PS1 for 5/12/88#PROTECTING AMERICAN INTERESTS IN THE PANAMA CANAL

Although politicians of both parties sound off every day about a variety of issues, lately I haven't heard any of them bragging about their 1978 vote to give away our Canal in Panama. Several of them, however, who voted ""no'' have been commenting, ""My vote against the Canal giveaway is looking better all the time.''

Nobody could reasonably assert that the American people approved of that Senate ratification of the Panama Treaty signed by President Carter, which calls for turning over all U.S. control of the Canal by December 31, 1999. All surveys showed that public opinion was as united against that giant giveaway as on any political issue since World War II.

It was a shameful day, ten years ago this spring, when the U.S. Senate gave away our great Canal that had been bought and built with American money and lives. It was brought about by pressures from Big Media and from the Big Banks which knew Panama could never repay its huge bank loans unless it got control of the tolls from the Canal.

The votes for the ratification of the Carter Panama Treaty were probably lined up by raw political power. If there was any argument advanced publicly that could have been persuasive on its own merits, it was that turning our Canal over to Panama would improve U.S. relations with Latin America.

Where are all those talkative treaty salesmen now? Our relations with Latin America have never been worse, and our relations with Panama have hit rock bottom.

Defenders of the treaty giveaway, if there are any today who want to be heard from, should not be allowed to blame the current situation on indicted strongman Manuel Noriega. He is no different from the pro-Communist, anti-American, drug-smuggling, dictator Omar Torrijos who ruled Panama ten years ago and insolently threatened to start a

war of ""liberation'' to close the Canal if we didn't hurry up and turn it over to Panama.

Congressmen Bob Walker (R-PA) and Jerry Solomon (R-NY), with 75 bipartisan co-sponsors, have introduced legislation calling on President Reagan to renegotiate the Panama Canal treaty in order (1) to permit U.S. troops to continue to be based in Panama after the year 2000 and (2) to permit the United States to act independently in defense of the Canal.

They call attention to the strategic importance of the Canal to the security and defense of the United States and our allies. The Canal is very vulnerable to disruption and closure resulting from political instability and anti-Americanism in Panama, terrorist attack, or air strikes or other attack by foreign powers.

Every ship in the U.S. Navy, except our largest aircraft carriers, can go through the Canal. Even the helicopter carrier the U.S.S. Okinawa recently went thorough the Canal on its homebound trip from the Persian Gulf to San Diego.

Without assured access to the convenience of the Canal, we would need a much larger Navy, one force to operate in the Pacific and another in the Atlantic.

The Walker-Solomon legislation is very reasonable. It does not call for repudiating the treaty, and it does not even demand that we retain ownership of the Canal. It merely calls on the President to secure the means necessary to act decisively in defense of the Canal so that American security will not be endangered.

Rep. Walker pointed out that Noriega has tried to get Panama's President Eric Arturo Delvalle to evict U.S. troops now stationed to protect the Canal. The Panama Canal Commission has reported to Congress that Canal workers had been intimidated and detained by Noriega's soldiers, thereby impairing the smooth operation of the

Canal.

Some people are now criticizing the Reagan Administration for indicting Noriega and escalating economic pressures to try to force him to exit Panama without being ready with a ""Plan B'' if Noriega refused to go. But the real problem is that Jimmy Carter and the U.S. Senate had no Plan B in 1978 if Panama turned out to be an unreliable and even anti-American custodian of the Canal.

That's not hindsight. Many of us said all this ten years ago. Only 21 Democrats and six Republicans are still left in the U.S. Senate who participated in that shameful giveaway on April 18, 1978. They owe the American people an apology.