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Arthur H. Davis, left, the American Ambassador to Panama, speaking with Gen. Fred Woerner, the commander of the U.S. Southern Command, and John Maisto, center, the American chargé d'affaires,

before boarding a plane for flight to Washington. Mr. Davis, who was recalled by President Bush last week, said Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega ordered the attack last week on opposition leaders.

U.S. Invasion Is Debated in Panama

By LINDSEY GRUSON

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PANAMA, May 15 — One of the happiest days in Martha D.'s life came last year when Washington began seeking the overthrow of Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega; one of the unhappiest, the day she realized the United States would not invade.

"I felt exactly the same way as the day I was told Santa Claus doesn't exist," said Mrs. D., a figure in Panamanian political and social life who spoke on the condition that she would not be fully identified. "Don't get me wrong, my admiration for the U.S. is extraordinary, even if I don't think it's Santa Claus anymore."

Now invasion fever is growing once again. The arrival Friday of the first of almost 2,000 reinforcements dispatched by President Bush has led many Panamanians to express hope that the United States will solve Panama's problem for Panamanians by

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sending in the marines to drive out the general, the country's 53-year-old de facto ruler.

"The majority of the people will clap and wave the troops on," said a former aide to Arnulfo Arias Madrid, who built a legendary political career here out of populist anti-American campaigns. "They'll give them water, coffee and sandwiches."

Services Have Deteriorated

While pro-invasion sentiment is widespread, it is far from unanimous. It is in large part little more than general dissatisfaction with the regime's inability to deliver services, which have deteriorated steadily throughout the 18-month crisis.

"If you have a cancer, you have to cut it out," said one Panamanian. "The whole country wants to be liberated from Noriega. We don't want an invasion, but it's our only hope to get rid of this evil."

But many Panamanians say an invasion would quickly provoke a backlash. They note that nationalist fever was fanned by Brig. Gen. Omar Torrijos Herrera's demand for sovereignty over the Panama Canal after he took power in a coup in 1968. Demonstrations at Balboa High School to protest the equal treatment given Panamanian and American flags erupted into riots in 1964 in which at least two dozen Panamanians and six Americans were killed. But the canal treaties signed in 1977 by President Jimmy Carter and General Torrijos, who died in a helicopter crash in 1981, went a long way toward calming matters.

Today, the leaders of the political opposition who apparently won the May 7 election remain united, publicly at least, against any invasion or direct American military intervention. In large part, that stems from the regime's attacks on them as "Yankee stooges" who have "sold out" the country.

But it also stems from geopolitical reasons. An invasion would almost certainly isolate any subsequent government from most other countries in the Western Hemisphere. Even the threat of an invasion has rubbed Latin Americans' anti-American nerve. Their denunciations of the Noriega regime, widespread electoral fraud and brutal crackdowns have been coupled almost without exception with strong warnings against "foreign intervention."

Still, for many Panamanians the removal of General Noriega by American troops would be a welcome event, despite a yearlong anti-American campaign by the Government.

'Bring Them In'

Ricardo Meléndez Vásquez, a 29-year-old unemployed carpenter, said: "In my neighborhood, everybody is for an invasion. Now." Mr. Meléndez, who has had to put off his wedding plans because of the depression ravaging what was once the region's financial jewel, added, "Bring them in."

Such sentiments, rare in Latin America, spring from this country's traditionally close ties to the United States. Panama was not a country until 1903 when Theodore Roosevelt paved the way for the building of the canal by arranging for what was then a province of Colombia to secede.

Over the years, this city became Miami south, a metropolis with shimmering skyscrapers and worldwide touch-tone telephone service. With its wide avenues and tropical shade trees, it had more in common with a typical Florida suburb than other Latin American cities.

For decades the United States has based tens of thousands of troops here. Many Panamanians say they think an invasion would be little more than a carnival in which thousands of free-spending soldiers would infuse dollars into the withering economy.

"There'll be about four people who fight," said one Panamanian, who supports an invasion even though he has long ties to Arnulfo Arias. "It'll be a fiesta."

But the vitriolic anti-American campaign has struck a sympathetic chord in many Panamanians, especially among the poor and blacks. Many note that Americans imposed strict segregation while running the canal and minorities suffered disproportionate casualties while constructing the 50-mile-long waterway. "It was nothing less than slavery," recalled a retired black union leader whose father died while building the canal.

Anti-Americanism is considered particularly strong among the 15,000-man United States-trained armed forces. It is also the bedrock of the Dig-

nity Battalions, paramilitary troops started last year as part of the regime's effort to fan the nationalistic flame. Benjamin Colamarco, the commander, said that weapons had been distributed to the 10,000 men in the paramilitary squads and that they would "fight to the last man."