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Remembering an Invasion: The Panama Intervention in America's Political Memory

Dave Nagaji
Linfield College

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**Remembering an Invasion:
The Panama Intervention in America's Political Memory**

A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty of the Department of History
in Partial Fulfillment for the Program of
Major in History

by

Dave Nagaji

McMinnville, Oregon

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Nagaji, Dave

Advisor's Name

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To Alan Suemori,
who,
more than anyone,
taught me to write
at an academic standard

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

In the December of 1989, the United States launched Operation Just Cause, a military invasion of the country of Panama, capturing Manuel Noriega and overthrowing his government.¹ This research project has examined how Colin Powell, Richard Cheney, James Baker, and George H. W. Bush presented Operation Just Cause in their memoirs. It has attempted to determine how these senior leaders' depictions of this invasion incorporated it into the Bush administration's overall foreign-policy strategy, and the research has found that their general approach was to present the Panama intervention as an isolated incident which had no intentional link to other major events at the time, was not made for strategic or political gain, and was driven entirely or almost entirely by idealist reasons. These former leaders accomplished this by neglecting to connect the Panama intervention with the decline of Soviet power, painting the media as an antagonistic force which hindered the invasion rather than helped the administration's standing, connecting the intervention to the Gulf War in incidental or only minor ways, frequently holding each other responsible for the decision to invade instead of taking responsibility themselves, and justifying it by appealing to democracy and self-defense.

Operation Just Cause was not the first time that Panama found itself involved with the United States. The small country had already gone through a long history of being entangled in American foreign policy. In 1898, the United States declared war on Spain. This conflict had been precipitated by sympathy for Spanish-occupied Cuba and the explosion of the *Maine*, an American battleship which had been stationed in Havana's harbor. The Spanish-American War was a clear victory for the United States, which decisively defeated Spain in a relatively short

¹ John Robert Greene, "Bush, George," in *The Encyclopedia of American Political History*, ed. Paul Finkelman and Peter Wallenstein (Washington, D.C.: CQ, 2001), 36.

amount of time and with relatively low losses of its own. In the wake of the conflict, expansionists within the United States triumphed; Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines came under American control. Meanwhile, the United States gained the rights to build a naval base in the newly-independent Cuba. These new land holdings increased the international influence of the United States and set the stage for further ventures in Latin America.²

Earlier, in 1870, the United States had hoped to build and utilize a canal in Panama. However, talks with Colombia, which controlled Panama, proved unsuccessful.³ The United States was forced to seriously revisit the idea of a canal in Panama after its war with Spain. As a direct consequence of its victory in the Spanish-American War, America was left with territory in the Atlantic as well as the Pacific. Creating a passageway which could bridge these two oceans suddenly became a matter of great military importance.⁴

Though the Senate granted President Theodore Roosevelt authorization to make a deal with the Colombian government and obtain the land necessary for a canal, the Colombians refused the offer presented to them. Threats were equally ineffective.⁵ In response to this lack of cooperation on the part of the Colombian government, President Roosevelt, who had played a major role in planning the Spanish-American War before resigning from his government post to fight the Spanish in Cuba, backed a Panamanian revolution against Colombia. With Colombia's

² April L. Brown, "Spanish-American War," in *The Encyclopedia of American Political History*, ed. Paul Finkelman and Peter Wallenstein (Washington, D.C.: CQ, 2001), 361-363.

³ Robert C. Harding, *The History of Panama* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2006), 22.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 24-26.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 28-29.

rule over, the now-independent country of Panama leased the necessary land to the United States and construction of the canal began.⁶

Staking out an aggressive position on foreign policy issues, President Theodore Roosevelt had been a strong advocate for United States intervention in Latin America.⁷ In 1904, when Panama nearly fell victim to a military coup, Theodore Roosevelt deployed U.S. Marines to end the crisis. In 1908, American troops were present in Panama to oversee the country's elections. Throughout the early twentieth century, United States military interventions in Panama continued, and a long-term presence of United States military personnel within the county took root. Meanwhile, the Panamanian economy became heavily reliant on banks based in the United States.⁸

President Herbert Hoover's Good Neighbor Policy, declared in 1928, promised a pivot away from the interventionist policies of Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson. However, such promises had little effect on how the United States treated Panama. Though less public and more secretive about doing so, the United States government continued to interfere in the political affairs of Panamanians. When Arnulfo Arias led a populist coup in 1931, his success was only allowed to occur because Washington was confident that he would not act against the interests of the United States. This approach of public friendliness was continued under President Franklin Roosevelt, largely for the purpose of undercutting Germany and Japan, which were seeking influence in Panama. Yet, despite some concessions to Panama under Franklin Roosevelt, the country's efforts to become economically independent failed and the country's

⁶ Sabra Bissette Ledent, "Roosevelt, Theodore," in *The Encyclopedia of American Political History*, ed. Paul Finkelman and Peter Wallenstein (Washington, D.C.: CQ, 2001), 333-334.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 334.

⁸ Robert C. Harding, *The History of Panama* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2006), 38-39.

canal remained in American hands. When Arnulfo Arias was elected Panama's president in 1938, the United States became concerned by his nationalistic ideas and pro-Nazi sympathies; the 1941 coup which overthrew him had American support. The new government aligned with the United States in World War II and facilitated a greater United States military presence.⁹

Despite the contentious history between the United States and Panama, the Cold War brought the two countries closer together. Panama's National Guard received American training and financial support as part of America's overall strategy of fortifying Latin American countries against the communist threat. Panama, with its canal and its strategic location, was of particular value to United States policy-makers.¹⁰ In an attempt to steer Panama's people away from revolutionary communism, President Kennedy dramatically boosted financial support being sent to Panama. Much of this money went directly to the country's military. The year 1963 saw the establishment of the School of the Americas, a school in the Canal Zone of the country which existed for the purpose of training officers of Latin American armies in anti-communist methods.¹¹ Panama was quickly becoming a centerpiece in America's grand strategy to combat global communism.

In 1969, a Panamanian Lieutenant Colonel by the name of Omar Torrijos emerged as the country's new leader after yet another coup. Though reportedly forced by gunpoint to join in the military takeover, Torrijos quickly took power for himself and assured his regime's safety by threatening to attack the Canal Zone if the United States attempted to depose him.¹² Under his rule, the office of president became purely symbolic; Torrijos himself made the decisions.

⁹ Ibid., 39-42.

¹⁰ Ibid., 50.

¹¹ Ibid., 56-57.

¹² Ibid., 66-67.

Defying the United States, Torrijos cultivated relationships with Fidel Castro and Momar Qadhafi.¹³ He even allowed communists to hold positions in his cabinet.¹⁴

It was under Torrijos that the country's canal would begin its movement away from United States ownership. When President Carter took office, he pursued a course of policy which was broadly based on a governing philosophy emphasizing human rights. Such an approach to issues led his administration to conduct actions in Latin America which many would consider radical.¹⁵ In 1978, the Senate approved Carter's treaties, setting the Panama Canal to come under Panamanian control at the end of the century.¹⁶ Carter meant for these treaties to appease the rulers and people of Panama, reducing the likelihood of the Torrijos regime attempting to take the Canal Zone by force.¹⁷ But these two men would not be in office much longer. Torrijos died in 1981, when his airplane crashed into a mountain, providing an opportunity for Manuel Noriega to take power.¹⁸ The previous year, Carter's administration was brought down by high inflation, persistent unemployment, and a hostage crisis abroad; Ronald Reagan was elected president.¹⁹

Noriega had grown up poor in one of Panama's slums. However, his brother was able to secure him a scholarship to attend a military academy in Peru. Afterwards, he continued his training under the United States military at Fort Bragg and the School of the Americans. He

¹³ Ibid., 69.

¹⁴ Ibid., 71.

¹⁵ Peter B. Levy, *Encyclopedia of the Reagan-Bush Years* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1996), 229.

¹⁶ Sabra Bissette Ledent, "Carter, Jimmy," in *The Encyclopedia of American Political History*, ed. Paul Finkelman and Peter Wallenstein (Washington, D.C.: CQ, 2001), 52.

¹⁷ Robert C. Harding, *The History of Panama* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2006), 79-80.

¹⁸ Ibid., 87.

¹⁹ Peter B. Levy, *Encyclopedia of the Reagan-Bush Years* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1996), 130-131.

became an informant for the CIA and continued in that capacity while chief of intelligence under Omar Torrijos. After Torrijos died, Noriega remained a high-ranking military officer and, when Paredes, who had become head of the military, stepped down from that post to run for president, Noriega took charge of the military.²⁰ By utilizing this position, “Noriega ruled Panama from behind the scenes from 1981 through 1989.”²¹

The degree to which Manuel Noriega built up and cultivated Panama’s military is worth noting. Having successfully “promoted himself to the rank of general,” Noriega quickly “renamed the National Guard the Panamanian Defense Forces,” as well as “tripled its size.”²² Noriega’s military force was indisputably better-equipped, more professionalized, and significantly larger than it had been two decades ago, giving his regime something of a deterrent against foreign powers. The strongman made his PDF flourish, and the bulk of its officers would remain loyal to him, even during difficult times.²³

The Reagan administration used Noriega as a tool in pursuit of its foreign-policy goals. Whereas Carter had acted based on a humanitarian agenda, Reagan was concerned with fighting communism. To this end, he supported the government of El Salvador, backed the contras in Nicaragua, and invaded Grenada.²⁴ By the time President Reagan took office, the dependence of the United States on the Panama Canal had diminished greatly; a navy which was always present in both the Atlantic and Pacific, better ground transportation, and the development of nuclear

²⁰ Robert C. Harding, *The History of Panama* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2006), 91-93

²¹ Alexander Kazan, Amy McKee, and Maryellen McQuade, “Panama,” in *Encyclopedia of Latin American Politics*, ed. Diana Kapiszewski and Alexander Kazan (Westport, CT: Oryx, 2002), 241.

²² Robert C. Harding, *The History of Panama* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2006), 93.

²³ *Ibid.*, 106.

²⁴ Peter B. Levy, *Encyclopedia of the Reagan-Bush Years* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1996), 229-230.

missiles reduced both its commercial and military importance.²⁵ Regardless, Noriega profited politically when he enacted legislation which gave Panama's military force a responsibility to protect the Panama Canal against communists. Despite the canal's reduced usefulness, this gesture appears to have worked. The United States provided Noriega's military with various armaments, including tanks.²⁶

Reagan's administration came to form a symbiotic relationship with Noriega. The dictator's background, having attended the School of the Americas and worked with the CIA, may have contributed to the ease with which he gained the trust of the Reagan administration and several of America's federal agencies. He allowed the United States and the contras to use Panamanian land in the campaign against Central American communism. He also permitted the American military to keep its headquarters for Latin America in his country, even though its existence in Panama was technically violating treaties between the two countries. Panama was again becoming a key piece in America's anti-communist strategy. His considerable assistance, especially in arming and training the anti-communist contras, led Reagan's administration to overlook his drug-trafficking activities. Furthermore, the United States provided funds for Noriega's preferred presidential candidate in Panama's 1984 presidential election. After the race became too close and Noriega opted to steal it for his candidate, the American government praised the election and sent Secretary of State Schultz to the subsequent inauguration.²⁷

Relations between the United States and the Manuel Noriega regime, however, became strained due to a string of abuses perpetrated by the dictator. A Panamanian named Hugo Spadafora attempted to raise awareness of Noriega's participation in the drug trade. He was

²⁵ Robert C. Harding, *The History of Panama* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2006), 90.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 93.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 93-98.

arrested by one of Noriega's intelligence agents, and his decapitated corpse was found shortly thereafter. This set off a scandal which led to Panama's president resigning from office and resulted in the United States government cutting economic aid to Panama down to a fraction of what it had been. Still, at least some in Washington saw the strongman as useful in the effort to arm the contras against the Sandinistas.²⁸ Then, in 1986, Congress reauthorized the sending of aid to the contras; with such aid now legal and openly carried out, Noriega's services in support of the contras were no longer necessary. Any protection from Washington which he may have still had evaporated when he became implicated in the Iran-Contra scandal and his "drug connections" became publicly known.²⁹

America's relationship with Noriega quickly turned even more sour. The dictator worsened his situation by responding to unrest within his country by imposing what was effectively marshal law and assaulting protestors. In response to such actions, the United States Senate called for him to step down. The American government withdrew all of its military aid and worked through several avenues to punish Noriega economically. By the time 1987 reached its end, the Panamanian economy had been crippled to a severe extent. Noriega began reaching out to the Soviet Union and Libya.³⁰

From here, events in Panama moved rapidly towards their conclusion. Noriega's military escalated its harassment of American servicemembers, and, in the December of 1988, Bush made a dramatic declaration: "Noriega must go."³¹ Another blatant perpetration of electoral fraud by Noriega led Jimmy Carter to publicly condemn his regime and prompted his fellow Latin

²⁸ Ibid., 98-100.

²⁹ Ibid., 102.

³⁰ Ibid., 104-107.

³¹ Ibid., 110.

Americans to give up on supporting him. Caught between the goal of promoting democracy and the belief that Panama should handle its problems without intervention from abroad, the Organization of American States was paralyzed. President Bush suggested that Panamanians overthrow their dictator, but when Giroldi, one of Noriega's officers, attempted to do so, the United States responded in an indecisive and convoluted way. Without American support, this haphazard coup failed; the conspirators were killed. As Americans residing in Panama continued to live in fear, American tanks and helicopters began arriving at United States bases within the country.³²

This crisis reached its climax in the December of 1989. The puppet-legislature of Noriega's regime named him "chief executive officer of the government"; he then made the declaration that Panama and the United States were in a "state of war."³³ The next day, December 16, 1989, two violent events occurred. A U.S. Marine was shot and killed at one of Panama's military checkpoints, and an American Navy lieutenant was arrested and beaten, along with his wife. President Bush ordered the invasion of Panama the next day.³⁴ In doing so, he acted without consulting Congress.³⁵ On December 20, 1989, American forces arrived in Panama, joining with the troops who had already been stationed there. Panama City was captured within seventy-two hours. Manuel Noriega fled to the Vatican embassy, which protected him until January 3, 1990. On that day, Noriega surrendered and was subsequently extradited to the United States, where he faced charges for his role in the drug trade. He was convicted in the

³² Ibid., 112-114.

³³ Ibid., 114.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Carol Jackson Adams, "War Powers," in *The Encyclopedia of American Political History*, ed. Paul Finkelman and Peter Wallenstein (Washington, D.C.: CQ, 2001), 433.

April of 1992 and sentenced to federal prison.³⁶ American forces “remained in Panama briefly,” so that they could prevent any potential uprisings and “oversee the transfer of power to Endara.”³⁷

At the time, there was no clear consensus on whether or not the Panama intervention was justified. By the December of 1989, Americans had come to see Noriega as brutal and abusive towards those whom he ruled over, due to the dictator’s cruel actions.³⁸ This negative overall perception of Noriega made the Bush administration’s intervention popular within the United States.³⁹ While polls initially showed a high rate of support for this action among Americans, such positive sentiments eventually faded. This was likely because of the critics who pointed out that Noriega had previously been supported by the United States, meaning that the American government played a role in his rise. Other Latin American countries called the intervention an illegal violation of Panama’s sovereignty.⁴⁰ The operation even caused the United States to be censured by the Organization of American States.⁴¹ However, a post-intervention poll by *CBS News* indicated “that 80 percent of Panamanians—even those who had lost their homes or relatives—approved of the invasion.”⁴²

³⁶ Peter B. Levy, *Encyclopedia of the Reagan-Bush Years* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1996), 273-275.

³⁷ Alexander Kazan, Amy McKee, and Maryellen McQuade, “Panama,” in *Encyclopedia of Latin American Politics*, ed. Diana Kapiszewski and Alexander Kazan (Westport, CT: Oryx, 2002), 244.

³⁸ Peter B. Levy, *Encyclopedia of the Reagan-Bush Years* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1996), 274.

³⁹ Carol Jackson Adams, “War Powers,” in *The Encyclopedia of American Political History*, ed. Paul Finkelman and Peter Wallenstein (Washington, D.C.: CQ, 2001), 433.

⁴⁰ Peter B. Levy, *Encyclopedia of the Reagan-Bush Years* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1996), 274-275.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 231.

⁴² Robert C. Harding, *The History of Panama* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2006), 116-117.

The Panama intervention has, so far, been framed with a historical context provided by tertiary sources. Now, it is time to turn to a review of the secondary-source literature related to this operation. Such literature is important, since it provides one with useful perspectives from a variety of writers. The secondary sources included here touch on the role which the fall of communism played in encouraging the invasion, the role which the media played in covering the invasion, ways in which the operation influenced the subsequent Gulf War, the meetings which directly preceded and led to the decision to invade, and arguments over the degree to which the Panama intervention was justified.

Eytan Gilboa's "The Panama Invasion Revisited: Lessons for the Use of Force in the Post Cold War Era," explains that this intervention "was the first American use of force since 1945 that was unrelated to the cold war," as well as "the first large-scale use of American troops abroad since Vietnam."⁴³ The United States had intervened in Latin America on many occasions to combat "perceived communists threats," but "Noriega was not a communist."⁴⁴ This piece claims that Bush's decision to intervene was brought about by two concurrent developments. The first of these was Noriega's behavior, particularly his repeated harassment of Americans in Panama. The strongman's appointment by the Panamanian National Assembly to "chief of the government," as well as this assembly's declaration of war against the United States, were followed by an escalation in this harassment and multiple cases of explicit violence against Americans.⁴⁵ The second development was the Soviet Union's collapse, which was becoming

⁴³ Eytan Gilboa, "The Panama Invasion Revisited: Lessons for the Use of Force in the Post Cold War Era," *Political Science Quarterly* 110, no. 4 (Winter, 1995-1996): 539, accessed November 25, 2018, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2151883>.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 558.

increasingly apparent; it “was already disintegrating.”⁴⁶ These events created an image of President Bush and his country as weak, at a time when people were looking to the United States “to become the sole remaining superpower.”⁴⁷ Bush’s ability to handle the Noriega crisis in Panama became a test of his “ability to conduct the war on drugs, to promote democracy in Latin America, and to lead world affairs.”⁴⁸ This article claims that Bush wanted to deal with Noriega by ordering “a limited snatching operation,” but Powell convinced him that their chances of getting Noriega and establishing Panamanian democracy would be higher if they demolished the dictator’s military forces and his whole regime.⁴⁹

Wassim Daghrir’s article, “The Media and Operation Just Cause in Panama,” argues that the media backed the operation and provided Bush with political profit. Instead of reporting on all of the factors which led the United States government to oppose Noriega, “the US press focused only on the official explanations,” particularly his “involvement with narcotics trade and his lack of respect for democratic rule.”⁵⁰ While “some commentators questioned the administration’s motives,” such “critical coverage was rather sporadic.”⁵¹ Similarly, the media accepted the Bush administration’s claim that American lives were in danger without scrutinizing this assertion or investigating the evidence offered in support of it. Daghrir goes as far as to say that media outlets protected the government’s explanations by largely excluding “US opponents to the invasion” from the mainstream debate.⁵² Meanwhile, objections to the

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 558-559.

⁵⁰ Wassim Daghrir, “The Media and Operation Just Cause in Panama,” *Journal of Arts & Humanities* 5, no. 5 (2016): 52, accessed November 25, 2018, <http://dx.doi.org/10.18533/journal.v5i5.942>.

⁵¹ Ibid., 53.

⁵² Ibid., 53-54.

intervention from other countries were either downplayed or presented as irrational. The American media “issued positive assessments of the Panama invasion” while praising President Bush’s decision-making and legitimizing his actions.⁵³ If Bush had been seeking to demonstrate his resolve and capabilities as a leader, he appears to have accomplished that goal.

“Paving the Way for Baghdad: The US Invasion of Panama, 1989,” by Brian D’Haeseleer, explains the degree to which members of the Bush administration learned from the invasion of Panama and applied these lessons during the Gulf War. The invasion’s dramatic success convinced Powell that American military power, properly utilized, could quickly defeat an opposing force. By Powell’s own testimony, the Army used the same methods which enabled its success in Panama again during the Gulf War. He also used the same techniques to smoothly handle the media during both of these conflicts. In both military and media matters, Powell noted what worked during the intervention into Panama and directly applied these lessons to the subsequent war with Iraq. Cheney, similarly, came to see Operation Just Cause as a valuable learning experience which prepared the administration for the Gulf War. In particular, the invasion allowed him to practice keeping control over the media and making sure that the public was receiving the sorts of messages which the administration wanted them to. He was able to effectively repeat this management of the media during the Gulf War.⁵⁴

Several books provide accounts of the decision-making process behind the invasion and the operation’s implications from the perspective of the administration. *George Bush: The Life of a Lone Star Yankee* presents all of this in terms which are generally positive. According to this

⁵³ Ibid., 55.

⁵⁴ Brian D’Haeseleer, “Paving the Way for Baghdad: The US Invasion of Panama, 1989,” *The International History Review* (June 2018): 10-11, accessed December 3, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2018.1480512>.

telling of the story, while many incidents of violence moved President Bush closer to ordering the intervention, the case of an officer's wife being sexually assaulted by the PDF "was the last straw."⁵⁵ It goes on to portray the ousting of Noriega as popular with Panamanians and very popular with Americans, even if the United Nations and Organization of American States condemned it. In addition to bringing democracy to Panama, it created an image of Bush as a strong and decisive leader.⁵⁶ *Destiny and Power: The American Odyssey of George Herbert Walker Bush* provides a similar account. This version of the story presents the killing of "a young American marine," as well as the harassment of "a navy lieutenant and his wife" as what prompted the invasion, but it does not single out any occurrence as the prime cause for his decision.⁵⁷ It claims that the invasion of Panama showed that President Bush could carry out "effective military action."⁵⁸

Another book, *Operation Just Cause: The Storming of Panama*, offers a different account of the prelude to the invasion. It assigns greater responsibility for the decision to launch the operation to Powell and offers an explanation of his motives. While mentioning that "Bush was visibly upset" by the violence perpetrated against Americans, it does so only briefly before pivoting to Powell's perspective.⁵⁹ It claims that Powell, who had once considered Panama to be "of secondary importance," saw that "The Soviet bloc was crumbling" and decided to take action in Panama in order to demonstrate America's capabilities as a superpower.⁶⁰ In this telling of the

⁵⁵ Herbert S. Parmet, *George Bush: The Life of a Lone Star Yankee* (New York: Scribner, 1997), 416.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 419.

⁵⁷ Jon Meacham, *Destiny and Power: The American Odyssey of George Herbert Walker Bush* (New York: Random House, 2016), 388.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 389.

⁵⁹ Thomas Donnelly, Margaret Roth, and Caleb Baker, *Operation Just Cause: The Storming of Panama* (New York: Lexington Books, 1991), 96.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

story, it was “Powell and his military advisers” who first concluded that an invasion was called for; Powell went on to convince Cheney at one meeting and the Joint Chiefs of Staff at another.⁶¹ Then, despite doubts raised by Scowcroft and Bush’s concerns about the consequent casualties which could result “among American soldiers and Panamanian civilians,” Powell was able to convince the president and the other officials present at the final meeting that the military both could and should topple Noriega’s regime through the use of overwhelming force.⁶² However, the book does note the many reasons that Bush was sympathetic to the idea of an invasion. Bush considered Noriega to be “his longtime nemesis,” he wanted to bring Endara into power as the head of a democratic government, he was receiving “intelligence reports” which depicted “Noriega as increasingly desperate and paranoid,” and it was appearing that the strongman could no longer keep his followers under control.⁶³

“The Validity of the United States Intervention in Panama under International Law,” by Ved P. Nanda, analyzes the intervention from a legal perspective. While Secretary of State Baker had argued for the invasion’s legality by presenting it as an act of self-defense, “Article 2(4) of the UN Charter” broadly opposed such actions and “Article 18 of the OAS Charter” directly held such actions to be illegitimate.⁶⁴ Though there was a “tense situation” in Panama, this article firmly argues that there was not sufficient danger for Americans or harm being inflicted on them to warrant “a full-scale invasion.”⁶⁵ The intervention, therefore, “was in disregard of the pertinent norms and principles of international law,” and, regardless of the “political objectives

⁶¹ Ibid., 97-98.

⁶² Ibid., 99.

⁶³ Ibid., 98-99.

⁶⁴ Ved P. Nanda, “The Validity of United States Intervention in Panama under International Law,” *The American Journal of International Law* 84, no. 2 (April 1990): 494-495, accessed November 27, 2018, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2203462>.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 497.

President Bush might have achieved,” this piece claims that his choice to invade was detrimental to the “long-term interests of the United States.”⁶⁶ Anthony D’Amato, in “The Invasion of Panama Was a Lawful Response to Tyranny” argues against the position taken by Nanda. To him, the intervention was justified for having freed the Panamanian people “from oppression by a gang of ruling thugs.”⁶⁷ D’Amato compares Noriega to an abusive husband. The strongman and those loyal to him had access to weapons, and he used his power to suppress dissenters with “imprisonment and disappearance.”⁶⁸ Since Noriega held so much power and treated his own people with such brutality, this piece argues, it was “not only legally justified but morally required” for someone to intervene and put a stop to him.⁶⁹ It concludes by claiming that America’s interventions to topple tyrannical regimes have “undoubtedly shaken” other oppressive rulers and “may very well act as catalysts” for global change.⁷⁰

This research project has set itself apart from the secondary literature on Operation Just Cause by focusing more closely on the writings which have been produced by those who were top-ranking officials in positions related to foreign policy at the time of the invasion. Their memoirs and other published personal writings serve as the primary documents which this paper has been built on. These sources have been examined to see what they wrote about the Panama intervention, as well as what they wrote about things which were closely connected to the intervention.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 502-503.

⁶⁷ Anthony D’Amato, “The Invasion of Panama Was a Lawful Response to Tyranny,” *The American Journal of International Law* 84, no. 2 (April 1990): 516, accessed November 27, 2018, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2203464>.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 517. Accessed November 27, 2018. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2203464>.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 518-519.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 524.

In interpreting these texts, this project has utilized the perspective of cultural history. The discipline of history has defined culture in multiple ways. This paper will examine culture in the broadest sense of the term, meaning the interconnected web of attitudes, experiences, values, and concepts which define human life.⁷¹ This definition of culture, leading to a focusing on perspectives, has made the practice of cultural history heavily tied into the field of anthropology.⁷²

The nature of the research done has made this paper into a work of “microhistory”; a kind of writing favored by historians who have drawn inspiration from anthropology, a microhistory focuses intensely on a small group of people who were involved in a particular event and places them “under minute scrutiny.”⁷³ Any historical project which uses the anthropology-inspired approach must exercise caution. With a limited number of sources, which often have flaws, it is easy to make leaps in reasoning and begin to go beyond one’s facts.⁷⁴ Still, a certain level of interpretation and some warranted inferences are necessary when trying to glean insights from memoirs, which tend to be dominated by the voices and assumptions of their authors. At times, it is necessary to read “against the grain,” attempting to see what has been omitted or left unsaid.⁷⁵

⁷¹ John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History: Aims, Methods, and New Directions in the Study of History*, 6th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2015), 205-206.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 222.

⁷³ Anna Green and Kathleen Troup, *The Houses of History: A Critical Reader in Twentieth-Century History and Theory* (New York: New York University, 1999), 174.

⁷⁴ John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History: Aims, Methods, and New Directions in the Study of History*, 6th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2015), 223.

⁷⁵ Anna Green and Kathleen Troup, *The Houses of History: A Critical Reader in Twentieth-Century History and Theory* (New York: New York University, 1999), 179.

THE DECLINE OF SOVIET POWER AND THE END OF THE COLD WAR

It would be careless to write about or consider American foreign policy during this period without keeping the Cold War in mind. The international political situation was clearly changing, according to these memoirs. However, their descriptions of these major changes give the clear impression that there was no causal connection linking the fading of the Soviet threat and the Panama intervention. Rather, these memoirs portray the end of the Cold War as essentially pointing toward peace, with minimal points to the contrary.

In 1962, Colin Powell saw a “neatness and simplicity” in the conflict with global communism and was eager to serve in Vietnam.⁷⁶ Such a Cold War perspective was the foundation of American strategy and planning. However, Mikhail Gorbachev, upon becoming the leader of the Soviet Union, directed his attention away from fighting foreign wars and supporting communist regimes abroad, opting to direct his resources toward domestic affairs instead.⁷⁷ Hearing from Gorbachev in person, Powell came to understand his position as one of “ending the Cold War” and ceasing to be an enemy of the United States.⁷⁸ Shortly before Girolodi’s attempted coup, in fact, Powell met two high-profile Soviets. One of them was General Dimitri Yazov, the Soviet defense minister. The other, General Colonel Vladislav A. Achalov, was Powell’s former adversary, from when Powell had been serving in Germany and in command of V Corps. The two Soviet military leaders were in Cheney’s office, as his guests.⁷⁹

Though skeptical of how successful Gorbachev’s programs of glasnost and perestroika would be, Richard Cheney understood that the United States military could need to change its

⁷⁶ Colin L. Powell with Joseph E. Persico, *My American Journey* (New York: Random House, 1995), 74-75.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 340-341.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 375.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 419.

strategy as a result. If Gorbachev did reform the Soviet Union, then the military's focus would have to pivot away from being prepared "to fight an all-out global nuclear war" and toward being ready "to defeat anyone trying to dominate a region of the world vital to us."⁸⁰ At the time that these developments were occurring, Cheney was immensely distrustful of Gorbachev and that Soviet leader's level of commitment to reform. However, in hindsight, Cheney observed "that 1989 was a turning point in modern history," because the Cold War was coming to a close.⁸¹ In fact, in 1989, Cheney was accompanying the Soviet Union's General Dmitri Yazov on a tour of Gettysburg when he received word from Colin Powell that a coup was underway in Panama.⁸²

The fact that the world was changing, particularly with the coming fall of Soviet communism, was also apparent to James Baker. At the time that they took office, the members of the Bush administration understood that a lot of things were changing and that many of the strategic and political assumptions which had been taken for granted since the end of World War II would no longer be relevant. A "long-term planning paper" which Baker read explained that the Soviet Union was in a state of decline, with "virtually every indicator" pointing to the fact that "Soviet power is waning."⁸³ Gorbachev's approach toward governance allowed for more cooperative diplomacy between the Soviets and Americans, but it also led to a new set of concerns. This new era of diplomatic relations allowed the United States to obtain positive results, such as convincing the Soviets to cut down on their support of the Sandinista government.⁸⁴ One of the new fears was that "humiliating the Soviets as they retreated from their

⁸⁰ Dick Cheney with Liz Cheney, *In My Time: A Personal and Political Memoir* (New York: Threshold Editions, 2011), 160.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 166-167.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 172.

⁸³ James A. Baker, III with Thomas M. DeFrank, *The Politics of Diplomacy: Revolution, War and Peace, 1989-1992* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1995), 40-41.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 59.

global empire” could lead to greater resistance by the “hard-liners in Moscow.”⁸⁵ Another fear was that “Gorbachev’s charm offensive and a diminishing Soviet military threat” could disrupt “West-West unity” and bring about the fragmenting of the NATO alliance.⁸⁶

Baker became especially close to Edward Shevardnadze, granting him personal insights into Soviet affairs. Baker’s dialogue with Shevardnadze, his Soviet counterpart, eventually moved away from formalities. They went beyond their official roles as “foreign ministers” to discuss their “private worries and thoughts.”⁸⁷ In one of their open discussions, Shevardnadze made clear to Baker the tremendous cultural impact which political reforms were having in the Soviet Union. He also spoke candidly of the Soviet economy’s slow progress toward modernization.⁸⁸ During another talk, Shevardnadze explained to Baker the problems which the Soviet government was having with decentralizing their system and granting more autonomy to the individual republics.⁸⁹ These insights which Baker received from Shevardnadze were pieces of information which certainly reinforced his understanding that the world was going through a process of change.

The decrease in the outright threat posed by the Soviet Union was apparent to George Bush as well. He saw Gorbachev’s reforms as creating an opening for the United States “to influence the situation in Eastern Europe” and “encourage liberalization.”⁹⁰ The danger was in moving too fast and “provoking an internal crackdown” by the Soviet government.⁹¹ Bush

⁸⁵ Ibid., 71.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 92.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 141.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 138.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 146.

⁹⁰ George Bush and Brent Scowcroft, *A World Transformed* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 39.

⁹¹ Ibid.

proposed to reduce the amount of American troops serving in NATO by a significant amount, in exchange for an equivalent gesture from the Soviets. It was only “the unanimous advice of the Joint Chiefs” which led him to take a more measured approach and remove ten percent of American combat troops in NATO, much less than his original idea of a twenty-five percent reduction of American troops in NATO.⁹² Bush clearly saw that the Soviet Union’s control of Eastern Europe was weakening and responded with an approach of de-escalation.

Bush also had surprisingly close and friendly relationships with senior Soviet leaders. He was frequently in touch with Gorbachev, more so than his “combined predecessors did with their Soviet counterparts.”⁹³ Beyond this, Bush liked Gorbachev personally. Their conversations were full of “Openness and candor,” and Bush believed that he “had a feel for his heartbeat.”⁹⁴ The two of them held a “joint press conference—the first ever in US-Soviet relations,” which helped them to build trust and make their personal relationship even stronger.⁹⁵ Later, Bush invited his counterpart to the White House. There, the interactions which they had led to an invitation for Bush to visit Moscow and an effort “to help Gorbachev’s staff modernize and streamline his office.”⁹⁶ Encounters like these helped them to discuss the issues privately, as well as establish a “personal rapport.”⁹⁷ Gorbachev was not the only high-ranking communist official whom Bush had the opportunity to interact with. He also hosted East Germany’s prime minister, who “had been the chairman of the Warsaw Pact meeting held only a few days before.”⁹⁸ From him, Bush

⁹² Ibid., 73-74.

⁹³ Ibid., 9.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 9-10.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 173.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 288-289.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 289.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 291.

learned that the Warsaw Pact was verging on collapse and that the Communist Party was losing members by the hundreds of thousands while becoming internally divided.⁹⁹

All of these leaders within the Bush administration were aware of the decline of Soviet power. However, none of them explained this understanding in aggressive terms. Instead, they emphasized opportunities for peace: reductions in troop deployments, an end to the Cold War, an increase in productive diplomacy, and greater familiarity with members of the high Soviet leadership. The prevalent themes brought up in their recollections of the Cold War's gradual conclusion are far from war-like, leaving no indication that they desired a show of force or that these events would have encouraged them to invade a country like Panama.

THE MEDIA'S ROLE

Each of these foreign-policy leaders, except for Bush himself, made moves in their memoirs to deflect the claim that the media legitimized the Panama intervention or the administration. They made no attempt to deny that the media focused on the Panama intervention. Such a claim would probably not have been credible. However, by using examples of situations in which the media's involvement in the invasion was negative, they implicitly argue that the administration did not receive support, legitimization, or any other benefits from the operation's media coverage.

Colin Powell portrayed the media's coverage of the Panama intervention in a generally-negative light. As planes launched from bases within the United States and headed toward Panama, the press reported these movements "as a show of force or a reinforcement operation,"

⁹⁹ Ibid.

and, thanks to this misinterpretation, American forces “achieved strategic surprise.”¹⁰⁰ Powell wrote that he understood “it would be hard to maintain tactical surprise” in this situation, but the extent to which he was blaming this on the media circulating the story is unclear.¹⁰¹ However, Powell was directly critical of what he considered to be a case of “cheap-shot journalism.”¹⁰² After the operation, some television networks showed a “visibly upbeat” President Bush happily answering questions at a press conference, while “simultaneously showing on split screens” a scene of “the first American casualties” being unloaded from a plane.¹⁰³

Powell was especially upset by the times when the press began to interfere with how the operation was being conducted. At one point, the press started criticizing “The White House” for not destroying a particular radio tower which was continuously broadcasting pro-Noriega propaganda.¹⁰⁴ Because of this, even though “the tower was not bothering us,” there were no nearby troops who could capture it, and “President Endara would need it in a day or so,” Scowcroft gave Powell the order to have it destroyed.¹⁰⁵ This forced the American generals directly controlling the operation to send combat helicopters to attack “a pointless objective.”¹⁰⁶ At another point, some reporters became trapped in a hotel in Panama City. These correspondents were “in no danger,” but “bureau chiefs and network executives in New York” put pressure on the administration to rescue them.¹⁰⁷ Accordingly, Scowcroft and Cheney told Powell to get them rescued, and Powell relayed these orders to the generals on the ground; the

¹⁰⁰ Colin L. Powell with Joseph E. Persico, *My American Journey* (New York: Random House, 1995), 428.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 431.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 431-432.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 432.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

soldiers who stormed the hotel to get the reporters out took casualties. After this incident, Powell told Cheney that he did not want to receive “any more such orders,” and Cheney complied with this request.¹⁰⁸

Richard Cheney had tried to control the media during the Panama intervention, but his efforts to do so were only partially successful. From the beginning, in considering how he would “handle the reporters,” his goal was to make sure that they not “interfere.”¹⁰⁹ In particular, he was concerned that they would start reporting details which “could jeopardize the security of the operation.”¹¹⁰ To this end, Cheney devised “a pool system, which basically meant that certain reporters were selected to be on call at a given time.”¹¹¹ Additionally, once in Panama, these reporters had their movements controlled by General Thurman, since “we couldn’t divert assets we needed to fight the battle to the task of escorting journalists.”¹¹²

Cheney, like Powell, was frustrated by the consequences of some reporters hiding out in a hotel during the fighting. These reporters, like some others, “had gotten down to Panama on their own, not as part of the pool system.”¹¹³ With “their home offices in New York” pressuring “the White House” to rescue them, Cheney was informed that the president wanted them rescued; though successful, it resulted in three American soldiers being wounded and the death of a Spanish photographer.¹¹⁴ While these reporters were trapped, Cheney contended, other reporters

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Dick Cheney with Liz Cheney, *In My Time: A Personal and Political Memoir* (New York: Threshold Editions, 2011), 175-176.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 176.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

had been focusing on them, “making it seem as though the military operation, which was generally going well, was somehow not succeeding.”¹¹⁵

James Baker downplayed the role of the media in the Panama intervention within his memoirs. He did mention the media’s airing of footage showing American aircraft taking off to assist in the invasion. Specifically, he singled out CNN for doing this and did not attribute these actions to any other news outlets. However, Baker appears to have believed that the footage being publicly aired before the operation did little or nothing to compromise its security. Without elaborating, Baker claimed that, in addition to CNN’s broadcasts threatening the coming invasion’s secrecy, “Word had finally begun leaking.”¹¹⁶ This would suggest that, because some source or sources were somehow making information about the operation known, CNN’s airing of information which foreshadowed an invasion was nothing new. Second, and perhaps more important to this point, Baker portrayed any such leaks or broadcasts as inconsequential to the intervention’s outcome. The operation “unfolded smoothly,” and, though there was “a fierce firefight at Noriega’s headquarters, the amount of resistance was less than anticipated.”¹¹⁷ His account did not provide any indication that media footage or any other sorts of leaks impacted the intervention in any way.¹¹⁸

Baker also described some incidents similar to those mentioned by Powell and Cheney. The most significant of these cases was the destruction of transmitter facilities. Rather than something forced on the administration and the military by outside pressures, Baker presented the idea to destroy these places as something thought up by “my experts” as a way “to keep

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ James A. Baker, III with Thomas M. DeFrank, *The Politics of Diplomacy: Revolution, War and Peace, 1989-1992* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1995), 191.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

Noriega off the airwaves.”¹¹⁹ The State Department apparently believed that doing so, in addition to securing key government buildings, would help “to restore Panamanian civilian authority as quickly as possible.”¹²⁰ Instead of portraying himself as a major planner of these maneuvers, Baker portrayed himself as supporting these ideas of the State Department reluctantly. He strongly believed “that once a decision to commit forces is made by the commander in chief, civilian authorities should draw back and let the professional soldiers do their job”; by helping the State Department in its effort to dictate military targets, Baker argued that he was simply acting to quickly resolve “a bureaucratic disagreement over the priority of targets.”¹²¹

The accounts offered by Powell and Cheney demonstrate that the media, by dictating the military’s targets, forcing American forces to rescue journalists, possibly compromising the element of surprise, and making the president look bad in at least one case, harmed the intervention. Meanwhile, they did not appear to offer any redeeming qualities of how the media presented or participated in the invasion. Bush’s memoirs offered no information on this point and Baker credited the State Department, rather than the media, with selecting particular targets. Still, even Baker neglected to mention any positive contributions by the media while mentioning that CNN made the operation public before it was supposed to be. These memoirs, to varying degrees, convey a message that the media did not play a positive or pro-administration role but instead damaged or could have damaged the administration’s efforts during the Panama intervention.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid.

CONNECTIONS TO THE GULF WAR

Operation Desert Storm, or the Gulf War, is another major event which needs to be taken into account when considering the Bush administration's invasion of Panama. The administration's foreign-policy leaders all, in varying ways and to varying degrees, managed to downplay the connection between these two conflicts. This theme reinforces the point that the toppling of Noriega stood as an isolate incident. According to such a view, the Panama intervention was not part of a broader strategy or foreign policy.

To understand how Colin Powell linked the Panama intervention with the Gulf War in his memoirs, one must understand what has been called the Powell Doctrine. This term, which "exists in no military manual" and came into popular usage as a result of Desert Storm, has the "decisive" use of force as its core trait.¹²² Rather than a definite set of rules, Powell understood the ideas which came to comprise this approach as overall guidelines for leaders to follow when making decisions. These ideas, that one should "Direct every military operation towards a clearly defined, decisive, and obtainable objective" and "Concentrate combat power at the decisive place and time," Powell wrote, came directly from the American Army's "Principles of War," which Powell learned while in ROTC.¹²³

This sort of policy may have been employed in Panama and during the Gulf War, but Powell downplayed the degree to which these two instances were connected. Using a force of "more than twenty-five thousand troops," the American military was able "to quickly eliminate the Panamanian forces as a threat and consolidate our position."¹²⁴ This same approach, Powell

¹²² Colin Powell with Tony Koltz, *It Worked for Me: In Life and Leadership* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012), 201.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 202-204.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 204.

explained, was used in Desert Storm to “eject the Iraqi army from Kuwait.”¹²⁵ As had been done in Panama, the United States used tremendous force to defeat an enemy and then withdraw from the region with its objective completed.¹²⁶ This would appear, at first glance, to establish a causal link between these two conflicts within Powell’s memoirs. However, Powell gave no indication that his experiences with the Panama intervention shaped or validated the ideas which he went on to employ in the Gulf War. Instead, Powell wrote that his Powell Doctrine and the guidelines which comprise it are derived from the teachings of Sun Tzu and Clausewitz. The Powell Doctrine, according to him, is simply a distillation of the “fundamental principles of war that go back thousands of years,” which “are taught as Principle of War” within the Army; Powell, therefore, claimed to have learned these teachings “as an ROTC cadet,” not while deposing Noriega.¹²⁷

While Richard Cheney did draw connections in his memoirs between the Panama intervention and the Gulf War, each one of these connections was either incidental enough or vague enough not to come with any major implications concerning the administration’s foreign policy. The first of these ways was related to the media. Cheney had already believed that “unduly negative reporting had helped sour public opinion” toward the Vietnam War, for example by depicting the Tet Offensive “as a devastating blow to our side, when, in fact, we dealt out punishing losses to the North Vietnamese.”¹²⁸ The role which the media played during the invasion of Panama reinforced Cheney’s belief “that the press ought not be the final arbiter of

¹²⁵ Ibid., 205.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 204-205.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 202-204.

¹²⁸ Dick Cheney with Liz Cheney, *In My Time: A Personal and Political Memoir* (New York: Threshold Editions, 2011), 176-177.

whether we have won or lost a war.”¹²⁹ Consequently, during Desert Storm, Cheney “would try to be sure that we had maximum opportunity to communicate directly with the American people—without going through the filter of the press.”¹³⁰

The other way in which Cheney connected the operation in Panama with the Gulf War was a way which hardly said anything. He wrote that, while many of the high-ranking officials within the Bush administration, himself included, came to their “jobs with a lot of experience,” they lacked “experience working together as a team.”¹³¹ Events in Panama provided them with “real experience managing crises together,” which, Cheney wrote, was why they responded so well to the crisis “eight months later when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait.”¹³² In summary, Cheney wrote that the Panama intervention taught him lessons in managing the media and taught the administration as a whole lessons in working as a team. However, his explanations of these matters indicate that there were only minor connections between what happened in Panama and what happened in the Gulf War.

James Baker was the most direct in connecting the Panama intervention with the Gulf War, but even his testimony fails to establish a firm link between the two. He wrote that the invasion ended the reservations which many Americans had concerning “the use of force in the post-Vietnam era.”¹³³ The outcome of this intervention, therefore, contributed to the administration’s effort “to build the public support so essential to the success of Operation Desert Storm.”¹³⁴ Still, the administration had a difficult time rallying this support, “both in Congress

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 177.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 179.

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ James A. Baker, III with Thomas M. DeFrank, *The Politics of Diplomacy: Revolution, War and Peace, 1989-1992* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1995), 194.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

and with the public at large,” and Baker appears to have held that it was the “resounding success” of the Gulf War which ended “our country’s long and oftentimes debilitating post-Vietnam hangover.”¹³⁵ This would appear to be a claim that the national significance of the Panama intervention was not as great as he first made it appear; it only went some of the way in showing Americans that the rules of the post-Vietnam era no longer applied.

George Bush portrayed the tie between the Panama intervention and the Gulf War as small at best. The Bush administration learned, while hunting Noriega, that it was difficult to hunt down and successfully locate a particular individual. This informed the means by which they would target Saddam himself: launching aerial attacks against multiple “command and control points where he may have been.”¹³⁶ Therefore, according to Bush, the operation in Panama had only a minor impact on the planning of the Gulf War.

The Bush administration’s leadership portrayed the impact of the Panama intervention on the Gulf War as minor. While they each acknowledge some continuity, such connections tend to be incidental. The connections, as presented in these memoirs, fail to suggest that the invasion of Panama was a major foreign-policy event for the administration.

PROVOCATIONS, MEETINGS, AND THE DECISION TO INVADE

All of these leaders addressed the issue of responsibility: who’s actions led to the invasion and which events prompted America’s response. In their memoirs, some of the administration leaders attributed a lot of influence to Powell. Additionally, all of them were in agreement that the final authority was that of President Bush. Each one emphasized the role

¹³⁵ Ibid., 331.

¹³⁶ George Bush and Brent Scowcroft, *A World Transformed* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 463.

which two incidents of violence against Americans at the hands of Noriega's forces played in bringing about the decision to go through with the Panama intervention.

Colin Powell explained that the killing of Marine Lieutenant Robert Paz, coupled with the detainment and harassment of Naval Lieutenant Adam Curtis and his wife set off a series of communications and meetings between Powell and other American leaders. The attack which killed Lieutenant Paz was especially bad, as it was both "inexcusable" and representative of "an increasing pattern of hostility toward U.S. troops."¹³⁷ Powell conferred with Thurman and told military leaders in charge of transportation and special operations "to be ready to move."¹³⁸ After that, he went to a meeting being held at Cheney's office. Powell and Cheney talked alone after everyone else had left this meeting. Asked what he thought, Powell argued that they "should intervene to protect American citizens," which he saw as an acceptable action to take, given that Noriega was "not a legitimate leader" but rather "a criminal" who was "under indictment."¹³⁹ After speaking with Cheney, Powell felt the need to consult with the chiefs of staff. They had a discreet meeting, in which Powell told them that "Paz's killing can't be overlooked" and that "Blue Spoon is a good plan"; he then asked for their views.¹⁴⁰ While Air Force Chief of Staff Larry Welch had reservations and Marine Corps Commandant Al Gray had hoped that the Marines would be able to play a bigger role in the operation, the service chiefs came to support the plan unanimously.¹⁴¹

¹³⁷ Colin L. Powell with Joseph E. Persico, *My American Journey* (New York: Random House, 1995), 421-422.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 422.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 422-423.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 423.

Powell described the meeting at which the Panama intervention was decided on as a session in which opinionated people spoke until Bush came to his decision. Cheney, Baker, Scowcroft, Gates, and press secretary Fitzwater were also present at that meeting, held on December 17. Cheney explained the situation, and Powell delivered a briefing of the plan. He went through their overall intentions: “eliminate Noriega *and* the PDF,” take temporary control of the country, and then hand power over once there was “a civilian government and a new security force.”¹⁴² He then went through the specific objectives of the various units which were to be deployed. Scowcroft raised concerns over the reality of casualties in such an operation and the possibility that Noriega could escape, “Baker believed we had an obligation to intervene,” and Bush asked questions. Eventually, Bush, rising from his chair, gave his approval: “Okay, let’s do it.”¹⁴³

Richard Cheney described the meetings which directly preceded the Panama intervention as being driven primarily by Colin Powell and George Bush. On December 16, Marine lieutenant Robert Paz was killed at a Panamanian checkpoint, and a “naval officer and his wife, witnesses to the shooting” of lieutenant Paz were imprisoned by Panamanian forces.¹⁴⁴ The next day, Cheney called a meeting of high-ranking officials from the administration and from the United States military. At the meeting, “Colin Powell was particularly eloquent on the consequences” of the strongman’s military killing Lieutenant Paz.¹⁴⁵ There was a sentiment at this meeting, though whether this was Powell’s view, Cheney’s view, or a consensus view is unclear, that such a killing could not “go unanswered.” Later that day, another meeting was held, this time with

¹⁴² Ibid., 423-424.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 424-425.

¹⁴⁴ Dick Cheney with Liz Cheney, *In My Time: A Personal and Political Memoir* (New York: Threshold Editions, 2011), 174.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 174-175.

President Bush in attendance. George Bush was briefed on the recommended course of action: “taking down Noriega and the PDF and restoring the democratically elected government of Panama.”¹⁴⁶ Such a plan was supported “All around the room,” and it was approved by Bush’s order: “Do it.”¹⁴⁷

James Baker wrote of the events which directly led to the meeting at which the Panama intervention was ordered. Baker called the killing of a Marine lieutenant on December 16 by Panamanian forces “a tragedy that sickened me.”¹⁴⁸ However, he noticed that this attack “had finally brought the military around” and that “After years of reluctance, the Pentagon was ready to fight.”¹⁴⁹ On December 17, Bush “called an emergency meeting of his senior advisers” which “was for principals only—no staff.”¹⁵⁰

Baker portrayed this meeting as largely irrelevant to Bush’s decision to intervene. There was “very little if any debate over the merits of invading Panama.”¹⁵¹ When Bush expressed his view, that killings like this would “go on and on,” there was no dissent; “We all agreed.”¹⁵² Because of this, “Most of the discussion” at the meeting was about “diplomatic and logistic details.”¹⁵³ Baker noted that Bush was concerned about the American casualties which would result from the operation, to which Powell responded that the situation was such that there were going to be American casualties in Panama with or without an invasion. The military might as well go on the offensive, Powell reasoned, since it would result in the same number of casualties

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 175.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ James A. Baker, III with Thomas M. DeFrank, *The Politics of Diplomacy: Revolution, War and Peace, 1989-1992* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1995), 188.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 188-189.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 189.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

as doing nothing and allow them to capture Noriega. Though Baker “knew the President had already decided on his course of action,” Bush “polled his advisers.”¹⁵⁴ Baker spoke in favor of intervening and echoed Powell’s reasoning. When the others were polled, “Cheney, Powell, and Scowcroft quickly agreed” as well.¹⁵⁵ Then, Bush ordered the operation: “Let’s do it.”¹⁵⁶

George Bush wrote only a brief account of the meeting at which the decision to invade was declared, informing readers simply that Powell briefed him in a thorough way that calmed Bush’s worries and improved his confidence.¹⁵⁷ However, he provided a more detailed account of his decision-making process. On December 17, Bush wrote that “Last night a young Marine was killed in Panama,” elaborating on how he and the other Marines had been shot at by Panamanians while they themselves were unarmed.¹⁵⁸ “Shortly after that a Navy lieutenant and his wife were taken in by the same check point people and harassed for 30 minutes,” and “A day or so before” all of this, Panama had declared war on the United States while naming “Manuel Noriega as the maximum leader.”¹⁵⁹ These events led him to “put into forward motion a major use of force to get Noriega out”; he made no mention of any military briefings or input he had received from his advisors.¹⁶⁰ Bush recognized that the operation was “a major gamble,” knew that “World opinion will be difficult,” suspected that “the Soviet reaction will probably be negative,” and was sure that “some of the Central Americans will be very wary.”¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 189-190.

¹⁵⁷ George Bush and Brent Scowcroft, *A World Transformed* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 23.

¹⁵⁸ George H.W. Bush, *All the Best, George Bush: My Life in Letters and Other Writings* (New York: Scribner, 2014), 449-450.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 450.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

Above all other things, the potential for American casualties weighed on Bush. The “Loss of American life” was a concern on his mind the day that he gave the order to intervene.¹⁶² During the hours leading up to the invasion itself, Bush thought a lot about “those young 19 year olds who will be dropped in tonight” and found it impossible to sleep, since “the lives of American kids are at risk.”¹⁶³ Later, after Noriega had taken shelter in “the Vatican Embassy in Panama,” Bush suggested that he would not be willing to drop the indictments, since the offer to allow Noriega to leave peacefully had been made “before we lost American lives.”¹⁶⁴

The administration’s foreign-policy leaders provided accounts which contradict each other at times. However, they were generally in agreement concerning the most important events in the leadup to Bush’s decision to order the operation. All of them depicted Bush as having the greatest influence and final authority, with all of them but Baker emphasizing Powell’s role in the decision-making process. They all placed significant emphasis on the attacks which provoked the American response. Perhaps consistent with this, Bush appears to have been extremely concerned with the possibility that Americans could be killed during the intervention, making clear that he was heavily invested in the defense of American lives.

HOW THEY JUSTIFIED THE PANAMA INTERVENTION

The foreign-policy leaders within the Bush administration demonstrated a consensus when writing explicitly about the motives behind the Panama intervention. Their collective explanation was that the operation was carried out to defend Americans and spread democracy to Panama. While these four officials wrote about the invasion’s justifications in various ways, all

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 451.

of them highlighted these motives while downplaying or ignoring other potential motives. As a result, the image of an invasion driven by concerns of self-defense and promoting democracy emerges from these accounts, which are often confusing and disjointed.

Colin Powell provides many reasons for the Panama intervention in his memoirs, but, overall, he appears to stress democracy. At one point, he listed the many justifications which the United States could have invoked: “Noriega’s contempt for democracy, his drug trafficking and indictment, the death of the American Marine, the threat to our treaty rights to the canal.”¹⁶⁵ At earlier points in that memoir, he told Cheney that “we should intervene to protect American citizens” and told the service chiefs that “Paz’s killing can’t be overlooked.”¹⁶⁶ While Powell undoubtedly presented these as strong reasons to intervene, he mostly focused on the cause of bringing democracy to the Panamanian people.

Much earlier in his story, Powell mentioned Noriega as an obstacle to Latin American democracy, framing him from the beginning as a threat defined by its opposition to democratic goals.¹⁶⁷ The democratic case against Noriega became stronger as Powell discussed the aftermath of the operation. When going through the losses incurred by the invasion and some of the operation’s shortcomings, Powell wrote that “Twenty-four Americans gave their lives in Panama to achieve this victory for democracy,” which seems to hold up the restoration of Panamanian democracy as the primary goal which was achieved.¹⁶⁸ Looking back on the intervention about six years after it had occurred, Powell wrote of its success, pointing to two things: Noriega’s state as a convicted and imprisoned man and Panama’s status of having “a new security force”

¹⁶⁵ Colin L. Powell with Joseph E. Persico, *My American Journey* (New York: Random House, 1995), 425.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 422-423.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 367.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 431.

and being “a democracy, with one free election to its credit.”¹⁶⁹ In a different memoir, writing about twenty years after the intervention, Powell provided evidence for its success by highlighting the current absence of American troops in the country and the fact that “the Panamanians have held four democratic elections.”¹⁷⁰ The reoccurring theme in these passages is the invasion being a success because it was a victory for democracy, which, whether he intended this or not, causes Powell’s memoirs to suggest that bringing democracy was the primary motive for the Panama intervention.

It is important to note that Richard Cheney portrayed his views on authority in foreign-policy decision-making as nuanced. He saw the Iran-Contra affair as part of the struggle between Congress and the executive branch over such control of foreign policy. Though he apparently believed that Reagan truly did not know of this plot and though he was “critical of the administration’s conduct,” Cheney felt that it was important “to defend the presidency itself against congressional attempts to encroach on its power.”¹⁷¹ However, due to the lack of interservice coordination which Cheney saw during the American invasion of Grenada, he supported the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986. Despite the fact that Reagan’s “administration was less than enthusiastic about the legislation,” Cheney believed that “Congress had properly asserted itself” in that latter case.¹⁷² Rather than as a strict adherent to a doctrine of centralized power, Cheney depicted himself as someone in favor of

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 434.

¹⁷⁰ Colin Powell with Tony Koltz, *It Worked for Me: In Life and Leadership* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012), 204.

¹⁷¹ Dick Cheney with Liz Cheney, *In My Time: A Personal and Political Memoir* (New York: Threshold Editions, 2011), 147.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 150.

keeping the branches of government in balance with one another, especially in matters relating to foreign policy.

Richard Cheney did not provide a single or definitive reason for the Panama intervention in his memoirs, making his exact stance on this matter unclear. Initially, when introducing Manuel Noriega to the reader, he wrote that “The Panama Canal was a strategic asset” and suggested that Noriega posed a threat to it.¹⁷³ He also wrote that “there were American lives at stake,”: more specifically, the lives of the “twelve thousand American troops stationed in Panama.”¹⁷⁴ Finally, he asserted that “our country’s patience was running thin,” which, having been written after a description of Noriega’s drug-trafficking activities, his “indictment by federal grand juries in Florida,” and his suppression of a democratic election, suggests that these were also reasons that the United States wanted Noriega to be removed from power.¹⁷⁵

Later, after the shooting of Lieutenant Paz, the idea of an intervention became a matter of punishing Noriega’s military, either to avenge Paz, to demonstrate American retaliatory power, or both; the precise reasoning here is ambiguous.¹⁷⁶ Finally, Cheney wrote about visiting American servicemembers in Panama after the intervention. There, he praised the troops for defending the democracy of the Panamanian people.¹⁷⁷ In summary, he presents the defense of the Panama Canal, the safeguarding of American lives, the halting of Noriega’s illicit activities, and the protection of Panamanian democracy as reasons for the Panama intervention; additionally, he may have been motivated to avenge the killing of Lieutenant Paz, showcase America’s military power, or both. Cheney offered many justifications for the invasion without

¹⁷³ Ibid., 168.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 175.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 178.

specifying one as more important than the others and often neglecting to present the reader with his exact reasoning.

James Baker offered multiple initial reasons for wanting to depose Noriega, and they were consistent with his stated beliefs. Baker suspected that Noriega was a threat requiring a forceful removal from the beginning of his time as secretary of state. He offered several reasons for this. Noriega was deeply involved in the international drug trade and his military was carrying out escalating “assaults” on “American servicemen and their families stationed in Panama.”¹⁷⁸ Meanwhile, his rule “threatened the transfer of the canal to Panamanian sovereignty,” in addition to America’s ability to protect the canal, while also hampering “our effort both to promote democracy in the hemisphere and to combat narcotics trafficking.”¹⁷⁹ Of these various provocations and perceived threats, Baker considered the “first and foremost” issue to be the threat posed by Noriega “to the lives and well-being of the 40,000 American servicemen and civilians living in Panama.”¹⁸⁰

Later, Baker discussed the exact ways in which the Panama intervention was justified in principle. He wrote that it was “an exercise in supporting democracy and the rule of law in the hemisphere.”¹⁸¹ On one hand, “Noriega was a dictator who had stolen an election.”¹⁸² His rule was one which “thwarted the will of the Panamanian people,” and the United States, by intervening and putting the democratically-elected government in power, “was simply enforcing the will of the Panamanians.”¹⁸³ The operation was, according to Baker, also justified on the

¹⁷⁸ James A. Baker, III with Thomas M. DeFrank, *The Politics of Diplomacy: Revolution, War and Peace, 1989-1992* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1995), 177.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 178.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 193.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 193-194.

grounds of self-defense. Noriega had already “started killing American servicemen,” and the administration refused to allow something like that to happen again.¹⁸⁴ The last of Baker’s justifications based on principle was the claim that the intervention was in line with “the time-honored admonition of the national anthem, whose little-noticed fourth stanza exhorts us to conquer ‘when our cause it is just. . . .’ ”¹⁸⁵

Along similar lines, Baker’s views on presidential war powers should also be noted. Baker believed, as he explained in the context of the leadup to the Gulf War, that the Constitution “is unassailable” on the point that authority in matters of foreign policy “is preeminent in the executive.”¹⁸⁶ This meant to him, in effect, “that the president didn’t legally need to have congressional approval when ordering troops into combat.”¹⁸⁷ The only reason that Baker supported obtaining congressional support for the Gulf War was the potential for that conflict, unlike those in Grenada and Panama, to have “significant casualties.”¹⁸⁸

Baker also presented multiple benefits which came from the Panama intervention. First, Baker wrote, President Bush’s “resolve in Panama was a tonic” which encouraged the government of Colombia “to stand up to” a cartel which had assassinated three presidential candidates.¹⁸⁹ He also asserted that the intervention deterred the Sandinista government from stealing an election “and strengthened the resolve of Nicaraguan citizens to stand up and be counted on *their* election day.”¹⁹⁰ Another bold claim of Baker’s was that the invasion had such a great affect that it “was directly responsible for the historic Santiago declaration,” which

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 194.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 334.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 334.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 334.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 194.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

committed nations within the Western Hemisphere “to collective action anywhere democracy was threatened in the region.”¹⁹¹ Lastly, it played at least some role in ending the anti-interventionist sentiment among Americans and, consequently, facilitated the country’s participation in the Gulf War to a certain degree. While Baker presents all of these occurrences as benefits, and therefore could be said to be offering justifications in hindsight, he insisted that these effects were not planned out when the decision was made to intervene. Rather, that choice “flowed from a single event: the President’s determination that a naked assault on democracy wouldn’t be tolerated.”¹⁹²

While George Bush listed several events which may have been reasons for the Panama intervention, he did not explicitly designate them as such reasons, at least not initially. He wrote about the killing of “a young Marine,” about the detainment and harassment of “a Navy lieutenant and his wife,” and that “the Panamanians declared war on the United States,” as well as “installed Manuel Noriega as the maximum leader.”¹⁹³ While these events were all clearly negative, why exactly they justified an invasion was not explicitly stated. It may have been to exact revenge, to topple a government nominally at war with America as a show of force, to remove a potential threat to the United States, or some other reason entirely; since Bush does not adequately explain his logic or precisely describe his reasoning here, one can only guess at this point what exact motive or motives this entry was meant to convey at this stage.¹⁹⁴

Interestingly, there is no initial mention of wanting to spread democracy or free the people of Panama from Noriega. In fact, by describing the people who killed the American

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ George H.W. Bush, *All the Best, George Bush: My Life in Letters and Other Writings* (New York: Scribner, 2014), 449-450.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

Marine as “Panamanians” rather than members of Noriega’s military, attributing the declaration of war to “the Panamanians,” and saying that these same “Panamanians” were the ones who “installed Manuel Noriega as the maximum leader,” Bush’s writing conflated the people of Panama with Noriega.¹⁹⁵ This severe conflation is partially undone in a subsequent footnote which explains that Guillermo Endara and Guillermo Ford had been elected as president and vice president, respectively, “back in May, but Noriega had overturned the election results.”¹⁹⁶ Still, the degree to which Panamanians opposed the Noriega regime was never touched on besides that brief point. And, hours before the operation, Bush wrote about having Endara and Ford instated as the new leaders of Panama as an uncertain possibility, while he wrote about the impending invasion as a certainty; putting the democratically-elected government in power seems to have been an afterthought or a secondary goal at best.¹⁹⁷

It is only later, in a letter sent to Mexico’s president on February 3, 1990, that Bush’s depiction of his motives for the Panama intervention changed. In this letter, while trying to justify the invasion, Bush claimed that he “had to protect American life,” suggesting, in hindsight, that this was his ultimate motive. He also directly justified the invasion with democracy by writing “that the Panamanian people supported our action by over 92% at one point” and mentioning his happiness “that Democracy has a chance now—a real chance there in Panama.”¹⁹⁸ As a result, through this letter, Bush’s reasoning changed from unfocused and indirect to focused and direct in his drive to protect Americans with the operation, while bringing democracy to Panama changed from being an incidental result to being an essential justification.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 450.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 458.

These explanations were echoed in another of Bush's writing which he produced some time after the letter to Mexico's president. In this later reflection, he described the invasion of Panama as an "operation to save American lives, bring Noriega to justice, and restore Panamanian democracy."¹⁹⁹

Bush was clear in stating, through the collected writings which he published, that he did not order the Panama intervention because it was popular. Rather, his writings cast it as an important but unpopular move. Writing shortly after ordering the invasion, he mentioned how countries around the world, particularly the Soviet Union and some countries in Central America, would probably react negatively.²⁰⁰ The letter which he wrote to the president of Mexico on February 3, 1990 showed him to have been at least partially correct on this point, since he acknowledged that the Panama intervention "has caused some heartburn in Mexico."²⁰¹ And, when reflecting on the widespread belief that "I live by the polls and want to be popular," he wrote about how "Panama might not have gone down well," in terms of popularity.²⁰² Still, Bush wrote, "you've got to do what you think is right, take the heat, and that's what I'm trying to do."²⁰³

President Bush and his top foreign-policy officials wrote testimonies which had varying degrees of precision but which indicated the same core motives for the Panama intervention. These leaders showed that they were capable, in many cases, of being incredibly vague. In other situations, their messages were clear, direct, and unmistakable. These written testimonies join

¹⁹⁹ George Bush and Brent Scowcroft, *A World Transformed* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 23.

²⁰⁰ George H.W. Bush, *All the Best, George Bush: My Life in Letters and Other Writings* (New York: Scribner, 2014), 450.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 458.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 460.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*

together in stressing two common themes: protecting the lives of Americans and establishing a democratic government in Panama. Other possible motives were either left unaddressed, addressed only briefly, or referred to only ambiguously.

CONCLUSION

In their recollections of the Panama intervention, the senior foreign-policy leaders of George Bush's administration, including President Bush himself, continuously pressed home a single point. This was the argument that the invasion which deposed Manuel Noriega was not motivated by other occurrences around the world or by the administration's foreign-policy strategy. According to their accounts, the operation was motivated entirely, or at least almost entirely, by idealist aims. The invasion, according to them, was not carried out for political or strategic gain, and any such gains which arose from it were mostly or entirely incidental.

The first major way in which they expressed this was through an implicit negative argument. Their memoirs, though they each noted the fall of the Soviet Union and its decline as an international military power, gave no indication that the receding of Soviet influence gave the administration any reason to demonstrate its power by toppling Panama's government. By portraying the American media as a force which hindered the operation, their memoirs appear to refute any claims that the invasion was ordered for the purpose of receiving positive news coverage which boosted Bush's image. The repeated downplaying of the connection between the Panama intervention and the Gulf War, which one can repeatedly see in these memoirs, suggests that any claims that paint the former as the administration's preparation for the latter are false. These three lines of argumentation imply that, whatever happened in Panama, it was not done for the sake of obtaining a better political image or securing a strategic advantage.

The second way in which the Bush administration's memoirs paint the Panama intervention as an idealist venture is through an explicit positive argument. Their descriptions of the final provocations which led to the invasion, the process of making the decision to invade, and the various principles used to justify it serve this purpose. At many points, the memoirs prevent a reader from pinning down exactly what their authors' arguments were by being vague and often unclear about what claims, exactly, were supposed to be made. At other times, they defer responsibility onto other members of the administration. When, however, the writers did take clear and positive stands, it was always to repeatedly emphasize one of several explicit points: that Americans in Panama were in danger, that Noriega was a tyrant who had to be removed, that democracy had to be spread, or that America was acting in self-defense. These, as perhaps the only clear statements concerning the administration's motivation for the invasion, serve as the explicit administration line, arguing that idealist causes were what drove the ultimate decision.

Such a depiction of the Panama intervention is certainly controversial. Many of the sources cited in this project's review of secondary literature are contradicted by the narrative backed by the administration. However, an investigation of the degree to which Bush and his fellow foreign-policy leaders told the truth or failed to do so is beyond the scope of this project. It has sought to understand how these individuals, in their memoirs, fit the Panama intervention into the Bush administration's overall foreign-policy strategy and found that they separated it out from other matters of foreign policy and domestic politics, presenting it as an act which was executed for the sake of idealist and humanitarian concerns, rather than political and strategic ones. Additional research would be necessary to attempt to determine whether they were honest memoirists or cynical manipulators of public opinion.

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