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New War Order PDF

How Panama set the course for post-Cold War foreign policy

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For a fleeting moment 20 years ago, the United States had the chance to become a normal nation again. From World War II through the collapse of European communism in 1989, America had been in a state of perpetual war, hot or cold. But with the fall of the Berlin Wall, all of that could have changed. There were no more monsters to destroy, no Nazi war machine or global communist conspiracy. For the first time in half a century, the industrialized world was at peace.

Then in December 1989, America went to war again—this time not against Hitler or Moscow's proxies but with Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega. Tensions between George H.W. Bush's administration and Noriega's government had been mounting for some time and climaxed when a scuffle with Panamanian troops left an American military officer dead. On Dec. 20, U.S. forces moved to oust and arrest Noriega. Operation Just Cause, as the invasion was called, came less than a month after the Berlin Wall fell, and it set America on a renewed path of intervention. The prospect of reducing American military involvement in other nations' affairs slipped away, thanks to the precedent set in Panama.

How real was the opportunity to change American foreign policy at that point? Real enough to worry the political class. Wyoming Sen. Malcolm Wallop lamented in 1989 that there was growing pressure to cut the military budget and that Congress was being overwhelmed by a "1935-style isolationism." But the invasion of Panama signaled that Washington was not going to pursue even a slightly more restrained foreign policy.

That the U.S. would topple the government of a neighbor to the south was hardly unprecedented, of course. The United States had invaded small Caribbean and Central American countries on numerous occasions throughout the 20th century. Indeed, before the onset of Franklin Roosevelt's Good Neighbor Policy in the 1930s, Washington routinely overthrew regimes it disliked.

During the Cold War, however, such operations always had a connection to the struggle to keep Soviet influence out of the Western Hemisphere. The CIA-orchestrated coup in Guatemala in 1954 and the military occupations of the Dominican Republic in 1965 and Grenada in 1983 all matched that description. Whatever other motives may have been involved, the Cold War provided the indispensable justification for intervention. And for all the rhetoric about democracy and human rights that U.S. presidents employed during the struggle against communism, there was no indication that Washington would later revert to the practice of coercing Latin American countries merely, in Woodrow Wilson's infamous words, to teach those societies "to elect good men." Thus the invasion of Panama seemed a noticeable departure. Odious though he may have been, Noriega was never a Soviet stooge.

The motives that President Bush cited for the Panama intervention foreshadowed the rationales for nation-building and so-called humanitarian missions that would recur frequently over the next two decades. Among other goals, the president said, the invasion aimed to "defend democracy in Panama." He expressed hope "that the people of Panama will put this dark chapter of dictatorship behind them and move forward as citizens of a democratic Panama." Bush emphasized that "the Panamanian people want democracy, peace, and a chance for better life in dignity and freedom. The people of the United States seek only to support them in pursuit of these noble goals"—apparently with U.S. troops, if necessary.

Questions immediately arose in the media and elsewhere as to whether the Panama mission was an isolated example—or whether it was a template for a new American global strategy. *Time* correspondent George J. Church asked the question that was on many minds: "Does this suggest a new post-cold war foreign policy that casts the U.S. as a different kind of global policeman, acting to save democracy rather than to stop Soviet expansionism?" He noted that administration officials "affirm that Bush is showing a new willingness to use American military power to further U.S. interests that have little or nothing to do with communism."

The worrisome question was how those "U.S. interests" would be defined. An answer came less than a year later, in an area far removed from the Western Hemisphere, when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait. The Bush administration's initial reaction seemed surprisingly restrained. Secretary of State James Baker reportedly quipped to his cabinet colleagues that it "appeared that the sign on the [Middle East] gas station just changed," an attitude that conveyed little alarm about a possible threat to American interests. It was not

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clear that the president ever shared that complacency, however. He certainly didn't after a bracing conversation with British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who admonished him not to "go wobbly."

The United States ultimately adopted a policy that was the antithesis of wobbly, sending more than half a million American troops to the Persian Gulf, at first to dissuade Saddam from expansionist designs he might have on Saudi Arabia, then finally to expel Iraqi forces from Kuwait. But if President Bush at times justified this large-scale military venture in language that echoed his Panama rhetoric, there were at least some tangible U.S. interests at stake, notably keeping the main global source of oil production and reserves in friendly hands. That was not even remotely the case in the next, and last, military intervention of the elder Bush's administration, where we saw the full flowering of the Panama precedent: the humanitarian mission in Somalia.

That mission, launched in December 1992, confirmed what Panama had suggested: that the ideology of democracy, human rights, and nation-building had become a motive for police action anywhere in the world. America had no stake in Somalia, vital or otherwise, and administration officials made little attempt to pretend that it did. The justifications for sending more than 20,000 troops halfway around the world were purely altruistic.

The narrow object of the U.S. military intervention in West Africa was to distribute food and medical supplies to relieve Somalis long caught up in a multisided civil war. But such small-scale humanitarian goals were never realistic, and perhaps not even sincere. U.S. forces soon became entangled in Somalia's complex, chaotic politics. The involvement of the United Nations, which Bush embraced, meant that the mission would inevitably have a wider, nation-building aspect. Any reluctance that the outgoing president might have had on that score was not shared by incoming Clinton officials. The new president's spokeswoman Dee Dee Myers candidly stated, "We went in there with a clear vision of humanitarian relief and nation-building."

To that was added a murky vision of regime change. Just as the Panama invasion centered on the person of Manuel Noriega, and Saddam Hussein personified evil during the Gulf War, Somali warlord Mohamed Farah Aideed became the focus of President Clinton's—and the media's—attention. Aideed proved more elusive than Noriega: a botched attempt to arrest him led to a running firefight in the capital of Mogadishu and left 18 Army Rangers dead.

The Clinton administration ultimately withdrew U.S. forces following that bloody incident, but the president and his advisers did not lose their enthusiasm for nation-building and regime change. Indeed, Somalia was just the beginning. The following year U.S. troops landed in Haiti to restore the elected president (and populist demagogue) Jean Bertrand Aristide to office. Later, U.S. air power was brought to bear against Bosnian Serbs to influence the civil war in Bosnia. That was followed by the dispatch of ground forces to implement the Dayton Accords.

This was the new norm—there may no longer have been a global menace to contend against, but dictators and warlords now had to be overthrown or hemmed in to ensure democracy and human rights. Virtually no one in the Clinton administration argued that Bosnia was essential to the security and well-being of the United States. Although Secretary of State Warren Christopher made a feeble attempt to justify intervention on the basis of general American security concerns—much as canal security and the wider implications for the drug war had been invoked in the Panama invasion—even he did not seriously argue that a parochial conflict could trigger another world war. Instead, he asserted, "This is an important moment for our nation's post-Cold War role in Europe and the world. It tests our commitment to the nurturing of democracy and the support of environments in which democracy can grow and take root." The U.S. was now responsible for guaranteeing order everywhere, not only in our relative "backyard" of Latin America but from the Middle East to the Horn of Africa to the Balkans.

The United States had assumed an identity as leader and defender of the free world during the Cold War. After the fall of European communism, the whole world was "free"—or should have been, in the eyes of our foreign-policy elites. There was no systematic challenger to U.S. power, and the only thing standing in the way of universal prosperity and democracy was the occasional Third World strong man. The Cold War itself had never been about democracy or human rights—not really—but it became an incubator for this new ideology. After the Berlin Wall fell, the war against the Noriegas of the world could begin—and it provided a convenient pretext for maintaining U.S. military power at Cold War levels. There was a new world to order, after all.

Operation Just Cause was a catalyst for Washington's new role not only as worldwide policeman, but as global armed social worker. There was a time two decades ago when empire could have been forsaken. But instead of coming home, we went to Panama City. □

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