Chapter 9: Panama and Haiti

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Background

In many ways U.S. interventions in Panama in 1989 and in Haiti in 1994 fit the pattern of nearly a century of repeated uses of force and the threat of force by the United States in the Caribbean Basin. From the military ouster of Spain from Cuba and Puerto Rico in 1898, through the proxy overthrow of the Arbenz regime in Guatemala in 1954, the United States acted as the ultimate arbiter of power throughout the region. In 1927, Under Secretary of State Robert Olds noted:

"...we do control the destinies of Central America and we do so for the reason that the national interest absolutely dictates such a course. There is no room for any outside influence other than ours in this region. We could not tolerate such a thing without incurring grave risks. ... Central America has always understood that governments which we recognize and support stay in power while those we do not recognize and support fall."[1]

Olds' words applied equally to the Latin Caribbean. While direct interventions became much less common after the 1920s threats of force, use of proxy forces, covert operations, and economic pressures were on occasion used to oust regimes of which the United States disapproved. This pattern began to change in the 1960s. Kennedy administration efforts to overthrow Fidel Castro in Cuba and Francois Duvalier in Haiti failed. Proxy forces proved inadequate, economic and diplomatic sanctions were unavailing. In both cases, Washington went to the brink of intervening with military force but backed off at the last second.[3] The global context of the Cold War, the influence of media-driven public opinion, and the need to cultivate political support from other hemispheric nations all led to a growing reluctance to use direct, unilateral force. The fundamental determination to remain preeminent in the region, however, endured.

These changes were evident in President Johnson's 1965 intervention in the Dominican Republic. For the first time, the United States sought support from other hemispheric nations for an intervention, ultimately getting the Organization of American States (OAS) to approve the creation of an "Inter-American Peace Force," nominally under the command of a Brazilian general.[4] An interim government was installed and relatively free elections were held. While clearly American dominated, this operation represented a move away from the traditional, unilateral approach to intervention.

The Carter administration's response to the 1979 Nicaraguan civil conflict represented even greater movement away from unilateralism. Facing the prospect of victory by the Marxist-dominated Sandinista Liberation Front, the United States asked the OAS to send an Inter-American force to Nicaragua. When it became clear that this proposal would be overwhelmingly defeated the administration withdrew it and, instead of undertaking unilateral intervention, turned to negotiations to deal with the situation.[5]

The Reagan administration seemed, in many ways, to return to earlier patterns of intervention with its use of a proxy force, the contras, to undermine the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua and in the 1983 intervention in Grenada. But with operations in Nicaragua constantly limited by pressures from the U.S. Congress and opposition from much of Latin America and in Grenada, the administration found it desirable to seek the support and participation of the Commonwealth Caribbean. The prolonged and indecisive nature of the Nicaraguan operations was especially illustrative of the growing limitations on American interventionism as Washington ultimately accepted political negotiations rather than force of arms as the means for dealing with the situation.

In its second term, the Reagan administration found itself confronting political disorder in both Haiti and Panama. While these situations threatened efforts to promote stability in the region, the possibility of direct military intervention was not initially considered as an option in either case. In 1986, the United States helped negotiate the departure of Haitian dictator Jean-Claude Duvalier, but found it much more difficult to promote a stable successor regime.[6] Instability and military rule, however, was nothing new in Haiti and after Jean-Claude fled the administration was able to consign that nation to the back-burner. The situation in Panama proved much more intractable.

Panama

Panama provided a multitude of problems for the Reagan administration. Reagan's opposition to the Panama Canal Treaties, the desire of Panama's dictator, Omar Torrijos, to play an active role in the emerging Central American crisis, U.S. plans to use Panamanian bases to support operations in Nicaragua and El Salvador, and growing concerns over that nation's role in the international narcotics trade all combined to make relations tense and potentially unstable.

The death of Torrijos in a 1981 plane crash removed one problem, but created another. A struggle for power broke out within the ranks of Panama's combined military and police force (known first as the National Guard and later as the Panamanian Defense Forces (PDF). In 1984 the most unscrupulous of the contenders, intelligence chief Manuel Antonio Noriega, emerged as the nation's new strongman.

Panama has a long tradition of preferring negotiations, intrigue, and coalition-building to brute force in resolving disputes. In many ways, Noriega...
Noriega was an embarrassment to U.S. policymakers, trying to portray Nicaragua as an island of totalitarianism in a sea of emerging democracies. Panama's 1984 elections only made the situation worse for U.S. policymakers. The opposition to Noriega was led by octogenarian Arnulfo Arias, an erratic populist whose overthrow the United States had promoted in 1941. Noriega's hand-picked candidate, banker Nicolas Ardito Barletta, seemed to fit Washington's prescription for an ideal Panamanian president. The problem was that Noriega had to resort to massive fraud to secure his election. Hoping that Barletta could move the nation toward democracy, and convinced that the military would not tolerate an Arias presidency, the Reagan administration ignored the fraud and endorsed the official results.

Barletta's presidency lasted only a year. In September 1985, the PDF murdered a leading Noriega critic, Dr. Hugo Spadafora. Spadafora had ties to Panama's traditional elite families and his death intensified their already strong opposition to military rule. When Barletta endorsed an investigation of the slaying, Noriega and the PDF forced him out of office, installing Vice President Eric Arturo Delvalle as the latest in a string of puppet civilian presidents. While U.S. Ambassador to Panama Everett Briggs and Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Elliot Abrams urged support for Barletta, others, notably in the defense and intelligence communities, were less enthusiastic and the United States accepted the fait accompli. There seemed few viable alternatives to Noriega, especially since his second in command, Colonel Roberto Díaz Herrera, was perceived as a leftist sympathizer.

In the months that followed, relations slowly deteriorated. Opposition to Noriega grew in the U.S. Congress where Republican Senator Jesse Helms, Chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee's Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere, and Democratic Congressmen Gus Yatron and Michael Barnes, chairs of subcommittees of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, held 1986 hearings on the situation in Panama. Reports of Noriega's and the PDF's involvement with narcotics trafficking fueled the criticism.

In June 1987, Noriega retired Colonel Diaz Herrera, both creating a dangerous opponent and removing a major obstacle to stronger U.S. action. Diaz Herrera responded by detailing PDF responsibility for the 1984 electoral fraud and the Spadafora murder. Panama erupted in riots and much of the business class joined with opposition politicians in protesting military domination. The PDF ultimately restored order and sent Diaz Herrera into exile, but the publicity generated by these events combined with continuing opposition demonstrations and strikes led to a dramatic shift in U.S. policy. After considerable debate, administration officials agreed to "quietly ease" Noriega out of power. Emphasis was on persuasion, political and economic pressures, and encouragement of internal opposition. There is no indication that consideration was given to the possibility of the use of armed force to accomplish this objective.

On June 26, by a vote of 84 to 2, the U.S. Senate passed Resolution 239 calling on the Government of Panama to remove General Noriega from command. Panama's rubber-stamp Legislative Assembly responded on June 29 by denouncing U.S. interference in its internal affairs and calling for the expulsion of U.S. Ambassador Arthur Davis. The next day a government-organized mob attacked the U.S. embassy.

A few hours after this attack, Elliot Abrams delivered a major speech on Panama which associated General Noriega with Castro and Nicaragua's Sandinistas. While criticizing the PDF's corruption and involvement in politics, Abrams also characterized the institution as "a vitaly important part of the fabric of Panamanian society." The United States was clearly trying to encourage the PDF to change its commander.

The campaign against Noriega encountered little international support. On July 1, the OAS approved a resolution which criticized "unwarranted interference in the domestic affairs of Panama." Undeterred, the United States turned to economic sanctions and, on July 23, froze military and economic assistance to Panama. Five months later Congress passed and President Reagan signed into law an Appropriations Bill which included bans on importation of Panamanian sugar, suspension of joint military exercises, and a requirement that U.S. representatives vote against loans to Panama by international financial organizations. Nothing the administration did had any evident effect on the Noriega, who continued to beat, arrest, and intimidate his domestic opponents. His use of force, however, was measured with few fatalities and a conspicuous lack of the tortures and disappearances which had characterized actions by erstwhile U.S. allies in Guatemala and El Salvador.

Noriega's efforts to deflect U.S. pressures were equally ineffective. Panama apologized for the June 30 attack on the U.S. embassy and paid for the damages, but this had no impact on policy. Noriega threatened that continued pressures would move Panama's politics to the left and took several symbolic actions such as granting landing rights to Aeroflot in an attempt to drive this point home. This only strengthened the administration's determination to force his resignation.

By late 1987, both sides seemed to be searching for a way out of the impasse. Retired Admiral Daniel J. Murphy, former deputy director of the CIA, traveled to Panama in August and November to sound out possible scenarios for a solution. Jose Blandon, Panama's Consul General in New York, developed a plan which would allow Noriega to retire gracefully but would keep the Delvalle regime in office and the PDF in power. The extent to which either of these was operating with official sanction remains unclear and both efforts ultimately collapsed, but they did indicate that, in traditional Panamanian fashion, everybody was seeking to make the best deal possible.

By early 1988, the administration knew that two Florida grand juries were preparing indictments charging Noriega with narcotics trafficking. In an election year in which drugs were becoming a major issue, any effort to suppress or even hold up the indictments risked major political disaster. But once they were handed down, pressures for a tougher stance against Noriega would greatly increase. In an effort to avoid this dilemma, the administration sent Assistant Secretary of Defense Richard Armitage to Panama to urge a speedy solution and convince Noriega that he could not count on Pentagon support. The meetings produced no positive results and, in the view of Ambassador Davis, may even have been counter-productive.

The indictments were handed down on February 4, 1988, with the predictable effect. Removing Noriega became a domestic political issue whose urgency increased as elections drew closer. Still trying to work through existing authorities, the United States concentrated on getting President Delvalle to fire Noriega. On February 25, he attempted to do so but the PDF ignored him and the Legislative Assembly obediently voted to remove him.
him, replacing him with Education Minister Manuel Solis Palma. Delvalle fled to a U.S. military base in Panama and the Reagan administration announced that it still considered him to be president.

Until this debacle, the United States had paid scant attention to Panama's political opposition. If anything, their insistence that Noriega's departure was non-negotiable and that the Delvalle administration should also be deposed had been perceived as hindering efforts to resolve the confrontation. The United States now wanted a united opposition front against Noriega, but this meant pressuring the opposition to accept Delvalle. Described by one Panamanian writer as "a political orphan," Delvalle lacked credibility with all significant political factions. The PDF viewed him with disdain as an American puppet, Noriega's political supporters saw him as a traitor who endangered their futures, and the opposition argued that he was the product of a fraudulent election who served Noriega until family pressures and threats to his sugar interests forced a change of course. By embracing him, the United States cost the opposition political credibility.

In the days following the Delvalle fiasco, the administration sought to create its own policy consensus. There was strong support for increasing economic sanctions, a tactic which was low cost but difficult to reverse. There was no apparent sentiment for the use of military force, despite the presence of over 10,000 U.S. troops stationed in Panama. General Fred Woerner, the Commanding General of the U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM), headquartered in Panama, was especially adamant on this point. Any use of force, he believed, would endanger U.S. dependents in Panama, many of whom lived off the military bases in Panamanian territory, and would damage military relations with nations where we had bilateral defense agreements. Woerner constantly argued that other, less costly, options were still available which could bring down Noriega. He was generally supported by Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Admiral William J. Crowe, Jr. But while arguing against intervention they also began developing detailed plans for just such an operation, should the necessity ultimately arise.

There were widespread hopes that a coup within the PDF would bring down Noriega, but little consensus as to what the United States could or should do to encourage and support this. When an attempt did occur on March 16th, the administration seemed ill-prepared to take advantage of it and the effort failed. Its major impact was to give Noriega an excuse for purging the officer corps of actual or suspected opponents.

To increase pressure, the United States announced on April 1 that 1,300 additional troops would be dispatched to Panama. Elliot Abrams urged further military pressures and supported a variety of plans for seizing Noriega and transporting him to the United States. These ideas produced a growing rift with General Woerner and Admiral Crowe, who viewed them as dangerous bluff or, even worse, ideas that could produce the military confrontation they were designed to avoid. Finally, at the urging of Secretary of State George Shultz, and with the support of the president, Washington again tried to arrange Noriega's departure by negotiation. Pressures were mounting on both sides to cut a deal. In Panama, economic sanctions were beginning to bite and hopes that Noriega's "friends" in the Pentagon and the CIA could shield him from escalating pressures were rapidly fading. In Washington, the approach of presidential elections and a growing tendency of Congress to adopt anti-Panamanian legislation made reaching a solution even more urgent.

By May, negotiations headed by U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Michael Kozak seemed close to success. Agreement was reached that Noriega would resign, effective in August, and would not leave the country until after the 1989 elections. The United States would dismiss the indictment against him, lift sanctions, and provide economic assistance. Washington would continue to recognize Delvalle as president, but Solis Palma would continue occupying the presidential offices while a broad-based dialogue established conditions for the elections. Opinion as to whether Noriega would comply with such a deal was divided, with some, such as the U.S. Embassy's Deputy Chief of Mission John Maisto arguing that he was playing for time, while others, such as Defense Attache Colonel Al Cornell, insisted that he really wanted a deal. In any case, Noriega asked for more time. This infuriated Shultz, who was delaying a trip to Moscow in order to announce the anticipated agreement. Over Kozak's objections, he ordered negotiations broken off. Why this effort failed is still in dispute. Some argue that Noriega always planned to scuttle arrangements at the last minute, others believed that pressures and threats from his own officers caused him to back off. Still others insist that Vice President George Bush, believing that any arrangement which gave Noriega immunity would jeopardize his chances in the U.S. presidential elections, manipulated policy to ensure that the deal fell through.

For the next eight months policy was put on hold, awaiting the inauguration of a new U.S. administration. Efforts continued to encourage potential dissidents within the PDF to mobilize international opposition and to create a unified political opposition for the May 1989 elections. This last effort was facilitated when Arnulfo Arias finally died in August 1988. The United States had little expectation that the elections would not be rigged, but hoped that Noriega would resort to blatant intimidation and fraud which would open the door for direct OAS involvement similar to that which had helped force Anastasio Somoza from power in Nicaragua a decade earlier. Noriega had long implied that he had a special relationship with George Bush and that once Elliot Abrams left the State Department a quick resolution of the dispute with the United States could be arranged. While this may have helped strengthen his support within the PDF, such rumors made it even more difficult for the new administration to negotiate any deal. Lacking other viable options, it concentrated on the 1989 elections, providing covert funding for the opposition, which had formed a coalition ticket headed by Arnulfo Arias' former executive secretary, Guillermo Endara, and encouraging the dispatch of international observers headed by former U.S. Presidents Jimmy Carter and Gerald Ford, and former Belizian Prime Minister George Price. The willingness to work with Carter signaled a shift away from the partisan debates of the Reagan era to the search for some degree of bipartisan consensus on dealing with Panama. Noriega's efforts to manipulate the electoral process was even more successful than expected and on election night it was clear that the opposition was heading for a massive victory. When the government tried to manipulate the count President Carter went on television, recognized the opposition's victory and declared that "the people of Panama are in the process of being defrauded of the votes they freely expressed."

With observers virtually unanimous in recognizing Endara's victory, Noriega finally had the entire election annulled on the grounds of foreign interference. Opposition protests were brutally suppressed, producing dramatic pictures of bloodied candidates. Panama's Roman Catholic Church joined the rising swell of denunciations of Noriega's actions and, prodded by the United States, the OAS agreed to convene a Meeting of Foreign Ministers to discuss the situation.

At first glance, Noriega's handling of the elections seemed to give the Bush administration exactly what it wanted. Bipartisan support for tougher measures seemed assured, and there was hope that the OAS might repeat its 1979 Nicaraguan performance. To further strengthen his hand,
Unfortunately for the Bush administration and people of Panama, the OAS effort at resolving the dispute proved disastrously inept. In May, that body did adopt, by a vote of twenty to one with six abstentions, a resolution calling for the peaceful transition of power “to a democratically elected government.” But it never explicitly recognized the opposition slate as that government. Instead, a mediation mission, headed by Ecuadorian Foreign Minister Diego Cordovez, tried to promote a political solution by treating Noriega’s puppets as fully legitimate and making avoidance of a U.S. intervention more important than the restoration of democracy. For Noriega, the mission provided him an opportunity to play time, exacerbate divisions among his opposition, and pose as a champion of Latin American nationalism. Divisions within the OAS mission combined with a perceived lack of credibility for U.S. threats to convince Noriega that he could survive international pressures and continue in power. The mediation effort collapsed when Noriega rejected a proposal for a referendum on accepting or rejecting the May elections and installed yet another puppet president, Francisco Rodriguez, when Solis Palma’s term expired on September 1.

By then, the United States was drifting toward the military intervention it had hoped to avoid. Upset by General Woerner’s critique of possible military options, the administration decided to replace him with General Maxwell Thurman, an officer with no Latin American experience or sympathies. Thurman took over on September 30, and two days later another coup attempt was launched by dissident PDF officers. Confusion, inexperience, and unclear guidance all contributed to a fatal lack of American support for these officers, who at one point actually managed to capture Noriega. Thurman was suspicious that this was actually an elaborate Noriega plot to lure the United States into intervention, Panama’s political opposition was completely out of the loop, and Noriega was able to turn the tables on his captors, rally military support, and ultimately have the leading plotters shot. In the aftermath, he again purged the officer corps and assigned his own men as bodyguards for ranking officers.

Public criticism of U.S. failure to support this effort, coupled with a growing loss of faith in other options accelerated the momentum toward unilateral military intervention. The OAS had failed, and the opposition appeared disheartened and frustrated. Economic sanctions could not be lifted, but were doing more damage to Noriega’s opponents than to his supporters. In the aftermath of the October uprising, prospects for the PDF removing its own commander seemed more distant than ever. The administration’s own exaggerated rhetoric, portraying Noriega as a key to Latin America’s drug trade and a menace to U.S. security, generated additional pressures for some quick, decisive action. Noriega’s own performance had similar results. Frequent appearances loudly defying the United States were designed to bolster domestic support, but had the effect of creating a popular U.S. image of him as a mad, machete-waving tyrant. The bloodied images of opposition candidates which appeared around the world following the May elections added to this perception and gave the opposition a huge boost in credibility. Finally, his decision to try to create a popular U.S. image of him as a mad, machete-waving tyrant. The bloodied images of opposition candidates which appeared around the world following the May elections added to this perception and gave the opposition a huge boost in credibility. Finally, his decision to launch a campaign of harassment against U.S. personnel in Panama, far from restraining U.S. pressures, produced a growing anger against him within the American military establishment.

Under pressure from Washington, General Thurman began hurriedly updating and revising plans for armed intervention. In the process he downplayed concerns over conditions within Panama and emphasized the rapid destruction of the PDF with a minimum of U.S. casualties. By the end of November it was clear that all it took to launch the operation was a credible excuse. Noriega soon provided that. On December 15, at his urging, the puppet National Assembly declared that because of continuing U.S. “aggression” Panama was “in a state of war.” The following day a U.S. officer, Lt. Robert Paz, was killed by PDF soldiers. For the President this was all the provocation necessary. On the 17th he authorized Operation Just Cause, the military invasion of Panama. This began in the pre-dawn hours of December 20th, and, with a few exceptions, the PDF quickly collapsed. Scattered violence continued for several days, however, and Noriega, who took refuge in the Papal Nunciatura, did not surrender until January 4. Sworn into office on a U.S. military base, the Endara administration was quickly installed to replace Noriega’s regime.

Criticisms of the intervention by Latin America leaders was loud and sharp, but seemed to have little long-range effect of hemispheric relations. The OAS did adopt, by a vote of twenty to one with six abstentions, a resolution calling for U.S. withdrawal, but took no action to enforce this. U.S. fatalities were surprisingly low; Panamanian fatalities were notably higher, but still well under a thousand. For an operation the United States had tried so long to avoid, the negative repercussions seemed surprisingly few.

### Haiti

Like Panama, the political crisis in Haiti endured through two different U.S. administrations. There, too, the United States encouraged election supervision and sought to involve the OAS in promoting a political transition. Both confrontations were with military regimes which refused to accept electoral results, violated human rights, and were suspected of narcotics trafficking. In both cases U.S. intervention resulted in the destruction of the existing military institution and the installation of an elected civilian government. But beneath these apparent similarities there are important differences. The fall of the Duvalier dynasty in 1986 brought neither stability nor democracy to Haiti. The poorest nation in the hemisphere, it was deeply divided along class/caste lines. A French-speaking mulatto elite dominated the nation while the black, Creole-speaking majority struggled to survive.

Haiti lacked any tradition of democracy, open elections, impartial judicial systems, limited power, or government accountability. Political parties were often groups of office seekers following some powerful individual. Described as “a nation occupied by the state,” the government’s main preoccupations seemed to be extorting taxes from the destitute peasantry and seizing opportunities for self-aggrandizement. In much of rural Haiti, where eighty percent of the population lives, the government was represented only by tax collectors and soldiers.

Haiti’s armed forces (FADH) were the most predatory and least professional in the Americas. Combining police and military functions, this 7,000 man force was poorly equipped, badly trained and disciplined, and accustomed to the uninhibited use of force against its own population. In rural areas, military authority was supported by a network of army-appointed section chiefs (chef seksyon) who acted as rural police and appointed their own deputies. Dating from the Duvalier era, there was also a network of para-military thugs, originally known as tonton macoutes, who functioned as agents of official terror. It was hardly surprising that the post-Duvalier era was marked by bloody power struggles. Elections scheduled for November 29, 1987, were
The military rescheduled elections for December. The four principal candidates boycotted this farce and the United States characterized the process as "rigged," but beyond suspending aid did nothing. The military declared that over a million votes had been cast and that their candidate, Dr. Leslie Manigat, had won. Sworn in on February 7, 1988, he would hold office for less than five months. Caught in an internal military feud over power and drug money, he was unceremoniously exiled on June 20. With Manigat’s own claim to office offtake and each side of the dispute accusing the other of being involved in narcotics trafficking, Washington could only deplore the continuing violence.

For over two years, while a dreary succession of military leaders tried to govern Haiti, pressures for a transition to a more democratic regime continued both on the international and on the domestic front. Within Haiti, opposition to military rule came to be symbolized by a radical priest, Father Jean-Bertrand Aristide. The conservative Roman Catholic hierarchy tried to silence him, the tonton macoutes tried to kill him, but his popularity only increased. In 1989, the United States persuaded the incumbent military ruler, General Prosper Avril, to step down and allow Supreme Court Justice Ertha Pascale Trouillot to serve as interim president. With the support of the military’s new commander, General Herard Abraham, she arranged relatively free elections for December 16.[35] To the dismay of the military and Haiti’s elite families, Father Aristide was elected president with two-thirds of the total vote.

Aristide took office on February 7, 1991, and was overthrown by the military on September 30, less than eight months later. His brief term in office was highlighted by his firing of General Abraham, whose support of elections had made possible his victory, and by conflicts with the Congress, the military, and Haiti’s mulatto elite.

During Aristide’s brief term in office the OAS General Assembly, by a vote of 34 to 0, had adopted Resolution 1080 which called for “the immediate convocation of the Permanent Council in the case of any event giving rise to the sudden or irregular interruption of the democratic political institutional process of the legitimate exercise of power by the democratically elected government in any of the Organization’s member states.” This reflected a new commitment to support elected governments against coups and a belated recognition of the dangers evident in the inability of the OAS to resolve the crisis in Panama.[36] The coup in Haiti was the first test of this resolution and, with the strong urging of U.S. Ambassador Luigi Einaudi, the OAS moved quickly to implement its mandate. On October 2, 1991, a meeting of Foreign Ministers of OAS member states was hurriedly convened. Declaring that “a small group of willful, violent men have betrayed their uniform and their nation,” U.S. Secretary of State Baker called on the delegates to “make clear that the assault on Haiti’s constitutional government has no legitimacy and will not succeed.”

Announcing that the United States, Canada, Venezuela, France, and the European Community had suspended all assistance, he called on the multilateral agencies to do likewise and urged all OAS members “collectively to defend the legitimate government of President Aristide.”[37] The next day, the foreign ministers formally condemned the coup and called on member states to “suspend their economic, financial, and commercial ties with Haiti,” and to “bring about the diplomatic isolation of those who hold power illegally.”[38] Haiti’s military ignored this resolution and pressured the parliament into installing Supreme Court Justice Joseph Nerette as the new president. Real power, however, was in the hands of Army Commander General Raul Cedras and the rest of the high command. The Foreign Ministers Meeting responded with even stronger action, calling on member states to “freeze the assets of the Haitian State and to impose a trade embargo.” They also dispatched a “civilian mission” to Haiti to negotiate Aristide’s restoration.[39] Some governments urged even stronger action. Argentine Foreign Minister Guido de Tellass suggested that the OAS create a multinational military force to return Aristide to power.[40] Except for Venezuela, no other major hemispheric states showed any interest for this option.

Headed by former Colombian Foreign Minister Augusto Ramirez Ocampo, the OAS mission labored for months to produce an accord. The failure of the European Community and other nations to support the trade embargo, despite a United Nations General Assembly resolution endorsing OAS actions, weakened the negotiators hand. U.S. enthusiasm for the return of Aristide also waned as the exiled president, supremely confident in the total righteousness of his cause, proved difficult to deal with. These factors, combined with the endless intrigues, rivalries, and double-dealings of the Haitian military and its political supporters, made reaching any accord a monumental task—and having all parties abide by any agreement even more problematical. President Bush also faced divisions within his administration when it came to dealing with Haiti. The CIA believed that Haiti had little value and that Aristide was unstable, untrustworthy, and anti-American. The military saw any commitment of resources to Haiti as a diversion from much more important areas. Many Republicans in Congress believed Aristide was a dangerous, pro-Castro radical and that involvement in Haiti could only harm their party’s chances in the 1992 elections.

By the end of 1991, the administration was backing off from any immediate commitment to restore the exiled Haitian president. The tone of Ambassador Einaudi’s remarks to the OAS Permanent Council on January 21, 1992, reflected this shift. While condemning the coup and calling for the restoration of democracy he stressed the need for an “arrangement reached among Haitians,” adding that, “Reconciliation takes time…. Bridging deep social divisions takes time.”[41]

In the days following this statement the administration distanced itself even further from Aristide. As the crisis dragged on, Haitians by the thousands tried to flee to Florida, creating a demand within that politically crucial state that Washington do something to control the influx. The Coast Guard had been picking up refugees and taking them to internment camps in Guantanamo Bay. With Guantanamo overflowing and Florida nervous at the prospect that the refugees might wind up there, President Bush ordered that refugees be returned directly to Haiti. He also announced that exemptions to the embargo would be granted to individual firms on a case-by-case basis.[42]

On February 23, 1992, the OAS mediation effort finally appeared to bear fruit. Aristide and a delegation of Haitian parliamentarians signed the “Washington Protocol” which recognized him as head of state and provided for the creation of an interim government with Rene Theodore, leader of Haiti’s tiny Communist Party, as prime minister. Both sides also agreed to request the lifting of international sanctions and to “reject and condemn any intervention by foreign armed forces.”[43]

The following month, under military pressure, Haiti’s Parliament refused to ratify the accord and the mediation effort collapsed. The military, the Parliament, and much of Haiti’s elite had become convinced that the administration’s growing disillusionment with Aristide would eventually lead to their acceptance of his ouster, providing an acceptable substitute could be found.[44] To accomplish this, Marc Bazin, a former
international banker who had been widely perceived as Washington's favored candidate in the 1991 elections, was installed in June as Prime Minister. While the Bush administration never recognized Bazin's government, they did pressure Aristide to negotiate with it. With U.S. elections approaching and a modicum of stability restored, the administration was more than ever willing to leave Haiti's fate to negotiations among Haitians, assisted by international mediation. The OAS continued its efforts, but met with little success. By the December 1992 Foreign Ministers Meeting, most member states had decided that the only way to make the embargo effective and break the political stalemate was to involve the United Nations. OAS Secretary General Joao Baena Soares opposed this, but was overruled by the foreign ministers. Details were quickly worked out. Former Argentine Foreign Minister Dante Caputo was appointed by both secretary generals as their special representative. He soon negotiated the establishment of an OAS/U.N. monitoring mission which began arriving in Haiti in early February, 1993.

Following the inauguration of Bill Clinton as president in January 1993, the stronger response from the international community seemed matched by a change in U.S. policy. Clinton publicly associated himself with Aristide and pledged a "much more aggressive effort" to return him to power. In March he appointed Ambassador Lawrence Pezullo as his special envoy to Haiti. Working closely, Caputo and Pezullo began seeking a formula to resolve the crisis.

While the OAS, in part because of Mexican opposition, could never develop a military component to its negotiating position, the U.N. and the Clinton administration were not so inhibited. They agreed that an international military/police presence, both to monitor the situation and to reorganize and train Haitian security forces, was an indispensable component of any solution. There was less consensus on the extent and nature of America's participation, with Washington arguing for a leading U.S. role (along with French and Canadian participation), and the U.N. wanting a more diversified force under U.N. control. These problems were ultimately worked out and, in April, Caputo presented the Haitian authorities with a plan for restoring constitutional government and reforming the security forces. To the dismay of the U.N. and the United States, the plan was rejected. Haiti's military still believed that they could wait out international pressures.

This placed the Clinton administration in a difficult position. Failure to respond decisively would anger important constituent groups, notably the Congressional Black Caucus, and would weaken the credibility of U.S. policy throughout the hemisphere. Exerting stronger pressure would run contrary to the advice of much of the intelligence and defense communities and might risk blundering into an unpopular military intervention. Again, the administration turned to the OAS and the U.N. On June 6, a Meeting of OAS Foreign Ministers adopted a resolution calling for an oil embargo and a suspension of commercial air service to Haiti. Ten days later, the U.N. Security Council voted to impose an oil and arms embargo and to freeze all foreign assets controlled by the de facto regime.

Under this pressure the regime began to weaken. Bazin quit as prime minister and General Cedras agreed to meet with U.N. and OAS negotiators in New York. The United States, supported by three other "Friends of the Secretary General," Canada, France, and Venezuela, participated in these talks as, reluctantly, did Aristide and his representatives. The result was the Governors Island Agreement of July 3. Aristide agreed to appoint a new prime minister (businessman Robert Malval) who would be approved by the Haitian Parliament. Once he was in office sanctions would be suspended. Cedras would resign and international trainers would separate the police and military and help train and reorganize both forces. Aristide would appoint a new military commander, decree an amnesty for all involved in the coup and return to Haiti by October 30. The international community would provide financial assistance to rebuild the shattered economy. This accord, hailed as a diplomatic triumph, soon began to unravel. Aristide and Malval quarreled and the promised amnesty decree was repeatedly delayed. The military and its allied thugs increased their violence against Aristide supporters. From July through September there were 118 confirmed or suspected political murders in Port Au Prince. Parliament couldn't meet, Malval's cabinet members did not dare go to their offices, and the mayor of Port Au Prince was prevented from reclaiming his office.

The Clinton administration stubbornly insisted that the Accords were "still on track," and moved ahead with plans to deploy U.S. and Canadian trainers. Problems with the U.N. and disputes between the U.S. Defense and State Departments delayed this and it was not until October 11 that the U.S. Navy troop ship Harlan County arrived off Port Au Prince with 218 unarmed American and Canadian trainers and engineers. A mob of pro-government thugs took over the docks, threatening violence should the troops land. To the surprise of the mobs' leaders, the Harlan County was ordered away, never to return. Coming at the same time as the U.S. military debacle in Somalia, the administration was unwilling to do anything which might risk American servicemen being killed by foreign mobs. The military and their supporters had, at little apparent cost, called the Clinton administration's bluff and won.

The Haitian crisis would drag on for 11 more months until U.S. troops occupied the country. Sanctions would be expanded and tightened, and negotiations would be attempted with little success, but until troops were preparing to embark for Haiti, the United States and the international community would not be able to regain credibility for their determination to oust the military from power. The administration tried a wide variety of approaches, in the process often exacerbating perceptions of its inconsistency and lack of will. It successfully pressed the U.N. to reinstate and tighten economic sanctions. It launched a campaign to link the Haitian military with narcotics trafficking, hoping that this would mobilize American public opinion against them the way it had against Noriega in Panama.

When the October 30 date for Aristide's return came and went with no sign that the authorities in Haiti would back down, Caputo and Pezullo tried to resume negotiations, this time between Malval and Cedras. But there was little room for compromise on either side. In Washington, divisions within the administration and between Republicans and Democrats increased, especially after a CIA report that portrayed Aristide as mentally unstable was leaked. This in turn infuriated the Black Caucus and led to the reassignment of the National Intelligence Officer for Latin America. Reports that sanctions were contributing to Haiti's infant mortality further divided the administration, with U.S. National Security Council officials expressing fears that Haiti would erupt into food riots if the stalemate were prolonged. But the thought of intervening was equally unpalatable. The only alternative was to keep seeking a negotiated settlement which none of the major Haitian factions seemed to want.

By April, the administration was running out of options and the political need to resolve the situation before the November Congressional elections was increasing. After bitter internal debates, the decision was reached to stop pressuring Aristide to compromise and concentrate instead on increasing pressures on the military and its allies. This led to the dismissal of Ambassador Pezullo, who believed this would transfer responsibility for a solution from Haiti to the United States and risk an unnecessary military intervention.
Conclusions

In May, the U.N. expanded sanctions, including banning private flights to Haiti. Washington increased pressures on the Dominican Republic which had developed a lucrative trade in smuggling embargoed goods, notably fuel, across its border with Haiti. Ultimately international observers were dispatched to help stem this flow of vital supplies.

In May 1994, the administration produced Presidential Decision Directive 25 that included participation in international forces to restore democracy as a justifiable use of force. The United States then began sounding out allies about their possible participation in a Haitian "peacekeeping force." Outside of Argentina, support in Latin America was minimal. Nevertheless, in early June, the administration had the Joint Chiefs of Staff issue orders to plan for the occupation of Haiti.[58]

The administration still hoped that intervention could be avoided if the Haitian military was convinced that their failure to yield power would produce this confrontation. A calculated series of statements and press leaks led to a wave of media speculation on the possibility of armed intervention. This had little discernible impact on Haiti's rulers, but it unleashed a fierce debate in the United States.[59] Members of Congress, such as Bill Richardson of New Mexico, traveled to Haiti to seek a possible political opening. Latin Americans looked in vain for some way to negotiate a political solution.[60] Fearing the consequences should Aristide return, and hoping, if no longer firmly believing, that opposition to intervention in the United States would save them, Haiti's military continued to hang tough.[61] Even when the Security Council, at Washington's request, authorized creation of a multinational force to restore Aristide to power, General Cedras and his supporters did not move.[62]

On September 10, the Joint Chiefs of Staff issued the order to execute "Operation Uphold Democracy," the invasion of Haiti. It took several days to assemble the needed troops and equipment. On September 15, President Clinton delivered a final ultimatum to Haiti's military: leave or be removed by force. At the same time, after considerable debate and with the last-minute additions of General Colin Powell and Senator Sam Nunn, Clinton agreed to a final mediation effort by former President Carter. This made little initial progress until the Haitian military became convinced that U.S. threats were credible and that force would be used if negotiations failed. A deal was worked out, then almost collapsed when the Haitian military reacted furiously to the news that U.S. troops were already on their way to Haiti. Only frantic last-minute negotiations by Carter, Nunn, and Powell produced a final agreement.[63] The military leaders agreed not to oppose the intervention and to resign in return for a general amnesty. On September 19, U.S. forces began landing in Haiti. They encountered no opposition.

The military probably believed that the negotiations with Carter insured the institution's future, but they were soon proved wrong. Within a few weeks the military was effectively disbanded. Several thousand continued on as interim police, but long-range plans for creating a new force excluded most of these. Leading military figures fled into exile and Aristide returned to govern a battered and exhausted nation. After three years of escalating confrontations the United States had achieved its goals in Haiti by force, but without significant bloodshed.

In both Panama and Haiti the decision to employ military force came after years of frustrating efforts to reach negotiated solutions to internal political conflicts. Each decision to utilize force was reached reluctantly, in good part because of the perception that all other options had been exhausted. Both interventions removed repressive and corrupt military regimes and installed elected leaders who had been forcibly prevented from exercising their mandate. In that sense, both were successful. On another level, success is much more debatable. In Panama, opposition to international narcotics trafficking was constantly cited as a rationale for actions against the Noriega regime. But intervention had no discernible impact on this traffic; indeed there is evidence that more drugs may be passing through Panama now than when Noriega ruled. In Haiti, restoring democracy was the most frequently proclaimed rationale for U.S. policy, but, as recent elections have shown, democracy in Haiti is weak and imperfect, and how democratic that nation's future will be remains to be seen.

There are several lessons which can be drawn from these two case studies. Perhaps most obvious is that in the initial responses to these crises virtually no one in the policy community contemplated resorting to force. If a significant possibility of such an outcome had been perceived, it is probable that policy would have evolved quite differently.

Both cases demonstrate the capacity of policy to become hostage to rhetoric. In neither case was the actual threat to vital national interests clear. High officials resorted to exaggerated rhetoric, political demonizing, and public confrontations which put national prestige on the line. However, the more this was done the harder it was to back off or reach a compromise negotiated settlement. General Noriega is a case in point. By portraying him as the king of drug dealers the Reagan and Bush administrations rallied public opinion and limited political criticism of their policies. But, in the process, they also made it more and more difficult to negotiate, as evidenced by the Bush campaign's extreme anxiety over the possibility of a deal which would drop indictments against Noriega.

Economic sanctions had a similar effect. Readily available at relatively low cost, both administrations and Congress found the temptation to employ sanctions in Panama and Haiti irresistible. But once employed they were difficult to abandon without paying a high price in credibility. When they didn't work the inevitable temptation was to ratchet them up another notch. Using sanctions to oust an undesirable regime in a small, less-developed nation is like using a sledgehammer to kill a fly. You may eventually get the fly, but in the process you do an immense amount of undesired damage to the environment in which the fly operates--damage which you may ultimately have to pay for. Sanctions are very difficult to target and often damage those within a nation whom the policy is ostensibly designed to support. Ending this damage ultimately became a major argument in favor of military intervention, contributing to the very decision which sanctions were supposed to help avoid.

Policymaking was badly hampered by failures to understand the prevailing political culture. In Panama this meant, among other things, that actions taken with the expectation that they would divide the military often led to binding them closer to Noriega on the assumption that his fall meant a similar fate for them. In Haiti, as Washington Post correspondent Pamela Constable has observed, "to an astonishing degree American officials underestimated the cynicism, greed, ruthlessness, and deep hostility to Aristide among military leaders and their civilian confederates."[64] In both nations there existed an entrenched tendency to see Washington as omnipotent, to assume that for things to change all that was necessary was for the United States to decide to cause the change. As a result local opposition groups often spent more time and effort lobbying American policymakers than trying to resolve their own problems.[65] In both nations the United States ultimately took responsibility for resolving disputes over political power.
Both Panama and Haiti provide classic examples of the capacity of domestic politics to shape, and even dominate, the foreign policy process. In Panama this was exemplified by the submerging of Panamanian realities into the domestic debate over narcotics trafficking. In Haiti the importance of refugees as a political issue, especially in Florida, played a crucial role. So too in the Clinton administration did the influence of the Congressional Black Caucus. Elections had strong but varying effects. The Reagan administration in its last months downplayed Panama in order to avoid embarrassing the Bush campaign. The Bush administration’s involvement in Haiti similarly declined during its last months in office. For the Clinton administration, however, resolving the Haitian crisis before 1994 congressional elections became increasingly important. The basic principle seems to be that the shorter the time to elections, the more dominant are domestic political factors in shaping policy decisions.

The international context is also significant. In Panama, initial confrontations with Noriega were strongly influenced by the need to gain support for policies in Central America. In Haiti, the death of U.S. servicemen in Somalia was critical in explaining the Harlan County debacle.

In each case, the effort to develop consistent and effective policies was hindered by divisions within each administration. Such divergent views reflected different perceptions of the nature of each situation and the potential for success of alternative policies as well as disputes over the political costs and benefits of various options. But they also derived from profound differences on the nature of U.S. international obligations and on the role of force in foreign policy. What is clear in both cases is that the Defense Department and the intelligence community were the least supportive of increased pressures, threats, or other actions which might eventually lead to the use of force. The military always saw the dangers inherent in such policies, while the State Department, the National Security Council, and political advisors were more likely to see escalated pressures as offering opportunities for avoiding a resort to force.

Military opposition can have a powerful inhibiting impact on decisions to use force. It is politically very dangerous for any administration to send troops into combat situations against the counsel of its senior military advisors. This reflects both the military’s prestige and problems of presidential credibility, especially when under close media scrutiny and prolonged partisan criticism for policies in a particular situation. It also reflects internal debates over formulating policy guidelines for the use of force. These were particularly fierce between Secretary of State Shultz and Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger in the Reagan administration. With increasing frequency, such divisions have surfaced in the media, undermining credibility. This perception of divided councils helped convince both the Panamanian and Haitian militaries that they could wait U.S. pressures. The weak credibility of threats undermined the 1992 effort to negotiate a settlement in Panama; by contrast, when the threat became overwhelmingly credible, President Carter’s last-minute negotiations in Haiti succeeded.

One important difference between Haiti and Panama was the extent to which the Bush and Clinton administrations were able to rally public support for the use of force. In Panama the use of force won approval by a four to one margin. Support over Haiti never approached these levels. This reflected both the impact of the experience in Somalia and a belief that dealing with narcotics trafficking was a much higher priority for the United States than promoting democracy in other nations.

In both these cases the United States backed into the use of force by exhausting or mishandling other options. The need to maintain administration credibility, the negative consequences of continuing economic sanctions, and the pressures of domestic politics combined to produce a situation where what was initially seen as a highly unlikely and undesirable option became the option of choice. A combination of luck, the weakness of the foes in question, and the excellent performance of the U.S. military on the ground meant that both these operations, in the short run at least, produced significant success at a limited cost. However, in the longer-run they reinforced negative trends in the region—the tendency to look to the United States to resolve domestic problems and, consequently, blame Washington for whatever goes wrong later—and in our own policy process reinforced the temptation of the United States to assume responsibility for resolving the problems of nations in the Caribbean Basin and to exaggerate the extent to which military force is an effective tool for this. It is worth noting that earlier U.S. interventions played a major role in shaping political culture in Panama and Haiti, just as interventions in Cuba and Nicaragua laid the political foundations for the rise of Castro and the Sandinistas. Whether our “successes” in Panama and Haiti will come back to haunt us too remains to be seen, but history gives us little reason to believe that costly U.S. involvement in these nations and their regional neighbors has finally come to an end.

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[i] Confidential Memorandum by Under Secretary of State Robert Olds, January 2, 1927, National Archives, Record Group 59, Document 817.00/4456.
[3] In 1961, Kennedy refused to use U.S. forces when the exile invasion at the Bay of Pigs (Playa Jiron) failed. In Haiti, in 1963, U.S. support for guerrillas was futile and efforts to involve the Dominican military only weakened that nation’s elected government. When reports indicated Duvalier was on the verge of fleeing the nation, U.S. Marines were actually dispatched to Port Au Prince by air, but hurriedly recalled when the rumors proved false.
Scranton, pp. 75-78.


Scranton, p. 121.

Scranton, pp. 119-128.

Buckley, pp. 112-13.


For example, the Senate, on March 25, by a margin of 92-0, passed a resolution declaring that the administration "should act immediately to impose additional diplomatic, political and economic pressure on General Noriega and should obtain his extradition from Panama." Six days later, by a 92-1 vote they urged the imposition of expanded economic sanctions. On May 17, by an 86-10 vote and over administration opposition, the Senate adopted a resolution condemning any negotiated dismissal of the indictments against Noriega.


Scranton, p. 165.

Scranton, p. 168.

Interviews with Colonel Arturo Getalla (Guatemala), military advisor to the OAS mission and with Lieutenant Colonel Daniel Delgado, PDF.


For a detailed description of the coup attempt, see Buckley, pp. 193-212.

Fishel, pp. 22-28.

Scranton, p. 199.


Ambito Financiero (Buenos Aires), October 9, 1991, p. 11.


Interview with Ambassador Lawrence Pezullo, August, 1995.

Shulz and Marcella, p. 21.

For an example of U.S. military thinking on this subject, see William W. Mendel and Stephan K. Stewman, Planning for Haiti, Leavenworth, LA: Foreign Military Studies Office, Combined Arms Command, June 1, 1983.


The Economist, September 4, 1993, pp. 41-2.

Martin, p. 82. Schulz and Marcella, pp. 25-26.


Interview with Dr. Robert Pastor.

Constable, p. 110.


John E. Reilly, "The Public Mood at Mid-Decade," *Foreign Policy*, No. 98, Spring, 1995, p. 82. 80 percent of the public and 57 percent of leaders polled said anti-narcotics operations should be "a very important foreign policy goal," but only 25 percent of the public and 21 percent of leaders felt the same about bringing democracy to other nations.
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