

Noriega's 'drugs' were really tamales

by Carlos Wesley

News that the "50 kilos of cocaine" allegedly found at the headquarters of Panamanian Gen. Manuel Noriega by U.S. forces after the Dec. 20 invasion were nothing more than corn tamales wrapped in banana leaves, a traditional Christmas fare, has made the Bush administration the laughing-stock of the Western Hemisphere.

In Colombia, radio and television reporters break out in giggles every time they read the story. Headlines from the Mexican press of Jan. 24 sum up Ibero-America's reaction:

● *El Nacional*: "Noriega's case goes flat . . . U.S. charges proven false. . . . U.S. Southern Command mistook tamales for cocaine." The paper also ran an AFP wire: "Perhaps, in order to salvage something, the spokesman claimed that the tamales were tools for the practice of witchcraft by Noriega. But witchcraft is not one of the charges for which the Panamanian military is being tried in Miami."

● *El Universal*: "Charges against Noriega go up in smoke. Many of the U.S. accusations against Noriega are false. . . . Alleged cocaine shipments found in his office turned out to be tamales. . . . List of assets claimed to be his, was wrong; they belong to the Panamanian government. . . . Southern Command issues retraction."

The Brazilian daily *Jornal do Brasil* ridiculed the tamales story in an article Jan. 24 by its special correspondent in Panama, Manoel Francisco Brito. When the tamales were first discovered, Brito wrote, it "was greeted as one of the strongest proofs of the links between the Panamanian ex-dictator and the traffickers. . . . So much so that on the fifth of this month, when Noriega was formally presented in federal court in Miami to hear the charges against him, the prosecutor advised the judge that the 'powder' would be included as proof of the accusation." But "the 'powder' was taking a long time leaving Panama—and now it is known why." Brito added, "If the army is not only incapable of differentiating cocaine from macumba powder, and it took them a whole month to discover their error, how can they confront traffickers?"

On Jan. 25, protesters demonstrated in front of the U.S. embassy in Mexico "to warn that a U.S. military invasion of Mexico is imminent because the country is full of tamales," reported Reuters. "Scores of people joined in the protest outside the heavily guarded embassy, shouting slogans that included 'They Invaded Panama Because of Tamales' and 'Yankees Get Out of Panama.' . . . 'We have come to this embassy to show the true nature of tamales. . . . They are inoffensive, none of them are hallucinogenic and they can't

be injected or snorted.' "

A Panamanian source said, "first it was watermelons, now it is tamales," in recalling that the first U.S. invasion of Panama in 1856, when the country was still part of Colombia, came about when an American who was drunk purchased a slice of watermelon from a street vendor and refused to pay for it. The ensuing argument ended in a fight in which the American was fatally wounded, and the Marines were ordered in "to protect American lives."

Protecting the real drug general

The Bush administration's credibility is also being challenged by television networks which are demanding that the Pentagon release the combat footage of the Panama invasion, particularly the AC-130 bombing of Panamanian Defense Forces headquarters, which could show whether it was the U.S. bombardment, or, as the Bush administration claims, elements of the Dignity Battalions, that caused the burning of El Chorrillo district, killing hundreds and leaving thousands homeless. The Pentagon now claims that it has lost the footage from the AC-130 bombardment.

The Bush administration's disinformation claim of "Noriega's massive wealth," a lie promoted especially by U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger in a speech to a meeting of the Organization of American States (OAS) on Aug. 31, 1989, is also under attack. According to the Jan. 22 *Miami Herald*, U.S. officials "privately concede that the U.S. government may have liberally mixed fact with fiction in its efforts to convince the world of Noriega's crimes. The U.S. State Department's case against Panama's Noriega contained many inaccuracies, documents seized by the U.S.-installed government show."

The *Miami Herald* neglected to say that Eagleburger's outburst was in defense of Panama's real drug general, Rubén Darío Paredes, who preceded Noriega as head of the PDF. It was Paredes who publicly admitted a personal relationship with Medellín drug cartel kingpin Jorge Ochoa, and whose son was killed by the drug cartel—together with Cesar Rodríguez, a pilot running weapons for the Nicaraguan Contras and Colombia's narco-terrorist M-19, and Nubia Pino de Bravo, widow of a pilot for the drug mob—in a drug deal that went sour, who gave the drug mafias entry into Panama. It was when Noriega stopped Paredes's bid for the presidency of Panama and began to dismantle the drug apparatus established by Paredes and many of the people that the United States has now appointed to be the government of Panama, that Henry Kissinger and the Reagan and Bush administrations decided to get rid of Noriega.

Judge William Hoeweler, at a Jan. 19 hearing on the Noriega case, stunned the courtroom with the announcement that he was scheduling the trial of Noriega for March 5, months earlier than expected, indicating the government's intention to railroad a conviction. It remains to be seen what effect these revelations will have.

Documentation

World criticism of invasion of Panama

Mexico: Alejandro Ramos of *El Financiero*, in a commentary published in the *Journal of Commerce* Jan. 16, entitled, "Keep Dan Quayle at Home":

"Mr. Quayle's trip, along with the Bush administration policy of 'shoot first and ask questions later,' will sow instability in a region that already is overwhelmed by an economic crisis of 10 years' duration, a crisis that has pushed the living conditions of hundreds of millions of people back to a level of extreme poverty. . . ."

"This situation leaves the U.S. without allies, but with satellites which provide fertile ground for social instability and future strong anti-American sentiment."

Mexico: Carlos Moncada Ochoa, *Impacto*, Jan. 18:

"During a press conference in Cincinnati, U.S. President George Bush unveiled a new concept of beauty. He said the operation by which the Panamanian people were massacred was 'beautifully coordinated.' There are pyromaniacs who enjoy the spectacle of fire, and to achieve that, burn down houses and buildings; spectators who enjoy it when blood pours down the face of a boxer or the flank of a bull. . . . These types have been shown up. Beauty is now dropping with paratroopers, tanks, flame-throwers, rockets, and bombs on an innocent people, wiping out entire neighborhoods, burying the victims as unknown persons, imposing a President, sacking embassies, and playing grating rock and roll at the Vatican's representatives. We would have thought that all of that were despicable. But no; Mr. Bush affirms that it is beautiful."

Great Britain: *Private Eye*, Jan. 11:

"There can be no defense for the position of the supine U.S. media, which have so far made no serious inquiry into how many Panamanian civilians died while being 'liberated.' Estimates of casualties range from hundreds to thousands, but counting seems the last thing on the mind of the new U.S.-installed government. . . ."

"New Panamanian president Guillermo Endara was for many years a leading camp follower of previous president Arias, who was deposed three times by the U.S. An admirer of Hitler and Mussolini, Arias was a white supremacist who tried to expel all West Indians from the country."

United States: *Baltimore Sun*, Jan. 19:

U.S. officials interviewed by the *Sun* were very upset at the U.S. raid on the residence of the Nicaraguan ambassador, and said that the U.S. also stores weapons. One State Department official said the searching of the Cuban ambassador's

car "exposes every American ambassador to the possibility of an armed blockade. He would have to agree to be searched. This is appalling. This is the most appalling thing I've ever seen."

United States: former State Department official Charles Meachling, Jr., *Miami Herald*, Jan. 22:

Meachling argues that the capture of Noriega was a violation of the Geneva Convention on the treatment of prisoners of war and says that this is racist and "demonstrates the contempt" in which the administration holds Latin America. When he surrendered, Noriega "was a prisoner of war in every sense, and, under the laws of war, entitled to the same treatment as any other general, officer, or PDF enlisted man for that matter. . . ."

Thereafter, instead of the routine courtesies afforded to surrendering enemy officers in America's other wars, including German and Japanese officers suspected of atrocities, Noriega was turned over to agents of the DEA, stripped of his uniform, and, in medieval fashion, manacled and shipped to the U.S. in chains. On arrival he was subjected to a mug shot, in his undershirt, while holding a prison number over his chest. The photograph was then released to the press. This degrading treatment, inflicted on a surrendering commander-in-chief, violates U.S. Army regulations and provisions of the Third Geneva Convention that require honorable treatment of prisoners of war in accordance with age and rank. It is unheard-of treatment of an ex-government leader and military commander, at least in civilized countries and since the dark ages. By comparison, Sitting Bull, the Sioux Chief who massacred Custer, and Emilio Aguinaldo, who led a rebellion against U.S. forces in the Philippines, got the red carpet.

"There is the additional question of what authority the U.S. Army had to turn Noriega over to the DEA, and whether it could thereby relinquish responsibility for his subsequent mistreatment. The Geneva Convention expressly forbids deprivation or renunciation of a prisoner's POW status. After World War II, German Army commanders were not absolved for the prisoners turned over to the Gestapo or the SS. Considering all the protection afforded POWs by the Geneva Convention, and Noriega's POW status, it is a mystery why Noriega's attorneys did not immediately move to return him to military custody."

United States: *Oakland Tribune*, Jan. 22:

"No one has bothered to tell the American soldiers who risked their lives in the belief they were liberating Panama from the grips of drug profiteers. But while they patrol the streets of Panama City, the new government is quietly appointing one drug-linked individual after another to some of the highest posts in the land. . . ."

"President Endara's appointments read like a 'who's who' of Panama's oligarchy. Many of those individuals have personal or business associations with the drug money-laundering industry."