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John H. Sununu ordered a study of how the Panama coup was handled by United States officials.

G.I. DUTY IN PANAMA

Troops Blocked 2 Routes at Request of Rebels, White House Says

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Oct. 5 — Senior Administration officials said today that the American military had played a greater role in the Panamanian uprising than it had previously acknowledged.

White House officials also said the Bush Administration's team performed badly in a major test, noting that the top foreign policy and military officials were never called together to discuss the attempted coup against Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega, the Panamanian leader. John H. Sununu, the White House chief of staff, ordered a study of how the Panama coup was handled. [Page A11.]

Moreover, there was continued criticism on Capitol Hill of the Administration's decision not to help the rebels more. That led to mutual recriminations between the Administration and members of Congress, like Senator Jesse Helms, Republican of North Carolina.

Noriega Was Believed Captive

Although many facts remain in dispute, officials said it was now accepted that General Noriega was in fact held prisoner by the rebels for between two and four hours during the coup Tuesday. On Wednesday, officials in Washington said they were not certain he had been a prisoner. Senator Helms said the United States lost its chance at getting the general because of the confusion and because it did not respond to a rebel appeal for military support in apprehending him.

In Panama tonight, armed men attacked the opposition party headquarters hours after General Noriega signaled a sweeping crackdown and opposition figures were detained. [Page A10.]

One important new disclosure surrounding the coup was that two days after President Bush declared publicly that it was not an American operation, Administration officials said United States Army troops in Panama had moved at the request of the rebels to block two routes that the rebels suspected would be used by forces loyal to the general. In earlier reports of the roadblocks, American officials had said the intention was merely to protect American lives and property.

The officials said the roadblock failed because a third road eventually used by General Noriega's loyal troops was not blocked.

The White House was on the defensive today as Senator Helms derided the Administration as "Keystone

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Bush Aides Admit a U.S. Role in Panama Coup and Bad Handling

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Kops" who displayed a "total lack of planning."

Defense Secretary Dick Cheney, in an interview in his office, said, "That is crazy, in my humble opinion."

Mr. Cheney said the White House had "made a conscious decision" not to confront the Noriega forces actively because officials did not see any circumstances under which they would have seized General Noriega without going to war with an element of the Panamanian Defense Forces.

Earlier, Mr. Cheney called Senator Helms's account "a bunch of hogwash."

Since Mr. Bush earlier this year had publicly invited Panama's military to oust General Noriega and turn him over to the United States, the accusations of bungling, if true, could lead to the Administration's first major foreign policy embarrassment.

In assailing the Administration, Mr. Helms provided an account of events that sharply conflicted with virtually every statement by Administration spokesmen in the last two days.

Although Mr. Cheney and other officials disputed Mr. Helms's account, several Administration policymakers acknowledged that there was some validity to his general point that the White House had not handled the rebellion properly.

White House officials said they lacked sufficient procedures to manage the fast-moving crisis, and they noted that at no time did all top national-security officials meet in one place to discuss strategy.

Feverish Round of Meetings

The accusations by Mr. Helms, presented in a speech on the Senate floor, plunged the White House into a feverish round of meetings, and Mr. Sununu met with senior aides to Mr. Helms.

The principal issue in dispute between Senator Helms and the White House is whether the rebels ever offered to turn General Noriega over to the American authorities. Mr. Helms asserted that at 9 A.M. Tuesday, the rebel officers told an American general that while they lacked the firepower to deliver the general, they invited the United States to fight its way into the compound and apprehend him.

The Administration, with Mr. Cheney as its spokesman, has said the rebels refused to turn over General Noriega and wanted instead to permit him to live peacefully in internal exile in Panama. According to the Administration version, that exchange took place later in the coup, about 11:30 P.M. Panamanian time on Tuesday. Panama is one hour behind Washington.

An Administration official with access to extensive reporting on the issue said the discrepancy probably stemmed from missed communications among the military, intelligence and diplomatic officials in Panama.

'Won't' Became 'Want'

That official said the rebels had told military officers in the Army's Southern Command that they "won't" turn General Noriega over. That was accurately relayed to Pentagon officials in Washington. Meanwhile, the Southern Command told the embassy in Panama of that information, which was misun-

derstood as their suggesting that the rebels "want" to turn him over.

That fact was reported to the State Department and Central Intelligence Agency simultaneously, prompting the State Department to call a hurried meeting with Government lawyers to consider such a step.

Minutes later, the coup collapsed.

One official attributed the confusion to the fact that most of the communications among American officials were

White House says officials performed poorly in a major test.

by telephone, and that connections were poor because Noriega loyalists intermittently interfered with the lines.

A few hours later, C.I.A. representatives were in Congress briefing members of the Congressional intelligence committees with the agency's version of events, which was that the rebels were prepared to hand over General Noriega.

Officials said the C.I.A. briefings, which contradicted the White House version of events, contributed to the storm of outrage from Mr. Helms and other Noriega critics, such as Senator David L. Boren, Democrat of Oklahoma and chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, and Senator John Kerry, Democrat of Massachusetts.

The pressure prompted Administration officials to elaborate on their actions before the coup. Administration officials said American representatives in Panama City were tipped off late Sunday night that the rebels planned a coup on Monday morning.

Officials said the leaders of the coup asked that the United States block the gate to Fort Amador, a Panamanian-American base that is home to the Panamanian Defense Forces' Fifth Company, and a road near Howard Air Force Base that it was believed the Seventh Company would cross if they sought to reinforce the rebels.

An Administration official said the rebels had been asked whether such American help was a prerequisite to undertaking a coup. "They said no, we'll go ahead anyway, but this would be helpful," the official said.

No Aim to Seize Noriega

The plan, as related by the rebel officers, was to declare a coup and then wait to see how many units rallied to each side. "They said their objective was not to capture Noriega," an Administration official said.

"They were just planning to announce that various senior officers had been retired," the official said.

According to Mr. Cheney, senior American officials had been prepared on Sunday to put the American forces into position to cut the two roads but did not decide to go ahead until Monday.

Early Tuesday, American forces moved into position at Fort Amador and Howard Air Force Base. The coup began at 7 A.M. Panamanian time, and the Fifth Company, in Fort Amador, made no move to mobilize its forces. At

11 A.M., the United States Army blocked the Amador gates.

An American official said that though the plan had not called for General Noriega's capture, the rebels "fortuitously" seized him in the Defense Forces headquarters and held him for several hours.

The Pentagon said the road near the Air Force base was blocked at 12:59.

Mr. Helms insisted that in a conversation at 9 A.M. the rebels invited the Americans to take General Noriega off their hands. At 9:30, Senator Helms said he received a call from Panamanian opposition figures who wanted Washington to block the road from the Tocumen Airport to the General Headquarters, where the general was being held.

Senator Helms said he called the White House and was told that high-level officials were all involved in meetings with visitors like Dmitri T. Yazov, the Soviet Defense Minister, or President Carlos Salinas de Gortari of Mexico.

Within hours, General Noriega had flown his forces to the airport, then had them move over the bridge the rebels had asked to be blocked.