PS1 for 5/4/89 # Renounce the Panama Canal Non-Treaty

The first step in the transfer of our U.S. Canal at Panama to the corrupt, drug-peddling, pro-Communist military dictator Manuel Noriega, under the 1978 Carter giveaway treaty will occur later this year when the Senate is called on to confirm an administrator of the Panama Canal Commission. What position will the U.S. Senate and the Bush Administration take on this issue?

Under the 1978 treaty, the new administrator confirmed in 1989 MUST be Panamanian, even though the Panama Canal Commission (the Canal operating agency) is a U.S. agency. But the Panamanian will, of course, be selected by the illegitimate military regime of Manuel Noriega. The whole scenario is so ludicrous that it looks like a 1930s B movie about a banana republic.

Rep. Philip Crane (R-IL) with 26 co-sponsors has introduced a House Joint Resolution to state that Congress believes the Panama Canal Treaties are illegal. On February 8, he chaired a hearing at which many authorities on Panama testified about this subject that has been pretty well concealed from the American people.

The heart of the claim that the 1978 Panama Canal Treaty was and is illegal concerns the DeConcini Reservation, which supposedly gave the United States the unilateral right to intervene in Panama to guarantee the Canal's neutrality. The treaty could not have passed without this reservation, which was instrumental in lining up the final vote needed for passage by a two-thirds majority of the Senate.

Panama boss Omar Torrijos threw a tantrum when it became clear that the Senate would add the DeConcini Reservation to the treaty. Whereupon President Jimmy Carter, in order to keep treaty ratification by both countries on track, telephoned Torrijos and told him to write his own "reservation about his understanding" of U.S. defense rights.

Panama drafted its own counter-reservation which insisted on Panama's "cooperation" before the United States could defend the Canal. This counter-reservation was never submitted to the U.S. Senate. This means that the two countries accepted different versions of the treaty and never ever agreed to the other's version.

There is nothing trivial about this difference; it goes to the heart of the treaty, namely, whether the United States will be able to intervene unilaterally to defend the Canal and assure our use of this gateway so essential to our national security. Without the reservation of that right, the Carter Administration and two-thirds of the Senate could not have overridden the wishes of the 78 percent of the American people who opposed the treaty (the figure admitted by Jimmy Carter in his Memoirs).

To be fair, we must say that the Canal Treaty mistake wasn't all Jimmy Carter's fault. All he did was to use the power of his office to get the Senate to ratify the treaty and cook up the deception of Torrijos's counter-reservation.

The principal terms of the Panama treaty had been negotiated under the Nixon and Ford Administrations when our foreign policy was a one-man show run by Henry Kissinger. He made

all the damaging concessions and browbeat thee Joint Chiefs of Staff into retreating from their determination to protect American rights in our Canal.

The chief argument used by those who urged the giveaway of our U.S. Canal in Panama in 1978 was that this would improve our relations with Latin America. The fact is that the Latins perceived it, not as magnanimity, but as a signal of the decline of U.S. power, prestige, and leadership in the Caribbean because we failed to defend our own national security interests there.

The result is that our relations with Latin America have never been worse. Everything that has happened in the soap opera was fully predicatable.

Noriega is no different from his predecessor, Omar Torrigos, who was also a corrupt, drug-peddling, pro-Communist dictator. Noriega is now the nexus for military dictatorship, Communism, drug trafficking, terrorism and subversion in the Caribbean.

Time has not eliminated our need for this most vital maritime passageway: 18 percent of our exports and 10 percent of our imports transit the Canal annually. Without assured access to the Canal that Americans built and paid for, our ships would have to make a three-week 13,000-mile trip through the Straits of Magellan.

It’s time to declare the 1978 Panama Treaty a non-Treaty, admit our country’s most costly diplomatic mistake, and stand up for our national security interests. This may be a costly move, but the cost of not doing this will be even higher. Cowardice and failure of leadership are always expensive.