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The little general wasn't worth it

Little Panama, all 2.4 million people, has just been busted by the U.S. supercoops. The big stick has struck and Americans are convulsed by a positive orgy of jingoism and self-righteousness, with backing from the U.S. media that recalls the tame Soviet media in the days of Leonid Brezhnev.

I can't help but be reminded of Afghanistan, exactly 10 years ago this month, when Soviet commando forces went in to "remove" its president whom Moscow had branded as a bloodthirsty, demented maniac. The same reason George Bush used for his invasion of Panama.

Manuel Noriega, who is still in hiding at the time of this writing, is a very bad man but there are much worse people heading governments around the world, some of them U.S. allies. The little general, let's recall, used to do lots of useful jobs for the CIA. It was only when the hysteria over drugs became a major domestic American political issue that Noriega went from being a sleazy friend to a convenient international demon.

The threat Noriega posed to U.S. security was tiny. Like Libya's Moammar Khadafy before him, Noriega's real sin was to loudly thumb his nose at Washing-

ton and make very rude gestures. Noriega humiliated the Reagan and Bush administrations, both of which bungled attempts to overthrow him. So an angry Uncle Sam finally got even.

Getting even may have been fine for the era of 19th-century gunboat diplomacy, as when France invaded Algeria because its ambassador had been slapped with a fly whisk. It's not right in this era of international good sense. Not when the Soviet Union is bending over backward to avoid using force to swat down its growing nuisances in the Baltic.

To all the chest thumpers who think the invasion was just Yankee doodle dandy, let me pose this question. Suppose the Soviets claimed they had had enough of Lebanon's hashish-dealing warlords and invaded Beirut — which happens to be closer to the Soviet border than Panama is to Florida. What would our reaction be? The big stick doesn't look so good when it's in someone else's hand.

Quite simply, ousting Noriega was not worth the 22 American soldiers already killed or 100 dead Panamanian civilians. Nor was it worth blowing to bits sections of downtown Panama. Nor will it be worth the future American casualties that

will inevitably follow.

Latin Americans are justly outraged. Many of their governments detested Noriega, but none wanted to see U.S. military intervention. A wave of anti-U.S. sentiment is sweeping the Americas, bolstering the nasty Marxist regimes of Cuba and Nicaragua who are saying, "We warned you about Yankee imperialism." Latins believe the real reason the U.S. went into Panama was to instal a puppet government that will keep the Panama Canal, which was to have passed to Panama in 1999, under U.S. control.

There is also a good chance that the U.S. will become bogged down in a messy police action in Panama. Order there has collapsed and the new U.S.-backed government of upper-class Panamanians has, so far, little support from the poor blacks who idolized Noriega.

How long will U.S. troops have to stay in Panama? Will they end up in a dirty little guerrilla war that is not worth one single American life?

And what next? Military cuts in Europe are causing a crisis for the U.S. armed forces. They are casting around for a new mission. Will they now become narcoshunters? Will we see U.S. paratroopers

dropping into Colombia, Peru or Bolivia? Latins see this as a real threat.

More worrying, Bush has chosen the very worst time to act macho. Gorbachev is fighting off hard-liners in Moscow who want to crush ethnic opposition and save East Europe from defecting en masse to the west. Moscow is currently facing demands from its own people for internal reforms and democracy.

This is the most delicate moment in world affairs of the past 50 years. Washington had been waiting for a pretext to invade Panama — which was provided last weekend by the shooting of an American officer in Panama City. The massive and complex invasion had clearly been planned months in advance. Couldn't Bush have at least waited? Is Panama really worth endangering all that is going on in East Europe and the USSR?

Bush, by his reckless, thoughtless action, has left the U.S. looking like an enraged bully and Mikhail Gorbachev like a gentle saint. George Bush is not Elliot Ness. The U.S. has no business playing G-men in Central America. It's shameful, stupid and counterproductive.

Panama may be the beginning, not the end, of Bush's Latin headaches.