

The Path to War

Operation JUST CAUSE, the U.S. military intervention in Panama in 1989, resulted from a variety of factors decades in the making. In 1903, the U.S. obtained the right to build and defend a canal across the Isthmus of Panama in exchange for helping the territory obtain independence from Colombia. Starting then, U.S. soldiers, sailors, and marines were stationed in Panama. Periodic U.S. interventions over the next seventy-five years safeguarded the canal and protected American interests. In exchange for American backing, Panamanian leaders rarely impeded U.S. use of the Canal Zone as a base from which to counter revolutionary movements and maintain stability in the region.¹

A new treaty, signed in 1977, called for an incremental withdrawal of U.S. military forces and hand over of U.S. facilities beginning in 1979, and a turnover of the canal to Panama in 2000.² Several headquarters, including U.S. Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM), U.S. Army, South (USARSO), and later Special Operations Command, South (SOC SOUTH), were located in the Canal Zone. In addition, roughly 50,000 American citizens lived in Panama, including canal workers, U.S. military personnel, and their dependents.³

When Panamanian dictator Brigadier General Omar Torrijos died in 1981, a two-year struggle for power ensued. In 1983, General Manuel Noriega became commander-in-chief of the Panamanian Defense Forces (PDF), which oversaw all military and law enforcement.⁴ The PDF also controlled the dominant political party, though Panama's political institutions were largely superficial.⁵

Noriega supported the U.S. assistance to the *Contras* waging unconventional war against the Cuban-backed Sandinista government in Nicaragua, suppressed leftist movements in Panama, and provided intelligence to the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA).⁶ However, he violently oppressed political opponents, trafficked drugs, laundered money, sold weapons to leftist guerrillas in El Salvador, and shared U.S. secrets with Cuban and Nicaraguan counterparts.⁷ Noriega undermined Torrijos's democratic reforms, dominated Panama's political system, and controlled the economy.⁸ Most of the country remained apathetic, and the dictator retained a strong base of support after fraudulent elections in 1984, but his opponents were enraged, and loose alliances emerged between dissident groups.⁹

Noriega's actions concerned the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), who viewed the Canal as strategically important, and a potential threat in the hands of insurgents, or a government sympathetic to the Soviet Union.¹⁰ After the PDF killed Noriega critic Hugo Spadafora in 1985, the relationship between the U.S. and Noriega began a downward spiral, with growing calls in the U.S. government for the dictator to step down.¹¹ Public acknowledgement of covert U.S. aid to the *Contras* ended that support in late 1986 and eliminated Noriega's value as a conduit to the anti-Sandinista guerrillas.¹² Sanctions levied in June

1987 damaged the Panamanian economy and emboldened Noriega's opponents.¹³ The dictator increased ties to the Soviet Union, and his supporters attacked the U.S. embassy and American policies.¹⁴

Noriega strengthened his position despite U.S. attempts to force his resignation through political and economic pressure.¹⁵ Opposition to Noriega was disorganized in early 1988, and the dictator was consolidating his support. In February, the PDF increased harassment of U.S. citizens in response to news of Noriega's indictment, along with his top aid, Colonel Luis del Cid, on drug trafficking charges in the U.S.¹⁶ Noriega became more aggressive in challenging the U.S. after sanctions stemmed the flow of U.S. dollars into Panama, impeding his ability to pay the PDF.¹⁷ As a result, senior U.S. officials revised their options for military involvement in Panama. On February 28, the CJCS ordered General Frederick F. Woerner, Jr., USSOUTHCOM commander-in-chief, to develop contingency plans for military operations short of war (ELABORATE MAZE).¹⁸ These addressed noncombatant evacuations, combat using forces already in Panama, and stability operations. Eventually broken into four distinct Operations Orders, PRAYER BOOK, planning intensified as tensions increased. Occasionally acts of violence occurred.¹⁹

By early 1989, U.S. President George H.W. Bush's administration concluded that Noriega could not be pressured into stepping down.²⁰ The situation escalated after the April arrest of Kurt Muse, an American citizen who ran an anti-Noriega radio station.²¹ Noriega annulled the results of the May elections, in which U.S.-supported candidates received the majority of the vote, and named an ally president. Beginning in May, additional U.S. reinforcements were sent to the Canal Zone (NIMROD DANCER), to increase pressure on the Noriega regime. Over the next several months, plans were revised, and Army Special Operations Forces (ARSOF) units rehearsed missions anticipated as part of Operation BLUE SPOON.²²

Beginning in July, a series of exercises and operations called "Purple Storms" asserted U.S. treaty rights of free movement, and rehearsed missions. "Sand Flea" exercises kept Noriega and the PDF off balance.²³ In September, the U.S. severed diplomatic ties with Panama, and increased economic sanctions.²⁴ In late-September, GEN Maxwell R. Thurman replaced GEN Woerner, and offensive operational planning against Noriega intensified. GEN Thurman made the XVIII Airborne Corps the ground force commander to unify conventional and special operations planning. Operational plans evolved toward a surprise assault to capture Noriega and dismantle the PDF.²⁵

Following the PDF killing of Marine First Lieutenant Robert Paz on 15 December 1989, President Bush gave the execute order for BLUE SPOON (renamed JUST CAUSE) to remove Noriega, subdue the PDF, protect American lives and property, and safeguard the canal.²⁶ The stability mission (PROMOTE LIBERTY) afterward lasted until 1991.

Noriega was captured and extradited, and the PDF was disbanded. The three candidates who received the most votes in the May 1989 election were charged with standing up a new government. More than 27,000 U.S. military personnel (including 3,600+ Army Special Operations Forces) participated in JUST CAUSE.

The following chart shows the escalation of the crisis. The subsequent four articles discuss ARSOF preparation for, and participation in military operations in Panama in 1989–1990. Forthcoming articles will examine the ARSOF role in JUST CAUSE and stability operations during Operation PROMOTE LIBERTY. (see endnotes pg. 64)

