

U.S. a monkey's uncle

Panama's El Supremo, General Manuel Noriega, more familiarly known to his adoring subjects as "Pineapple Face," has clearly made a monkey's uncle of Uncle Sam.

When the U.S. slapped Noriega with drug charges, just about everyone thought it was a dandy idea.

This column did not. We predicted that the U.S. would probably create a big, new mess in Central America. Now, after months of humiliating failure, the fuddled Reagan administration once again seems about to boot out the pesky general or, more accurately, buy him out of office. Maybe.

Meanwhile, two groups in Washington are acutely unhappy over the spreading fiasco in Panama — conservatives and supporters of Israel.

Pressure is growing on the right to get Uncle Sam to renegotiate the 1977 Panama Canal Treaty. Back then, that flower child of American politics, Jimmy Carter, agreed to return the strategic canal to Panama in 1999.

After watching the current farce in Panama, conservatives are steaming. There's no way our precious canal is going to be run by a bunch of cocaine-dealing, sexually depraved, murderous, torturing Latino thugs, say the alarmed hawks. Worries that are being accentuated by Noriega's growing chumminess with the Cubans and — gasp — Libyans. Rumor has it that if Uncle Sam boots out Noriega, the general will take to the mountains, where Cuban arms have been cached, and turn into another Castro.

So, conservatives are demanding renegotiation of the 1977 Treaty to allow U.S. military forces to stay in the Canal Zone permanently. Of course, the right always hated Carter's treaty with Panama, which they branded as a sell-out. The credulous Carter made this deal with another big drug dealer, Gen. Omar Torrijos, who was then ruler of Panama. Torrijos died in a very suspicious air crash and — surprise — Noriega took over. Treaties made with criminals, says the right — rather self-servingly — are non-operative.

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While the right fumes and frets, Israel's backers in Washington are also watching the Panamanian drama with growing concern. Noriega, as has not been revealed in the press yet, was as thick as thieves with Israel's intelligence agency, the Mossad.

Panama, where everything is for sale, was used by the Mossad as its main operating base in Latin America. Noriega's head of internal security was a Mossad agent; Israeli operatives guarded Noriega, and ran much of his communications and intelligence activities. Embarrassingly, Noriega may even own a home in Israel and has been rumored to be seeking political asylum there.

Long before Ollie North began helping the Nicaraguan Contras, Israel trained, armed and even directed them from Panama and Honduras. Accusations are now being made in Washington that Israeli agents also smuggled drugs from Central America into the U.S. — possibly in co-operation with CIA agents or part-time helpers.

Panama also served as headquarters for Israel's extensive Latin American arms business. Battle-proven Israeli weapons were sold to Guatemala, Honduras, Argentina, Chile and Paraguay. In many cases, nations receiving these Israeli arms were on America's boycott list because of their human rights violations.

Interestingly, many of the same shady Israeli arms merchant-intelligence agents involved in the Contra and Iran-arms scandals were also busy in Panama. More cloak and machine gun stuff is sure to emerge and none of it will enhance the reputation of either Israel or the Reagan administration. Particularly not after the still half-suppressed scandal of the Iraqi pipeline deal showed that Israeli business-intelligence interests had what many think was a highly questionable degree of influence over Ed Meese, the power behind the Reagan throne.

So, one wonders, if the feisty Panamanian general is ousted, what skeletons will come tumbling out of the closet? Israel, already in plenty of hot water, does not need to be linked to running drugs and arms in the Americas, nor to propping up the most unsavory Noriega. Charges will inevitably be made that because Noriega was a pal of Israel, the pro-Israel lobby in Congress kept heat away from Panama — just as it has done for other outcasts like Liberia's Sgt. Doe or Zaire's Gen. Mobutu.

Add in the CIA's close ties to Noriega and Panama's "services" to some very big banks, to the Vatican's anti-communist covert operations in Latin America, and lots of other hanky panky. Noriega could be much more trouble out of Panama than in Panama.