PS for 1/4/90

Time to Take Back Our Canal

Ask yourself the question, why is President Bush receiving such overwhelming approval (the ABC poll said 80 percent) for his invasion of Panama? Why did the usually super-cautious, non-risk-taking President feel that he could order an American expeditionary force to land in another country and take it over?

Surely the answer cannot be that Panama is run by a corrupt, ruthless, drug-peddling, pro-Communist, anti-American thug who doesn't allow free elections and orders his minions to beat up or kill his opponents. On every continent, there are plenty of dictators with similar resumes.

Surely the answer cannot be that Manuel Noriega is one of the kingpins in the drug cartel. If that were the rationale, why don't we set fire to the drug production centers in Colombia and Bolivia instead of Noriega's police headquarters.

Surely the answer can't be that President Bush decided to reassert the Monroe Doctrine and chase foreign systems out of the Western Hemisphere. If that were the reason, a U.S. expeditionary force should land in Cuba in January and in Nicaragua in February.

Surely the answer can't be that President Bush had an overwhelming urge to "establish democracy" in Panama. Only a handful of countries around the world have ever had any "democracy" as we know it, and certainly Panama has never had any; its entire history is the story of one dictator being replaced by another, usually by a process of succession called a coup.

Surely the answer can't be that Americans have forgotten Vietnam and are ready to take on another foreign expedition to defend freedom over dictatorship. President Bush just sent General Brent Scowcroft on a mission to China that was the equivalent of re-recognizing the bloody butchers of Tiananmen Square.

Surely it can't be because the liberal Democrats are filled with the Christmas spirit and yearn to say only nice words about the President. That will be the day!

Surely the answer cannot be the Panama's strongman insulted America and Americans. That behavior is the daily sport of those who hang around the bars at the United Nations.

It’s a great case of misplaced indignation to get ourselves in a stew of Noriega. He isn’t one white worse than his predecessor, the man with whom President Jimmy Carter signed the infamous Panama Treaties of 1977, Omar Torrijos, another pro-Communist, anti-American, drug-peddling dictator.

If we are going to start spreading democracy by offering a million dollar bounty for the head of a foreign dictator, how about offering a similar sum for the head of Nicolae Ceausescu or Deng Xiaoping?

The answer to our questions is that there is something fundamentally different, geographically different, politically and even emotionally different, about our relationship with Panama. The difference is our Canal and the Treaties under which Panama is about to take it over.

The 1977 Panama Canal Treaties, which were signed by Jimmy Carter in 1977 and ratified by the U.S. Senate by one vote in 1978, are one of the great swindles of all time. The word “swindle” is appropriate because the American people were cheated out of the ownership of real estate that we had bought and paid for four times over.

Checks were drawn on the U.S. Treasury to pay $40 million to the French company for the purchase of its assets after it gave up trying to build a canal, $25 million to Colombia as settlement of its claims over the Canal Zone, $10 million to the Republic of Panama for the purchase of the Canal Zone, and $4.7 million for the purchase of 3,598 plots of land from individual landowners in the Zone.

All the relevant historical documents confirm that the Panama Canal and the Canal Zone around it are properties of the American taxpayers. The Canal Zone is probably the most bought and paid for piece of real estate in history.

Sovereign rights over the Canal Zone were granted to the United States “in perpetuity” by Article III of our 1903 Treaty with Panama. This right of ownership was upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court in the 1907 case called *Wilson v. Shaw*.

All observers admit that at least 80 percent of the American people opposed giving away our Canal when President Jimmy Carter signed the Panama Treaties with Omar Torrijos in August 1977. The Senate ratified the Treaties in 1978 only after adding the DeConcini Reservation retaining unilateral U.S. rights to protect our Canal.

Terrible Torrijos then threw a tantrum and threatened to reject the Treaties. Instead of calling his bluff, Carter telephoned him and told him to “write his own reservation,” which Torrijos did.

The result was that Panama accepted one version of the Treaties and the U.S. Senate a different version. The American people were never told about the deception.

History has given us another chance. We should nullify the Panama Treaties and assert our continuing management of this vital property.