P.Se to the NEWS

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PANAMA CANAL NEUTRALITY

The latest ploy of the proponents of the Panama Canal Treaties is to get Panama dictator Torrijos to say he will permit the United States to "maintain the neutrality of the Canal" after Panama takes full control in the year 2000.

Why in the world would we want our Canal to be neutral? "Neutrality" is a treaty trap that would imperil our national security.

During World War II, we used the Canal constantly but closed it to German and Japanese ships and submarines. Weren't we fortunate that the Canal wasn't administered under a treaty of neutrality that would have guaranteed equal treatment to both Allied and Axis ships?

During the Missile Crisis of 1962, after our U-2 plane discovered the missiles Khrushchev had deployed in Cuba, our national survival depended on moving our fleet quickly from the Pacific to the Caribbean. Fortunately our Navy had immediate and unimpeded access to our Canal.

If Castro's friend Torrijos had been in control of the Canal, he might have decided to "alleviate world tension" by closing the Canal to both U.S. and U.S.S.R. ships. Such neutrality would have left us at the mercy of Soviet offensive missiles, but would not have hurt the Soviets because their missiles came across the Atlantic.

During the Vietnam War, 70 percent of our war supplies went through the Canal. It is not difficult to imagine Torrijos taking the position that it would violate the Canal's neutrality to allow the war to be supplied through the Panama Canal.

Torrijos adamantly refused to allow a treaty provision promising that Panama would keep the Canal open. Panama negotiator Escobar bragged that, although the United States demanded such a provision, Panama refused to agree to it.

The Canal can be neutral and closed just as well as it can be neutral and open.

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But the facts of world geography dictate that neutrality, either open or closed, would hurt the United States but not our enemies.

Suppose Castro brings his victorious 14,000 troops home from Angola and decides to conquer several islands in the Caribbean. We decide to bring our Pacific fleet through the Canal to set up a blockade to prevent such aggression. Would Torrijos allow our warships to transit the Canal in order to frustrate the plans of his friend Castro?

Torrijos could simply close the Canal for "repairs" for 30 days. By the time we could sail our ships around the tip of South America, we would be confronted with the choice of accepting the fait accompli of additional Castro/Soviet bases 'in the Caribbean or mounting an invasion with U.S. Marines.

Suppose we have a future confrontation with the Soviet Union or with Red China. Panama could announce that, in such a time of crisis, world peace requires that the Canal be neutral and closed for the duration. A neutral closed Canal would deprive us of our ability to defend our long unguarded Atlantic and Pacific coastal cities, but it would not interfere in the least with strategic war plans of Russia or China.

Those who argue that it would not be in Panama's economic interest to close the Canal and forfeit the tolls do not understand Communist tactics. Communists never permit economic considerations to take priority over ideological objectives. Those who might argue that Torrijos is not a Communist have absolutely no way of guaranteeing that his successor will not be.

The Neutrality Treaty is far worse than a giveaway of our Canal to a Latin American dictator. It is the conversion of a major U.S. military asset into a strategic weapon in the hands of any and all potential enemies. American national security depends on maintaining our right to send our ships through the Canal in time of crisis, while denying transit to our enemies.

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