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## Manuel Noriega and his impact on the events in Panama from 1981 to 1989

*Manuel Noriega i jego wpływ na wydarzenia w Panamie od 1981 do 1989*

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**Abstract:** Manuel Noriega shaped the fate of the Panamanians for eight years. After the death of Omar Torrijos, Noriega became the *de facto* ruler of Panama. He was not the elected leader, notwithstanding his policy affected every citizen. His illicit activities led to social and political unrest in Panama and were the causes for the American intervention in the country in December 1989. The aim of the article is analyse if it was really necessary for the Americans to apply military action in Panama and why, for many years, the USA accepted the activities of Noriega. It is essential to know whether Panama itself could deal with the internal problems and why the people were dissatisfied with the rule of Manuel Noriega. The 1980s in Panama can be treated as a lost decade. The economic measures employed by the United States managed to deteriorate the industry of Panama. The outcome of the invasion is also significant – the loss of lives, homelessness and lootings. The article presents, step by step, what led to the American intervention in Panama and how Manuel Noriega deceived both the Panamanians and the American authorities to remain in power.

**Keywords:** Panama, Manuel Noriega, American intervention, illicit activities, military leader.

**Streszczenie:** Manuel Noriega kształtował losy Panamczyków przez osiem lat. Po śmierci Omara Torrijosa, Noriega został faktycznym przywódcą Panamy. Nie był liderem wybranym w wyborach, jednak jego polityka oddziaływała na każdego obywatela. Jego nielegalne działania doprowadziły do społeczno-politycznych niepokojów w Panamie oraz były przyczyną interwencji amerykańskiej w kraju w grudniu 1989. Celem tego artykułu jest przeanalizowanie, czy Amerykanie rzeczywiście musieli zastosować działania wojskowe w Panamie oraz dlaczego, przez wiele lat, USA akceptowało działalność Noriegi. Warto dowiedzieć się, czy Panama mogłaby poradzić sobie samodzielnie ze swoimi problemami wewnętrznymi i dlaczego rodacy byli niezadowoleni z rządów Manuela Noriegi. Lata 80 XX wieku w Panamie można potraktować jako straconą dekadę. Działania dotyczące gospodarki zastosowane przez Stany Zjednoczone wpłynęły negatywnie na przemysł panamski. Znaczące wydają się także skutki inwazji: straty w ludziach, pozbawienie dachu nad głową oraz grabieże. Artykuł ten przedstawia, krok po kroku, co doprowadziło do interwencji amerykańskiej w Panamie i jak Manuel Noriega zwodził zarówno Panamczyków jak i władze amerykańskie, aby tylko pozostać u władzy.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Panama, Manuel Noriega, interwencja amerykańska, nielegalne działania, przywódca wojskowy.

## Introduction

The article will review the events which took place in Panama since the death of Omar Torrijos<sup>1</sup> – after which Manuel Noriega became the new political leader. The decade of the 1980s was marked by his illicit activities which caused political and social unrest in Panama and finally led to the American armed intervention in December 1989.

I will attempt to analyse here the following problems: was it really necessary for the Americans to apply military action in Panama? Should they have sought for any other successful means of dealing with the problematic situation there? Why, for many years, did the USA accept the illusions of democracy in Panama? What was their decision to intervene really based on? It is essential to know whether Panama itself could deal with the internal problems and why the people were dissatisfied with the rule of Manuel Noriega – were they awaiting the actions of another country on their territory? The core of the text will surely be the figure of Manuel Noriega – what made him the leader of the country and why he did not become the president and was “indirectly” in charge of Panama. Could Panama have become a democracy earlier if Noriega hadn’t striven for power?

In most works devoted to the 1980s in Panama, authors try to depict the USA – Panama relations and base all their research on that area of study. I decided to treat the decade in a different way and analyse the political and social changes which affected Panama in that time with the American military intervention only being the last straw which led to the disposal of Manuel Noriega.

## Plan Torrijos

On 31<sup>st</sup> July 1981 Omar Torrijos died in a plane crash. The leader was gone and the country had to deal with the loss. Although there still was President Aristides Royo, who was to rule until the elections in 1984, the real power in Panama was in the hands of military leaders. On 8<sup>th</sup> March 1982 four National Guard officers signed a secret plan called *Plan Torrijos*. The plan established an order in which Rubén Darío Paredes, Armando Contreras, Manuel Antonio Noriega and Roberto Díaz Herrera were to command in *Instituto Armado* – the Army Institute in Panama until 31<sup>st</sup> July 1988 (Fitzgerald, 2007). In reality the gap left by Torrijos was at first filled by col. Florencio Flores – he headed the military for 8 months, but was forced to retire in March 1982 by his fellow officers. At that

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<sup>1</sup> General Omar Torrijos was the leader of Panama from 1968-1981. He negotiated the Panama Canal Treaties with the United States and gained public support of the Panamanians by his public policy measures.

point Rubén Darío Paredes became the commander of the National Guard. He stepped down in August 1983 as he wanted to run for president in the 1984 elections. National Ruling Junta, in 1982 consisted of: col. Rubén Paredes – commandant, Lt.col. Armando Contreras – chief of staff, Lt. col. Manuel Noriega – assistant chief of staff and head of G2 – intelligence division. The remaining lieutenant colonels were: Ángel Mina, Julián Melo, Alberto Purcell, Elías Castillo, Marcos Justine Fernández, Pedro Ayala, Cecilio Fisher, Roberto Díaz Herrera (Harding, 2001). On 12<sup>th</sup> August 1983 Manuel Noriega became the commander of the National Guard.

### Noriega takes charge

Manuel Antonio Noriega Moreno was born in 1934. His mother died shortly after giving birth and very little was known about his father. Manuel was raised by his godmother. Thanks to his cousin (an influential figure in the military – Luis Carlos Noriega) M. Noriega was admitted to Chorrillos Military Academy in Peru. The years spent in the Academy were the turning point of his life. He gained there the degree, knowledge and important contacts, which shaped the rest of Noriega's life (Kempe, 1990). He also received intelligence and counterintelligence training at the School of the Americas at the U.S. Army's Fort Gulick in the Panama Canal Zone in 1967, as well as a course in psychological operations at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. He was commissioned in the Panama National Guard in 1967 and promoted to lieutenant in 1968. As Noriega supported Omar Torrijos, he received a promotion to lieutenant colonel and was appointed chief of military intelligence G2 by Torrijos. Noriega strengthened his position as *de facto* ruler in August 1983 by promoting himself to general (Dinges, 1990).

When Noriega took charge of the National Guard, one of his first decisions was to change its name to the Panamanian Defence Forces (PDF). On 29<sup>th</sup> September 1983 the National Legislative Council was forced by Noriega to accept *Ley 20* – a bill which created the PDF (doc: *Ley 2 de 29 de Septiembre de 1983*).

### Figurehead presidents

As it was mentioned, Aristides Royo was appointed the president of Panama in October 1978 for six years. Notwithstanding, he was unable to finish his term in office. In July 1982 a wave of strikes affected the country. Teachers, doctors, labourers, university students and opposition political parties were protesting against the increase of the costs of living and demanding the rise of salaries. On July 30<sup>th</sup> a great march was organised to show the discontent of the society. The military leaders of Panama decided it was an opportunity to get rid of the unwanted president. Claiming that president Royo's policy was the reason for the

deterioration of the situation in the country, the Army forced him to step down. The citizens were informed that Aristides Royo had to quit because of a “sore throat”. The event was called *el gargantazo* – from the Spanish name for the ailment. Vice President Ricardo De La Espriella took the office of president. It was the beginning of the tendency of the 1980s in Panamanian politics – “figurehead” or “puppet presidents” (Fitzgerald, 2007) chosen by the military leaders, more precisely – one leader – Manuel Noriega.

In 1983 the Constitution of Panama was reformed. The main changes were: creating *Asamblea Legislativa* – the Legislative Assembly instead of National Legislative Council, reducing the term of the president from six to five years and creating the second vice-presidency, and not allowing National Guard members to participate in elections. The elections of the president were to be direct – by popular vote. The amendments were approved by the national referendum on 24<sup>th</sup> April 1983 (doc: *Constitución Política de la Republica*).

### **The 1984 elections**

On 13<sup>th</sup> February 1984 president Ricardo De La Espriella was forced to resign from the office as the Military accused him of cooperating with the opposition leader Arnulfo Arias Madrid. He was succeeded by Vice President Jorge Illueca. The presidential elections were scheduled for 6<sup>th</sup> May 1984. There were seven candidates for the post, the most important of whom were: Nicolás Ardito Barletta from National Democratic Union (UNADE), Arnulfo Arias Madrid representing the union of parties called Opposition Alliance and former PDF Commander Rubén Darío Paredes acting as a Nationalist Popular Party candidate (Sanchez, 2007).

Despite a lot of irregularities the Election Tribunal proclaimed the victory of Nicolás Ardito Barletta. He won by 1713 votes. The candidate was supported by Manuel Noriega and his success was created by fraudulent actions of the Military (Arrauz 1, s.a.). Although it was almost certain that the elections were manipulated, the USA accepted the new president of Panama. Barletta was educated in the USA, at the University of Chicago where George Schultz (US Secretary of State in the Reagan Administration) was his professor – the United States thought he would not cause any trouble (Caño, 1984).

### **Resentment of the Panamanians towards Noriega**

Due to the fact the real power in Panama was vested in the hands of the Military which was gaining posts and overtaking national institutions, the main opposition newspaper *La Prensa* wrote: “Panama is an army with a State that

serves the army” (Pizzurno Gelós et al, 1996:601). The resentment towards the Army was growing in the Panamanian society day by day. On 19<sup>th</sup> November 1984 Mario Zúñiga started *Coordinadora Civilista Nacional* (COCINA) – National Civic Coordination – a movement whose aim was to show popular dissatisfaction with the governmental actions. The members were wearing white clothes to show their honesty and purity in opposition to the corruption of the authorities of the country (Fitzgerald, 2007). In August 1985 Mario Zúñiga was kidnapped and seriously beaten by the PDF (Sanchez, 2007).

One of the figures openly and firmly showing his discontent towards Noriega was Hugo Spadafora – a popular medical doctor. He used to be a vice minister of health under Torrijos. On 13<sup>th</sup> September 1985, on television, Spadafora accused Manuel Noriega of drug and weapons trafficking. Next day Spadafora’s decapitated body was found near the border with Costa Rica. It was almost clear that the order to murder him was given by Noriega<sup>2</sup>. When president Ardito Barletta was informed about the assassination, he called for a commission to investigate the case. Having announced such a willingness, Barletta was forced to resign from the office of the president facing threats towards him and his family issued by the troops. The pretext given for his resignation was popular discontent with his policy. Afterwards, Noriega placed the Vicepresident Eric Arturo Delvalle as the acting president (Harding, 2006).

As it was agreed in *Plan Torrijos* Manuel Noriega was supposed to step down in July 1987 and colonel Roberto Díaz Herrera was to be his successor in the PDF command. However, Noriega announced that he was going to remain in power for another five years and forced Díaz Herrera to retire. The actions outraged Díaz Herrera so much that he decided to reveal publicly all the atrocities of Manuel Noriega. On the press conference on 6<sup>th</sup> June 1987 he informed about the fraud in the 1984 presidential elections and that the winner was Arnulfo Arias, accused Noriega of murdering Hugo Spadafora as well as of organising the assassination of Omar Torrijos. He also informed that Noriega was a drug trafficker. As a result, Díaz Herrera was arrested and sent into exile in Venezuela (Pizzurno Gelós et al, 1996).

The 1980s in Panama were characterised by the suppression of liberal democratic institutions, the extension of military control, human rights abuses and torture and murder (Guevara Mann, 1996). The “confession” of Díaz Herrera encouraged the Panamanians to express their resentment towards the actions of the military. The movement named *Cruzada Civilista Nacional* – National Civic

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<sup>2</sup> For a description of the activities and death of Spadafora check: Koster, R.M., Sanchez, G., *In the Time of Tyrants*, New York: WW Norton&Company, 1990, p.19-46.

Crusade which united 65 different organisations called for civil disobedience. The members demanded the reconstruction of public institutions and restoring democracy in Panama. Their actions included waving white handkerchiefs, cars continually blowing the horns and housewives banging kitchen pots on patios of their homes. The Crusade advocated general labour strikes and led to a standstill in Panamanian businesses (Koster et al, 1990). On 10<sup>th</sup> June 1987 the government issued a decree no. 56 which suspended constitutional guarantees and declared the state of emergency in the country (doc: *Decreto 56 de 1987*). The animosity of the crowds towards Noriega was being presented in numerous protests on the streets of Panama.

The PDF Commander accused business and opposition political leaders, including former president Ardito Barletta of conspiring with the United States to overthrow president Delvalle. On 19<sup>th</sup> June 1987 the state of Martial Law was imposed and all constitutional guarantees were removed. On 7<sup>th</sup> July the Panamanian president prohibited demonstrations in public places. On 10<sup>th</sup> July more than 100,000 people dressed in white took to the streets of Panama City in a peaceful protest. Soon, however, they were attacked by the Noriega guards called Dobermans. Hundreds of people were wounded and about 500 arrested. The riots which took place on 10<sup>th</sup> July 1987 are known as *Viernes Negro* (Black Friday) (Harding, 2006). By the end of July Noriega decided to destroy the Crusade – he imprisoned its leaders, closed down newspapers and radio stations. Many oppositionists fled the country (Conniff, 2001). One of such people was Roberto Eisenmann, the editor of the oppositionist newspaper *La Prensa*, who, after death threats, made his way to the United States (Weeks, 1987).

## Noriega and his relations with the United States

### Noriega as an informant

Manuel Antonio Noriega started cooperating with the USA during his time in the Peruvian Chorrillos Military Academy – the CIA contacted him to gain information about possible communists at the academy as he was: “the perfect informant – he had an archival memory and Luis Carlos his half-brother could act as the perfect intermediary for intelligence reports and payments” (Kempe, 1990: 51). It was easy to cooperate with Noriega because, as former US Ambassador to Panama – Ambler Moss said: “he was driven by simple principles: power and money. He didn’t have Torrijos’s messianic sense of destiny in the world” (Harding, 2001: 156).

When, in 1970, Noriega became head of the National Guard intelligence unit – G2, he was worth even more for the CIA – and the agency paid him 110,000 dollars a year. President Jimmy Carter gave an order to drop Noriega from the CIA payroll in 1977. However, in 1981, vice president and former CIA director George Bush hired him again for spying (Harding, 2001). Even Manuel Noriega himself admitted that the United States itself sought his services:

I had been the U.S. contact person throughout the 1970s, and I was well known to everyone in the CIA; Now with Casey<sup>3</sup>, the relations would become tighter. In 1983, when I assumed command, the CIA was pleased to have a direct connection with the leader of the Panamanian military (Noriega et al., 1997: 65).

Noriega was seen by the Americans as a valuable collaborator. He worked not only for the CIA but additionally with: the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), the Department of Defense, and the White House to deal with the communism in Central America (Harding, 2006). This cooperation seems quite bizarre as Manuel Noriega was at the same time one of the drug dealers. He coordinated the drug trafficking of the Colombian Medellin Cartel which was supplying the US drug consumers through the territory of Panama. He also acted as an intelligence provider for the Castro government in Cuba and was selling American visas to the Cubans; he also traded with the island despite the American embargo. Noriega was also trafficking weapons to Salvadorian leftist rebels<sup>4</sup>; he supported the Sandinistas in Nicaragua<sup>5</sup>, while at the same time, as American collaborator, he was to provide assistance for the Contras. The aid was being given to two groups which wanted the other one to be destroyed. The Panamanian general was also a “friend” of the: Israelis, Taiwanese and Libyans. On that account, Manuel Noriega became known as “rent-a-colonel”. His associates were unaware that he served the ones who were paying him at the time, no matter what policy they represented.

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<sup>3</sup> William Casey was the CIA director (1981-1987).

<sup>4</sup> El Salvador was affected by a bloody civil war which lasted from 1980 till 1992. For more information consult: *Americas Watch, El Salvador's Decade of Terror: Human Rights Since the Assassination of Archbishop Romero*, Yale University Press, 1993.

<sup>5</sup> In Nicaragua since 1979 Sandinistas were fighting the Contras- rebels supported by the USA with funding, arms and training. For more information read: Falcoff, M., Royal, R., *Crisis and Opportunity-US Policy in Central America and the Caribbean*, Washington DC, 1984 or: Gutman, R., *Banana Diplomacy-the Making of American Policy in Nicaragua 1981-1987*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988.

### **Deterioration of the relations of Noriega with the United States**

The friendly collaboration between Noriega and the USA came to an end. Various circumstances led to such a situation. One of the problems was the internal situation in Panama – the murder of Hugo Spadafora, the figurehead presidents, the military repressions and public resentment towards the rule of Noriega. The person himself also deteriorated the alliance with the USA when he refused to cooperate with the country as it wished him to do in matters very important for the Americans. He was asked to: help to prepare a peace plan for the Contadora Group<sup>6</sup> for the Central American conflicts, to provide haven for deposed Philippine dictator Ferdinand Marcos and to reinstall in Panama president Ardito Barletta. Noriega declined all those requests. He even undermined the efforts of the Contadora by providing arms for the guerrilla movements in Central America (Pizzurno Gelós, 1996; Kempe, 1990).

Another problem was the School of the Americas. It provided training for Latin American military personnel and the number of students in 1984 was 29,000. Nevertheless, the school was located in Fort Gulick – an American base on the territory of Panama – according to Canal Treaties signed in 1977 and in 1984 the fort was to be returned to Panama. Noriega decided that he would take over Fort Gulick. Consequently the Americans had to relocate the School of Americas to Fort Benning, in Georgia, USA (Sanchez, 2007).

Initially the Reagan Administration supported Noriega. He was praised for the ability to: “maintain an acceptable level of stability on the isthmus, as well as for the dictatorship’s collaboration with the US efforts in Central America” (Guevara Mann, 1996:158). The USA also backed Noriega because it knew that Noriega could be replaced by Díaz Herrera – person no.2 in the PDF. American Administration thought that Díaz Herrera was a communist and consequently did not fancy him as the Panamanian leader. That is why neither illegal removing of Panamanian presidents nor the murder of Hugo Spadafora affected the actions of the USA in a significant way (Bryła, 1997). One of the examples of cooperation were the joint Panamanian – US military exercises held in January 1985. They involved 10,000 American troops and lasted for four months (Weeks, 1987).

To present the will of cooperation with American Drug Enforcement Administration, Noriega participated in *Operation Pisces*. It was a covert intelligence operation which took place from 1985 to 1987. The action allowed the Americans

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<sup>6</sup> Contadora Group was a group of 4 countries: Mexico, Panama, Colombia and Venezuela that met on the Panamanian island of Contadora to devise peace plans for the conflicts in Central America, which occurred in the 1980s in El Salvador, Nicaragua and in Guatemala.



to freeze hundreds of bank accounts of people connected with drug trafficking. The Americans arrested 220 drug dealers and seized 28 million dollars in cash and assets and more than 11,000 pounds of cocaine in Southern California. As a result, Panama was praised as a country which fully cooperates with the USA in fighting the drugs (Dinges, 1990).

### **Indictment of Noriega**

In spite of all the movements on the part of Noriega to show his will of cooperation with the Americans, he could not feel fully safe. On 12<sup>th</sup> June 1986, *The New York Times* revealed:

The army commander of Panama, a country vital to United States interests in Latin America, is extensively involved in illicit money laundering and drug activities and has provided a Latin American guerrilla group with arms, according to evidence collected by American intelligence agencies. Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega, who is in effect the leader of the country, had been tied to the killing of a political opponent. For the last 15 years, he had been providing intelligence information simultaneously to Cuba and the United States... (Hersh, 1986).

Having been informed about the accusations, the American authorities became divided as to how to act in the case of Noriega. Congress, the State Department, the Justice Department and the White House wanted the removal of Noriega whereas the CIA, the Department of Defense and the Drug Enforcement Agency advocated keeping Noriega in power. The Americans began to take a series of measures to oust Manuel Noriega. One of the most harsh opponents of the General was Jessie Helms – a Republican senator from North Carolina. On 24<sup>th</sup> September 1986 he made the US Senate authorise Amendment no.2897 to Foreign Assistance Act<sup>7</sup>, which demanded the CIA director William Casey:

to provide a report to the Senate and House Committees on Intelligence by 1<sup>st</sup> March 1987, whether and to what extent the defense forces of the Government of Panama have violated the human rights of the Panamanian people, are involved in international drug trafficking, arms trafficking, or money laundering, or were involved in the death of Dr. Hugo Spadafora (doc: S.Amdt.2897).

The amendment was one of the measures to get the CIA director to inform the Senate about actions of the agency, as William Casey had a quality of being unwilling to inform anybody if he was not clearly asked to do so (Lugar, 1988). It was commonly known that Casey had been supporting the atrocities of Noriega for years.

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<sup>7</sup> *Foreign Assistance Act* was signed in September 1961 by president J. Kennedy and described US foreign assistance programs which could be implemented, such as economic assistance programs and non-military aid.

Another event that deteriorated the position of Noriega in the United States was the Iran – Contras scandal revealed in December 1986<sup>8</sup>. It was made public that Noriega was supporting the Nicaraguan Contras with arms – the operations were ordered and financed by the United States against US Congress restrictions and founded with money earned through the secret arms selling to Iran (Koster et al, 1990). William Casey – the CIA director could no longer collaborate with Noriega. To make matters worse for the General, William Casey died in May 1987. Under those circumstances the PDF Leader lost the support of American politicians. The US policy towards Noriega was now directed into removing him. On 26<sup>th</sup> June 1987 the US Senate in Resolution no.239 called for free elections in Panama and for Noriega to step down (doc: *American Foreign Policy Current Documents 1987*). As a response to this Senate Resolution, on 30<sup>th</sup> June 1987 Noriega orchestrated a mob attack against the US embassy in Panama (Guevara Mann, 1996). The crowds threw stones at the building and the personnel of the diplomatic mission.

On 24<sup>th</sup> September 1987, the US Senate adopted a resolution put forward by senator Christopher Dodd – a Democrat from Connecticut. It called for economic boycott against Panama: “to cease all economic and military assistance...suspend all shipments of military equipment and spare parts...prohibit the importation of sugars, syrups, or molasses” (Pettingell, 1987: 56). The resolution was severely criticised by president Delvalle:

We believe the time has come to warn that the Panamanian government will not tolerate any more actions of intervention and disrespect, that it is ready to firmly maintain its national dignity at any cost, and that it will undertake the defense of its national sovereignty as demanded by circumstances (Pettingell, 1987: 56).

The government of Panama did not take the US Senate resolution into account and, consequently, all economic aid for Panama was suspended. In the meantime, since the revelations made by *The New York Times* in June 1986, the evidence against Manuel Noriega was being collected by judges in Miami and Tampa. Finally, after months of investigation, on 5<sup>th</sup> February 1988 Noriega was accused by Federal Courts of Miami and Tampa. The prosecutors coped with a lot of obstacles and resentment on the part of American agencies since the CIA and the FBI were reluctant to accuse the Panamanian General. *The New York Times* cited the accusations of the judges:

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<sup>8</sup> For more information on the Iran-Contras case see: Kornbluh, P., Byrne, M., *The Iran-Contra Scandal: the declassified history*, A National Security Archive Documents Reader, the New Press, 1993.

In Tampa Noriega is charged with conspiring to smuggle more than a million pounds of marijuana into the United States and to permit more than \$100 million in proceeds from the marijuana sales to be laundered through Panamanian banks. The Miami indictment described the movement through Panama of thousands of pounds of Colombian cocaine bound for the United States. General Noriega performed a variety of services for the Colombian smugglers (Shenon, 1988).

All the indictments were rejected by Panamanian authorities. They feared nothing as there were very limited extradition treaties between Panama and the United States and it would be impossible to take Noriega to the USA to sue him.

Following the charges against Noriega in the American courts, on 25<sup>th</sup> February 1988 president Delvalle announced on television that Manuel Antonio Noriega would no longer be the PDF Commander. However, nobody in the PDF took Delvalle seriously and it was the president who was deprived of the office. The Legislative Assembly was called to an urgent session on 26<sup>th</sup> February 1988, voted the decision of the president unconstitutional and condemned him as acting in favour of a possible US invasion in Panama. Consequently, Delvalle was dismissed and, as his Vice-president Roderick Esquivel resigned of his own free will in December 1987, Manuel Solís Palma, the minister of education, was proclaimed the new Panamanian president (Pizzurno Gelós et al, 1996). The USA, notwithstanding, continued to recognise Eric Arturo Delvalle as the Panamanian president. He had to flee into exile to the United States as he and his family were being persecuted by the men of Noriega. Having the support of the American Administration, the deposed Panamanian president initiated anti-Noriega campaign in the USA. He convinced American courts that he should represent the Panamanian government and therefore its government assets in US banks were frozen. In March 1988 about 40 million dollars belonging to Panama as well as the canal revenues were suspended following the insistence of Delvalle (Robinson, 1989).

The efforts of Delvalle to abolish Noriega were followed by some PDF officers. On 16<sup>th</sup> March 1988 Leonidas Macías organised a failed coup against General Noriega. The barracks coup was undertaken by Colonel Macías, majors: Fernando Quezada, Jaime Benítez, Aristides Valdonado and captain Humberto Macea with the aim of deposing general Noriega. The event failed due to the action taken by major Moisés Giroldi – the head of PDF security who turned out to be loyal towards Noriega and stopped the plotters, all of whom were immediately jailed (Fitzgerald, 2007).

On 18<sup>th</sup> March 1988 the state of emergency was introduced in Panama. It resulted from the failed coup, the actions of Delvalle in the United States and American economic sanctions. As the outcome of the activities and responding to the increase of military personnel in American bases in Panama, Noriega united

his supporters in *Batallones de la Dignidad* – Dignity Battalions. Those were paramilitary units consisting of labourers and ex-military members created to: “defend the motherland against the foreign aggression” (Pizzurno Gelós et al, 1996: 629). It is worth mentioning that the battalions were being trained by PDF and one of the people who organised everything was Mike Harari – a former Israeli Mossad agent, a person who was very close to Noriega (Pizzurno Gelós et al, 1996).

### **Economic measures**

In March 1988 harsh economic sanctions were imposed on Panama: the USA froze 56 million dollars of Panamanian assets in US banks, excluded Panama from the US sugar import quota and refused to pay the Canal fees as well as prohibited commercial trade with Panama (doc: *The US Invasion of Panama. The Truth...*). In April 1988 President Reagan announced the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA) – it prohibited all payments from private US citizens and corporations to Panama and froze all the assets of the government of Panama in American banks (Guevara Mann, 1996). As a result of the sanctions: the Panamanian gross domestic product contracted by staggering 15.8 per cent in 1988 and the total loss in its governmental revenue mounted to 450 million dollars (Smith, 2000). By the end of 1988 the economy fell by 20 per cent, the construction sector fell by 78 per cent, electrical consumption by 21 per cent, tourism – 35 per cent, imports by 44 per cent and exports – 17 per cent (Harding, 2001).

American companies doing business in Panama protested against the sanctions and consequently those were weakened – the US Treasury Department made some exceptions to enable the firms to continue operations. The Department also wanted to minimise the harm to the citizens of Panama and its economy, so only the transactions with the Panamanian government were prohibited (Robinson, 1989). Yet, the sanctions affected only the Panamanian economy and general Noriega remained untouched. In fact, Libya, Japan and Taiwan gave loans to Panama at the time of US sanctions. It turned out the enemies of the USA such as Libya were close friends of Noriega and the fact set in motion the fear of Americans that the Libyans will use Panama to organise terrorist actions against the USA (Bryła, 1997).

### **Diplomatic solutions and covert actions**

Apart from the economic sanctions the Americans used also their diplomatic means to depose Manuel Noriega. The American State Department tried to talk the General into resignation. On 18<sup>th</sup> March 1988 two officials of the Department visited Noriega. Michael Kozak and William Walker wanted to discuss the

terms for Noriega's departure from Panama: "he would have sought asylum in another country and the United States would have promised not to seek his extradition" (Pear, et al, 1988). After listening to the proposal, Noriega turned it down claiming that his relinquishing the power would be possible only if he could stay in Panama and choose his successor (Pear, et al, 1988). Noriega added in his *Memoirs* (Noriega et al, 1997) that during that meeting with Kozak and Walker he was also offered two million dollars and a medal commemorating his service – both of the gifts were rejected. Another American plan was drafted in May 1988. The White House officials tried to draw up a plan for Noriega to leave Panama. It assumed that: the general would be able to appoint his successor as military leader, all senior officers in the armed forces would retire, General Noriega would leave the country by August, and could not return to live there for 10 months, but would be allowed to visit for holidays. In exchange, the drug-related indictments would be dropped (Roberts, 1988).

Also Noriega himself at some point decided to frame his resignation scheme. He asked his aide José Blandón who acted as Panamanian consul general to New York to draw up a plan of the general's giving back the power. It was prepared in September 1987 and assumed that Noriega would resign by April 1988 together with all PDF staff members with twenty-five years of service and that the PDF would no longer control the immigration, customs, prisons, civil and criminal investigation. In return for those concessions, Noriega would be granted criminal immunity (Kempe, 1990). The PDF Leader told Blandón to present the plan to the Reagan Administration and Congress. When the American authorities started giving the plan some consideration, Noriega backed off and claimed he had not asked Blandón to prepare any plans (Sciolino, 1988). In fact, he started looking for a much more profitable proposal on the part of the USA. Blandón, in effect, was later one of the Panamanians who testified against Noriega and contributed to his indictments in American courts in February 1988.

Noriega admitted that he was preparing to withdraw himself from the PDF leadership and accept the American proposals but he gave up the idea at the last moment, for the well-being of the Panamanians (!):

I knew I had strong opponents in Washington, but the campesinos and the unions were supporting me – it was not my popularity that was at stake, nor my physical health, nor stress or anything like that; there was no personal problem. I was simply weighing the balance of the country in the international scheme of things (Noriega et al, 1997: 137-138).

"I cannot regret my decision and I have no remorse for my actions, but I am deeply pained by all that has happened..." (Noriega et al, 1997: 139).

Moreover, the attitude of the USA towards Noriega differed in the American decisive bodies. The State Department articulated that it is a question of American prestige and credibility to remove the general at all costs, the Pentagon, on the other hand, opted against any military action as not being worth the risk (Bryła, 1997).

When all negotiations with Noriega to step down failed, the United States decided on covert military actions. Since March 1988 until December 1989 the CIA had 5 secret plans to oust Noriega – all the plans included the name “Panama” and a number. “Panama 1” was a plan to install a government headed by president Delvalle in an American base in the Canal Zone; “Panama 2” was to orchestrate the kidnapping of Noriega and taking him to court (Bryła, 1997). In July 1988 President Reagan authorized the CIA to work with former PDF colonel Eduardo Herrera Hassan: “to foment a coup in the ranks of the PDF” (Robinson, 1989:195). The code name of the action was “Panama 3”. However, the Senate objected due to the fact that Noriega could be assassinated, which would violate the US executive order that prohibited ordering the death of foreign leaders. The plans also leaked to the press and consequently were abandoned (Robinson, 1989). Another attempt was called “Panama 4” and was approved by the new American president George Bush on the occasion of the forthcoming Panamanian elections in May 1989 – the plan was to provide the Panamanian opposition with 10 million dollars for propaganda activities and fraud prevention (Guevara Mann, 1996). There existed also a plan named “Panama 5” whose aim was to remove Noriega from power: “to recruit officers within the Panama Defense Forces and exiled opposition figures to overthrow Noriega” (Wright, 1989). However, this plan was not implemented as the press made it public.

In Panama, the PDF, responded to US plans to depose Noriega by harassing the American personnel in the Canal Zone. One of significant incidents took place on 3<sup>rd</sup> March 1989 when the PDF detained twenty school buses with American children going to their schools in the Zone. They were set free by the intervention of US military police. The effect of the provocation was that the Zonians began sending messages to the US Congress asking for action against the Noriega regime (Harding, 2006).

### **The 1989 elections in Panama and their outcome**

Before the election scheduled for 7<sup>th</sup> May 1989 the Americans living in Panama decided to show their resentment towards Noriega. One of them was Kurt Muse. Together with his friends he set up a radio station *La voz de la libertad* – the voice of liberty, which broadcast messages calling for support for the

opponents of Noriega in the May elections. Muse was found and arrested by the PDF. He was imprisoned, however, the Americans succeeded in freeing him during the operation “Just Cause”. The action to get Muse out a prison in Panama City was called “Acid Gambit”<sup>9</sup>.

The main parties participating in the Panamanian elections were: COLINA and ADOC. COLINA-National Liberal Coalition – a group of eight pro-Noriega parties: *PRD* – *Partido Revolucionario Democrático* – Democratic Revolutionary Party; *Partido Laborista* – Labour Party; *Partido Panameñista Revolucionario* – Panamanian Revolutionary Party; *Partido Republicano* – Republican Party; *Partido Panameño del Pueblo* – Panamanian People’s Party; *Partido Democrático de Trabajadores* – Democratic Workers Party, *Partido Liberal* – Liberal Party and *Partido de Acción Nacional* – Nationalist Action Party. Their candidate was Carlos Duque – a businessman and Noriega’s associate. ADOC – Democratic Alliance of Civic Opposition consisted of: *Partido Democrático Cristiano* – Christian Democratic Party, *Movimiento Republicano Liberal* – Liberal Republican Movement and *Partido Liberal Auténtico* – Authentic Liberal Party. The candidate of ADOC was Guillermo Endara Galimany – a lawyer.

Due to the US covert financial donations for the campaign and popular support given to the opposition – Guillermo Endara – the candidate of ADOC won the elections. Notwithstanding, he was unable to begin his term in office. Although, according to election observers, the opposition won with 75 per cent, the PDF confiscated hundreds of ballot boxes and rig the election for the Noriega’s candidate (Conniff, 2001). The opposition demanded proclamation of their victory in the elections, however, they were brutally attacked by Noriega’s Dignity Battalions. The presidential candidate Guillermo Endara and his candidate for vice-presidency Guillermo Ford were wounded and one of their security guards was killed (Fitzgerald, 2007). As a consequence, facing the pressures of Noriega to proclaim Carlos Duque the president, the Election Tribunal nullified the elections. In the decree no.58 of May 10<sup>th</sup> 1989, the Election Tribunal claimed that the results of the election were influenced by foreign interference, which had declared them fraudulent much earlier than the elections took place. They also declared that there were cases of buying the votes and the lack of necessary election documents and voting ballots (doc: *Decreto no.58 del Tribunal Electoral*).

The reaction of the United States was an immediate increase in the number of soldiers on the territory of Panama and the continuation of economic

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<sup>9</sup> For more information see: <http://web.archive.org/web/20131129100843/>, [http://www.specialoperations.com/Operations/Just\\_Cause/Acid\\_Gambit/default2.html](http://www.specialoperations.com/Operations/Just_Cause/Acid_Gambit/default2.html)

sanctions. Also the Organisation of American States condemned the election abuses in Panama and tried to intervene diplomatically, yet, unsuccessfully (Robinson, 1989). As the term of office of the president of Panama started in 1984, was about to terminate and the May elections were nullified, on 31<sup>st</sup> August 1989 by agreement no.1, a provisional government was created in Panama. Its head was announced Francisco Rodríguez who was to act as the provisional president. Also the Legislative Assembly was renamed *Asamblea Nacional de Corregimientos* – National Assembly of Small Provinces. All the actions were just a concealed continuation of military rule in Panama (Arrauz 2, s.a.). The new provisional president announced on 1<sup>st</sup> September that Panama was in the state of “undeclared war” referring to the economic and political sanctions and US military presence aimed at deposing general Noriega (Fitzgerald, 2007). The American reaction to the Rodríguez government was specified in National Security Directive 21 of 1<sup>st</sup> September 1989:

United States policy towards Panama continues to be to achieve the departure of General Noriega from power and the establishment of a democratic government based on the will of the people as expressed in free elections... (doc: *National Security Directive 21*).

In the summer of 1989 the United States carried out a series of military exercises on the territory of Panama. Their cryptonyms were “Sand Flee” and “Purple Storm” and the official aim was to train to defend the Panama Canal according to the Torrijos – Carter Treaties. In fact, they were the preparation practice for the incoming invasion in Panama.

Soon also the PDF felt it was time to change the commander-in-chief of their army. Major Moisés Giroldi (the same person, who in March 1988 prevented the coup against Noriega) decided to collaborate with the United States to capture Noriega. On 3<sup>rd</sup> October 1989 the major and his aides managed to take Manuel Noriega into custody in his own office. Giroldi had informed the Americans about his plans and had asked them for help. Notwithstanding, the Americans were unwilling to act militarily and to support the coup as they feared it was a trap due to the fact that the leader – Giroldi had once stopped a coup organised partly by the USA in March 1988. The US reluctance allowed the troops still loyal to Noriega to reach the PDF headquarters and to rescue the General<sup>10</sup>. The plotters were assassinated the following day by the PDF in an action called *Masacre de Albrook*.

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<sup>10</sup> A detailed description of the coup can be found in: Manegold, C., S., *Amateur Hour*, *Newsweek*, October 16th, 1989, p.26-31.



The Noriega's rule was reinforced when on 15<sup>th</sup> December 1989 the National Assembly declared that Panama was in a state of war and named Manuel Noriega the *Lider Máximo de la lucha de la liberación nacional* (Pizzurno Gelós et al, 1996) the Maximum Leader of the fight for national liberation, making him the leader of the government. It is essential to stress that it was not a declaration of war – it just informed that the country is “in a state of war” (doc: *The US Invasion of Panama. The Truth...*).

### Operation “just cause”

The United States did not wait long to act. Several incidents led to the decision of George Bush to invade Panama militarily. On 16<sup>th</sup> December 1989 with the tensions being high members of the PDF opened fire on a car with US soldiers, which refused to stop at a roadblock. One officer, Robert Paz, was killed and the other was wounded (Smith, 2000). The same day another American army lieutenant was arrested and beaten by the PDF and his wife was sexually abused (Guevara Mann, 1996). It was enough for the US President to start acting. On 19<sup>th</sup> December in a US military base in the Canal Zone Guillermo Endara was sworn in as the new Panamanian president, together with his two vice presidents – Ricardo Arias Calderón and Guillermo Ford. On 20<sup>th</sup> December 1989 at 12.46 am the American military intervention in Panama began<sup>11</sup>. The “Operation Just Cause” involved 24,000 US troops armed with the most sophisticated weaponry and aircraft. Analysts said that the Pentagon experimented with some of the newest high-tech weapons in a real battlefield situation (doc: *The US Invasion of Panama. The Truth...*).

In a televised speech President Bush presented the Americans his reasons for the invasion of Panama in the following way:

For nearly two years, the United States, nations of Latin America and the Caribbean have worked together to resolve the crisis in Panama. The goals of the United States have been to safeguard the lives of Americans, to defend democracy in Panama, to combat drug trafficking and to protect the integrity of the Panama Canal Treaty. Many attempts have been made to resolve this crisis through diplomacy and negotiations. All were rejected by the dictator of Panama, Gen. Manuel Noriega, an indicted drug trafficker... As President, I have no higher obligation than to safeguard the lives of American citizens. And that is why I directed our armed force to protect the lives of American citizens in Panama and to bring General Noriega to justice in the United States (doc: *Panama, the decision to use force*).

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<sup>11</sup> For more details see: Panama invasion: The US operation that ousted Noriega, *BBC News*, 20 December 2019, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-50837024>

It was easier to justify a military invasion to protect American lives than an action based on vague legal principles. International law did allow the United States to protect the lives of its citizens living abroad (Ropp, 1991).

Bombs were being dropped but the main target could not be detected. The PDF headquarters located in a poor district of Panama City, Chorrillo, were bombed and burned. Notwithstanding, Manuel Noriega managed to escape. On 24<sup>th</sup> December he and members of his high command sought refuge in the Vatican Embassy in Panama. The place was chosen as it was the only one not being observed by the US forces who had thought that Noriega would make his way to the Cuban or Nicaraguan missions (Conniff, 2001). The head of the Vatican Nunciature was Monsignor José Sebastián Laboa – he was not a supporter of Noriega, but had to give him refuge as it had been done in the cases of other refugees. On that account, M. Noriega spent in the embassy the following days. During the time negotiations were being carried out by the US military. While the talks were being conducted very loud music was being played from loudspeakers placed around the embassy. The music by “Van Halen” band was used with a purpose to prevent the press from overhearing the negotiations between the US general Marc Cisneros (who headed the troops in front of the embassy) and Monsignor Laboa. Finally, it was Laboa who threatened to stop the talks if the music was not turned off<sup>12</sup>. After nine days, on 3<sup>rd</sup> January 1990, General Manuel Noriega decided to surrender to the American soldiers. He had been talked into doing that by Monsignor Laboa, who skillfully handled the mediations. In the *Memoirs*, Noriega explained that during the time in the Vatican embassy he did not want to commit suicide nor kill Laboa. He considered turning himself to the Panamanians but they preferred the Americans to take him (Noriega et al, 1997). The General made the American soldiers agree on his wearing a uniform and be taken to a helicopter to Miami, where he became Federal Prisoner no.41586. In 1992, after a process, Noriega was sentenced to 40 years imprisonment for drug trafficking, money laundering and racketeering (Rother, 1992)<sup>13</sup>.

### Reactions after the invasion

President Bush praised the invasion as being a blessing for the Panamanians:

The United States is eager to work with the Panamanian people in partnership and friendship to rebuild their economy. The Panamanian people want democracy, peace and the chance for a better life and dignity and freedom. The people of the United

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<sup>12</sup> An accurate description of Noriega’s stay in the embassy can be found in: Noriega, M., Eisner, P., *America’s Prisoner-The Memoirs of Manuel Noriega*, New York: Random House, 1997.

<sup>13</sup> Noriega was extradited to France in 2010 but in 2011 France extradited him back to Panama to be imprisoned there. He died on 29<sup>th</sup> May 2017 due to a brain tumor.

States seek only to support them in pursuit of these noble goals (doc: *Panama, the decision to use force*).

Eighty per cent of the American people supported their president. According to a poll also ninety-two per cent of the Panamanians approved the US action (Ropp, 1991).

The reactions in the world were varied. The Organisation of American States (OAS) on 22<sup>nd</sup> December 1989 passed Resolution #534 (800/89) that condemned the US invasion:

... the permanent council of the OAS resolves to deeply regret the military intervention in Panama, to urge the immediate cessation of hostilities and bloodshed and to request the launching of negotiations between the various political sectors of the country that will lead to a concerted solution to the Panamanian institutional crisis (doc: *The US Invasion of Panama. The Truth...*).

Twenty countries supported the resolution, with the United States casting the only dissenting vote. Abstaining were the four Central American countries with close ties to the United States – Costa Rica, El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala and the Caribbean Island state of Antigua and Barbuda (Goshko et al, 1989). Also the United Nations in the Resolution of 30<sup>th</sup> December 1989 denounced the invasion by 75 to 20 votes – Great Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Turkey, Israel, Japan and Australia proved to be US supporters, whereas Cuba and Peru were the most harsh critics of American actions in Panama (Bryła, 1997). In Panama, the Election Tribunal, having analysed the results and votes from 7<sup>th</sup> May 1989 delivered by Panamanian Episcopal Conference, proclaimed ADOC Party coalition the winner obtaining 62 % of the votes and the COLINA defeat with just 24,9 % of the votes (Caño, 1989).

The invasion of Panama left the country shattered<sup>14</sup>. The victims were not fully reported and the Chorrillo district of Panama City looked like a “little Hiroshima”. Red Cross estimated that there were at least 3,000 civilian deaths and 20,000 Panamanians lost their homes. Despite all the losses, the Panamanians approved of the invasion (Harding, 2006).

William Leogrande claims that the invasion was a success for Bush: the operation was over quickly and achieved its primary mission – installing a government friendly to Washington. US casualties were low – the Panamanians lost more lives and property, but they were relieved that Noriega’s brutal reign was over (Leogrande, 1990).

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<sup>14</sup> In April 2022 Panamanian President Laurentino Cortizo established the national day of mourning in Panama to be celebrated on 20<sup>th</sup> December each year since 2022 to commemorate the victims of the US invasion: *Panama Gets New National Holiday: Honoring Victims of 1989 US Invasion*, <https://www.nbcchicago.com/news/national-international/panama-gets-new-national-holiday-honoring-victims-of-1989-us-invasion/2796866/>

## Conclusions

The time of Noriega rule changed the lives of Panamanians. At first the reforms introduced by Omar Torrijos were thought to be the preview of positive changes in the lot of the Panamanians. However, after his death, the struggle of the commanders was more for the power than for the well-being of the citizens of Panama. Whereas it can be argued that the times of Torrijos did present some degree of human welfare, the times of Noriega surely cannot be treated as such ones. It may even be assumed that Manuel Noriega managed to destroy the germs of democracy and a kind of political stability started by Omar Torrijos. Panama was in fact governed by the army. The General placed figurehead presidents in the office, introduced terror and tolerated no criticism. Every indication of acting against the plans of Noriega was destroyed by his faithful soldiers, either in the form of massive attacks by the Dignity Battalions against the protesting crowds, or in clandestine operations – murdering the inconvenient critics (e.g. Hugo Spadafora). The Panamanians lived in a military state.

The 1980s in Panama can be treated as a lost decade. The economic measures employed by the United States managed to deteriorate the industry of Panama. The outcome of the invasion is also significant – the loss of lives, homelessness, lootings – they all affected the country. In political terms “Operation Just Cause” harmed Panama as well. The Panamanians felt that their new president – Guillermo Endara, who was sworn in a day before the invasion, was in fact installed by the Americans.

Although it can be stated that the United States “created” Noriega, manipulated his actions according to the current trends of the American Administrations, but, in fact, it was general Noriega who orchestrated the outcome of his involvements, always being positive for him. The Panamanian Defence Forces (PDF) Leader survived two major coups against him, (there were also other, less significant ways of deposing him), he negotiated his resignation with the US authorities trying to win as much as possible. However, Noriega lost the last battle – his capture finally came true. George Bush chose the protection of the lives of the Americans living in Panama as a pretext for the intervention. Actually, the reason was the safety of the Panama Canal. The USA could not allow such an unpredictable person as Noriega to operate the international marine trade on his own.

The Americans used military means to depose Noriega due to the fact that all other attempts failed – neither the negotiations (offering money to the General, promising to drop the court charges) nor economic sanctions or covert actions were able to lead to the overthrow of the PDF leader. The reasons for such

an unsuccessful outcome could be: insufficient planning on the part of the USA or underestimating the skills of the Panamanian Leader. The United States had “introduced” the problem (employed Noriega as an informant), cooperated with him (joined US–Panama military exercises, assistance for the DEA), relied on his help in Central American problems (in Nicaragua and El Salvador) and then, suddenly realised that the General was getting out of control. Until the atrocities of Noriega were made public, he had been a convenient co-operator of the USA. The CIA knew that he was a double agent and that he sometimes acted contrary to American interests, nevertheless, the agency tolerated him. When *The New York Times* revealed the actions of Noriega and his connection to drug dealers, the American Administration could no longer pretend that the General was a positive person. But, even at that stage, the US authorities had different plans of action for him.

The Panamanians tried to make the PDF Leader resign from the office. They showed their resentment towards his rule in street protests, by civil disobedience, in oppositionist newspapers – all these means were too little, though. The PDF acted to destroy the citizens – it had guns, well-trained military units (*Dobermans, Dignity Battalions*) and, first of all, it had the power to suspend constitutional guarantees in Panama. There were some seeds of the popular decision making – elections when the people could vote, but, ironically, could not choose the presidents, who were appointed by Manuel Noriega. Besides, the office of the head of state was not at all significant – there existed the president but he had no real power. All the decisions were to be approved by the General. Even former Panamanian presidents (Delvalle) turned for help to the USA.

The coups organised within the PDF were too weak to depose the Commander. At the end, there appeared some faithful soldiers who always saved Noriega. The Panamanians themselves were unable to depose Noriega. The situation in the country was too complex – all forms of life were militarised, directly or indirectly. Noriega was governing the country from behind the scenes. He preferred to be the leader of the military than the president, who in fact had much less power.

The American intervention was a relief for the Panamanians. The USA overthrew the dictator who had endured all other attempts of suppressing him. The price was very high and Panama was to suffer the consequences for many years to come, but without external assistance, the citizens would not have achieved much. Although the undertaken political and economic steps were harsh, the figure of Manuel Noriega was too tough to be eradicated in any other way, only by the Panamanians themselves.

Could Panama have become a democratic country in the 1980s if Noriega had not assumed the power? Rather not, since 1968 the army had been *de facto* the ruler of the country. Torrijos introduced some roots of democratic measures but they were not enough. When Noriega started his leadership, it was easier for him to govern in a “military” way than to extend some forms of democracy. He was prepared to administer the country as he had been taught in the military academy, he had no democratic examples to follow.

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