

The problem with Panama

Panama is a hot, steamy neck of land that connects Central and South America. It has jungles, beaches, some remarkably beautiful women, lots of mosquitos, and, of course, its *raison d'etre*, the Panama Canal.

Inside the Canal Zone, a slice of middle America laid across the narrow waist of Panama, 10,000 U.S. troops protect the vital maritime link between the Pacific and Atlantic. A link that has now grown less important in the age of huge carriers and tankers that are too large for the canal. Though the canal will eventually revert to Panamanian control, this little nation of 2.1 million is still a bulwark of U.S. influence in Central America.

Early in the week, Panama was convulsed by riots sparked by charges made by a senior National Guard officer, Col. Diaz, that the nation's strongman, Gen. Noriega, had committed a whole slew of crimes. Noriega, claimed Diaz, had arranged to have a bomb put aboard the aircraft of Panama's late strongman, the flamboyant Gen. Omar Torrijos, who was killed in a mysterious 1981 crash. Diaz also accused Noriega of beheading a leading opposition figure, of involvement in the drug trade and of illicit dealings with the intelligence services of Cuba and Israel.

Diaz claimed he had broken with his former ally at the urging of a certain Indian Guru named Sai Baba. Noriega has his own gurus and seers and has suggested that Diaz is under a spell. Panama is that kind of place. Roman Catholicism mixes readily with Latin and African juju. Of course, who are we to sneer after the lessons of Jim, Tammy and Oral?

The charges made by Diaz are likely true. For some time Washington has been grumbling about the unattractive Noriega. He has been accused by U.S. investigators and Congress of drug running, spying, torture, murder and just about everything else except failure to promote equal pay. Many Panamanians, an easy-going, fiesta-loving people, are also fed up with the general and his strong-

Punch



"I told her once, and she was right, I never told her again."

ERIC MARGOLIS



arm henchmen. That's why they have taken to the streets pleading with the U.S. to boot him out.

And now, there are clear signs that Panama's business community is also turning against Noriega. When this happened in Somoza's Nicaragua, it marked the end of the oligarchic dynasty.

Ousting Noriega and his cronies would be a few minutes work for the U.S. brigade stationed in the Canal Zone. Most Panamanians would be delighted. But as distasteful as Noriega may seem, Washington is leery about using its muscle against a Latin leader.

Few Latins regard Panama as much more than a seamy and rather sleazy dictatorship whose leaders line their pockets with money from drugs, arms dealing, financial chicanery and contraband. It's sort of a rent-a-country where, for the right price, shady financiers, dictators on the lam, *narcotraficantes* and all varieties of intelligence spooks can freely operate.

Even so, an American ouster of Noriega would inevitably produce an uproar in Latin America and international condemnation. Emotions quickly flare at the mere mention of "Yankee intervention." Latins deeply resent the implication that they are too politically immature to manage their own affairs and must rely on Uncle Sam to discipline their unruly politicians.

Should Washington do anything at all? It's curious how liberal-left Americans demand that the U.S. keep hands off left-wing regimes like Nicaragua but, in the next breath, demand that Washington do something about rightist regimes in places like Panama, Korea or the Philippines.

Few of these people bother to realize that the high level of internal dissent in right-wing regimes shows that they are not absolute dictatorships. When, by contrast, did we last see protests in Havana against the regime of Fidel Castro? Compared to Marxist Cuba, Panama seems a beacon of freedom and human rights.

Still, something ought to be done. Bad regimes spawn problems that invite communist subversion. Strong democracies are the best defence against leftism. Now is the time for some deft CIA work, a gentle financial nudge from Washington and a nice Miami retirement villa for Gen. Noriega.

But make sure, please, that in booting out the nasty general that a nastier *pistolero* does not grab power. Or, even worse, that the underground communist party in Panama does not emerge and make a coup. Remember that when fuzzy-headed President Jimmy Carter undermined Nicaragua's Somoza, the result was the Sandanista dictatorship of the proletariat and all those Cuban and Soviet advisers.

Panamanians, who prefer making fiestas to revolutions, need a spring cleaning, not Marx.