

Noriega: A man who knows too much

Behind all the cheers and self-congratulation over the fall of Panama's tiny tyrant, Manuel Noriega, and Romania's world-class despot, Nicolae Ceausescu, there are some very red faces — which I find a suitably amusing note on which to end this event-packed year.

First, bullet-riddled Romania. I think what really triggered off the rebellion against Ceausescu was the defection a few weeks ago of star gymnast Nadia Comaneci, who fled to Florida and into the arms of a married Romanian roofer. Hardly a noble way to begin a revolution, but there you are.

When things blew up in Romania, Ceausescu was off in Tehran being feted by the Iranians, who style themselves as defenders of the world's oppressed. Very embarrassing. The mortified Persians quickly fired their hapless ambassador to Bucharest, blaming him for having invited the late "Genius of the Carpathians."

Next, there was PLO leader Yasser Arafat, who was the only major foreign guest to turn up for Ceausescu's Communist party jamboree earlier this month. Arafat, with his usual 5 o'clock shadow and pistol, looked oddly out of place as he clapped politely amidst the droves of party hacks chanting slavish incantations to the glory of Ceausescu. Yasser, send your appointment secretary to Beirut.

Arafat was there because Romania has been acting as a secret intermediary between the PLO and the Israelis, the latter who officially insist they won't ever talk to the PLO. Odd that the man Romanians called "Draculescu" had fallen into the role of Mideast peacemaker.

The Israelis, however, are in no position to cheer over Arafat's Romanian faux pas. Israel has had all sorts of covert dealings with Ceausescu for decades, using

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Romania as an intelligence base, conduit to the Arabs and partner in lots of shady arms deals.

The most charming of these, and one that displays Mideast cynicism at its richest, was a deal in which Israel reportedly sold tanks it had captured from Egypt back to the Egyptians via Romania. The naughty Romanians also sold arms captured by Israel from the PLO to Noriega, who then sent them to the Nicaraguan Contras, all under the guidance of Ollie North.

Personally, I'd love to see Noriega stand trial in the U.S. He must have stacks of dossiers tucked away in a Swiss bank vault detailing his work on behalf of the CIA. At one point, Noriega even discussed with his American patrons the possibility of assassinating the entire Sandinista leadership in Nicaragua — for a large fee, of course.

Noriega's chief tormentor, President George Bush, was CIA chief during a period when the agency was up to its ears in plots with the Panamanian strongman.

There are also juicy rumors that Noriega has a large and fascinating collection of infrared photos made of visiting U.S. legislators cavorting with under-age Panamanian boys and girls.

The ubiquitous Israelis were also deeply involved with Noriega in all sorts of mysterious operations. Pan-

ama City became a major intelligence base for Israel's Mossad and Noriega apparently had more than a few burly Israeli "security advisers" in his entourage.

Even the Vatican, whose legation now houses the deposed Noriega and a bunch of his henchmen, is not without sin. In the early 1980s, the Holy See set up a whole series of dummy companies in Panama that were used as conduits to secretly send money from Rome to Poland's Solidarity movement. Noriega eagerly co-operated in this venture and, according to some reports, also worked with the Vatican to finance anti-communist movements in Latin and Central America.

The collapse of Italy's Banco Ambrosiano exposed many of these goings-on.

Poor Noriega. I don't know when he found time to ravish all the virgins and do all the other beastly things he is accused of. When he was not busy with the Americans, Israelis and the Vatican, Noriega also worked for the Cubans and Nicaraguans. Panama was a secret intermediary between the U.S., Cuba and, at times, Nicaragua. Noriega supplied intelligence to Cuba's secret service, the DGI, and perhaps to the KGB.

Equally important, under Noriega, both Cuba and Nicaragua used Panama as a means of circumventing the economic boycott imposed on them by the U.S. Panama bought spare parts and other scarce goodies from Uncle Sam and shipped them to Havana and Managua.

Much about these Panamanian and Romanian she-nanigans will shortly emerge, causing many red faces and a good amount of consternation among the righteous. Just about the only nation that refused to have anything to do with either Noriega or Ceausescu was that last bastion of good old Stalinism, Albania.

Who, I wonder, are we going to have to kick around in the new year?