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The War to Start All Wars

The 25th Anniversary of the Forgotten Invasion of Panama

BY GREG GRANDIN
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As we end another year of endless war in Washington, it might be the perfect time to reflect on the War That Started All Wars — or at least the war that started all of Washington's post-Cold War wars: the invasion of Panama.

Twenty-five years ago this month, early on the morning of December 20, 1989, President George H.W. Bush launched Operation Just Cause, sending tens of thousands of troops and hundreds of aircraft into Panama to execute a warrant of arrest against its leader, Manuel Noriega, on charges of drug trafficking. Those troops quickly secured all important strategic installations, including the main airport in Panama City, various military bases, and ports. Noriega went into hiding before surrendering on January 3rd and was then officially extradited to the United States to stand trial. Soon after, most of the U.S. invaders withdrew from the country.

In and out. Fast and simple. An entrance plan and an exit strategy all wrapped in one. And it worked, making Operation Just Cause one of the most successful military actions in U.S. history. At least in tactical terms.

There were casualties. More than 20 U.S. soldiers were killed and 300-500 Panamanian combatants died as well. Disagreement exists over how many civilians perished. Washington claimed that few died. In the “**low hundreds**,” the Pentagon’s Southern Command **said**. But others charged that U.S. officials didn’t bother to count the dead in El Chorrillo, a poor Panama City *barrio* that U.S. planes **indiscriminately bombed** because it was **thought** to be a bastion of support for Noriega. Grassroots human-rights organizations **claimed** thousands of civilians were killed and tens of thousands displaced.

As Human Rights Watch **wrote**, even conservative estimates of civilian fatalities suggested “that the rule of proportionality and the duty to minimize harm to civilians... were not faithfully observed by the invading U.S. forces.” That may have been putting it mildly when it came to the indiscriminate bombing of a civilian population, but the point at least was made. Civilians were given no notice. The Cobra and Apache helicopters that came over the ridge didn’t bother to announce their pending arrival by blasting Wagner’s “Ride of the Valkyries” (as in *Apocalypse Now*). The University of Panama’s seismograph **marked** 442 major explosions in the first 12 hours of the invasion, about one major bomb blast every two minutes. Fires engulfed the mostly wooden homes, destroying about 4,000 residences. Some residents began to **call** El Chorrillo “Guernica” or “little Hiroshima.” Shortly after hostilities ended, bulldozers excavated mass graves and shoveled in the bodies. “Buried like dogs,” **said** the mother of one of the civilian dead.

Sandwiched between the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989, and the commencement of the first Gulf War on January 17, 1991, Operation Just Cause might seem a curio from a nearly forgotten era, its anniversary hardly worth a mention. So many earth-shattering events have happened since. But the invasion of Panama should be remembered in a big way. After all, it helps explain many of those events. In fact, you can’t begin to fully grasp the slippery slope of American militarism in the post-9/11 era — how unilateral, preemptory “regime change” became an acceptable foreign policy option, how “democracy promotion” became a staple of defense strategy, and how war became a branded public spectacle — without understanding Panama.

Our Man in Panama

Operation Just Cause was carried out unilaterally, **sanctioned neither** by the United Nations nor the Organization of American States (OAS). In addition, the invasion was the first post-Cold War military operation justified in the name of democracy — “militant democracy,” as George Will approvingly **called** what the Pentagon would unilaterally install in Panama.

The campaign to capture Noriega, however, didn't start with such grand ambitions. For years, as Saddam Hussein had been Washington's man in Iraq, so Noriega was a CIA asset and Washington ally in Panama. He was a key player in the shadowy **network** of anti-communists, tyrants, and **drug runners** that made up what would become **Iran-Contra**. That, in case you've forgotten, was a conspiracy involving President Ronald Reagan's National Security Council to **sell** high-tech missiles to the Ayatollahs in Iran and then divert their payments to support anti-communist rebels in Nicaragua in order to destabilize the Sandinista government there. Noriega's usefulness to Washington came to an end in 1986, after journalist Seymour Hersh **published** an investigation in the *New York Times* linking him to drug trafficking. It turned out that the Panamanian autocrat had been working both sides. He was "**our man**," but apparently was also passing on intelligence about us to Cuba.

Still, when George H.W. Bush was inaugurated president in January 1989, Panama was not high on his foreign policy agenda. Referring to the process by which Noriega, in less than a year, would become America's most wanted autocrat, Bush's National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft **said**: "I can't really describe the course of events that led us this way... Noriega, was he running drugs and stuff? Sure, but so were a lot of other people. Was he thumbing his nose at the United States? Yeah, yeah."

The Keystone Kops...

Domestic politics provided the tipping point to military action. For most of 1989, Bush administration officials had been half-heartedly calling for a coup against Noriega. Still, they were caught completely caught off guard when, in October, just such a coup started unfolding. The White House was, at that moment, remarkably in the dark. It had no clear intel about what was actually happening. "All of us agreed at that point that we simply had very little to go on," Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney later **reported**. "There was a lot of confusion at the time because there was a lot of confusion in Panama."

"We were sort of the Keystone Kops," was the way Scowcroft **remembered** it, not knowing what to do or whom to support. When Noriega regained the upper hand, Bush came under intense criticism in Congress and the media. This, in turn, spurred him to act. Scowcroft recalls the momentum that led to the invasion: "Maybe we were looking for an opportunity to show that we were not as messed up as the Congress kept saying we were, or as timid as a number of people said." The administration had to find a way to respond, as Scowcroft put it, to the "whole wimp factor."

Momentum built for action, and so did the pressure to find a suitable justification for action after the fact. Shortly after the failed coup, Cheney claimed on PBS's *Newshour* that the only objectives the U.S. had in Panama were to "safeguard American lives" and "protect American interests" by defending that crucial passageway from the Atlantic to the Pacific Oceans, the Panama Canal. "We are not there," he emphasized, "to remake the Panamanian government." He also noted that the White House had no plans to act unilaterally against the wishes of the Organization of American States to extract Noriega from the country. The "hue and cry and the outrage that we would hear from one end of the hemisphere to the other," he said, "...raises serious doubts about the course of that action."

That was mid-October. What a difference two months would make. By December 20th, the campaign against Noriega had gone from accidental — Keystone Kops bumbling in the dark — to transformative: the Bush administration would end up remaking the Panamanian government and, in the process, international law.

...Start a Wild Fire

Cheney wasn't wrong about the "hue and cry." Every single country other than the United States in the Organization of American States voted against the invasion of Panama, but by then it couldn't have mattered less. Bush acted anyway.

What changed everything was the fall of the Berlin Wall just over a month before the invasion. Paradoxically, as the Soviet Union's influence in its backyard (eastern Europe) unraveled, it left Washington with more room to maneuver in its backyard (Latin America). The collapse of Soviet-style Communism also gave the White House an opportunity to go on the ideological and moral offense. And at that moment, the invasion of Panama happened to stand at the head of the line.

As with most military actions, the invaders had a number of justifications to offer, but at that moment the goal of installing a "democratic" regime in power suddenly flipped to the top of the list. In adopting that rationale for making war, Washington was in effect radically revising the terms of international diplomacy. At the heart of its argument was the idea that democracy (as defined by the Bush administration) trumped the principle of national sovereignty.

Latin American nations immediately recognized the threat. After all, **according** to historian John Coatsworth, the U.S. overthrew 41 governments in Latin America between 1898 and 1994, and many of those regime changes were ostensibly carried out, as Woodrow Wilson once put it in reference to Mexico, to teach Latin Americans "to elect good men." Their resistance only gave Bush's ambassador to the OAS, Luigi Einaudi, a chance to up the ethical ante. He quickly and explicitly tied the assault on Panama to the wave of democracy movements then sweeping Eastern Europe. "Today we are... living in historic times," he **lectured** his fellow OAS delegates, two days after the invasion, "a time when a great principle is spreading across the world like wildfire. That principle, as we all know, is the revolutionary idea that people, not governments, are sovereign."

Einaudi's remarks hit on all the points that would become so familiar early in the next century in George W. Bush's "Freedom Agenda": the idea that democracy, as defined by Washington, was a universal value; that "history" represented a movement toward the fulfillment of that value; and that any nation or person who stood in the path of such fulfillment would be swept away.

With the fall of the Berlin Wall, Einaudi said, democracy had acquired the "force of historical necessity." It went without saying that the United States, within a year the official victor in the Cold War and the "sole superpower" left on Planet Earth, would be the executor of that necessity. Bush's ambassador reminded his fellow delegates that the "great democratic tide which is now sweeping the globe" had actually started in Latin America, with human rights movements working to end abuses by military juntas and dictators. The fact that Latin American's freedom fighters had largely been fighting against U.S.-backed anti-communist rightwing death-squad states was lost on the ambassador.

In the case of Panama, “democracy” quickly worked its way up the shortlist of *casus belli*.

In his December 20th address to the nation announcing the invasion, President Bush gave “democracy” as his second reason for going to war, just behind safeguarding American lives but ahead of combatting drug trafficking or protecting the Panama Canal. By the next day, at a press conference, democracy had leapt to the top of the list and so the president **began** his opening remarks this way: “Our efforts to support the democratic processes in Panama and to ensure continued safety of American citizens is now moving into its second day.”

George Will, the conservative pundit, was quick to realize the significance of this new post-Cold War rationale for military action. In a syndicated column headlined, “**Drugs and Canal Are Secondary: Restoring Democracy Was Reason Enough to Act**,” he praised the invasion for “stressing... the restoration of democracy,” adding that, by doing so, “the president put himself squarely in a tradition with a distinguished pedigree. It holds that America’s fundamental national interest is to be America, and the nation’s identity (its sense of its self, its peculiar purposefulness) is inseparable from a commitment to the spread — not the aggressive universalization, but the civilized advancement — of the proposition to which we, unique among nations, are, as the greatest American said, dedicated.”

That was fast. From Keystone Kops to Thomas Paine in just two months, as the White House seized the moment to radically revise the terms by which the U.S. engaged the world. In so doing, it overthrew not just Manuel Noriega but what, for half a century, had been the bedrock foundation of the liberal multilateral order: the ideal of national sovereignty.

Darkness Unto Light

The way the invasion was reported represented a qualitative leap in scale, intensity, and visibility when compared to past military actions. Think of the illegal bombing of Cambodia ordered by Richard Nixon and his National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger in 1969 and conducted for more than five years in complete secrecy, or of the time lag between actual fighting in South Vietnam and the moment, often a day later, when it was reported.

In contrast, the war in Panama was covered with a you-are-there immediacy, a remarkable burst of shock-and-awe journalism (before the phrase “shock and awe” was even invented) meant to capture and keep the public’s attention. Operation Just Cause was “one of the shortest armed conflicts in American military history,” **writes** Brigadier General John Brown, a historian at the United States Army Center of Military History. It was also “extraordinarily complex, involving the deployment of thousands of personnel and equipment from distant military installations and striking almost two-dozen objectives within a 24-hour period of time... Just Cause represented a bold new era in American military force projection: speed, mass, and precision, coupled with immediate public visibility.”

Well, a certain kind of visibility at least. The devastation of El Chorrillo was, of course, ignored by the U.S. media.

In this sense, the invasion of Panama was the forgotten warm-up for the first Gulf War, which took place a little over a year later. That assault was specifically designed for all the world to see. “Smart bombs” lit up the sky over Baghdad as the TV cameras rolled. Featured were new night-

vision equipment, real-time satellite communications, and cable TV (as well as former U.S. commanders ready to narrate the war in the style of football announcers, right down to instant replays). All of this allowed for public consumption of a techno-display of apparent omnipotence that, at least for a short time, helped consolidate mass approval and was meant as both a lesson and a warning for the rest of the world. “By God,” Bush said in triumph, “we’ve kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all.”

It was a heady form of triumphalism that would teach those in Washington exactly the wrong lessons about war and the world.

Justice Is Our Brand

In the mythology of American militarism that has taken hold since George W. Bush’s disastrous wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, his father, George H.W. Bush, is often held up as a paragon of prudence — especially when compared to the later reckless lunacy of Vice President Dick Cheney, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, and Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz. After all, their agenda held that it was the messianic duty of the United States to rid the world not just of “**evil-doers**” but “**evil**” itself. In contrast, Bush Senior, we are **told**, recognized the limits of American power. He was a realist and his circumscribed Gulf War was a “war of necessity” where his son’s 2003 invasion of Iraq was a catastrophic “war of choice.” But it was H.W. who first rolled out a “freedom agenda” to legitimize the illegal invasion of Panama.

Likewise, the moderation of George W. Bush’s Secretary of Defense, Colin Powell, has often been contrasted favorably with the rashness of the neocons in the post-9/11 years. As the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in 1989, however, Powell was hot for getting Noriega. In discussions leading up to the invasion, he advocated forcefully for military action, believing it offered an opportunity to try out what would later become known as “the Powell Doctrine.” Meant to ensure that there would never again be another Vietnam or any kind of American military defeat, that doctrine was to rely on a set of test questions for any potential operation involving ground troops that would limit military operations to defined objectives. Among them were: Is the action in response to a direct threat to national security? Do we have a clear goal? Is there an exit strategy?

It was Powell who first let the new style of American war go to his head and pushed for a more exalted name to brand the war with, one that undermined the very idea of those “limits” he was theoretically trying to establish. Following Pentagon practice, the operational plan to capture Noriega was to go by the meaningless name of “Blue Spoon.” That, Powell **wrote** in *My American Journey*, was “hardly a rousing call to arms... [So] we kicked around a number of ideas and finally settled on... Just Cause. Along with the inspirational ring, I liked something else about it. Even our severest critics would have to utter ‘Just Cause’ while denouncing us.”

Since the pursuit of justice is infinite, it’s hard to see what your exit strategy is once you claim it as your “cause.” Remember, George W. Bush’s original name for his Global War on Terror was to be the less-than-modest **Operation Infinite Justice**.

Powell **says** he hesitated on the eve of the invasion, wondering if it really was the best course of action, but let out a “whoop and a holler” when he learned that Noriega had been found. A new

Panamanian president had already **been sworn in** at Fort Clayton, a U.S. military base in the Canal Zone, hours before the invasion began.

Here's the lesson Powell **took** from Panama: the invasion, he wrote, confirmed all his "convictions over the preceding twenty years, since the days of doubt over Vietnam. Have a clear political objective and stick to it. Use all the force necessary, and do not apologize for going in big if that is what it takes... As I write these words, almost six years after Just Cause, Mr. Noriega, convicted on the drug charges contained in the indictments, sits in an American prison cell. Panama has a new security force, and the country is still a democracy."

That assessment was made in 1995. From a later vantage point, history's judgment is not so sanguine. As George H.W. Bush's ambassador to the United Nations, Thomas Pickering **said** about Operation Just Cause: "Having used force in Panama... there was a propensity in Washington to think that force could provide a result more rapidly, more effectively, more surgically than diplomacy." The easy capture of Noriega meant "the notion that the international community had to be engaged... was ignored."

"Iraq in 2003 was all of that shortsightedness in spades," Pickering said. "We were going to do it all ourselves." And we did.

The road to Baghdad, in other words, ran through Panama City. It was George H.W. Bush's invasion of that small, poor country 25 years ago that inaugurated the age of preemptive unilateralism, using "democracy" and "freedom" as both justifications for war and a branding opportunity. Later, after 9/11, when George W. **insisted** that the ideal of national sovereignty was a thing of the past, when he said nothing — certainly not the opinion of the international community — could stand in the way of the "great mission" of the United States to "extend the benefits of freedom across the globe," all he was doing was throwing more fuel on the "wildfire" sparked by his father. A wildfire some in Panama likened to a "little Hiroshima."