

Why Bush is terrified of a real Noriega defense

by Robyn Quijano

Nearly one year after a U.S. invasion force massacred at least 4,000 civilians in Panama to take out Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega, the general is in the news again. This time, Noriega's conversations with his defense team, illegally taped by the U.S. government, were aired on Cable News Network (CNN). While the U.S. media have made great noises about the threat to freedom of speech posed by the refusal of the courts to allow CNN to air the tapes, the Bush administration's conspiracy to deny Noriega a fair trial has been played down, along with the fact that Panamanian officials listened to the tapes months ago. This is the same Panamanian puppet regime that has conveniently sued to assure that Noriega's assets remain frozen, backing the Bush administration's ploy to force him into the hands of a court-appointed lawyer; that same regime has announced that should charges be dropped against Noriega in the United States, they will try him in Panama for murder.

It would seem that the Bush administration, which ordered the general be delivered dead, not alive, has already gone to great lengths to see to it that Noriega has no competent defense. Henry Kissinger warned during the days after the invasion that it were better that the general never make it to trial. But now, as the first anniversary nears, and as Bush prepares for another invasion of a Third World nation to consolidate his new world order, the nasty business of what Noriega knows about the dirty drug dealings of Bush's Contra operation haunts the President.

Remember the ratings

Last year's yuletide invasion of Panama, which left thousands of Panamanian civilians dead, boosted George Bush's

ego and his ratings at the polls. After all, the mightiest nation in the world had just scored against a nation of 2 million Panamanians. Two years of propaganda against General Noriega, "the bloody dictator, drug runner," had succeeded in creating an atmosphere in which few could or would dare to read the implications of the clean little surgical strike that imposed democracy on the small U.S. ally.

Nearly a year later, the international press admits that there are more drugs and dirty money coming out of Panama than during the previous government. Among other media outlets, "60 Minutes" and the *Los Angeles Times* have testified to the mass graves and coverup of the deaths of thousands of Panamanian civilians. In a letter published Nov. 12 in the *Los Angeles Times*, U.S. writer Godfrey Harris, author of the book *Invasion*, said that while in Panama, he had spoken with members of the 193rd Infantry Brigade of the U.S. Army, "who told me that they had been ordered to place hundreds and hundreds of bodies in bags aboard cargo planes that took them to Honduras, where they were secretly buried at the U.S.'s huge Air Force base there."

Still, few report that the Panama Canal treaties have been nullified by the dismemberment of the Panamanian Armed Forces, one of the main aims of the invasion. And the press continues to paint Noriega as a bloody dictator, worthy of the worst possible treatment. Two years of media bombardment was far more successful than Bush's more recent attempt to paint Saddam Hussein as "worse than Hitler," although the success of the Goebbels-style campaign against Noriega has been used by the Establishment's propaganda machine as a model for the anti-Saddam campaign.

Only this publication has reported what any honest investi-

gator could find out—that during two years of U.S. destabilization, less than a handful of people were killed in Panama, most by accidents during skirmishes. Through dozens of U.S.-orchestrated anti-Noriega protests, Noriega's defense forces committed the "brutality" of towing away the Mercedes and BMWs of the *rabiblanco*, or "white-tails," as the oligarchy is called there. Several military men died in the final coup attempt of October 1989, which the U.S. promoted, and then sabotaged in order to make way for the invasion that could not occur if Noriega were toppled.

The invasion—planned months before any of the excuses Bush used, such as Noriega's alleged declaration of war, and "aggression against U.S. citizens"—was a necessary precedent for the Bush strategy of genocidal wars against the Third World. The death of a handful of military men carrying out a coup, victims whose blood is on the hands of the U.S. President who set them up and then pulled out on them, is now the pretext for charging Noriega with murder inside Panama.

Noriega's human rights record should be contrasted not only to the Operation Just Cause massacre of innocent civilians, but also to the situation in Mexico, where Bush's Harvard-trained ally Carlos Salinas de Gortari's security forces have killed hundreds of opposition leaders since he stole the presidency through massive vote fraud two years ago.

Yet, in part because the U.S. public at large has refused to demand that the Panama file be opened, George Bush believes more than ever that he can send a U.S. invasion force to any Third World nation, commit any atrocity, and come out as the champion of democracy, or at least the American way of life. Many Americans still, after all, give George an A+ for his splendid little invasion of Panama.

One of George's illusions is that he can carry out another "surgical strike," bombing Iraq back to the Stone Age, and mopping up within six days. The Panamanian Defense Forces were trained to combat a U.S. invasion, and its plans to carry out guerrilla warfare against U.S. forces were only canceled after General Noriega responded to the bombardment and massacre of civilians by taking refuge at the Papal Nuncio's office and calling off the resistance. Bush mistakenly believes that bombing of Iraqi population centers, and the demonstration of disregard for human life by the all-powerful adversary, would have the same effect in Iraq.

Judicial fascism

The Bush administration, which has, through the Thornburgh Justice Department, torn up the Constitution in order to jail and silence enemies of the Establishment's policies, also believes that the U.S. population will not revolt against the further imposition of judicial fascism. So far, Bush and his courts have gotten away with the jailing of Lyndon LaRouche and his associates, and the targeting of black elected officials and hundreds of others on his political enemies list. So why not remove the embarrassment of a competent defense for the "dirty dictator" Noriega?

"I am now at the mercy of a totally unfair and unjust system, which chooses my prosecutors, and now chooses my defense attorneys," declared Noriega Nov. 16 in a statement before Federal Judge William Hoeveler. According to the English-language version distributed by his lawyers, Noriega said: "When I was brought to the United States, I mistakenly believed that I would be able to receive a fair trial. In order for this to come true, I also believed that I would be able to use my money to hire the lawyers of my choice. It is painfully obvious that the United States government does not wish me to be able to defend myself, and has done everything possible to deprive me of a fair trial and due process.

"They have taken my money, deprived me of my lawyers, videotaped me in my cell, wiretapped my telephone calls with my lawyers, and even given them to the Endara government [of Panama] and to the press. The government of the United States has ignored my status as a prisoner of war and has violated the Geneva Convention," said Noriega.

"Worst of all, they have not acted in a humanitarian manner. Despite repeated requests by the International Red Cross, they have violated my human rights by denying my wife and children visas so that they may come to the United States to visit with me. To deprive a woman and children of the basic human right to visit their husband and father is shameful and a violation of international law.

"Obviously, it is to the benefit of the United States government that I cannot defend myself, for what they fear I know," he said. "This is not a case about drugs. I realize that this case has implications to the highest levels of the United States government, including the White House."

Noriega said he was never under the illusion that his trial was going to take place under equitable conditions. "But I also never expected to face a virtual army of prosecutors and investigators on such an uneven field of battle," and allowed only lawyers who have received no pay whatsoever and "who are only permitted to use pistols, while the prosecutor's office has nuclear weapons."

"This they call a fair fight," he said. "The battle I face ahead is very similar to when the United States invaded my country. That was one-sided and unfair, and so is this battle."

One year later, it is about time the American people questioned just what "way of life" George is talking about defending as he commits nearly half a million U.S. troops to the Gulf. Before 50,000 body bags find their way home, and while we can still do something about it, serious U.S. citizens should study the Panama file.

If George Bush thought so much of democracy that he killed thousands of Panamanian civilians to install a U.S.-backed "democracy," why will he risk 50,000 U.S. casualties to reimpose the government of the Emir of Kuwait, a dictator by any reading of Webster's dictionary? As long as the Americans continue to swallow George's "big lie," the U.S. as a nation will suffer the tragedy of a decaying empire destroying itself.