
FOREIGN AFFAIRS

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The Next Panama Crisis

WASHINGTON

The next Panama crisis is coming in exactly eight weeks. Under the treaty, the term of the American administrator of the Canal Company expires on Dec. 31. He must be replaced by a Panamanian. Further, the new head is to be nominated by the Government of Panama, appointed by the President of the United States and confirmed by the Senate.

That was the real, but unmentioned, importance of the flap over the recent failed attempt to oust Gen. Manuel Noriega. American indignation at defiance from the shrewd, corrupt little dictator turned a serious national interest into a preposterous personal vendetta, to the U.S. disadvantage.

Washington had already committed another in a long string of bumbles in handling Panama, and it went unnoticed. As the treaty provides, General Noriega had nominated a new administrator, his crony Carlos Duque. President Bush rejected him without even bothering to send it to the Senate.

But he went further, blocking a possible solution. There could have been a quiet arrangement, through mediators, to make sure General Noriega offered a man the U.S. would accept. He has been smart enough not to obstruct for a minute the functioning of the canal, which is 99 percent of why Panama matters to the U.S. and the rest of the world.

However, the U.S. said it would not accept anybody proposed by General Noriega. That puts Washington in the position of violating the treaty it signed, and the Panamanian strongman will doubtless make a noisy point of it, to the distress of all America's friends and treaty partners.

The ploy the U.S. intends to use is to appoint the Panamanian who is now No. 2 in the Canal Company as acting administrator. He is a highly respected engineer named Fernando Manfredo, fully capable of doing the job. But it isn't clear whether he will agree to put himself in the middle of the fight.

A new administrator of the canal must be named.

Washington will argue that choosing a Panamanian citizen fulfills the "spirit" of the treaty, and that it has a right to ignore the letter because the existing Government is not "legitimate." An acting administrator wouldn't be submitted for Senate approval.

This is a box the U.S. made for itself when it conferred the distinction of being America's current No. 1 bugaboo on General Noriega, as though he were the main reason for our interest in Panama. He's a crook, a drug dealer, a thoroughly nasty man once on the C.I.A. payroll, but that doesn't make him so exceptional. You don't hear the President of the United States calling for the ouster of the Prime Minister of the Bahamas or Honduran generals, who are just as involved in drugs.

But we got hooked on General Noriega and launched amateurish schemes for not-so-covert action to show who is boss by proxy. Elliot Abrams, the rambunctious Assistant Secretary of State for Latin America in the Reagan Administration, cooked up the idea of a mini-coup in which the weak Panamanian President fired the General in early 1988.

The General immediately fired the President, whom he had installed in the first place, and the U.S. cut itself off from Panamanian authorities on grounds that the Government was then illegal. Gen. Fred Woerner, head of the U.S. Southern Command, understood the intricate problems that posed and the foolish inversion of U.S. priorities. He discreetly criticized the policy and was bounced for his sensible efforts to keep bad from getting worse.

We have the Joint Chiefs to thank that things didn't go on to disaster. Mr. Abrams's next script would have bundled opposition leaders into Quarry Heights, the U.S. headquarters, surrounded them with U.S. troops, and had them proclaim a government in exile on Panamanian territory.

Adm. William Crowe, then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, put his foot down. Such folly would have endangered every U.S. base in the world. Furthermore, the Pentagon figured it could take three more U.S. divisions to deal with the possible consequences.

What bothered Admiral Crowe the most was that the U.S. was supposed to take all the risks while the opposition waited compliantly to be handed power. Those who argued that Washington should have made sure this year's bungled coup would work had no reason to believe General Noriega's rebellious henchmen would give way to civilians. More likely, the U.S. would have been saddled with a Noriega clone whom it had put in power.

The lesson is that flag-waving, posturing and cockamamie plots can't substitute for strategic thought and sound diplomacy. Instead of stirring American emotions, the Administration's responsibility is to make U.S. interests clear. Where Panama is concerned, that is the canal, first, second and third. Now we are left to face the real issue. It won't be easy. □