

U.S. policy: By George or by jingo?

If there was any question that American foreign policy is increasingly made for TV, it was dispelled by the recent hit mini-series called *Get Noriega*, a sort of *Miami Vice Goes to War*. Viewers loved it. I did not, as previously noted in this column.

In fact, I am deeply dismayed by the growing preoccupation of the U.S. with side shows like Libya, Nicaragua or Panama while urgent and important problems in Europe or the Mideast are being ignored. And rather shamed, too, by the invasion of pipsqueak Panama that showed a bullying, jingoistic, shallow-thinking side of America's character.

This process was begun by actor Ronald Reagan. He produced two brilliant mini-series: *Marxist Storm Over Grenada*, and the even more successful *Target: Moammar Khadafy, Beast of Benghazi*. In both docu-dramas, tiny countries were blown up into world-class threats. Grenada's Marxist leaders had no style, but the flamboyant, Khadafy proved a wonderful villain.

Americans thrilled as their boys went in to save Grenada and then gave the wicked Moammar a sheltering. So what if 100-odd Libyan civilians died or the U.S. broke its own laws by trying to assassinate Khadafy? Americans puffed out their chests and yelled, "Sic 'em!" There would be no more ayatollahs to affront Yankee pride.

President George Bush followed old master Reagan's technique. To make a zippy foreign policy TV drama you need a devilish foreign leader ruling a small nation that can't fight back — and with no powerful allies. You need to create a comic-book simple conflict between the good USA and the evil foreigner. Then, intolerable provocation followed by swift, righteous punishment. Throw in some female roles, if possible, like



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heroic girl soldiers. The result: Top viewer ratings, dumbfounded Democrats, and you don't have to deal with the headaches of the budget deficit.

Bush the former bureaucrat has now become Bush the provider of bread and circuses. Most of the U.S. media, to their great discredit, have eagerly joined in this process. They cheered on the invasion of Panama with an uncritical, jingoistic fervor reminiscent of the days of the Spanish-American War.

What next? Well, this past week we were treated to a real TV mini-series called *Drug Wars*, a saga of U.S. anti-drug agents battling against Mexican drug kingpins and corrupt politicians. Great fun, to be sure, but the image of U.S. cowboy-agents swaggering around south of the Rio Grande treating the Mexicans like peons or felons filled me with unease.

Now that communism is on the rocks and Khadafy is being as quiet as a desert mouse, foreign devils are hard to find. The last big phony issue, Arab and Iranian terrorism, has gone on the back burner. The hot new topic is crime and punishment. You can't turn on your TV without seeing cops and robbers docu-dramas. Americans are now seized with police frenzy.

Reagan's theme was the war on terrorism. Bush's is the War on Drugs. The current mania for police dramas dovetails perfectly into the anti-drug crusade. Uncle

Sam will no longer land Marines in Latin America to fight communism. From now on, US drug agents will kick in the doors of Latin drug dealers and their backers. George Bush as Sonny Crockett.

Having supposedly beaten the Reds and won the Cold War, macho U.S. Republicans feel nothing prevents them now from laying on the big stick wherever appropriate, be it on drug-running Latinos or bomb-tossing Arabs. It's back to the good old 1950's when Uncle Sam was the kingfish.

Americans have a great ability to delude themselves. When the rest of the world says the U.S. is wrong about Grenada, Libya, Panama or its Mideast policy, most Americans just get indignant. Moral fervor, hot whipped by the press, replaces thought.

Americans love crusades. But outsiders are seeing a men whose main concern is to play well to TV cameras. They see a nation in deep economic crisis caused by wild spending, sleazy financiers and a general lack of fiscal morality. Most important, they see the U.S. as increasingly peripheral to the course of world affairs.

The first quarter of the next century will belong to Europe. I even wonder if America has not already taken the first big step back to the isolationism of the late 1890s, when it ignored the rest of world and spent its time bashing around Central America or chasing Pancho Villa.

It's incredible, even horrifying, that President Bush decided to go play Gang Busters in Panama at the most delicate and important moment in world affairs in the last 50 years. While Mikhail Gorbachev is reshaping the world, George Bush and his media advisers are busy writing cops and robbers scripts. Someone needs to tell them that all the world's not a TV sound stage.