

That foreign devil Noriega

I like naughty General Noriega. Sure, I know he's a bad hombre. But you can't help but admire this pint-sized Panamanian for standing up to the U.S. and making old Uncle Sam look like one pretty dumb gringo.

In fact, I find the current hoo-ha over Panama to be highly comical and very entertaining. Let's call it *Panama Vice*.

Noriega, known to his people as "old pineapple face" just tickles my funnybone. For those who haven't followed this tempest in a teapot—or should I say, coke spoon—here's an el quicko recap of the gripping drama:

Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega is Panama's strongman. He runs the National Guard, one mean-looking bunch of pistoleros. They run Panama, a tiny nation of under two million people—less than the population of Metro Toronto.

A presidential election was just held this week and, surprise of surprises, it was rigged. The general's candidate, a chubby nobody, beat the popular opposition leader. Both of these guys look like characters straight out of *Miami Vice*.

Uncle Sam erupted in righteous outrage. How dare you rig an election, Washington thundered at Noriega.

The Yankees don't like the little general even though he used to work for the CIA and provided all sorts of smelly services for Uncle Sam. Last year a U.S. court indicted Noriega for dealing cocaine. Since then, the U.S. has huffed and puffed at Panama, trying to blow down its wicked leader. The mighty U.S. did its worst and—caramba!—the little general is still there, making rude gestures at the angry gringos.

Down to monitor the election went a bevy of U.S. politicians. They were led by a most Christian and caring Jimmy Carter. Wits used to call him

"America's first female president." Carter wandered around humid Panama City looking increasingly dismayed. Sort of as if his wallet had just been stolen and he was waiting for Carl Malden to come and bail him out. Other U.S. senators pounded their fists and threatened U.S. military intervention if Noriega didn't quit.

The 10,000 U.S. troops in the Canal Zone have been put on alert. Are the Yanks going to do a Crockett and Tubbs on el general? Let's hope not. The crummy U.S. Army almost got beaten by a handful of Cubans when it invaded Grenada. Latin Americans don't like Noriega but they like Yankee invasions even less. So the CIA is handling matters for the moment.

The boys from Langley dished out US\$10 million to buy votes for the opposition in the election. By my estimate, this means 10 bucks for every Panamanian voter. That's amazing. Up here in chilly

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Canada, we not only don't get paid to vote, we only get to vote for numskulls and purse-snatchers. Down Panama way, they get paid to vote and get one smart hombre to lead them. Now that makes sense.

How come the U.S. has suddenly become so warlike? The same Congressmen who abandoned the Contras and wouldn't fight communism in Central America are now screaming that troops be sent to oust Noriega. Politics, that's why. Cheap politics.

Noriega has been branded a big-time drug dealer. Hysteria over drugs is sweeping North America. Politicians smell lots of votes. Parents are being told that getting rid of Noriega will save their little darlings from becoming break-dancing crack heads. And, to boot, that Noriega is an election rigger.

Well, sakes alive. It's a good thing the U.S. backs only decent people like the hashish and opium running Christian warlords in Lebanon. The white powder Thais or the Mexicans, who are up to their sombreros in drugs. As for rigged elections, what about all those black African states, or U.S. allies like Egypt and Morocco.

Come to think of it, what about Chicago, where the dead still rise to vote for the Democrats?

Come on, gringos, you're picking on little Panama

because it's a juicy and safe vote grabber. Kind of like blasting South Africa. Sure, Panama's a sleazy place. But the U.S. created it, after all—a little slice of jungle with nothing but a canal. Panamanians have to live by their wits—which is just what el general is doing.

Ah, yes, then there's the race question. Panama's white middle and upper class opposes Noriega. But its lower classes, black or mulatto, support the little general. Wait till U.S. politicians discover they're trying to overthrow the hero of downtrodden blacks. Watch them run for cover. That's, of course, if the U.S. doesn't send in its troops.

The hysterical Americans are making pipsqueak Panama into a second Libya, and el general into a sort of cocaine Khadafy. Americans, it seems, must have their foreign devils. It's hugely comical—and sad.

