

# Panamanian pandemonium

Sixteen men on a dead man's chest, yo, ho, ho and a bottle of rum. Avast, mateys, and harken here. Aye, lubbers may call yon green land Panama. Rot their timbers! Any good sea dog knows there be Portobelo where Henry Morgan, greatest of all the buccaneers, drank grog, wenched and ruled the Spanish Main.'

Panama's skyscrapers and banks give it the look of a modern nation. But this is all shiny veneer. Beneath, remains the old pirate city-state from where the buccaneers plundered the galleons of the king of Spain.

Ghosts of pirates still lurk in the moonlit ruins of Portobelo, notorious in its day as the wickedest city in the world. There you could buy anything, sell anything, kill anyone and swig rum until your beard curled. Three centuries later Panama is still much the same place.

North Americans, whose knowledge of the outside world often seems limited to the International House of Pancakes, were amazed this week to see Panama's strongman, Gen. Antonio Noriega, indicted by a U.S. Federal Court on charges of drug smuggling. Then the general was accused by the media and Panamanian exiles of murder, passing secrets to Cuba, playing footsie with the Sandinistas, laundering money, taking bribes and a host of other malefactions.

Noriega, with his pock-marked cheeks and greasy hair, admirably fits the role of Latin villain. In fact, he much resembles the loathsome heavies from whose lust-crazed hands comely blonde virgins used to be rescued by Zorro.

U.S. federal prosecutors hardly resemble masked avengers. Instead of skewering the nasty Panamanian, the U.S. government only managed to make him very angry. Noriega slashed back with counter-charges that the gringos had planned to push Panama into war with Nicaragua.

No one would have believed such stuff until the Ollie North circus. Now, who knows what craziness lurked in the hearts of Ronald Reagan's A-Team?

Having pushed the general into a corner,

ERIC  
MARGOLIS



Washington has abruptly found itself smack in the middle of yet another Central American imbroglio — and one that could turn very messy. Noriega may well be the pirate chieftain that Washington describes, but his little nation of 2.1 million has the Panama Canal and some important U.S. military bases. For years Panama has pretty much done what Uncle Sam asked, while doing the same for just about anyone else with ready cash.

Now, fighting back against Washington's crude attempts to unseat him, the wily general is stirring up Panamanian nationalism and demanding that the 10,000-man U.S. garrison get out of the Canal Zone. Suddenly, Panama has started flirting with the Soviets. Is a second Nicaragua at hand?

Watching this tropical spectacle is both comical and depressing. Panama has joined that band of tiny nations, like Libya and Nicaragua — most the size of Toronto — that thumb their noses at Uncle Sam. If Washington had wanted to get rid of Noriega it should have used the CIA to mount a professional coup — not a farcical trial by media.

The East Coast media may have lost the war in Vietnam, but they do not yet have the power to overturn foreign regimes.

A coup may yet come. Many Panamanians want to restore good relations with the U.S. so they can get on with business. But Noriega, with his back to the wall, might turn Panama from a happy-go-lucky little pirate lair into another glowering Marxist state.

It's not hard to imagine a besieged Panama joining Cuba and Nicaragua, or Libya dishing out cash to Noriega as a way of getting back at the Americans. Or, in other words, Ronald Reagan's worst nightmare: A hotpot of wicked Sandinistas, Cubans, Panamanians and — groan! — Libyans.

Why Washington chose to pick such a pointless fight when its Central American policy is in tatters is a mystery. Perhaps the administration was trying a rerun of its Libyan scenario: Building up a foreign devil and then striking him down in a frenzy of righteous fervor.

Of course, Noriega is up to his ears in larceny, but so are many other heads of state and bigwigs around the world who are still America's good buddies. What this burlesque shows is just how empty-headed and adlepatated the administration has become, and how much U.S. foreign policy is now a prisoner of empty theatrics.

To get anything done overseas, the administration must first make a huge public relations drama. It is next picked up and magnified by the media. Congress then reacts to "public opinion" by doing something — always too little, too late. That's why people like Noriega and Daniel Ortega can run rings around the befuddled Americans.