

Why the Invasion Was Justified

How does President Bush justify sending 10,000 troops into combat in tiny Panama? He offers four reasons, two of them so inflated that they evaporate on inspection. "To defend democracy in Panama," he said. Yes? Well, who appointed America the world's political policeman? "To combat drug trafficking," he said. Yes? Well, when did it become the mission of America's armed forces to chase after Manuel Noriega like an operetta Foreign Legion pursuing the Red Shadow?

But impatience with puffed-up reasons should not detract from solid ones. The President also said he acted to safeguard the lives of Americans and to protect the integrity of the Panama Canal treaties. Those are sound reasons, and taken together they support the intervention. Mr. Bush was not obliged to act yesterday, but he was justified in doing so.

It was General Noriega who last week declared that a "state of war" existed with the United States. That appeared to put American lives and treaty rights in peril, especially when followed by a series of violent incidents that resulted in the death of one American soldier, the wounding of another and the mistreatment of a third soldier and his wife. The President acted in response to real risks.

To his credit, he turned to military force only as a last resort. Beginning two years ago with economic sanctions, Washington tried a variety of less drastic approaches. This May, General Noriega trashed the ideal answer, free elections, with blood and fraud. He ruthlessly crushed revolts by Panamanian officers.

Washington made clear its sympathies but re-

frained from direct military involvement. Mindful of Latin sensitivity to unilateral U.S. intrusions, the Administration sought multilateral action through the Organization of American States, to little avail. That record should make the U.S. invasion more palatable to critics concerned about military restraint and respect for sovereignty.

Even if justifiable, the invasion carried substantial costs, including casualties and hostages. The legitimacy of Guillermo Endara's new presidency is tainted for having begun at a U.S. base. Early elections could reaffirm the apparent victory General Noriega stole from Mr. Endara in May.

American forces may not be able to withdraw quickly and safely to their bases without being drawn further into Panamanian politics. The U.S.'s action, together with its support for the Aquino Government in the Philippines, may complicate renewal of American base agreements abroad.

Some important friends and allies have already voiced misgivings. And the invasion has fueled enduring Latin suspicions about Washington's selective respect for sovereignty. Civilized countries, with the U.S. usually in the vanguard, oppose foreign intervention in the affairs of sovereign states. Panama is readily distinguishable from, say, Afghanistan; still, what kind of precedent does the invasion set for potential Soviet action in Eastern Europe?

Any course in Panama would have had costs. In the end, the most important questions are: Did President Bush test less drastic approaches? Yes. Is there a clear legal basis for the presence of Americans in Panama? Yes. Does the President have a responsibility to protect them? Yes.