



Journal of Arts & Humanities

The Media and Operation Just Cause in Panama

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ABSTRACT

As far as the press of such a democratic political system is concerned, one would expect the American mainstream media to act independently of the government's will by putting the official pretexts and objectives for interference abroad under serious questioning -before accepting or rebutting them- looking for alternative sources of information, and instituting the conditions for a fair debate -by offering the opportunity to several conflicting opinions to argue and debate and then come out with the most convincing conclusions. In order to check if the US mainstream media acted as an independent organ during U.S. interference in Panama, I will examine their treatment of the official objectives for intervention as well as the most prominent methods they applied during their coverage of a typical case study of American Global Realism.²

Keywords: Media and foreign policy, operation 'just cause', Panama.
available online: 13th may, 2016.

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1.0 Introduction

At a time when the Cold War was 'agonizing' and the 'new world order' taking a life of its own, the government of the US found new arguments in favor of its December 1989 invasion of Panama. Like any other military action, operation 'Just Cause' was preceded by a well-orchestrated public relations campaign meant to gain the support

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² For a detailed analysis of the role of the mainstream media in American foreign policy, see Wassim Daghrir, *The Media and Foreign Policy* (Saarbrücken, Germany: Scholars' Press, 2015).

of the US Congress, press, and public opinion and, thus, to generate a national consensus over the administration's most crucial decisions. As far as the press of such a democratic political system is concerned, one would expect it to act independently of the government's will by putting the official pretexts and objectives for invasion under serious questioning -before accepting or rebutting them- looking for alternative sources of information, and instituting the conditions for a fair debate -by offering the opportunity to several conflicting opinions to argue and debate and then come out with the most convincing conclusions. In order to check if the US mainstream media acted as an independent organ during the Panamanian episode, I will examine their treatment of the official objectives for intervention, their coverage of the military operation, and their assessment of the invasion with regard to international law.

2.0 The Media and Panama

When Panama's leader Manuel Noriega was still a close US-ally, little ink was spilled in the US press about his true nature or about his involvement in drug-trafficking, money-laundering, and various other misdeeds.³ After Washington's break-up with Noriega, however, most US media outlets discovered his corrupt nature and felt free to accord prominent coverage to his doubtful activities. Accordingly, Noriega was swiftly transformed in the US press from "military leader" to "strongman dictator". And the wider the break-up between the White House and Noriega, the faster the media's 'demonization' of Noriega accelerated. As background information for operation Just Cause, **CBS's** Dan Rather referred to the Panamanian leader as a "wily jungle snake" and a "swamp rat", who was "at the top of the list of the world's drug thieves and scams". And **ABC's** Peter Jennings called Noriega "one of the more odious creatures with whom the US has had a relationship".⁴

Many US reporters and editors seemed to have uncritically embraced the White House's explanations for its break-up with Noriega. Instead of citing a maximum of causes, including Noriega's refusal to cooperate further in the US war against Nicaragua, his inutility after the Iran-contra revelations, and his inability to maintain order in his own country, the US press focused only on the official explanations - especially Noriega's involvement with narcotics trade and his lack of respect for democratic rule. Accordingly, *the New York Times* reported that Noriega "began as a CIA asset but fell afoul of Washington over his involvement in drug and arms trafficking".⁵ Similarly, **ABC** declared on the day of the invasion: "Let's remember that the US was very close to Mr. Noriega before the whole question of drugs came up".⁶ The readers and viewers of the major media outlets got, however, only half of the story: First, Noriega's drug links were asserted by US intelligence already in the early 1970s. But, considering Noriega's usefulness in US espionage and covert operations, US officials overlooked the drug issue. Second, the press did not give emphasis to the fact that Noriega's involvement in the drug trade was heaviest in the early 1980's, at a time when his ties to the US government were especially close. Actually, when the US/Noriega relationship began to fray in the mid-1980s, several experts, including officials from the US Drug Enforcement Administration, asserted that Noriega had already drastically curtailed his drug links.⁷ Third, US editorialists were unable to uncover the fact that it was more the public revelation of Noriega's involvement in drug trafficking -especially after his indictment by US courts- than the trafficking itself that provoked a shift to an anti-Noriega policy. In effect, when Noriega became a public relations problem for the White House, his drug activities could no longer be tolerated. Finally, TV commentators and newspaper columnists were far more severe in their condemnation of the Panamanian leader than of his collaborators -the CIA, the Pentagon, the State Department, Vice-president Bush, and the American banks that fattened themselves with drug money during Noriega's reign.⁸

³ Among the exceptional articles was a May 1986 *New York Times* article, which disclosed Noriega's links to the CIA, the narcotics trade and other corrupt activities. The *Times'* story proved highly embarrassing to the Reagan administration.

⁴ **ABC**, December 20, 1989. See also Mark Cook and Jeff Cohen, "How Television Sold the Panama Invasion", *Extra*, January-February 1990, p. 6.

⁵ *The NYT*, January 21, 1990.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Martin Lee and Norman Solomon, *Unreliable Sources* (New York: Carol Publishing, 1990), p. 294.

There is no doubt that some commentators questioned the administration's motives. A *New York Times* article, for instance, admitted that

Noriega's alleged drug dealings were relatively small scale by Latin American standards... American officials strongly suspect high-ranking military officers in Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador of similar, and in some cases even greater involvement in drug dealing. Yet, [they] have not taken harsh action against them.⁹

Nevertheless, this kind of critical coverage was rather sporadic. The media often tended to promote the administration's drug argument as a rationalization for its divorce with Noriega and for its decision to invade Panama. Indeed, the Bush Administration justified the invasion by claiming that overthrowing Noriega was a major victory in the war on drugs. Yet, drug trafficking continued under the US-sponsored Endara government. Some alternative papers did report that the US-backed officials had close links to companies, banks, and people heavily involved in narcotics-trafficking or money-laundering. Nevertheless, such revelations received little attention from the major media. So, if mainstream journalists had reported the backgrounds of the new Panamanian leaders installed during the US invasion and their connections to money-laundering banks and drug traffickers, a primary rationale for the invasion would have been shredded.¹⁰

One of the main justifications advanced by the US government for its decision to break up with Noriega and to intervene in Panama was its traditional yearning for democracy. Shortly before the May 1989 Panamanian elections, President Bush declared that Noriega was preparing to rig the results. *The New York Times* immediately reported the president's comments in an article headlined: "Bush warns Panama on Election Fraud".¹¹ And when Noriega nullified the election results, a *New York Times* editorial attacked "General Noriega's insult to democracy".¹² There was no doubt that Noriega's behavior represented an insult to democracy. But why did the US press show little concern for democracy in Panama five years earlier, when Noriega's candidate Nicolas Barletta became president through a rigged vote? Actually, the press failed to call attention to Washington's support for the 1984 elections, when President Reagan sent Secretary of State George Schultz to attend Barletta's inauguration and praise the country's "democratization".¹³ After he had fallen out of favor with Washington, US journalists frequently described Noriega as a "dictator" and a "thug". Nevertheless, no such epithets were issued in 1984, when he rigged the presidential elections with the political backing of the US government. Furthermore, the press was eager to describe Washington's policy more as a pro-democracy policy than as an anti-Noriega one. Yet, Noriega was not the sole obstacle to democracy in Panama. So, the administration's acknowledged distinction between Noriega and the corrupt and anti-democratic Panamanian Defense Forces (PDF) could bring the press to place some doubts on the administration's democratic commitment. The press did not, however, clearly demonstrate that democracy had as little to do with the break-up of US/Noriega relations.

The main official goal for the Panama invasion was the need 'to safeguard the lives of Americans'. When President Bush indicated that he was fearful for the lives of thousands of Americans living in the Canal Zone, the press uncritically portrayed operation Just Cause as a humanitarian mission, without really checking if the threat was ever real. As a direct pretext for intervention, the Bush Administration argued that US citizens in Panama were threatened, citing the example of the December 16 confrontation that led to the death of a US Marine officer and the injury of another when they tried to run a roadblock in front of the PDF. The Panamanian version of events was that 'the US soldiers opened fire -injuring three civilians- and tried to run the roadblock'.¹⁴ This version was largely ignored by US journalists, as were the several reports which described the death of the US serviceman as an isolated accident. As for the claim

⁹ *The New York Times*, June 10, 1990, cited in Michael Parenti, *Inventing Reality* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1993), p. 163.

¹⁰ Mark Cook and Jeff Cohen, "How Television Sold the Panama Invasion", *op. cit.*, p. 5.

¹¹ *The New York Times*, May 3, 1989, cited in Martin Lee and Norman Solomon, *Unreliable Sources*, *op. cit.*, p. 315.

¹² Editorial, "Stern but Steady on Panama", *The NYT*, May 10, 1989.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Mark Cook and Jeff Cohen, "How Television Sold the Panama Invasion", *op. cit.*, p. 6.

that a US officer had been violently interrogated and his wife sexually threatened, the administration provided no supporting evidence, nor did the press ask for any. Therefore, “since the Marine’s death and the interrogation were repeatedly invoked to justify the invasion, the lack of press scrutiny of these claims is stunning”.¹⁵ In fact, the media not only failed to scrutinize the administration’s main justifications in favor of the invasion -by transmitting the White House’s claims at face-value-, they tended also to ignore the sources that offered alternative interpretations of the news coming from Panama. In effect, the press was reluctant to publish the reports which indicated that the invasion had been scheduled before the provocations that justified it [the death of the American serviceman] ever occurred. The US press was also not keen to publicize Panama’s calls for the dispatching of a UN peacekeeping force to calm down the tensions between the PDF and the US troops and prevent delicate encounters around the Canal Zone. So, had US commentators paid attention to the largest possible variety of sources, including Panamanians, the administration’s pretexts for intervention might have been better explained, analyzed, and, maybe, shredded.

Furthermore, while US commentators applauded the ‘protecting Americans’ rationale, they perceived no ironic dissimilarity with the fact that Bush did not send 25,000 troops to Guatemala when, a few weeks before the Panama invasion, an American nun was abducted and sexually abused by US-backed Guatemalan officers.¹⁶ The fact that the administration’s arguments did not apply to the US-backed countries was apparently not considered as an interesting subject of analysis by the US mainstream circles.

In a word, during the first days of the invasion, when the administration was in a critical need for popular support, the media kept faithful to the official line and failed to scrutinize the official justifications for operation Just Cause. Indeed, tracking a drug dealer, restoring democracy, and protecting American lives were invoked repeatedly as just cause for the US military invasion. And to keep the official version unchallenged, US opponents to the invasion were virtually excluded from the mainstream circles. The prestige media’s tendency to rally around the flag during the early stages of the attack was illustrated by a CBS producer who put it thus:

When American troops are involved and taking losses, this is not the time to be running critical commentary. The American public will be rallying around the flag.¹⁷

The editorial choice to rally around the flag was reinforced by the US government’s decision to restrict US reporters’ access to Panama and to impose a strict control of the information related to operation Just Cause. In fact, neither the military nor the government was interested in having anyone question the soundness of the Panama intervention and the military phases of its execution. The Bush team set out to control television and front-page news in the first days of the operation knowing that exposés of official deception [such as Noriega’s 110 pounds of ‘cocaine’ that turned out to be tamales¹⁸] would not appear until weeks later buried on the inside pages of America’s dailies.¹⁹

Commenting on the US major papers’ coverage of operation Just Cause, the *Toronto Globe and Mail* ran a front-page article critiquing the US and its media for “the peculiar jingoism of US society so evident to foreigners but almost invisible for most Americans.”²⁰ Indeed, while covering the military operation, “many reporters abandoned even the pretense of operating in a neutral, independent mode”.²¹ Television commentators used pronouns like “we” and “us” in describing the invasion, as if they

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 7.

¹⁶ Noam Chomsky, *Deterring Democracy*, *op. cit.*, p. 150.

¹⁷ Cited in Mark Cook and Jeff Cohen, “How Television Sold the Panama Invasion”, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

¹⁸ When US officials claimed that 110 pounds of cocaine were found in Noriega’s house, the information received prominent coverage. When, a month later, the ‘cocaine’ turned out to be tamales, the information was mentioned in the *Washington Post*’s page A22.

¹⁹ Mark Cook and Jeff Cohen, “How Television Sold the Panama Invasion”, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

²⁰ *The Toronto Globe and Mail*, December 22, 1989, cited in Mark Cook and Jeff Cohen, “How Television Sold the Panama Invasion”, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

²¹ *Ibid*, p. 4.

themselves were members of the invasion force.²² On day one, **NBC's** reporter Tom Brokaw exclaimed: “**We** haven’t got [Noriega] yet”. **CNN's** anchor Mary Anne Loughlin asked a former CIA official: “Noriega has stayed one step ahead of **us**. Do you think **we**’ll be able to find him?”²³ This lack of objectivity was still more obvious in the vocabulary used to describe the military phases of the operation. Thus, a **CNN** correspondent reported on the day of the invasion: “US troops have taken detainees but we are not calling them ‘prisoners of war’ because the US has not declared war”.²⁴ Similarly, during the early stages of the operation, many network correspondents did not call the invasion an ‘invasion’ until the term was used by Washington. Instead, it was referred to as a ‘military action’, ‘intervention’, ‘operation’, ‘expedition’, and ‘insertion’.²⁵

In the initial days of the invasion, the press focused mainly on operational questions: Was the invasion going well? Was there much resistance? And, especially: How many American lives were lost? This kind of operational questions tended to drown out the other issues, especially those related to the Panamanian casualties, international law, and foreign reaction.²⁶ In effect, the readers and viewers of the US big media had few opportunities to learn that operation Just Cause represented a clear violation of the UN Charter and the inter-American treaties, or that the invasion was immediately condemned by the international community. In fact, the US commentators’ assessment of the invasion with regard to international law was rather positive. Typical was Rita Braver, from **CBS Evening News**, who declared: “The invasion was legal according to all the experts I talked to”.²⁷ Yet, article 20 of the OAS Charter reads the following:

The territory of a state is inviolable. It may not be the object, even temporarily, of military occupation or other measures of force taken by another state directly or indirectly on any grounds.

The UN’s as well as the OAS’ condemnation of the invasion was given scant, often critical, notice in the mainstream media. On December 21, for example, one **CBS** correspondent labeled as a “lynch mob” the Latin American diplomats at the OAS who condemned the invasion.

With international law being ignored and international condemnation marginalized, the US editorialists issued positive assessments of the Panama invasion. On December 21, 1989, for example, a *New York Times* front-page news analysis put it this way:

George Bush has completed a Presidential initiation rite [joining] American leaders who since World War II have felt a need to demonstrate their willingness to shed blood to protect or advance what they construe as the national interest... Panama has shown him as a man capable of bold action.²⁸

Similarly, hailing the accomplishments of operation Just Cause, a June 1991 *Washington Post* story concluded that human rights under the new US-backed regime have improved and “press freedoms have been restored”.²⁹ The *Post’s* report failed to mention that newspapers and television stations were closed by US occupation authorities and that newspaper editors and reporters critical of the invasion were jailed or detained.³⁰ Such challenging facts were simply out of the prestige media’s agenda.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ **CNN**, December 21, 1989, cited in *Ibid* (emphasis added).

²⁴ **CNN**, December 20, 1989, cited in *Ibid*, p. 5.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ **CBS Evening News**, December 20, 1989, cited in Mark Cook and Jeff Cohen, “How Television Sold the Panama Invasion”, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

²⁸ *The NYT*, December 21, 1989, cited in *Ibid*, p. 6.

²⁹ *The WP*, June 18, 1991, cited in Michael Parenti, *Inventing Reality*, *op. cit.*, p. 163.

³⁰ Michael Parenti, *Inventing Reality*, *op. cit.*, p. 163.

3.0 Conclusion

To sum up, it wouldn't be too mistaken to maintain that, during the early stages of the US invasion of Panama, the prestige media did not behave as an independent organ, not only because of official censorship but also by editorial choice. Indeed, the press emphasized the official objectives for intervention and disregarded the various alternative interpretations. The American television viewers and front-page readers were not clearly notified that George Bush sent 25,000 US troops to Panama to reinstall a pro-US government, turn Panama back to the client-state status, and prove to the world Washington's determination to defend US credibility in the international arena. What the American public read in the major newspapers was what the White House declared: the need to protect American lives, combat drug-trafficking, restore democracy, and protect the US access to the Panama Canal. Furthermore, US commentators seemed to be unable or unwilling to ask the right questions: was the invasion inevitable? Were the threats real? What about respect for internationally accepted principles of law? Does "Just Cause" represent another episode of Gunboat diplomacy, or a new version of the Monroe Doctrine? Such fundamental questions were rarely raised in the mainstream circles, which tended to accept the legitimacy of the attack and to focus on operational matters. One does of course not expect the media to be in total opposition to the government's decisions, but only to assume their role and open room for a real debate, where conflicting views could conflict unreservedly, for the real benefit of the supreme national interest.

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