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MORAL ISSUES IN PANAMA TREATY

We've heard a lot about the political, diplomatic, constitutional, and financial issues involved in the new Panama Canal Treaties, but what about the moral issues? A good case can be made that the Treaties are highly immoral because they deprive us of the physical means of defending the Canal with the least cost in American lives.

The first of the two Panama Treaties runs to 1999. Under it, we retain the right to defend the Canal, but here is the way this right is hamstrung by the treaty terms:

(1) We immediately cede to Panama most of the territory of the Canal Zone, which means we surrender the buffer zone that enables us to keep five miles away from the Canal all saboteurs, rioters, or attacking troops.

(2) We are forbidden to increase the number of our troops at the Canal over the present level.

(3) The defense of the Canal is made subject to a Combined Military Board consisting of an equal number of Americans and Panamanians who must "consult and cooperate" on defense planning.

(4) Under the overall deal with Panama, the U.S. taxpayers will give the Torrijos regime $50 million in military sales credits, which he will use to arm his troops, primarily to perpetuate his own dictatorship.

Now assume that there is a threat to the Canal during the next 22 years, from Torrijos who may want to "nationalize" the Canal immediately, or from Communist agitators whom he allows to run riot, or from saboteurs from Panama or Cuba or elsewhere. Our existing troops at the Canal will be called upon to defend the Canal without the advantage of the Zone, without reinforcements from the United States,

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with the treaty-noose of being forced to "consult and cooperate" with the Panamanians, and possibly even against an attack by Torrijos' troops who have been armed with American tax dollars.

Next comes the question of defending the Canal under the second Treaty, which goes into effect after 1999. Although the Carter Administration has claimed that "the U.S. will have the permanent right to defend the neutrality of the Canal from any threat, for an indefinite period," the Panamanians flatly deny our right to intervene, and the text of the treaty supports their interpretation.

The second Panama Treaty specifically states that after 1999, "only the Republic of Panama shall operate the Canal and maintain military forces, defense sites and military installations within its territory."

When I ask Treaty proponents what we will do if Panama closes the Canal to our warships, they reply, "we'll send in our troops, do whatever is necessary for national security, and retake the Canal."

It would be impossible for us to do this while obeying the Treaty which denies us the right to have a single troop, base or installation at the Canal or adjacent territory. This is why Senator Robert Dole's release of the secret State Department cablegram touched such a raw nerve.

Yes, we probably could violate the Treaty and retake the Canal -- but at what cost in lives of American servicemen?

Are we willing to risk American blood for the paper promise of a pro-Communist dictator who demonstrated his contempt for his country's own Constitution when he seized power, and who has demonstrated his contempt for human rights ever since?

Should we surrender American territory and property, already paid for by American taxpayers, which we may find it necessary to reacquire by the additional expenditure of American lives? This is the moral issue that cries out for an answer before it is too late.

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