PS for 7/12/90

The Panama Canal Issue Revisited

PBS television last month aired a two-hour program attempting to justify the giving away of our U.S. Canal at Panama by the Jimmy Carter Administration in 1978, a transfer which will take final effect in the year 2000. That date is approaching fast.

Narrated by Edwin Newman, the TV program failed in its mission of trying to make the American people feel good about the deal. We should not have given away our Canal; we don't feel good about it; and events have confirmed all the arguments of those who were then and still are opposed to giving it away.

The 1903 treaty, under which we built and still operate the Canal, guaranteed United States ownership of the Canal Zone "in perpetuity." The Zone is the most bought and paid for piece of real estate in the history of the world.

The Panama Treaty was signed by Carter in 1977 and, after a bitter political battle, ratified by the U.S. Senate in 1978. That battle cost the scalps of a dozen Senators and was a major factor in the capture of the Senate by Republicans in 1980.

The principal argument used by the treaty's salesmen was that it would improve U.S. relations with Panama and Latin America. Those claims sound rather hollow since the Bush Administration's invasion of Panama on December 20, 1989.

The PBS program described in detail how bad Manuel Noriega was. Unfortunately, PBS didn't tell its viewers that the Panamanian dictator to whom the Carter Administration gave away our Canal, Omar Torrijos, was just as obnoxious a drug-smuggling, pro-Communist, anti-American, anti-democratic thug as Noriega.

The PBS program admitted that the Carter Administration covered up Torrijos' human rights violations, drug trafficking, and money-laundering. PBS admitted that there was an "obsession" on the part of the Carter Administration to get the Panama treaty signed and ratified, no matter what.

Perhaps, inadvertently, the PBS program revealed why establishment power and media sources have been so supportive of Bush's invasion of Panama. It was "necessary," we were told, "to protect its future," in other words, not to save the Canal, but to save the treaty.

The unspoken corollary of this premise is that no Administration could possibly continue the process of turning over the Canal so long as any villain like Noriega is still ruling Panama. Giving the Canal to Noriega would have meant that once again Uncle Sam had been brough to his knees by a two-bit Third World dictator, so Noriega just had to go.

Now Noriega has been ousted, but the problems connected with the Canal turnover are just as grim as ever. The larger question is, are the Panamanians capable of operating the Canal?

Running the Canal, and guiding large shops through the locks, requires a team of skilled workers. We can get a preview of how Panamanians run things by looking at the Panama Railroad, which the Carter treaty turned over to them in 1979.

The railroad, according to PBS, is “no longer considered safe, partly because of the condition of the train and tracks, partly because of robbers.” You can wait hours for a train that never comes.

Police protection in the Canal Zone has already been turned over to the Panamanian government. In a 1989 survey, 69 percent of those living in the Zone said they would hesitate to call the Panama police in case of an emergency.

The Panama government has made no plans for administration of the Canal in the year 2000. Canal workers have no guarantees of job security or retirement.

Even more fundamental is the lack of evidence that Panama is capable of governing itself. It has no experience with democracy, and a coup is the ordinary method of changing from one regime to another.

Even the newspaper in Panama City warns against “a possible return to militarism.” Another Panamanian spokesman pointed out how easy it will be for the bad guys of the future to threaten the Canal’s employees and their families.

PBS trotted out Sol Linowitz, the chief negotiator of the Carter treaty, to defend it and call it “U.S. foreign policy at its best.” The truth is that it was U.S. foreign policy at its worst; it was part and parcel of the “America Last” policy which has been a State Department hallmark throughout most of the 20th century.

PBS did allow one voice to timidly suggest that “renegotiating the treaty should be considered.” Indeed, it should. Panama must first prove it is capable of governing itself.