not only changing the face of the Soviet Union, but the Russian leader had also captivated world attention and won widespread admiration, and—most worrisomely—trust in Europe and elsewhere. Gorbachev's popularity in European capitals put Bush under severe pressure to match the Soviet leader's acumen. As Bush would later write,

[t]here was a practical political need to react to Gorbachev's overtures...his proposals would appeal to Europeans, particularly the Germans. Gorbachev was very popular in Europe, where there was a kind of euphoria in the air. His speech increased the pressure on our incoming Administration to get moving, to match him with offers of our own. I did not want to be seen as lagging behind Gorbachev with nit-picking, foot-dragging responses. Yet I certainly did not want to make a foolish or short-sighted move either.²⁸

Indeed, in early April NATO General Secretary Manfred Wörner had warned Brent Scowcroft that "although we are successful, public perception is that Gorbachev is driving history."²⁹ But as Gorbachev and his foreign minister Eduard Shevardnadze traveled extensively throughout Europe preaching perestroika and an end to the East-West conflict, the Bush foreign policy apparatus—bogged down in its careful policy review and fumbling to articulate clear responses to situations in Panama, China, and elsewhere—was unable to

²⁷Baker, p. 41.

²⁸Bush and Scowcroft, p. 9.

²⁹Ibid, p. 66.

engineer a cohesive Western response. As a result, serious divisions arose between the NATO allies regarding the future of the alliance and of Europe.

During a trip to France in 1985, for instance, Gorbachev raised the concept of a “common European home” in which Europeans, not Washington, would determine the future of the continent, coordinating on economic, cultural, and environmental issues. The next summer, he expanded on his vision of a “common European home [from the] Atlantic to the Urals” to a group of West European parliamentary leaders. The savvy Soviet leader also rejected the Brezhnev doctrine, declaring that “[a]ny interference in domestic affairs, and any attempts to restrict the sovereignty of states—friends, allies, or any others—is inadmissible” and hinted that a united Europe would have no need for security alliances like the Warsaw Pact and NATO.³⁰ Baker, Bush’s closest advisor, felt that “Gorbachev’s strategy was to weaken Western cohesion through high-profile, publicly attractive proposals.”³¹ And according to National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft, “[i]n 1989, [Gorbachev] was running around Europe trying to outpromise things in arms control and so forth. It looked like typical Soviet tactics [designed to] split the west.”³²

Moscow, additionally, had scored points in Europe and elsewhere with a new approach to the UN. As one account notes, the Soviets’ new UN policy formed part of “Moscow’s ‘new thinking,’ [a] trend toward multipolarity in global politics and security” and enabled the Soviets “to go beyond the ritual mouthing of Third World causes...With this

³⁰“Gorbachev’s Vision of a United Europe, July 6, 1989,” *Historic Documents of 1989*, (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 1990), p. 399.

³¹Baker, p. 45.

³²Interview with Scowcroft quoted in Mervin, p. 171

initiative,” the article concluded, “the defensive, narrow, and reactive character of the current U.S. approach to international organizations is embarrassingly obvious.”³³

The United States, faced with Gorbachev’s dynamism and growing influence, seemed at a loss. For some 40 years Washington had orchestrated a cohesive Western Cold War strategy and had advocated a world order based on American principles. Now, however, Bush’s inability to counteract or credibly respond to Gorbachev’s initiatives raised eyebrows in Europe and other parts of the world. As the *New York Times* noted:

Washington’s response to the fascinating if inconvenient stream of proposals flowing from Moscow has been a crushing disappointment to most Europeans, and to others. If, as advertised, Mr. Bush’s long-awaited speech in Texas 10 days ago reflected his policy review, it produced little of substance...The centrist *Financial Times* of London was dismayed, describing the review as ‘a waste of time’ and bemoaning ‘the abysmal poverty of the Western response’ to Mr. Gorbachev...Washington seems paralyzed, the only immobile place in a world fraught with change...[I]f it continues to resist, if it remains locked into a Cold War posture, the Europeans are likely to formulate initiatives of their own. In using the phrase ‘a common European Home,’ Mr. Gorbachev clearly intends to promote in Western capitals the view that it is for Europeans, not Americans, to decide what Europe’s future should be.³⁴ And according to the *Washington Post*, Gorbachev’s dynamism meant that Bush needed to “demonstrate an awareness of the broad sweep of global change” and repair the “American failure to articulate a convincing sense of the new world that almost everyone sees taking shape around them.”³⁵

The President’s perceived failure to formulate a coherent and credible response to the Kremlin’s new challenge kindled condemnation at home as well. *Newsweek* reported that “so far, Bush has offered no vision to match the Soviet leader’s,” and concluded that “change

³³Edward C. Luck and Toby Trister Gati, “Gorbachev, The United Nations, and U.S. Policy,” *The Washington Quarterly*, (Autumn 1988), p. 23; p. 26.

³⁴R.W. Apple, “A Successful Alliance Gropes for a Purpose,” *The New York Times*, May 21, 1989, Sec. 4, p. 1.

³⁵Stephen S. Rosenfeld, “Is Bush Being Too Careful?” *The Washington Post*, April 14, 1989, p. A27. Also see Anthony Lewis, “Missing the Big One,” *The New York Times*, April 23, 1989, Sec. 4, p. 23.

is coming to Europe; the question is whether Bush will lead it or follow it.”³⁶ Another account wondered “what is it about George Bush that keeps him from assuming the statesman’s role that beckons to him?” while a *Washington Post* story reporting on ex-President Reagan’s criticisms of his successor’s approach to the Kremlin stated:

Instead of plunging ahead with negotiations...Bush opted for the delaying tactic of a policy review, behaving the way new presidents do when replacing someone from the opposing party with different views....The only discernible element of consistency is Bush’s preference for reacting to events. This is in notable contrast to the risk-taking Reagan, who was sometimes naïve but had a strong sense of mission and what he wanted to accomplish...[Bush] does not want to go too fast, too far with Gorbachev, and his natural reluctance to take any initiative has left him vulnerable to the initiatives of others.³⁷

Similarly, another *Post* article assessed that “President Bush’s judgement is seriously impaired by Mikhail Gorbachev,”³⁸ while a May 1989 *New York Times* article added that

[Bush’s] Administration is widely viewed as having failed so far. Hyper-cautious by nature, a reactor rather than an initiator, he must ‘shake that tendency,’ in the words of Republican political strategist Kevin Phillips, if he is to develop any real momentum for himself and wrest the world’s attention from the galvanic Mr. Gorbachev.³⁹

Criticism in the media was echoed on the Hill, where the Democrats hoped to reassert Congressional involvement in foreign affairs and conservative GOP congressman were reacting negatively to what they saw as the tepidness of Bush’s response to Gorbachev. According to Senate majority leader George Mitchell, the Bush administration was frightened by the uncertainties and opportunities presented by Gorbachev’s glasnost and

³⁶Russell Watson, “Bush’s First Foreign Crisis,” *Newsweek*, May 8, 1989, pp. 16-18.

³⁷Steven S. Rosenfeld, “Drug-store Diplomacy,” *The Washington Post*, May 19, 1989, p. A27; Lou Canon, “Reagan is Concerned About Bush’s Indecision,” *The Washington Post*, May 6, 1989, p. A21.

³⁸Mary McGrory, “Witlessness as Foreign Policy,” *The Washington Post*, May 18, 1989, p. A2.

³⁹Apple, *A Successful Alliance*, p D1.

perestroika. He charged the Bush team with being so ambivalent about changes in the eastern bloc that it frequently seemed “nostalgic about the cold war.”⁴⁰

With the Soviet leader active, involved, and accepted in Europe, and given a nascent push by European leaders toward continental cooperation, U.S. concern regarding its ability to participate in determining the nature of the Cold War’s end and the structure of the post-Cold War world was running high. In addition to events in East Germany, 1989 saw unprecedented dissolution of eastern bloc unity, as movements for democratization and independence led by reformers and separatists became both more coherent and more influential. Change occurred with blitzkrieg-like quickness.

In January, for instance, Hungary granted citizens permission to conduct public demonstrations and in January permitted the formation of independent political parties. That same month, 15,000 people in the Soviet state of Georgia marched to protest the 68th anniversary of annexation; in March, congressional elections in the USSR saw party regulars ousted by reformers and ethnic nationalists across the Union—including Boris Yeltsin's capture of Moscow’s at-large seat by 89 percent. By April, Poland’s opposition party Solidarity obtained legalization and by June had won 99 seats in the 100 member upper house and all available opposition seats in the lower house. That same month, Moscow recalled 1,000 tanks from Hungary—the first stage of a unilateral withdrawal of 10,000 tanks and 50,000 ground troops from Eastern Europe. July’s annual Warsaw Pact Summit was colored by a sense of disunity, with Gorbachev calling for “independent solutions of national

⁴⁰Quoted in William Schneider, “The Old Politics and the New World Order,” *Eagle in a New World: American Grand Strategy in the Post-Cold War Era*, Kenneth A. Oye, Robert J. Lieber, and Donald Rothchild, eds., (NY: Harper Collins Publishers, 1991), p. 53.

problems,” Romanian boss Ceausescu complaining about alliance disunity, and East Germany’s Honnecker departing early due to illness. The summit concluded with a statement recognizing that “there are no universal models of socialism.”⁴¹ The Pact’s eventual demise seemed inevitable, while the grassroots-led push for democratization in eastern Europe promised to change the face of the continent.

Coupled with Gorbachev’s energetic outreach campaign, these changes were having a tremendous effect on Western unity. As James Baker later wrote:

Nineteen eighty-nine would be the fortieth anniversary of NATO. Despite the fact that the Atlantic Alliance had been the most successful coalition in history, we were concerned that the more reform advanced (or was perceived to have advanced) in the Soviet Union, the more difficult it would be to maintain Western cohesion...Many Americans...were quite concerned at the time that ‘EC92’ would lead to an inward-looking European political and economic bloc, walled off from the rest of the West.⁴²

For instance, in late February, West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher met to discuss the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons in West Germany. The Washington-London axis hoped to modernize the Lance tactical missiles currently deployed, but West Germany was bitterly opposed to the idea. One month later, NATO’s Nuclear Planning Group came down on Berlin’s side.⁴³ Bush and Scowcroft concluded that “Gorbachev had undermined U.S. leadership,” and that if “we looked as if we were just dragging our feet, the Europeans would cease to follow and the Soviets would seize the international agenda.”⁴⁴

⁴¹Foreign Affairs, *Chronology*, pp. 213-221.

⁴²Baker, pp. 43-44; p. 166.

⁴³Foreign Affairs, *Chronology*, p. 230.

⁴⁴Bush and Scowcroft, p. 43.

The lines that had separated eastern and western Europe were fading fast; that division had always been a political one, imposed by the Cold War's ideological divide. Sensing that the danger of an East-West military conflict on the continent was sufficiently diminished and faced with the prospect of a reunited Germany, European leaders set out to build a stable Europe. In May 1988, the Western allies met in Brussels for the 40th NATO summit. European disagreement with the U.S. desire to upgrade its continental nuclear umbrella was strong, and support for a Soviet initiative to reduce German-based short-range missiles ran high.⁴⁵ Brent Scowcroft later wrote:

We were all very conscious of how much was resting on the outcome of the summit. Could we shore up the German ruling coalition? Would we be able to bring Britain and West Germany to a compromise? Would we emerge with the President as the clear and decisive leader of the alliance? Could we get out in front of Gorbachev and turn around the sharply negative image the press had drawn of the performance and even the capability of the President and the Administration in foreign policy?⁴⁶

In June, Gorbachev would travel to Bonn for private talks with Helmut Kohl, where the two issued a joint declaration supporting national self-determination, mutual reduction in nuclear and conventional forces, and a "Common European Home."⁴⁷ However, as the United States fumbled to assemble a policy framework that would satisfy Europe, maintain U.S. involvement in continental affairs, and match Gorbachev's elan, events in Panama unbalanced the administration and handicapped its efforts.

⁴⁵Apple, *A Successful Alliance*, p. D1; Peter Tarnoff, "America's New Special Relationships," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 69, no. 3, (Summer, 1990), p. 67.

⁴⁶Bush and Scowcroft, p. 81.

⁴⁷*Foreign Affairs, Chronology*, p. 231.

U.S.-Panamanian relations had reached their nadir by the end of 1988. The Reagan administration's attempts to broker a deal with Noriega had come to naught and the two countries settled into a pattern of mutual recrimination in the diplomatic arena, while on the ground in Panama, PDF harassment of U.S. personnel based in the canal zone intensified. Noriega also began to play what James Baker called 'the leftist card,' buddying up to long-time U.S. opponents like Muammar Qaddafi and Fidel Castro.⁴⁸ During the first months of 1989, the Bush administration mutely endured the affronts being heaped upon the United States by Noriega, keeping sanctions in place and pinning its hopes on a positive outcome in the May 7, 1989 elections.⁴⁹ Panama's opposition movement had grown significantly in recent years and it seemed that clean and fair elections would produce a defeat for Noriega's PRD-PDF machine. At stake were the presidency, two vice-presidential posts, 67 legislative seats, and 505 district representatives.⁵⁰

U.S. policy took a two-pronged approach in the weeks leading up to the election. First, the White House sought to bring the attention of the international community to bear on the voting in the hopes that this scrutiny would produce clean results. Second, the administration initiated a covert operation known as "Panama-4." The operation involved an underground anti-Noriega propaganda campaign and the transfer of \$10 million to Noriega's political opponents, Guillermo Endara, Ricardo Arias Calderón, and Guillermo "Billy" Ford. But while Panama-4 managed to transfer some funds to the opposition, it collapsed a few

⁴⁸Baker, p. 184. Financial support from Libya was crucial in helping Panama weather U.S. economic sanctions. See Malone, *Panama Debacle*, p. C1.

⁴⁹John Goshko, "U.S. Drafts 2-Stage Plan for Dealing with Panama," *The Washington Post*, April 30, 1989, p. A32.

⁵⁰Murillo p., 730.

weeks before the elections. Clandestine anti-regime radio broadcasts by CIA employee Kurt Muse were halted when Muse was arrested by Panama's secret police. Afterward, U.S. officials in Panama told the *Washington Post* that the operation "was so badly bungled that it...raised questions about the CIA's commitment to it." The unnamed sources described Muse's broadcasts as "ineffective" and reported that a joke "making the rounds" was that the secret radio station "was so clandestine that nobody could hear it."⁵¹

In early April, the scheme for channeling money to Noriega's political adversaries unraveled as well. Carlos Elata Almarán, a wealthy Panamanian businessman through whom the CIA transferred funds to the opposition party, was arrested on April 5 in Macon, Georgia, on charges of conspiring to import 600 kilos of cocaine and laundering drug money. As a result, Panama-4 came under immediate review by the Senate Intelligence Committee, and its funding was cut off.⁵²

In all likelihood, the opposition had no need for U.S. financial support. The Panamanian economy was in ruins and outside of PRD-PDF circles support for Noriega was at an all-time low. Unsurprisingly, a series of independent polls conducted in spring 1989 indicated that the opposition ticket was leading Noriega's candidates by two to one; if the May elections were conducted fairly, their victory seemed certain. President Bush became increasingly vocal regarding the U.S. goal of seeing fair elections in Panama, announcing in late April that former U.S. presidents Jimmy Carter and Gerald Ford would be leading a

⁵¹Ibid., p. 731; Carla Anne Robbins, "Taking Aim at Noriega," *U.S. News and World Report*, May 1, 1989; William Branigin, "U.S. Move in Panama Called Inept," *The Washington Post*, April 29, 1989, p. A1.

⁵²Murillo, pp. 731-723.

delegation of election observers to Panama.⁵³ Just prior to the election, a second team of U.S. observers, including bipartisan Congressional representation, was dispatched.⁵⁴ The result, as the *Washington Post* reported, was that the election came “to be regarded by Panamanians and the outside world as a test of whether the United States can end [Noriega’s] defiance.”⁵⁵

With anti-Noriega sentiment running high and the opposition far ahead in the polls, the dictatorship resorted to fraud in an attempt to insure its candidates’ election.⁵⁶ According to one account,

PDF soldiers and officers, many times in uniform, openly worked for the dictator’s campaign; voters in districts which were heavily anti-government were assigned polling stations very far from their neighborhoods; the syndicate of taxi and bus drivers, controlled by the regime, was instructed not to transport potential opposition voters on election day; voter registration cards of many deceased were issued to [Noriega] supporters so that they could vote several times; government employees were ordered to turn in the identity cards of three relatives, so that they could be ‘pre-voted’ in favor of [Noriega]; many opposition candidates that were expected to win were declared ineligible to run on the most ridiculous of technicalities; PDF personnel, through a law passed by the legislature at the last minute, were permitted to vote wherever they chose, facilitating multiple voting.⁵⁷

But despite this widespread manipulation, the opposition ticket of Endara, Arias, and Ford clearly outperformed the Noriega machine: independent exit polls showed the opposition triumvirate winning by a three to one margin. In fact, a large percentage of Noriega’s

⁵³“Carter to Lead Panama Observers,” *The Miami Herald*, April 28, 1989; “Ex-President Ford Arrives in Panama to Observe Vote,” *The Miami Herald*, May 5, 1989.

⁵⁴“GOP Head Joining Observers,” *The Miami Herald*, May 3, 1989; Goshko, p. A32.

⁵⁵Goshko, *U.S. Drafts*, p. A32.

⁵⁶Noriega had been vehemently unwilling to allow the presence of international observers during the election. See “The May 7, 1989 Panamanian Elections: Pre-Election Report based on the Findings of an International Delegation,” (Atlanta, GA: Carter Center, Emory University, 1989) and “The May 7, 1989 Panamanian Elections: International Delegation Report,” (Atlanta, GA: Carter Center, Emory University, 1989).

⁵⁷Murillo, p. 733.

support base—supposedly accomplices in committing the fraud—had defected.⁵⁸ Boxed in by foreign observers, the never-discreet Noriega was out of options and responded with sheer, inarticulate force.

With the regime's defeat obvious by early afternoon of election day, Noriega's paramilitary "Dignity Battalions" and "Committees for the Defense of the Fatherland and Dignity" were ordered to disrupt voting and destroy tallies across the country. In Panama City the battalions killed César Augusto Cajar, a volunteer at a polling station. In the city of Chiriquí, during a violent confrontation at one voting location, a handicapped Catholic priest was shot and killed at point-blank range by a PDF corporal. In one poor neighborhood in Panama City a group made up of uniformed PDF troops and paramilitary members opened fired over the heads of queued voters, dispersing them, and destroyed the ballots. In Colón, large numbers of ballot boxes were stolen and burned in pro-Noriega manifestations by battalion members. The morning after the elections, pre-dawn raids on polling stations nationwide saw large numbers of tallies confiscated and burned. As dawn broke, the streets of Panama's cities were deserted except for heavily armed PDF patrols.⁵⁹

International reaction to these events was instantaneous and unrestrained. In a May 8 interview with Ted Koppel for ABC's "Nightline" television news program, former President Carter, visibly perturbed, expressed his hope that "there will be a worldwide outcry of condemnation against a dictator who stole this election from his own people." Carter went so far as to encourage public protests in Panama to force Noriega's acceptance of the election

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 735.

results. Similarly, the second delegation of observers sent by Bush arrived in Miami on May 9 and immediately condemned the Noriega regime's theft of the elections. Senator Connie Mack of Florida announced his plans to introduce legislation that would annul the Panama Canal treaties if the PRD-PDF ticket were installed in office. After being briefed by Carter and the other U.S. delegates, the administration quickly issued a statement denouncing events in Panama.⁶⁰

The most stunning moment of the post-election violence occurred on May 9, when a pro-opposition parade led by Endara, Arias, and Ford took place in Panama City. With television cameras rolling and international correspondents on hand, the three were stopped on the city's principal thoroughfare by a group of Dignity Battalion members who, as the police passively watched, proceeded to beat the three politicians and their bodyguards with iron bars. As the small group of oppositionists sought to re-enter their vehicle, the car was swarmed, its windows shattered, and one of the bodyguards was executed with a shot to the back of his head. Another was shot as well, but not fatally. Endara was beaten unconscious; Ford attempted to ward off his attackers who continued to reign blows upon the 52-year-old politician. Ultimately, a PDF sergeant commanded the battalion thugs to stop and arrested Ford, who was dragged off soaked in blood to spend the night in jail.⁶¹ A few hours after the foiled parade, Noriega officially annulled the election results.⁶² The brutal scenes flashed

⁵⁹William Branigin, "Noriega's Candidate Claims Win: Panama's Opposition Cites Fraud, Calls Its Victory Massive," *The Washington Post*, May 8, 1989, p. A1; William Branigin, "Carter Says Noriega is Stealing Election: Panama General's Forces Obstruct Count," *The Washington Post*, May 9, 1989, p. A1.

⁶⁰Ibid.

⁶¹Ford was released the next morning, thrown from a moving police car in front of his house; one opposition politician, Olimpo Saez, was held for four days and repeatedly tortured during his incarceration.

⁶²ABC World News, May 9, 1989; NBC Nightly News, May 9, 1989; Murillo, pp. 737-738.

across TV screens world-wide, inspiring international outrage which paralleled reaction to Tianamen Square.

Given the Bush administration's support for democratization in Central America as the solution to the region's instability (not to mention the impending Nicaraguan elections), Noriega's brazen abnegation of the democratic process was a direct challenge that held implications for U.S. policy across the entire globe. The administration was now, more than ever, on the spot. As President Bush put it a few days after the event:

The people of Latin America and the Caribbean have sacrificed, fought, and died to establish democracy. Today, elected constitutional government is the clear choice of the vast majority of the people in the Americas, and the days of the dictator are over. Still, in many parts of our hemisphere, the enemies of democracy lie in wait to overturn elected governments through force or to steal elections through fraud. All nations in the democratic community have a responsibility to make it clear, through our actions and our words, that efforts to overturn constitutional regimes or steal elections are unacceptable. If we fail to send a clear signal when democracy is imperiled, the enemies of constitutional government will become more dangerous. And that's why events in Panama place on enormous responsibility on all nations in the democratic community.⁶³

In the wake of his abrogation of the May elections, Noriega made no pretense at democratic government. A newly created body called "the Council of State" replaced the national legislature; headed by Noriega, it allowed the dictator to exercise unlimited power in Panama. On August 31, 1989, the Council appointed Francisco Rodríguez, a high school friend of Noriega's and then Comptroller General of Panama, as president. The United States, predictably, refused to recognize Rodríguez and condemned the situation in Panama.⁶⁴

⁶³George Bush, "Remarks and a Question-and-Answer Session with Reporters on the Situation in Panama, May 10 1989," PPP-CD, George Bush, 1989, p. 536.

⁶⁴Murillo, p. 747, citing *The Washington Post*, September 1 and September 2, 1989.

Noriega's defiance was unequivocal: "No one," he had announced in May, "is going to tell me when I have to go, and much less the United States."⁶⁵

The White House rushed to formulate a firm response to the new situation in Panama. Hours after the beating of Endara and Ford, the President called top advisors to the Oval Office to discuss options. The next day Bush met with 20 Congressional leaders to discuss Panama, received a briefing from CIA director William Webster, and conferred again with key aides. That afternoon he announced to the press corps that he was dispatching 2,090 soldiers to reinforce SOUTHCOM and was recalling Ambassador Arthur Davis immediately.⁶⁶ The United States also pledged to support efforts by the OAS and other international bodies to address the issue of electoral fraud in Panama and ordered U.S. employees and their dependents to safe houses inside the canal zone.⁶⁷

These actions did not represent a serious deviation from previous policy toward Noriega's Panama, however. Noriega had upped the ante, but the United States appeared out-bluffed. As one reporter at a May 9 press conference put it to the President: "Did you put yourself in a box here by making such a public point of being upset about those elections, and if Noriega decides to stay anyhow, does it look like the U.S. has been ineffective?"⁶⁸ Some certainly thought so. Prior to the elections U.S. Senators Bob Graham and Connie Mack, along with representatives John McCain and Charles Robb, touring Central America, announced that "[i]f we wimp out in Panama and passively let a fraudulent election go

⁶⁵"Panama City Radio" Interview with Noriega, May 8, 1989," FBIS-LAT, May 1989, p. 1008.

⁶⁶Murillo, pp. 739-740.

⁶⁷Horwitz, p. 53.

⁶⁸Unnamed reporter, "Interview with members of the White House Press Corps, May 9, 1989," PPP-CD, George Bush, 1989, p. 534.

forward...our moral standing within Nicaragua and our credibility to the world community will be seriously compromised.”⁶⁹ After May 7, the *Washington Post*'s David Broder concluded that

[i]n a generally serene and hopeful world picture, one irony stands out like a sore thumb: the Soviet Union displays its forbearance by tolerating experiments in democracy in Poland and Hungary, while the United States shows its self-restraint by allowing democracy to be throttled in Panama. President Bush says that ‘there’s a high frustration level’ he feels at the inability, after two years of trying, to rid the hemisphere of Manuel Antonio Noriega, the drug-running Panamanian strongman. He’s right to feel frustrated, but he and this country ought to feel angry and embarrassed about what’s happened.⁷⁰

Congress certainly indicated its stance in no uncertain terms; in the wake of the annulled elections the House passed a unanimous resolution condemning Noriega and supporting Bush’s recall of Ambassador Davis and the new troop deployments to SOUTHCOM.⁷¹ In early June, the Senate passed a non-binding resolution declaring that it would strictly oppose the appointment of any Panamanian as Canal Administrator (according to the treaties, this would happen in 1999) as long as Noriega remained in power.⁷² Ultimately, however, the United States appeared to have let Noriega get away with stealing his country’s elections in full view of the international community and despite the White House’s high profile advocacy of fair elections in Panama and its clear support for the anti-Noriega opposition.⁷³

In Nicaragua, as in Panama, U.S. hopes to see the Sandinista government removed from power had been—given the collapse of Reagan’s Contra war and the bitter acrimony in

⁶⁹“Senators: Panama Tests U.S. Resolve,” *The Miami Herald*, April 15, 1989, p. A8.

⁷⁰David Broder, “The Score: Noriega, 3; USA, 0: A Nonstop Slap in Democracy’s Face,” *The Washington Post*, September 11, 1989, p. A15.

⁷¹Murillo, p. 741, citing *The New York Times*, May 17, 1989.

⁷²Helen Dewar, “Senate Gives Warning on Canal Transfer,” *The Washington Post*, June 2, 1989, p. A4.

Congress regarding U.S. Nicaragua policy—tied to democratic elections scheduled for 1990. Bush, unlike his predecessor, opted to encourage the Nicaraguan opposition to participate in the elections, lending them organizational and financial support, and backed off on the Contras.⁷⁴ After Nicaragua's National Opposition Union (UNO) nominated Violeta Chamorro as its presidential candidate, the administration won Congressional approval for \$9 million to support UNO activities in order, as James Baker put it, to "level the playing field."⁷⁵

Both the Panamanian and the Nicaraguan elections were key to U.S. objectives for the region. In the post-containment age, the spread of democracy was seen not only as the best manner by which to end the Cold War definitively, but as the mechanism by which global stability would be secured—as the old adage runs, democracies don't attack democracies. The State Department's Michael Kozak expressed the administration's view on the subject during November 1989 hearings on Panama:

[A] consensus has developed...that the only means to achieve long-term stability is through the development of democratic processes and institutions. Where democracy is established, transfers of power occur periodically through peaceful orderly processes and not through coups or social convulsions. And while civil liberties and free elections do not always guarantee that the government in power will follow responsible economic, social, or foreign policies, they do guarantee that a government that fails to do so will be brought up short by its own constituents. Nowhere is [the need for democratization] more evident than in Panama.⁷⁶

In turn, a U.S.-led democratization of Central America would not only quiet the domestic political furor over past policies in the region, but could also send a strong signal to Eastern

⁷³Haynes Johnson, "Panama a Specter of U.S. Policy," *The Washington Post*, May 12, 1989, p. A2.

⁷⁴Robert Pear, "Quayle Calls Managua Vote Plan a Sham," *The New York Times*, June 13, 1989, p. A3.

⁷⁵Cynthia J. Arnson and Johanna Mendelson Forman, "United States Policy in Central America," *Current History*, vol. 90, no. 554, (March 1991), p. 98; *Foreign Affairs Chronology*, p. 248.

⁷⁶Kozak, *Statement*, p. 3.

Europe and other areas seeking ideological direction in the post-Marxist era. According to James Baker,

The Reagan Doctrine had aimed at rolling back Soviet beachheads around the globe, and had succeeded very well. My sense was that besides continuing the pressure on Soviet clients, we could use elections as a tool to dislodge them. The trend toward democracy in the 1980s had been strong, and Gorbachev's own emphasis on glasnost (or openness) and elections made the Kremlin susceptible to the argument that if elections were good enough for Moscow, they would be good enough for its clients in Nicaragua, Angola, Afghanistan, and Cambodia...With most of these regimes already under siege, we were now able to turn to elections as the mechanism for making a peaceful transition to democracy.⁷⁷

(It was also perceived that national security and military objectives in Latin America could be met via democratization. Analysis by top military officials judged that “[d]emocratization in Latin America secures our southern flank and is the best defense against totalitarian inroads.”)⁷⁸ But the fiasco of Panama's May 4 elections—and the weakness of the U.S. response—could have the opposite effect, especially in nearby Nicaragua. And a defeat in the Nicaraguan elections, given the White House's outspoken support for free and fair elections there and coming on the heels of Noriega's audacity in Panama, would spell serious damage for U.S. efforts to democratize the Central American isthmus.

Elsewhere in Central America, other problems continued to dog the United States and impede the White House's ability to focus on engaging in European events. In Guatemala, for example, civil violence remained out of control while in El Salvador the Marxist FMLN guerrillas came close to toppling the government in November 1989. Bush's ineffective handling of Noriega and the set-back of the thwarted May 4 elections, coupled with these ongoing problems, bespoke a United States whose ability to shape events in the region was

⁷⁷Baker, p. 46.

seriously diminished. As a result, the Bush administration—like the Reagan administration before it, but for entirely different reasons—assessed that its number one foreign policy focus was Central America. But now the objective was to *remove* Central America—as a potential threat to the President’s international and domestic political credibility—from Washington’s foreign policy agenda so that Bush could move on to what he and James Baker felt was the real order of business: making sure the Cold War’s conclusion gave birth to a world order modeled on American principles and ideology.⁷⁹

According to James Baker, he and Bush judged that “it was critical to our overall foreign policy goals and our ability to conduct a successful foreign policy to remove [Central America] from the domestic political arena.”⁸⁰ Despite the administration’s portrayal of Bush as a “just the facts” sort of president, Bush and top aides, as one account tells us, “frequently consulted a chart entitled ‘Comparative Presidential Job Approval’ which showed Bush’s poll ratings month by month on a line, alongside lines that tracked the ratings of Presidents Reagan, Carter, Ford, and Nixon.”⁸¹ Bush scholars Michael Duffy and Dan Goodgame relate how Brent Scowcroft told them that “Bush is constantly popping into Press Secretary Fitzwater’s office after a major presidential speech or action or (more likely) reaction to ask, ‘How are the overnights, Marlin?’—meaning, How is it playing?”⁸²

Without doubt, Bush evinced a healthy concern for his domestic political standing, both on the Hill and among U.S. voters. But that concern also went beyond mere domestic

⁷⁸Woerner, p. 24.

⁷⁹Baker, p. 42.

⁸⁰Ibid., p. 51.

⁸¹Duffy and Goodgame, p. 75.

⁸²Ibid., p. 77.

politics. Bush and Baker felt that “it was time for [the United States] to reap the legacy of Ronald Reagan’s policy of peace through strength: to begin rolling back global Communism and catalyze democracy’s victory in Central and Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union itself.” But they also reckoned that this “was going to require a very different strategy...building domestic consensus at home.” As Baker put it, “[d]espite the President’s overwhelming victory over Michael Dukakis, the Democrats had reaffirmed their control over both the Senate and the House, and the bitterness of the campaign had some potential to poison the atmosphere for building a truly bipartisan policy.”⁸³ In the long term, Baker judged that U.S.-Soviet relations would be the “central focus” of his job. “If I could assist the Soviet empire in a ‘soft landing,’” Baker later wrote, “the opportunities for the expansion of democracy and free markets and the resolution of regional conflicts would be almost endless.” But “the path to maximizing our leverage began not in negotiations with Moscow but with a consensus in Washington. The more unified and bipartisan American policy was, the more unified and cohesive would be the Western Alliance writ large.”⁸⁴

The ongoing wars in Central America may have not been the defining issue of 1988, but Bush and his top advisers decided they would not be free to move forward on the pressing matters of Soviet disintegration and European reunification until they had put the domestic debate over U.S. policy in Central America behind them. According to Baker, “the President and I realized our central mission was to end the Cold War,” but

we would also have to be developing longer-term strategies for dealing with an emerging class of transnational problems that didn’t fit into traditional categories: terrorism, narcotics, the environment, and non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction... [I]f we were going

⁸³Baker, p. 31.

⁸⁴Ibid., pp. 41-42.

to have any chance of tackling these, we were going to have to have the Congress and the American people behind us—and that meant first dispensing with Central America as the continuing obstacle to bipartisanship.⁸⁵

As Howard J. Wiarda explains it:

Baker wanted to appease the congressional Democrats and defuse the partisan conflict over Central America that had all but paralyzed foreign policy in the Reagan administration...By defusing the Central American issue, Baker could gain the goodwill of the Democrat-controlled Congress on issues he considered more important. Second, Baker saw Central America as a can of worms for his President, a no-win situation, a 'black hole' into which the United States pours billions of dollars and receives nothing but grief. Third, Secretary Baker wanted to concentrate all his attention on what he views as more pressing foreign policy matters: the President's trip to Europe for the NATO summit and a projected summit with Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev later. These larger goals were not to be diminished by the ugly divisive issues of Central America; thus, Central America and the congressional critics had to be finessed and removed from the front pages in favor of the pageantry, drama and favorable headlines of summitry.⁸⁶

Two primary issues stood in the way of putting the acrimony of U.S.-Central America relations to rest: Manuel Noriega and U.S. policy toward Nicaragua's Sandinista government.

During the 1988 election campaign, Bush had reached out to right-wing Reagan supporters by calling for renewed military aid for the Contras. It became patently clear, however, that any such initiative would be met with strong and outspoken opposition on the Hill.⁸⁷ According to Baker, "[i]f the administration persisted in pressing forward with military aid to the Contras, the President would be embarrassed in his first major foreign policy test, and lose credibility at home and in the region."⁸⁸ As a result, he concluded, "[m]y first task was to rebuild bipartisanship [and] I knew the key to bipartisanship was to resolve the dispute over Central America.

⁸⁵Ibid., p. 46.

⁸⁶Howard J. Wiarda, American Foreign Policy Toward Latin America in the 80s and 90s: Issues and Controversies from Reagan to Bush, (NY: New York University Press, 1992), pp. 35-36.

⁸⁷Rochelle Stanfield, "Cutting Deals," *National Journal*, (April 1989), p. 889.

⁸⁸Baker, p. 51.

Within two weeks of his election Bush met with Democratic Speaker of the House Jim Wright privately to discuss Central America. “Would you be willing to work with Jim Baker on trying to search out the ingredients of a common policy?” Bush asked. Wright replied in the affirmative, and negotiations on a bipartisan Central America policy commenced.⁸⁹ “We can’t have one, two, or three policies towards Central America. That demoralizes our friends and comforts our enemies,” Baker told members of Congress during their discussions.⁹⁰

On March 24, 1989, the administration announced amid much fanfare that it had successfully worked with Congressional Democrats to create a Bipartisan Accord on Central America. The deal didn’t so much formulate a dynamic new U.S. policy toward Central America as it sought to remove the Contras from the debate. For right-wing Republicans, the deal included \$49.7 million in “humanitarian aid” for the Contras and the administration’s promise that it would not abandon them. For the Democrats, Bush pledged his strong support for the peace initiative being engineered by Costa Rican President Oscar Arias and promised not to seek military aid for the Contras before the Nicaraguan elections.⁹¹

Shortly after Bush’s election, the five Central American presidents had drawn up the Tesoro Beach agreement, which allowed for the “demobilization, repatriation or relocation” of the Contras along with a pledge by Nicaragua to hold free and fair elections in the near

⁸⁹Robert A. Pastor, “George Bush and Latin America: The Pragmatic Style and the Regionalist Option,” *Eagle in a New World: American Grand Strategy in the Post-Cold War Era*, Kenneth A. Oye, Robert J. Lieber, and Donald Rothchild, eds., (NY: Harper Collins, 1992), p. 362. For more details on the accord see Baker, p. 58.

⁹⁰Baker p. 55. Pastor *George Bush and Latin America*, p. 372, footnote 15, citing unpublished manuscript by Jim Wright.

⁹¹Pastor, *George Bush and Latin America*, p. 362; Baker, p. 58.

future.⁹² If the elections were deemed internationally to be clean and if they brought the Sandinistas a defeat, the United States might be able to forget about Nicaragua and move on to other matters. However, from the administration's point of view, Noriega's annulment of the May elections sent the wrong message about U.S. support for democracy—and indeed, about U.S. influence—in Central America, with serious implications for the pending vote in Nicaragua.⁹³

Over the summer of 1989 the White House's Panama policy remained bogged down. Noriega's theft of the May elections went unanswered, and as the United States maintained economic sanctions against the strongman's regime, Noriega, in turn, responded by continuing to voice defiance and by improving relations with "rogue" states like Cuba, Nicaragua, and Libya. Additionally, tension between U.S. personnel stationed in Panama and Noriega's PDF forces increased. As early as March 1989, the military reported that more than 1,000 incidents of PDF or Dignity Battalion harassment against U.S. personnel in Panama had occurred over the past year. That month, in fact, the U.S. chairman of the Panama Canal Commission, William Gianelli, resigned his post, citing the campaign of intimidation and its effects on the morale of Canal employees as his motive.⁹⁴

In the aftermath of the May elections, the White House decided to replace SOUTHCOM commander Frederick Woerner—perceived as too soft and reluctant to press Noriega—with the more aggressive General Maxwell Thurman. (After assuming the post on

⁹²Georges Fauriol, "The Shadow of Latin American Affairs," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 69, no. 1, (January, 1990), p. 124; Melvin, p. 165

⁹³Kozak, *Statement*, p. 3.

⁹⁴Murillo, p. 727.

September 30, 1989, Thurman was ordered to increase the frequency of U.S. military maneuvers in Panama with the goal of putting psychological pressure on Noriega and encouraging the PDF officer corps to move against him.)⁹⁵ On May 13, Bush publicly commented that he hoped to see a mutiny occur in Panama, and assured that “there is no vendetta against the Panamanian Defense Forces as an institution.”⁹⁶ Noriega responded by encouraging his supporters to increase the frequency and intensity of their harassment of U.S. civilians and SOUTHCOM personnel.⁹⁷

In early October, it appeared that Bush’s suggestion had been taken to heart by some members of the PDF, when a group of officers led by Major Moises Giroldi attempted to remove Noriega from power. The coup seemed to be everything the United States had been hoping for. After an extended firefight on October 3, a small group of rebel officers and the forces under their command sized control of and closed off the PDF’s headquarters (known locally as the *Comandancia*) and took Noriega into custody. They announced over radio that Noriega and his general staff had “been retired” and that new elections would occur under the auspices of the OAS.⁹⁸ For several tense hours the rebels remained enclosed in the PDF headquarters with Noriega, exchanging sporadic gunfire with loyalists outside the compound

⁹⁵Baker, pp. 183-188.

⁹⁶George Bush, “Interview with Members of the White House Press Corps on the Situation in Panama, May 13, 1989,” Bush Presidential Library Online Archives, (www.csd1.tamu.edu/bushlib/papers/).

⁹⁷David Hoffman, “Bush Seeks Overthrow of Noriega,” *The Washington Post*, May 14, 1989, p. A1. Immediately after the elections, two U.S. defense attachés were arrested while a navy enlisted man was beaten by pro-Noriega forces. On June 16, 1989, a private and his wife were assaulted by a PDF member. The private was beaten and locked in the trunk of his car while his wife was raped. Grant, p. 29; Horwitz, p. 52 citing “U.S. Southern Command and Treaty Affairs Fact Sheet,” (September 18, 1989). Noriega was however careful to never directly target the canal, which might have prompted a U.S. attack under the 1979 treaties.

⁹⁸Murillo, p. 754.

and hoping that other battalions would either stay out of the fighting or openly declare against the dictator.

But the insurgency was small and not well organized, and its morale crumbled when it became clear that U.S. support was not be forthcoming. Giroldi had spoken with U.S. intelligence officials prior to making his attempt and had come away from the encounter convinced that once the revolt commenced SOUTHCOM forces would block key avenues and prevent pro-Noriega units from reaching the Comandancia. However, as a result of sporadic communication with rebel leaders and communication problems between SOUTHCOM and Washington, a clear order to block the routes didn't come until late in the game. Additionally, air support that would keep loyalist forces pinned down elsewhere in Panama was never authorized and SOUTHCOM also left several alternative routes open. A nervous Giroldi inexplicably permitted Noriega to make a phone call; the general, logically, alerted allies to the situation, and within hours several pro-Noriega battalions had arrived on the scene. As Noriega's supporters fired on the Comandancia the general promised the plotters a full pardon in exchange for their surrender. Otherwise, Noriega reportedly told Giroldi, "You are going to die. Your men are being brought into custody outside, you are a dead man." Shaken, Giroldi acquiesced and the insurgents lowered their arms. The coup was over. Noriega personally executed one involved officer on the spot. More were incarcerated while others, including Giroldi, were executed either later on October 3 or the following day.⁹⁹

⁹⁹Murillo, p. 757; Frederick Kempe, "Panama Tragedy: How the Inexperience of American Officials Helped Doom Coup," *The Wall Street Journal*, October 6, 1989, p. A4. For official confirmation of a U.S. blockade of

The perceived failure of U.S. forces to support the coup leaders, block key paths leading to the Comandancia, or take Noriega into custody ignited a heated policy debate in Washington. President Bush had himself encouraged just such a coup in May, but now it appeared that when the United States had a perfect opportunity to at last rid itself of the Panamanian strongman, the President had not been ready to respond, or simply did not know how to respond.¹⁰⁰ Criticism of what was regarded as a major foreign policy failure came not only from the U.S. media and the congress, but from within the administration itself. In the days after the failed coup attempt, numerous stories in the nation's leading newspapers quoted administration officials expressing criticisms or doubts regarding the White House's handling of the affair.¹⁰¹ In a *Washington Post* story titled "U.S. Officials Caught Off Guard in Coup Attempt," top Bush aides described "a cloud of uncertainty" which hampered Bush's ability to make a decision regarding U.S. support for the uprising.¹⁰² In a *New York Times* article, "White House officials" were quoted as saying that "the Bush Administration's team performed badly in a major test."¹⁰³ Another *Times* story reported on

tension between the chief of staff and Brent Scowcroft, the national security advisor, over the fact that contingency planning...did not take into account the kind of fast-moving, focused events that led to the collapse of the rebellion...Administration officials said the crisis evolved in a frenetic atmosphere, including garbled messages from the American Embassy in Panama to the State Department and the fact that two key sources of information from

roads leading to the PDF Comandancia see "Statement of Hon. Richard Cheney, Secretary of Defense," in GPO, *1989 Events in Panama*, p. 9.

¹⁰⁰Hoffman, *Bush Seeks Overthrow*, A1.

¹⁰¹For example, David Hoffman and William Branigin, "Key Queries Never Put to Bush," *The Washington Post*, October 7, 1989, p. A1.

¹⁰²William Branigin, "U.S. Was Caught Off Guard by Coup Attempt," *The Washington Post*, Friday, Oct. 6, 1989, p. A33.

¹⁰³Unnamed Bush officials cited in Stephen Engelberg, "Bush Aides Admit a U.S. Role in Coup, and Bad Handling," *The New York Times*, October 6, 1989, p. A1.

Panama to the White House—the embassy and American military officers based in Panama—
'were not talking to each other.'¹⁰⁴

This internal criticism of his handling of the affair rendered Bush's position even
more awkward. As the *Washington Post* reported:

Early last Friday morning an 'enraged' President Bush ordered his top advisers to put a stop
to internal criticism of the administration's handling of the coup attempt last week in
Panama, according to knowledgeable officials...From Tuesday through Thursday officials in
many departments told reporters that the Administration had been ill-prepared for its first
international crisis, had no contingency plans for dealing with it, and reacted clumsily to
unfolding events...The Friday session, officials said, was an effort to better control how the
administration's actions were being portrayed in the media, initiating yet another phase in a
four day damage-control effort...Bush's anger Friday, aides to senior officials said, was based
on reading the morning newspapers, many of which quoted senior officials lamenting how the
crisis had been mishandled, and suggesting an efficient crisis management operation was
lacking and that the president was either too cautious or too hampered in information he was
receiving to make informed decisions.¹⁰⁵

The concern was that perceptions (or admissions) of a weak response to an opportunity in
Panama would deal the administration's credibility a blow both internationally and on the
home front.¹⁰⁶

Indeed, many critics judged that, given Bush's previously stated support for a coup,
his clumsy reaction to events in Panama on October 3 meant that other PDF officers
contemplating an anti-Noriega uprising would now seriously doubt the credibility of the
White House's desire to take action against Noriega. Some took this logic one step further,
arguing that the failure would have an even wider effect. "It was a clear signal to the thugs
running Panama," wrote Washington pundits Roland Evans and Robert Novak,

¹⁰⁴Unnamed Bush official quoted in Bernard Weinraub, "White House to Study Handling of Panama Crisis,"
The New York Times, Friday, October 6, 1989, p. A11.

¹⁰⁵Ann Devroy, "Bush to Aides: Stop Second Guessing: President Angered by Recriminations Over U.S.
Response to Rebellion," *The Washington Post*, October 11, 1989, p. A23.

¹⁰⁶Dowd, *Bush, Under Fire*, p. A3; "U.S. Foreign Policy Hurt by Weak Intelligence Gathering," Reuters,
October 9, 1989.

that all that tough talk about ousting drug lord Noriega did not count for much. It also revealed how much help the Colombian government and Nicaragua's democratic opposition can count on in an emergency...It is hard to imagine any other Panamanian officer trusting the Bush administration enough to risk his life.¹⁰⁷

The assessment seemed not at all off mark; opposition groups in Panama surely read U.S. reluctance to show overt force and back the rebel officers as a signal that credible U.S. aid to anti-Noriega sectors in Panama was not forthcoming. For example, opposition candidate Billy Ford met with Bush in Washington shortly after the failed military uprising. According to one account, Bush struggled to reassure the Panamanian politician that the United States was serious about removing Noriega from power. "Just because we didn't help out this time, doesn't mean we can't help next time," the President offered. Ford's reply was terse: "We cannot fight a monster like Noriega with rocks," he said.¹⁰⁸

The perception that emerged in the wake of the thwarted coup centered on "the absence of effective U.S. leadership and a coherent policy in Panama, the hypocrisy of the administration's war on drugs, the emerging limits of U.S. power, and the diminished will of the United States to confront its enemies."¹⁰⁹ The contents of an internal planning memorandum authored by the State Department's Mike Kozak suggest that the administration itself probably reached a similar conclusion during its post-coup analysis. In April 1989, Kozak had written that "[w]e should understand clearly that [Noriega] will not leave without a stronger U.S. effort than we have mounted to date...The credible threat represented by our willingness to use force opens other options and is the only wedge which

¹⁰⁷Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, "Who Lost Noriega?" *The Washington Post*, October 9, 1989, p. A21

¹⁰⁸Quoted in Buckley, p. 213.

¹⁰⁹Horwitz, p. 55.

will separate Noriega from the Panamanian Defense Forces.” Kozak had added that “the preferred strategic alternative...was to incite a PDF coup through a series of actions making the threat of U.S. military action credible.”¹¹⁰ Following its feeble response in October, the administration would have had to conclude that the threat of aggressive U.S. action in Panama was anything but credible.

There is little doubt that the White House’s handling of the abortive revolt tarnished perceptions of Bush’s capabilities and hurt him on the domestic level. Senator David Boren (D-OK), chairman of the Senate’s Intelligence Committee, announced after receiving a CIA briefing that he had come to the conclusion that “we had an insurrection of some very courageous people...and the United States did nothing.”¹¹¹ Jesse Helms (R-NC) exploded that the administration looked like “the Keystone Kops,” while Congressman Henry Hyde (R-IL), ranking member of the House Intelligence Committee, complained that “we look indecisive, vacillating, and weak.”¹¹² Representative David McCurdy (D-OK) said that the coup “makes Jimmy Carter look like a man of resolve. There’s been a resurgence of the wimp factor.”¹¹³ When the Senate Intelligence Committee met to discuss Panama days after the failed coup, Senator Boren complained that

For the last two years...when I and others have voted ... in support of providing funds for the Panamanian project, the question has been asked in every single meeting: Are we prepared to follow through?...I have always assumed, and I would never have voted for it had I not assumed, that we were prepared and had a policy of being prepared, to use whatever military force was necessary at the time to see to it that we succeeded.¹¹⁴

¹¹⁰Kozak memo quoted in Baker, p. 181.

¹¹¹Quoted in Murillo, p. 759.

¹¹²Helms quoted in Engelberg, *Bush Aides*, p. A1; Hyde quoted in Baker, pp. 186-197.

¹¹³Quoted in Woodward, *Commanders*, p. 225.

¹¹⁴Quoted in GPO, *1989 Events in Panama*, pp. 3-4.

According to Boren, Bush was guilty of “talking tough but acting less than courageously.”¹¹⁵

Reactions in the media were similarly critical. *Newsweek*'s cover story on the coup was titled “U.S. v. Noriega: Amateur Hour” and went on to wonder if “the Panamanian opposition [would] ever trust the United States again? Would Colombia...take seriously the American war on drugs?...[This is] the beginning of a crisis of credibility [for Bush].”¹¹⁶ Columnist George Will wrote that “U.S. governance [has] suffered...from pandemic unseriousness of the sort revealed in the latest policy train wreck regarding Panama,” while the *New York Times* dubbed Bush's handling of the coup “a model of incompetence.”¹¹⁷ At the press conference held by the administration immediately after the coup, one reporter asked “Sir, what about Panama? Simply put, a lot of your critics say you blew it. Your administration blew it on Panama.”¹¹⁸

In the wake of widespread criticism of his handling of the coup, President Bush's concern with Noriega's defiance took on a personal dimension. As Harold Molineu points out, after the Giroldi incident “President Bush himself became a target of Noriega's boasting as the general taunted the president and dared him to try again.”¹¹⁹ Bush—indignant over *Newsweek*'s coverage of the event—hectorated top advisors that, in regard to Panama,

¹¹⁵Quoted in Buckley, p. 212.

¹¹⁶“On Panama: Luck and Incompetence,” *The New York Times*, October 8, 1989, sec. 4, p. 20; C.S. Manegold, “Amateur Hour,” *Newsweek*, October 16, 1989, p. 30.

¹¹⁷George Will, “An Unserious Presidency,” *The Washington Post*, October 10, 1989, p. A23; New York Times, *On Panama*, sec. 4, p. 20.

¹¹⁸Unnamed reporter, “The President's News Conference, October 6, 1989,” PPP-CD, George Bush, 1989, p. 876.

¹¹⁹Molineu, p. 247.

“amateur hour is over.”¹²⁰ Author Michael Conniff explains that for Bush, the U.S.-Noriega standoff had come not only reflect badly on U.S. credibility, but also on his own personal credibility as president. For the president, Conniff notes, Noriega was a “monster” whose actions “brought discredit and ridicule upon the president.”¹²¹

The administration, however, denied that it had handled the situation badly and rejected assertions that the rebel officers had requested the U.S. to take custody of Noriega. According to Secretary of Defense Cheney, the only contact between the insurgents and U.S. officials had occurred after the coup began toward midday on October 3 and Giroldi’s emissaries “made it very clear to us that they would not turn [Noriega] over to us; there was no suggestion, ‘Will you move him from one spot to another spot.’ It simply didn’t happen.”¹²² White House efforts at damage control also involved casting doubt on the motives of the coup leaders. Giroldi, the “individual who was allegedly plotting the coup...was a noted confidant, crony, of Noriega’s,” Cheney asserted.¹²³ “[W]e had serious doubts about whether or not this was a legitimate coup attempt or whether it was an effort by General Noriega to seek to involve the United States in ways that would be embarrassing by sucking us into coup-plotting with someone who was a Noriega crony—a confidant, somebody who controlled the 4th Infantry Company that provided security for PDF

¹²⁰Daniel P. Franklin and Robert Shepard, “Is Prudence a Policy? George Bush and the World,” Leadership and the Bush Presidency: Prudence or Drift in an Era of Change? Ryan Y. Barilleauz and Mary E. Stuckey, eds., (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1992), p. 172.

¹²¹Conniff, pp. 162-163.

¹²²Bob Woodward and Joe Pichirallo, “U.S. Move on Noriega Was Option: Rebellion in Panama Ended as Commander Was Receiving Orders,” *The Washington Post*, October 8, 1989, p. A1.

¹²³Branigin, *U.S. Was Caught Off Guard*, p. A37.

headquarters.”¹²⁴ He added that “[t]his was not a situation where we had a pro-democracy movement trying to topple a dictator and restore democracy.”¹²⁵

However, these efforts at spin control, as Kevin Buckley tells us, “caused more problems for the administration.”¹²⁶ For example, after Cheney’s statement regarding Giroldi, Senator Alfonse D’Amato exploded: “You expect to have choir boys lead an insurrection?” What nonsense!”¹²⁷ Other critics, responding to Cheney’s assertion that the coup would have resulted in another dictatorship, pointed out that rebel communiqués broadcast over Panamanian radio had called “for the holding of free and democratic elections with the supervision of the Organization of American States.”¹²⁸ And one unnamed Bush official declared that “Giroldi was a professional military guy. He was not tainted. I can show you lots of [stuff] on these guys. He’s not among them.” Another added that “We’ve been encouraging them to do a coup for a while...here they do something and we have the secretary of defense saying they’re anti-democratic forces. That’s very dangerous. They won’t do anything for a long time.”¹²⁹

The Bush team took another blow when it was forced to revise its coup chronology after coup survivors surfaced in Miami. The revised account admitted that—contrary to prior denials from the Oval Office—the Panamanian plotters had been in contact with U.S. intelligence officials before the coup began, on October 1, when Giroldi met with CIA agents. The *Washington Post* and *Wall Street Journal* reported that after the meeting

¹²⁴Richard Cheney, *Statement in GPO, 1989 Events in Panama*, p. 9.

¹²⁵Woodward and Pichirallo, *U.S. Move*, p. A1.

¹²⁶Buckley, p. 213.

¹²⁷Quoted in Murillo, p. 759.

¹²⁸Woodward and Pichirallo, *U.S. Move*, p. A1.

“Girolodi was under the impression that the United States had agreed to provide all the support he requested, and told his associates that U.S. assistance in cutting off Noriega loyalists and air support was assured.” Moreover, it appeared that the CIA officials who had met with Girolodi “assured U.S. decision makers they had confidence in him.” Intelligence agents based in Panama were quoted as stating that “[we] gave [Girolodi] everything he wanted that night.” And in stark contrast to earlier White House chronologies, sources within the Pentagon now disclosed that the Defense Department’s Crisis Action Center had been placed on alert as of October 2.¹³⁰

The new accounts also revealed other embarrassing details. For instance, the CIA hadn’t provided Girolodi with the means to contact SOUTHCOM; following the seizure of the Comandancia, U.S. officials had tried in vain to contact the rebels by phone but the outgoing calls were interrupted by switchboard operators “who chastised the officials for using lines they had been ordered to keep free.”¹³¹

We also know now that the U.S. did finally—belatedly—agree to take Noriega into custody, under specific conditions: the coup members were to have given “a declaration of democratic principles.” The order to implement a blockade of the Pan-American highway and a second route in order to prevent pro-Noriega troops from coming to his aid was eventually

¹²⁹Buckley, p. 213.

¹³⁰Joe Pichirallo and Molly More, “Coup Leader Barred Giving U.S. Noriega,” *The Washington Post*, October 11, 1989, p. A1; Kempe, *Panama Tragedy*, p. 1; Colin Powell, “Statement of Gen. Colin Powell,” in GPO, *1989 Events in Panama*, p. 11.

¹³¹Murillo, p. 759; Woodward and Pichirallo, *U.S. Move*, p. A1; Arthur Brisbane, “U.S. Officials Defend Panama Strategy: Scowcroft Says Bush Personally Authorized Taking Custody of Noriega,” *The Washington Post*, October 9, 1989, p. A17; Kempe, *Divorcing*, pp. 388-389.

given, but it came too late.¹³² This new information, coupled with the administration's ill-conceived attempts to spin the failure, colored the U.S. response to the coup in an even more negative light.

All in all, the episode spelled the worst foreign policy disaster to confront the Bush administration since it had taken office.¹³³ In the wake of the thwarted coup, writes one chronicler, "several things were clarified."

One was the degree of embarrassment that Noriega caused Bush: it was high and rising. The next crisis was guaranteed to be a domestic political ordeal for Bush, who appeared completely unable to handle Noriega. As time passed, the political costs of U.S. inaction would become greater and greater. The Noriega situation revived discussion of the 'wimp' factor. It was a reminder of the reservations that many Americans held about Bush and the questions still unanswered about what he and Noriega knew about each other.¹³⁴

Vice President Dan Quayle later wrote that "[in] late 1989 there was a specific, nagging issue driving The Wimp Factor: the continuing outrageous behavior of Manuel Noriega."

According to Quayle, "the President's perceived failure to do anything about [Noriega not only] looked like a broken campaign promise [but also] the administration began to look

¹³²Murillo, pp. 754-759; Engelberg, *Bush Aides*, p. A1; Buckley, p. 213; Pichirallo and More, *Coup Leader Barred*, p. A1; Kempe, *Panama Tragedy*, p. 1; Cheney, *Statement in GPO, 1989 Events in Panama*, p. 9; Woodward and Pichirallo, *U.S. Move*, p. A1; Brisbane, *U.S. Officials Defend*, p. A17; Kempe, *Divorcing*, pp. 388-389.

¹³³Author Louis Murillo relates that "Such was the anxiety of the Bush administration [after the Giroldi coup] that it even attempted the unthinkable: talk to Noriega again...one week after the failed uprising [it] arrange[d] a meeting. On October 12, [Noriega's lawyer] Rubino flew to Washington and met with Kozak and two legal advisors of the administration. Kozak told Rubino that the United States would not seek the general's extradition after his resignation and exile, but that the indictments would not be dropped...[t]he Miami attorney took the proposal to his client in Panama, but General Noriega found it unacceptable." When questioned on October 13 as to whether he might revisit the issue of cutting a deal with Noriega, President Bush had replied "I can't do that. It would send an impossible signal in this fight against drugs. I can't drop a good indictment." Murillo, p. 761 citing *The Washington Post*, December 21 1989; see also George Bush, "The President's News Conference, October 13, 1989," PPP-CD, George Bush, 1989, p. 1339. For more on the last minute attempt to renegotiate a deal see David Hoffman and Bob Woodward, "'It Will Only Get Worse,' Bush Told Aides," *The Washington Post*, December 21, 1989, p. A31.

¹³⁴Buckley, p. 219.

weak...President Bush wanted nothing more than the chance to get Noriega out of there.”¹³⁵

For George Bush, the situation in Panama was getting downright personal.

Indeed, after nearly a year of struggling to prove its foreign policy credentials, meet Premier Gorbachev and change in Europe head on, put the Central America morass behind it, and remove General Manuel Noriega from the picture, the Bush administration had made little, if any, progress. In the eyes of the administration, its inability to make headway on these issues had become, after the October coup, more than a recurring problem: it was now a credibility crisis of major proportions that threatened to undermine Bush's stature as president and irreparably damage his ability to project U.S. leadership overseas. Noriega had become a symbol of Bush's seeming ineffectiveness. It was time for the President to extricate himself from the messy stand-off in Panama and deal with the looming issues of the day; he could not afford to let the Noriega problem drag on into his second year in office. “Amateur hour is over,” Bush told his advisers after the foiled October coup. “[Noriega will] overstep some day and [I] want [you] to be ready.”¹³⁶ James Baker's memoirs clarify the significance of the awkward U.S. response to the Giroldi uprising: “[t]he October coup was a watershed for American policy toward Panama and Noriega.”¹³⁷ Similarly, an unidentified senior White House advisor told the *New York Times* during Just Cause that “we suspected that the President felt after the coup that sooner or later we would have to [invade].”¹³⁸

¹³⁵Dan Quayle, *Standing Firm: A Vice-Presidential Memoir*, (NY: Harper Collins Publishers, 1994), p. 107; p.141-42.

¹³⁶Quoted in Franklin and Shepard, p. 172.

¹³⁷Baker, p. 187.

¹³⁸Quoted in Maureen Dowd, “Doing the Inevitable: Bush Reportedly Felt that Noriega ‘Was Thumbing His Nose at Him,’” *The New York Times*, December 24, 1989, p. A5.

The administration immediately took several steps to tighten up its Noriega policy. It found ways to increase the already intense economic pressure it was leveling against Panama.¹³⁹ But it also pursued other strategies with new vigor. For instance, the administration revamped its approach to covert options against Noriega—this time granting its agents wide authority to act against the Panamanian dictator. In late October, the House and Senate intelligence committees approved a CIA plan called “Panama-5” whose goal was to foment another anti-Noriega uprising. According to investigative reporter Robin Wright, “[t]his time there would be few restrictions on the agents. The death of the dictator was not sought, but if he died in the course of an uprising or an abduction attempt, no reprimand of the CIA would follow.” As a senior Bush official told Wright, “[w]e want [Noriega] alive in the United States or dead.”¹⁴⁰ However, the Giroldi revolt (as well as a smaller, less significant uprising the previous year) had sparked sizeable purges of the PDF officer corps; those officers who now remained in control were decidedly loyal. Additionally, any potential leaders of future anti-Noriega attempts were likely to be discouraged from moving ahead, given the weak U.S. reaction to the Giroldi episode. As a result, military contingency planning regarding Panama also took on new life.¹⁴¹

¹³⁹George Bush, “Developments Concerning National Emergency with Respect to Panama: Message from the President of the United States Transmitting A Report on Developments Since his Last Report of October 19, 1989, Concerning the National Emergency With Respect to Panama, Pursuant to 50 U.S.C. 1641(c) and 1703(c),” 101st Congress, 2nd Session, House Document 101-183, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. GPO, May 1990).

¹⁴⁰Robin Wright, “U.S. In New Bid to Oust Noriega,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 16, 1989.

¹⁴¹The most detailed account of the military planning which eventually led up to Operation Just Cause is Bob Woodward’s *The Commanders*. Also see Richard H. Shultz, Jr. “The Post-Conflict Use of Military Force: Lessons from Panama, 1989-91,” *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 16., no. 12, (June, 1993) and Col. John T. Fishel, *Foe of Peace: Planning and Executing the Restoration of Panama*, (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, 1992).

As military preparations picked up pace, the administration enacted a policy of confrontation and provocation.¹⁴² In November, for example, the White House leaked details of a \$3 million covert action plan to unseat Noriega.¹⁴³ If the plan were successful, fine; if not, leaking the story would further antagonize Noriega and the PDF and might lead them to commit the sort of mistake that would provide Washington with a pretense to intervene under the terms of the canal treaties.¹⁴⁴ Meanwhile, White House spokespersons made a point to announce several times after October that the administration was reviewing the ban on CIA participation in assassinations, and in November the Justice Department announced that the U.S. military could participate in the arrest of individuals outside the United States.¹⁴⁵ And SOUTHCOM's new chief, Maxwell Thurman, again increased the frequency of U.S. military exercises, taking advantage of U.S. treaty rights to stage them on major highways and near the PDF's headquarters. Several armed standoffs between U.S. and Panamanian personnel occurred as a result. U.S. rights to airspace similarly permitted SOUTHCOM to bring air power into play as an intimidation factor.¹⁴⁶ As James Baker noted, "[a]ll these measures were designed to shake Noriega's confidence, to convince him and his military that U.S. patience was wearing thin, and persuade him that his most advisable course was a safe, honorable exit."¹⁴⁷ However, Baker also felt that any confrontation that might lead to violence would provide the United States with a reason to

¹⁴²Baker, pp. 183-188.

¹⁴³Pastor, *George Bush and Latin America*, p. 375; Michael Wines, "U.S. Plans New Effort to Oust Noriega," *New York Times*, November 17, 1989, p. A3.

¹⁴⁴Michael Gorden, "U.S. Drafted Invasion Plans Weeks Ago," *The New York Times*, December 24, 1989, p. A1.

¹⁴⁵Grant, p. 36; Michael Isikoff and Patrick Tyler, "U.S. Military Given Foreign Arrest Powers," *The Washington Post*, December 16, 1989, p. A1.

¹⁴⁶Woodward, *The Commanders*, *passim*; Grant, *passim*.

intervene militarily. “These things take time,” he commented to an aide. ““We’ve got to wait for public opinion to build.’ Or,” he recalls thinking to himself, “a blatant provocation against American citizens that would arouse public sentiment and make intervention more palatable.”¹⁴⁸

Meanwhile, situations elsewhere in Central America and in Europe raised the bar even higher for the Bush team. In late October Nicaragua accused the Contras of violating cease fire agreements and on November 1 the Sandinista army resumed military operations.¹⁴⁹ That same month a guerrilla offensive in El Salvador brought the U.S.-supported government there to the brink of collapse.¹⁵⁰ According to Steven Ropp, “these developments in Central America were interpreted as being international responses to U.S. weakness and timidity.”¹⁵¹ Across the Atlantic, the Iron Curtain continued to crumble. In November the Berlin Wall fell; by early December, the GDR’s parliament revoked the law guaranteeing the communist party’s leading role and expelled 12 top party members—including Erich Honnecker. In Lithuania, the Supreme Soviet voted to abolish the communist party’s monopoly on power and legalized political opposition; by the end of the month, the party announced its intention to declare independence. Most dramatic of all was the violent collapse of Nicolae Ceausescu’s regime in Romania. Equally striking, however,

¹⁴⁷Baker, p. 184.

¹⁴⁸Ibid., p. 187.

¹⁴⁹Foreign Affairs, *Chronology*, p. 248.

¹⁵⁰Arnson and Mendelson Forman, pp. 98-99; Fauriol, p. 128.

¹⁵¹Steven Ropp, “The Bush Administration and the Invasion of Panama: Explaining the Choice and Timing of the Military Operation,” *United States Policy in Latin America*, John Martz, ed., (University of Nebraska Press, 1995), p. 89.

were accounts from within the USSR that described growing right-wing opposition to Gorbachev's reform program.¹⁵²

Confronted with its October failure in Panama, Nicaragua's continued recalcitrance, and these startling developments in Europe, the administration set out to breath new life into its foreign policy. In addition to increased intelligence and military planning related to Panama, Bush and his team also endeavored to break out of their traditional prudent posture and forcefully engage the Soviets. With recriminations regarding the President's handling of the Giroldi coup still echoing in Washington, on October 31 the White House announced that a Bush-Gorbachev "informal summit" was on for December.

One thing stands out above all others in regard to George Bush's December meeting with Mikhail Gorbachev at Malta: his obvious desire to prove himself as a statesmen and visionary on a par with the Russian leader. This was not only evident from the way in which the administration crafted the meeting—dramatically staging it onboard naval vessels moored off the coast, for instance¹⁵³—but also from the way Bush moved to seize the initiative, forwarding proposals that would not only take the Soviet leader by surprise, but which would also demonstrate his vision and leadership to the NATO allies and the rest of the world.¹⁵⁴

The meeting began on December 2 aboard the cruiser Maxim Gorky. Despite his early assertions that the meeting was to be an informal "get-together" designed to improve

¹⁵²Foreign Affairs, *Chronology*, pp. 227-229.

¹⁵³Questioned as to whether he'd been "hot-dogging" when he'd gone ahead with the shipboard meetings despite rough weather and violent waves, Bush responded: "Hot-dogging? No. Well, you know, these charismatic, macho, visionary guys—they'll do anything." See "Excerpts From Bush's News Conference After NATO Meeting," *The New York Times*, December 5, 1989, p. A16.

¹⁵⁴Craig R. Whitney, "Bush and Gorbachev Proclaim a New Era for U.S.-Soviet Ties; Agree on Arms and Trade Aims," *The New York Time*, December 12, 1989, p. A1.

personal relations between the two leaders, Bush laid out an impressive array of proposals.¹⁵⁵ His suggestions included a strategic arms control treaty to be signed by June 1990, an agreement banning shipboard tactical nuclear weapons, a treaty on mutual reduction of conventional forces by the end of 1990, an eventual end to U.S. chemical weapons production, the significant liberalization of U.S.-Soviet trade relations contingent on relaxation of Soviet emigration policy, and a hard push for the cessation of eastern bloc arms shipments to Nicaragua and El Salvador.¹⁵⁶ (According to Baker, U.S. objectives in pressing this point at Malta included not only testing Soviet sincerity, but also signaling to Nicaragua that the upcoming elections there would be taken very seriously in Washington.)¹⁵⁷ The summit ended with the stunning statement from Gorbachev that he and Bush had agreed that “the characteristics of the Cold War should be abandoned.” “We searched for the answer to the question of where do we stand now,” Gorbachev said. “We stated, both of us, that the world leaves one epoch of Cold War and enters into another epoch.”¹⁵⁸ Bush came away from Malta having won renewed prestige: his handling of the summit was greeted with widespread approval both in Washington and in Europe. George Bush had won one—a big one, the beginning of the end of the Cold War—overseas at last.

The disaster of the October coup attempt in Panama and the fall of the Berlin Wall had shocked the prudent Bush administration into adopting a more active foreign policy

¹⁵⁵One post-summit analysis asserted that Bush “was afflicted by almost childlike desire to surprise the Great Surpriser [and] embarked on a two-month propaganda campaign to mislead the world: no formal agenda, he insisted; no real negotiations; just a feet-up get-acquainted session. Once aboard the Maxim Gorky, however, he would about face and present the Soviet leader with a detailed list [of initiatives]...the Bush strategy was to win world approbation.” William Safire, “Doormat Diplomacy,” *The New York Times*, December 4, 1989, p. A23

¹⁵⁶Foreign Affairs, *Chronology*, p. 234; Whitney, p. A1.

¹⁵⁷*Ibid.*, p. 51.

strategy; the Malta summit signaled the emergence of a more assertive George Bush. One *New York Times* piece reported that

Bush ended the summit talks confident that he had shown global leadership while not angering a Western alliance resistant to American dominance in world affairs, Administration officials said today....On the arms control front, they said Mr. Bush's proposals answered complaints that the United States was slipping from the leadership of NATO. But at the same time they said the President was careful not to try to carve out a new European map or undertake the kind of unilateral, impromptu arms control negotiations that so alarmed Western Europe when President Reagan met with Mr. Gorbachev in Reykjavik, Iceland, in 1986. 'We're standing here at the seat of NATO, and it's clear they perceive that the President of the United States has done what they fundamentally wanted him to do: to demonstrate leadership in an international environment,' a senior official said.¹⁵⁹

But Noriega did not give George Bush much time to bask in the glow of his success at Malta. Instead, his regime intensified its harassment of U.S. military personnel in Panama. On December 11, Panamanian arrest warrants were issued for SOUTHCOM's top officers, General Maxwell Thurman and Major General Marc Cisneros, for "excessive noise" and "disturbance of the public peace" due to SOUTHCOM's constant military training maneuvers.¹⁶⁰ Four days later, Panama's recently-founded Council of State (whose 511 members were appointed by Noriega in October) passed two resolutions which would have a tremendous impact. First, they named Noriega as "Maximum Leader" with full political authority. Second, the assembly declared that Panama was in "a state of war" with the United States. This was not an official declaration of war, but minutes after the two

¹⁵⁸Whitney, *Bush and Gorbachev Proclaim*, p. A1.

¹⁵⁹Andrew Rosenthal, "President Thinks He Struck the Right Balance at Malta," *The New York Times*, December 5, 1989, p. A17.

¹⁶⁰Murillo, p. 770; "Official to Issue 'Summons' to U.S. Generals," FBIS—LAT-89-237, December 12, 1989, p. 21; "U.S. Generals Declared 'Fugitives From Justice,'" FBIS—LAT-89-237, December 2, 1989, p. 21.

resolutions were approved Noriega made a combative speech in which he talked about “sitting on the side of the canal and watching the bodies of my enemies float by.”¹⁶¹

The statement, which received play in the United States and was later mentioned in the administration’s post-invasion explanations, not only cast mud on George Bush’s personal achievement at Malta—it was also the most direct challenge to the United States to date in a long string of similar provocations and affronts. Between March 1988 and March 1989 there had been some 1,000 recorded incidents of PDF harassment against U.S. personnel in Panama.¹⁶² By May 1989 SOUTHCOM reported 600 more such episodes. Examples included beatings, armed intrusions onto U.S. military installations, illegal detentions, and searches of U.S. servicemen at gunpoint.¹⁶³ At the same time, Panama also formalized relations with the Soviet Union, appointing a charge d’affaires in Moscow and expanding trade ties.¹⁶⁴

On the tail of Noriega’s belligerent speech came the incident which would provide the Bush administration with a reason to finally employ force to resolve its Panama problem: the death of a young U.S. Marine officer, Lieutenant Robert Paz, at the hands of PDF forces. On the evening of December 17, Paz and three other Marine Corps officers changed into civilian clothes and headed towards downtown Panama City to have a drink. On their way, according to the officers, they became lost and found themselves approaching the Comandancia, an area which SOUTHCOM commanders had declared off-limits. The four

¹⁶¹William Branigin, “Noriega Appointed ‘Maximum Leader,’” *The Washington Post*, December 16, 1989, p. A21; Pastor, *George Bush and Latin America*, p. 376; Baker, p. 188; “Officials Call for Noriega as Head of State, December 7, 1989” and “Assembly to Grant Noriega ‘Full Power, December 7, 1989,”” FBIS-LAT-89-238, December 13, 1989, p. 43.

¹⁶²Murillo, p. 727.

¹⁶³Horwitz, p. 52 citing “SOUTHCOM and Treaty Affairs Fact Sheet,” (September 18, 1989).

Marines came upon a roadblock manned by members of the “Machos del Monte” brigade (key in putting down the Giroldi coup) and slowed down. According to the canal treaties the driver, Captain Richard Haddad, should have been waved through, identified as a U.S. officer by a blue decal on the windshield. Instead, five Machos del Monte surrounded the car and tried to force the servicemen out. Haddad stepped on the gas and drove through the roadblock instead of complying. In the confusion which followed, the Panamanian troops began firing at the departing vehicle. One bullet hit Lieutenant Paz in the back, wounding him mortally. He died 15 minutes after arriving at Gorgas Hospital.¹⁶⁵

Adding to the tension surrounding these events was the detention of a U.S. couple at the same roadblock just prior to the shooting. U.S. Navy Lieutenant Adam Curtis and his wife had been ordered to pull over and wait while PDF forces checked their paperwork, and as they waited they witnessed the events which led to the death of Robert Paz. After the shooting, the Machos del Monte blindfolded the couple and took them to a nearby PDF facility for interrogation. Curtis was repeatedly kicked in the groin and the head; his wife’s hands were handcuffed overhead and she was forced to stand for several hours surrounded by Panamanian soldiers who threatened her with rape. Four hours later the two were released.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁴“Trade Office Head Reports on Soviet Relations,” FBIS-LAT-89-238, December 12, 1989, p. 44.

¹⁶⁵There is serious doubt whether the Paz incident was casual. “Exactly one year after the Paz shooting, the *Los Angeles Times* would publish an investigative article claiming that the U.S. Marines were on a mission of provocation. According to confidential U.S. military and civilian sources, Haddad, Paz, and the other two marines belonged to a secret cell called ‘The Hard Chargers.’ This cell consisted of a few SOUTHCOM officers frustrated with the meek response of U.S. military authorities to constant acts of intimidation by the PDF. Although the cell acted independently, their activities were known to several ranking SOUTHCOM officers.” In late 1992 the Pentagon’s version of the Paz killing was weakened by another investigative article published in *Armed Forces Journal International*. Murillo, p. 772 citing Kenneth Freed, “Report: U.S. Troops Provoked Slaying,” *The Los Angeles Times*, December 22, 1990 and John Roos, “Did President Bush Jump the Gun in Ordering the Invasion of Panama?” *Armed Forces Journal International*, (September, 1992).

¹⁶⁶William Branigin, “Marines’ Wrong Turn Set Stage for Invasion,” *The Washington Post*, January 4, 1990, p. A1; Murillo, p. 771.

When news of the incident reached Washington, the Bush team played it cool, despite outrage expressed in other sectors.¹⁶⁷ The general expectation was that this was yet another insult which the administration, ever-confounded by Noriega, would let slide. One French reporter asked Bush at a press conference if “the murder of this American officer down there over the weekend—does this show that actually the United States is pretty powerless to do anything in Panama, that they can do this and get away with it?”¹⁶⁸ However, reaction within the Bush cabinet was unequivocal. Ever since the foiled Giroldi coup and Noriega’s declaration of a “state of war” with the United States, the Bush team had been preparing to employ force in Panama in order to resolve its credibility problem there once and for all.¹⁶⁹ The murder of a U.S. officer, combined with the detention and interrogation of the Curtises and the ever-intensifying harassment of SOUTHCOM personnel, echoing as it did aggression against U.S. civilians and troops in other places (Iran, Beirut), provided the administration with a clear, concrete rationale for using force.

A key development in the decisionmaking process which led the White House to activate contingency plans for military action in Panama was what journalist Bob Woodward dubbed “the conversion” of General Colin Powell, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. According to Woodward, “one senior administration official” related that

When Colin came in here and said Noriega has gone over the line, everyone sat up straight...Powell took the position that the killing was an outrage and an affront to the

¹⁶⁷William Branigin, “U.S. Assails Panama in Killing of GI,” *The Washington Post*, December 18, 1989, p. A1.

¹⁶⁸French reporter quoted in “Prelude to Invasion: What Bush and His Spokesmen Said in the Days before the U.S. Action,” *The New York Times*, December 21, 1989, p. A19.

¹⁶⁹One day prior to the shooting, the administration concluded that U.S. military officials had the authority to arrest drug traffickers, terrorists, and other fugitives overseas, suggesting that a move against Noriega was imminent. Isikoff and Tyler, p. A1.

country, the officials added...when Powell was national security adviser to Reagan, the Noriega problem grew into a *politically troublesome symbol of U.S. impotence*....Powell had just assumed the Joint Chiefs chairmanship when rebellious Panamanian officers failed in their attempted coup...The Bush administration was criticized for not acting quickly or forcefully enough...Powell has spent much of the last month dealing with proposals for sharp reductions in the U.S. defense budget. He has argued in administration circles that reductions are feasible but that the United States must remain a global power. According to sources, he has said, “[w]e have to put a shingle outside our door saying, ‘Superpower Lives Here,’ no matter what the Soviets do, even if they evacuate from Eastern Europe.” [emphasis added].¹⁷⁰

On Sunday, December 18, James Baker tells us, President Bush called an emergency meeting of his senior advisors to discuss developments in Panama. According to Baker, “[t]he meeting itself was anticlimactic. I recall very little if any debate on the merits of invading Panama.” The president opined that “this is just going to go on and on,” recalled Baker. “I knew the President had already decided on his course of action, but one by one, he polled his advisers...[who all] quickly agreed that the time for diplomacy had passed, and at 3:50 p.m., the President said, ‘let’s do it.’”¹⁷¹ The invasion was scheduled for one a.m. the morning of December 20.

Bush remained quiet on Panama for most of Monday. Around 6 p.m. he began to telephone congressional leaders to notify them that military action was pending. Later that evening he repeated the process, calling allies and foreign leaders to apprise them of the imminent invasion.¹⁷² Soon the U.S. media picked up on large scale movements of troops, gunships, and supplies from U.S. bases to parts south, and rumors of an invasion consumed Panama. Noriega apparently took the new deployments as just the latest round in a long game of posturing and did not order his forces into a state of military readiness.¹⁷³ Not that it

¹⁷⁰Woodward, *The Conversion*, p. A31.

¹⁷¹Baker, p. 188.

¹⁷²Buckley, p. 232.

¹⁷³Pastor, *George Bush and Latin America*, p. 376.

is likely that a prepared PDF could have offered any significant resistance to the U.S. invasion force, which represented a more than impressive display of U.S. military capabilities.

Some 10,000 troops were flown to Panama the night of December 19 to reinforce the 14,500 ground troops already stationed there. High-tech Abrams M1 tanks, Apache attack helicopters, and the new F-117 stealth bombers were also deployed.¹⁷⁴ About three hours prior to the 1 a.m. invasion deadline, the United States advised Panamanian opposition leaders Guillermo Endara, Ricardo Arias Calderón, and Billy Ford of the pending attack. They were sworn in as the heads of a new Panamanian government by what Colin Powell later described as a “Panamanian Justice of some kind” on a U.S. military base one hour before the invasion began.¹⁷⁵

The 15,000-man PDF was overwhelmed almost immediately. Within two days all pockets of resistance were subdued and within five days the Noriega-PDF machine’s hold on the country was terminated. In addition to 24,5000 U.S. ground troops, highly mobile Abrams tanks, and the withering firepower of the army’s air-cavalry Apache gunships, the Air Force dropped 422 bombs on Panama within the first 13 hours of the invasion, Navy SEAL teams were paradropped to secure or destroy key installations (such as Noriega’s private airstrip), and a \$1 million reward was posted for information leading to Noriega’s apprehension. By midday of December 21, the United States had lifted its economic

¹⁷⁴Ibid., p. 376.

¹⁷⁵Pastor, *George Bush and Latin America*, p. 376; Colin Powell quoted in “The Pentagon: Excerpts From Briefings on U.S. Military Action in Panama,” *The New York Times*, December 21, 1989, p. 20.

sanctions against Panama and unfrozen the country's assets.¹⁷⁶ On January 1, in accordance with its treaty obligations, the United States turned over the presidency of the Panama Canal Commission to a Panamanian and reaffirmed its intention to relinquish control over all operations of the canal at the end of the decade.

The battle was over nearly as soon as it had begun. The Panamanian strongman had gone into hiding as soon as Operation Just Cause commenced and managed to elude capture for five days, causing concern in Washington that the mission's main objective had not been met. Noriega eventually sought asylum in the Papal Nunciature, which was quickly surrounded by U.S. troops. On January 3, 1990 the Papal Nuncio convinced Noriega to surrender, and he was taken into custody and immediately flown to the United States, where he stood trial for drug trafficking, was convicted, and sentenced to 40 years in a U.S. prison.¹⁷⁷ It was over. George Bush had kept his word, after all.

¹⁷⁶"Bush Announces Invasion of Panama, December 20, 1989," Historic Documents of 1989, (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 1990), pp. 701-702; Pastor, *George Bush and Latin America*, p. 376; New York Times *The Pentagon: Excerpts*, p. 20; Ann Devroy and Patrick E. Tyler, "U.S. Forces Crush Panamanian Military; Noriega in Hiding as Fighting Continues," *The Washington Post*, December 21, 1989, p. A1; George Bush, "President Bush's Remarks Announcing the Surrender of General Manuel Noriega in Panama, January 3, 1990," in Vitas and Williams, *National Security*, p. 183.

¹⁷⁷*Bush Announces Invasion of Panama in Historic Documents*, pp. 701-702; Pastor, Eagle in a New World, p. 376; New York Times *The Pentagon: Excerpts*, p. 20; Devroy and Tyler *U.S. Forces Crush*, p. A1; Bush, *Remarks Announcing the Surrender of General*, p. 183.