

*US vs Panama*

## High-Intensity Annoyance

Joel Ross  
Douglas Naquin

*"No commander abandons his ship during times of storm."*

—General Manuel Noriega, 26 May 1988

“I am feeling as if I had taken a laxative,” sighed Colonel Roberto Diaz Herrera. It was June 1987, and Diaz had just finished several days of statements to local newsmen about long-term corruption and other criminal activities in the Panama Defense Forces (PDF). Diaz, who had just been granted an “indefinite vacation” from his post of PDF chief of staff and second in command to General Noriega, apparently had decided to begin a second career as a political exile by hosting a “wake for dignity.” Throughout the “wake,” Diaz held forth on such weighty matters as the mystical powers of his Indian guru, Sai Baba; the “negative impulses” emanating from Noriega; and other interesting tidbits on Noriega, such as his masterminding of the 1984 election fraud and 1985 decapitation of opposition gadfly Hugo Spadafora. For good measure, Diaz let it be known that the spirit of former “Maximum Leader” Omar Torrijos remained restless; thus, he had deduced that Noriega was involved in Torrijos’ death in 1981 in a plane crash.

It is fair to say the significance of Diaz’s ravings was not immediately apparent. The Foreign Broadcast Information Service’s (FBIS) bureau in Panama received a phone call from its headquarters’ operations center asking why the translations of Diaz’s largely metaphysical and incoherent rambling about headless men, horoscopes, and herb recipes were being forwarded at a high precedence. It also wanted to know who Sai Baba was and if he held a PDF commission. It soon became clear, however, that Diaz’s remarks were

to serve as the catalyst that ignited the showdown between the US Government and Noriega’s regime.

Perhaps with Diaz’s remarks setting the tone, the US-Panama relationship between June 1987 and June 1989 was occasionally described as a comic opera. If that is what it was, “*La Crisis*” passed its second anniversary with everyone still waiting for the Fat Lady to sing and bring down the curtain. In fact, no one really knew who the Fat Lady was, let alone what song she would sing, or even who had the best seats. As with most operas, it had gone on too long, and hardly anyone could understand the words.

Some may believe that it is rather insensitive to classify as comical the general deterioration of a country and its relationship with a traditional ally. Between June 1987 and June 1989, however, attempts by the US and the majority of Panamanians to oust Noriega resulted in some unprecedented situations for those of us who lived and worked in Panama during this period. If not exactly comical, many of these situations certainly bordered on the surreal.

*"An idea is the last thing any one dies for in Panama."*

—Statement by unidentified “foreigner” to  
*Le Monde*, 27 April 1989.

Because the US no longer declares war on other countries, someone invented the term “low-intensity conflict” to cover a wide range of hostile situations, ranging from name calling to armed confrontation. At first, only the US military was prepared for this new brand of warfare. As proof, for almost two years the US Army’s intelligence

brigade in Panama sported a sign outside its headquarters that read: "Military Intelligence: Low Intensity." The sign disappeared one day, however, when someone evidently decided the message could be misinterpreted.

Although we were all ready to trot out low-intensity conflict for what was happening in Panama, the term was too generic. With the PDF still designated as a friendly force, it was difficult to classify our differences as a "conflict." Without fully realizing it, the US and Panama had slowly become enmeshed in a new kind of warfare, "high-intensity annoyance."

High-intensity annoyance is best described as a strategy that aims to inconvenience one's adversary through predominantly nonviolent means until the adversary abandons the whole mess. The more ludicrous the situation, the better, for then the adversary starts to question seriously the wisdom of pursuing his objective. Once bloodshed is ruled out, it becomes a matter of who can be the most annoying.

From the time it gained its independence from Colombia in 1903 to the 1977 Canal Treaties, annoyance has been Panama's trademark in achieving its domestic and foreign policy goals. Until October 1989, even its coups had been both localized and civilized—the struggle taking place among members of an elite group, with the losers usually being exiled to Miami. The difference in the high-intensity annoyance campaign of 1987-1989, however, was that the US Government, Noriega, and Noriega's opposition managed to involve just about everyone remotely associated with Panama.

The opposition initiated its own version of high-intensity annoyance in 1987. It was led by the newly formed Civic Crusade, a grouping of mostly middle- and upper-middle-class businessmen who had emerged with the goal of leading the people to victory and the joys of no-load mutual funds. Its members took to banging pots and pans and waving white handkerchiefs as the way to force Noriega from power. For months,

US officials in Panama waited for Noriega to cover his ears and scream: "Okay, I can't take the noise anymore. I'm leaving." Noriega, however, was well conditioned to withstand such pressure. In fact, the regime quickly proved it could more than hold its own in the annoyance game: Birdshot, tear gas, riot police known as "Dobermans," and water-cannon trucks with pictures of Smurfs on them outclassed the opposition at its own strategy.

The Civic Crusade, whose faceless "leaders" quickly earned the savage moniker *rabiblancos* ("white butts"), had the good sense to confine its few mass gatherings to the hotel and business district, thus making it convenient to pop in for cocktails after a hard afternoon of pot banging and hanky waving. Progovernment rallies were fewer but glitzier and better bankrolled. Our own favorite was the government's "Carnival for National Dignity," which featured free beer and several *salsa* bands; at an opposition rally, you had to bring your own pots. In a remarkable coincidence, almost every progovernment rally occurred on a payday, and the government was quite accommodating in arranging for employees to be paid at the site of the demonstration.

The one opposition weapon the government could not seem to match or shut down was Radio Bemba ("radio lips"). To the less politically astute, it was Panama's ever-present rumor mill. Over 85 years, however, Radio Bemba had developed into the opposition's intelligence network, propaganda service, and morale booster. Virtually every Monday between June 1987 and May 1988, Radio Bemba proclaimed that "*This week*" was going to be the "make or break" week for either the opposition or Noriega. In addition, word was often spread via Radio Bemba that a "massive" antigovernment rally was to take place, for example, at El Carmen Church at noon. Unfortunately, the government also had access to Radio Bemba, and it would respond by announcing over its radio station—a real one—that anyone just happening to be walking by El Carmen Church at noon would find it risky, because the Dobermans were scheduled for riot-control practice at that very place and time. Still,

the fact that no one with a pot, pan, or handkerchief was seen within two miles of El Carmen Church at noon just served to prove how effective Radio Bemba was in getting the word out that the massive rally had been postponed.

All in all, the summer of 1987 was a heady time to be a US official in Panama. We were fighting the good fight for democracy and getting on the ABC Evening News—while keeping our reservations for the beach every weekend. In effect, we had free passes to both pro and antigovernment demonstrations, and we had little trouble learning to navigate the not-quite-impassible barricades of burning tires and mounds of confetti. (After all, there had to be enough room for the beer trucks and *salsa* bands to get through.) Thus, we were able to put up a brave front for concerned friends and relatives back home, while knowing full well that people rarely, and *gringos* never, get hurt in Panamanian political demonstrations. We were smart enough, however, to stay away from Panama City during the weekly lottery drawings.

For most of that summer, Panama's civil disturbances were indeed civil. The unwritten rule was that all demonstrations took place between 9:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. The Dignity Battalions were still but a gleam in Noriega's eye, and the biggest sacrifice opposition protesters usually made was to allow their maids time off at noon and 6:00 p.m. to go bang pots on their behalf.

*"When the Spaniards arrived, the Incas were already using this plant (coca), and they continue to use it. Why have no actions been taken against Bolivian and Peruvian officials or anything of that sort?"*

—General Noriega, 5 February 1988

Until February 1988, an objective observer could be excused for thinking that the real problem in Panama was internal and that the US found itself on the side of the downtrodden middle and upper-middle classes clamoring for democracy and a bigger cut of the GNP. In February, however, grand

juries in Miami and Tampa indicted Noriega for drug trafficking. After these indictments, the US community began to experience high-intensity annoyance firsthand.

News of the indictments made just about everyone in Panama shrug and say, "All right, what now?" Noriega's involvement in the drug trade was well known in both the US and Panamanian communities. In fact, by June 1986, the US Embassy's briefing for new arrivals included the helpful information that Panama was not so much a country as it was a racket.

*"There is no cash in the National Bank of Panama"*

—Manuel Solis Palma, 11 May 1988

The indictments had little impact on the US community in Panama until President Eric Arturo Delvalle, an uncomfortable Noriega crony, was inspired to "separate" Noriega from the PDF. Instead, Delvalle soon found himself separated from the presidency. When Delvalle underwent his midnight pumpkin change into president-in-hiding on 25 February 1988, high-intensity annoyance skirmishes increased in frequency.

The US reacted on 2 March, when it froze approximately \$50 million in Panamanian assets in US banks. Within two days, all the banks in Panama had closed.

The significance of cash is most painfully apparent when no one has any, as was the case in Panama following the US action. Imagine having all the world's major credit cards in your wallet but no store, restaurant, or travel agency will accept any of them, because they cannot receive the necessary funds from the US bank. In addition, the local branches of the US banks were closed. No checks were accepted, because no banks were open to cash or deposit them. This situation became particularly nasty when it was time to pay telephone or electricity bills. And without payment, the service was cut off. Panamanian citizens were especially affected by these measures: The life-savings of

many people, including many of the middle class who formed the nucleus of Noriega's opposition, were invested in banks that were not open for withdrawals.

This situation went on for months, but the Panamanians came up with some intriguing ways to deal with the problem. Government employees, for example, paid for goods by signing over their salary checks—a \$100-paycheck was issued in four \$25 checks for easier bartering—that the government would then accept as payment for public services. Some restaurants had difficulty purchasing enough food to maintain their menus, or they cut their menus because cash-paying customers were scarce.

One of the authors went to one such restaurant:

I asked for steak, shrimp, and then pasta, but I was told in each case that the item was "not available at this time." When I asked the very dignified waiter if the restaurant actually had any food for customers, he replied very politely: "The gentleman may order anything he wishes this evening, as long as it is chicken and rice."

*"None of us desires the command."*

—Colonel Leonidas Macias, 25 February 1988

One of the most serious breaches of the traditional Panamanian abhorrence of violence occurred on 16 March 1988, when Colonel Leonidas Macias, the Chief of the National Police, botched the first of at least two coup attempts against Noriega. Following the news of the coup attempt, flaming barricades spewed smoke throughout the city, and vehicles were stoned. Although tear gas eventually filled the air, the police responded slowly, because it was not immediately clear who was in charge.

The five-year-old son of one of the authors was attending the international school downtown, which had ignored the order not to begin the school year:

The school dismissed the students as soon as the scent of tear gas wafted through the corridors. My son's bus, however, could not get past the burning barricades. Phone and electricity services were cut throughout the city, and many hours passed before I found out he had been evacuated to the US Ambassador's residence. My son finally arrived home safely that evening. I was concerned about any lingering trauma he might have from this experience, but I breathed easier when he excitedly told me, "Dad, I saw fire in the streets! And a million cars!"

"Were you worried?" I asked carefully.

"Worried? Nah, it was cool! Can I see it again tomorrow?"

"I think not," I replied. So much for trauma.

*"Panama has been subjected to the most terrible and criminal aggression ever imposed on any people in the history of humanity."*

—Solis Palma, 29 April 1988

The various measures and strikes resulting from the coup attempt and its aftermath led to a sense of unending crisis. Electricity, phone, and water outages occurred at all hours, some lasting for days. Traffic lights were ripped down and not replaced. Most stores were closed, and, when they finally reopened, they did so with boarded windows. Many stores could not replenish goods because of the cash and credit problems. Panamanians responded to the adversity in their usual wry fashion. To boost sales, shops began selling products at special "crisis prices." Solis Palma, Noriega's hand-picked "Minister in Charge of the Presidency," explained: "There are far fewer white handkerchiefs and banging pots," not because of decreasing political fervor, but "because we no longer have any."

Even though Noriega ensured that his PDF troops were paid in full before any other public employees, the cop on the beat was beginning to

feel the economic pinch. Involuntary donations increased, especially when a traffic officer came face to face with a US citizen, usually a good source of ready cash. *Gringos* were easily identified, because they were the ones who most often remained more than three panaseconds at a traffic light that had just turned green. A panasecond is the smallest measureable unit of time: the moment between the light's change and the blast from the carhorn of the Panamanian behind you.

One of Panama's "finest" had the misfortune to assume that someone, such as one of the authors, actually had the funds to aid his country's economy:

He stopped me for "intending" to turn left at a green light without waiting for an additional green turn-arrow. My visiting mother was with me, so I cooperated at first to show her a unique slice of the local culture.

I pulled over as instructed and handed my driver's license to the policeman, who proceeded to explain the felony. When it was clear I was not impressed, he asked if I had any money. I told him I did not, so he asked to see my wallet. I took it out of my pocket and, stealthily dropping a couple of \$20 bills to the floor, handed over the empty leather. He found a \$1 bill I had overlooked. When I saw the disappointed look on his face, I told him he could keep the dollar. He sourly rejected my offer.

"Who's the lady with you?" he inquired.

"My mother."

"Does she have any money?"

"She gave me her last dollar."

My own annoyance tactics gained me, along with my dollar, my release from further indignation. But this was just the first of many police "inquiries" into the status of my wallet.

"Panama Policy: A Classic Oxymoron"

—Cartoon in hallway of the  
US Embassy in Panama

As the events of February-April 1988 unfolded, the US Government undertook two major policy initiatives. In its first planned attempt at high-intensity annoyance, it embarked upon a policy of active nonrecognition. Second, it resorted again to that traditional standby, economic sanctions. If any country was ripe for sanctions, it was one whose most important natural resource was rain and whose currency was the dollar. In April, President Reagan prohibited the US Government from paying any money whatsoever to the Noriega regime; currency owed to Panama in canal fees and taxes would be placed in escrow.

Active nonrecognition worked—for about a month. Although Noriega's regime tried not to recognize our nonrecognition, the Embassy could no longer receive the many protest notes that had begun pouring in. Similarly, we were forced to ignore the regime's attempts to declare two of our diplomats *persona non grata*. We again had to return the diplomatic notes containing the respective declarations. As a result, one of those diplomats—the ever-dangerous Public Affairs Officer—was still at his post over a year later, albeit with a 24-hour bodyguard to ensure that he would not be provided with one-way tourist accommodations to Miami.

We also received other, less publicized benefits from our nonrecognition policy. Because President-in-Hiding Delvalle had become the only Panamanian Government official we recognized, Panama instantly became the one country where the ratio of US Embassy staff to host-government personnel was approximately 120 to 1. Second, the Embassy was able to reduce drastically its budget for official functions. Now that we were unable to deal with the ministries, this reduction proved fortunate. The US Government was then free to reallocate this money for the bribes that soon became necessary to conduct business.

*"It will not be long before Noriega falls."*

—President Eric Arturo Delvalle, 13 April 1988

The economic sanctions were fully implemented—for about a month. One weekend in April, however, the regime cut off all electricity and telephone service to Embassy employees in Panama solely because the Embassy had not paid the bills for three months. Following two nights of preparing romantic candlelight dinners, watching food thaw, and connecting the mildew dots on the walls, Embassy managers, strongly supported by their spouses, decided that certain pragmatic exemptions in our steely determination not to pay 1 cent to the regime might be in order, especially for those US citizen employees who were working so hard to bring democracy to Panama. The exemption was granted.

Suddenly, being a US Government employee in Panama was not much fun. The electricity cutoff only foreshadowed more interesting times, as we began to experience adventures that would have inspired Lewis Carroll. Most of these adventures could be traced to the challenge of documenting someone to an unrecognized government with whom one needs to conduct business. For example, the regime quickly figured out that it did not have to accept visas issued to US officials by Delvalle's ambassador in Washington. In turn, after some of its employees were refused entry into Panama, the State Department soon "recognized" (or was it de-unrecognized?) the Panamanian Consulate in Tampa, whose visas were the only ones the Noriega regime would honor. Whenever an Embassy employee announced that he or she was departing Panama on temporary duty or leave, the response was not "have a nice trip" but "how are you getting back into the country?"

Once in Panama, however, any "diplomat" who had arrived after we began nonrecognizing the regime could not receive proper documentation, including the "carnets" that identified someone as a diplomat. There was no Foreign Ministry with which we could do business. Thus, any Embassy employee assigned to Panama after February 1988

operated in a sort of diplomatic limbo, unsure of his or her status. At least post-nonrecognition arrivals knew they could not be declared *persona non grata*. From a diplomatic standpoint, they were already *personae non existent*.

One of the most interesting manifestations of our unusual situation was the problem resulting from the issuance of 1989 Panamanian license plates in March. The absence of official contact prevented the Embassy from receiving 1989 diplomatic license plates from the Panamanian Foreign Ministry. As a result, Embassy employees were instructed not to drive their cars once the license-plate deadline expired in mid-March. To compensate, the Embassy provided each employee with a rental vehicle, presumably with the money it was saving on official functions. In turn, the regime soon responded with a new law on rental vehicles, requiring formal PDF permission before a car could be rented to any foreigner.

Such problems would preoccupy Embassy and military officials for weeks. This was all right, because there was not much else for these officials to do. Individual creativity began to flourish. Some Embassy employees found enamel paint to be effective in transforming a red 1988 plate into a blue 1989 plate. Others found "selling" their vehicles to a US military employee or Panamanian friend and then "borrowing" the vehicle indefinitely to be a good way to maintain personal transportation. Those with two cars in a family—one diplomatic plate and one standard plate—found a version of the shell game to come in handy, switching plates between "legal" and "illegal" cars. Noriega could take our visas, strip us of our diplomatic status, and turn off our electricity, but messing with our cars was going too far.

When the PDF decided to crack down on expired license plates, it did not target the non-diplomats of the US Embassy or Panamanian employees of the US military. Instead, it decided to focus on the children attending the Department of Defense Dependents Schools (DoDDS). The contractor who

owned the DoDDS school buses had tried the license-plate switch to compensate for his inability to get new plates.

One morning in March 1989, PDF traffic police stopped 21 DoDDS school buses. As busloads of disappointed kids contemplated the effect that missing a history test that morning would have on their scholastic development, US Army and PDF officers engaged in a heated argument near the buses. Meanwhile, armed US soldiers assumed defensive positions on the rooftops of one of the military bases, and concerned parents rushed down to the PDF police station to "bail out" their little scofflaws. Eventually, the buses were returned, the US military paid a 500-dollar fine for each bus, and the proper license plates were obtained. The resolution of this conflict probably can be traced to the PDF's horror at the prospect of continued custody of dozens of surfer-attired, rat-tail-coiffed, and Walkman-wired junior-high and high-school students.

Another mark of high-intensity annoyance was propaganda and invective, which flowed continuously from the regime media. In particular, the Ambassador, the Deputy Chief of Mission, and other high-level US Government figures were the targets of personal attacks. Even minor players, however, had some moments in the spotlight. One week in May 1988, a regime tabloid published the photographs of all but one of the US citizen employees of the Embassy under the headline: "Panamanians: Know These Gringos Who Are Starving Your Children." The one absentee was immediately suspected of being a Cuban mole.

Following this expose, one of the authors carried boxes of Animal Crackers in his car:

The idea was to hand them out to young stoplight contractors who, unsolicited, would happily wash the windshield and then dry it with a dirty rag so competitors at the next stoplight would be provided an equal opportunity. The plan was to be ready with an "Animal Cracker Defense," should such a libelous story appear again.

About a week after the publication of the photographs, the tabloid accused me and two colleagues of running an antiregime clandestine radio. Ironically, one could hardly hear the radio, even with sophisticated antennas. In addition, the radio was so clandestine that virtually no one in Panama knew about it. Still, not only had a newspaper spelled my name right for the first time ever, but our names also appeared in Cuban and Chinese media. Besides starving children, we were destabilizing a country. Who said no one recognizes good work in the government?

The Panamanian employees of the Panama Canal Commission (PCC) and US Government were among those most affected during the second year of this conflict. This is primarily because US Government agencies in Panama, including the PCC, Southern Command, and FBIS, were responsible for paying Social Security, income, and education taxes for their Panamanian employees directly to the Panamanian Government. When the sanctions went into effect and these taxes were not paid, it was the Panamanian employees who were held responsible. Although an exemption for Social Security payments was granted in June 1988, income and education taxes continued to be withheld from the regime. Because these employees' taxes were not paid, they were denied the precious *Paz y Salvo*, or tax clearance certificate. Without this document, Panamanians cannot travel outside the country, buy or sell property, or even conduct such mundane business as obtaining license plates. Predictably, the regime suddenly made the *Paz y Salvo* necessary for virtually any business in which it was involved. Of course, the regime became involved in more business than ever.

Various ways were sought to circumvent this problem. The regime quickly closed one avenue by forbidding Panamanian employees from paying their taxes individually, except for those employees of the US Embassy. This had the double effect of portraying the US Government as the villain while ensuring that, should this little annoyance tactic ever end, all payments would be received.

For some reason, the regime was not entirely confident its countrymen would recognize their duty to the fatherland and pay their taxes. On another level, those who underestimated the regime tended to believe that Panama's Latin American status naturally indicated that an overworked regime official might easily mistake a picture of Alexander Hamilton for a *Paz y Salvo*. We found, however, that bribes in Panama, along with most everything else, were closely regulated. Bribe season might occur several times a year, but only when the regime declared it "open." Thus, entrepreneurial Panamanians who just wanted to get a license plate or to visit a sick relative in Costa Rica never knew when they would hit the jackpot. It is arguable that the "thrill" from such gambling, more than anything else, contributed to the drop in business of Panama's countless casinos. "*Paz y Salvo* roulette" provided enough excitement for a month, which was exactly how long the *Paz y Salvo* was valid. After that, one had to spin the wheel again.

The Panamanian staff working for FBIS in Panama, by virtue of being considered employees of both the US Embassy and US military, had to face many of the problems that arose over the two years of the conflict. At one point, the regime media accused the staff of working for a US satellite spy station that communicated with submarines in the canal, making up for in imagination what it lacked in truth. Overall, however, the incidents and obstacles were more serious, if less exotic. For example, soon after *rabiblanco* season officially opened in August 1988, Panamanian employees or FBIS had their official bus shot at as it took them home from work. Four gunmen firing at point-blank range managed to hit the bus just once. Other employees were subjected to personal late-night searches and insults by PDF patrols, detained for hours of questioning by the PDF, threatened with legal proceedings as a result of the tax issue, and found themselves and their children—many of whom attended school in the US—virtual hostages in their own country.

*"The US will have to recognize the results, since the elections will be clean and honest and will lead us to an improved democracy."*

—Carlos Duque, 2 May 1989

The period leading up to the 7 May elections was strange indeed. Everyone knew there would be trouble, yet no one could do much to prevent it. Shops covered their windows with plywood, businesses and schools announced they would be closed the day after the elections, and people stockpiled food and candles for the impending disaster. Even Americans who lived on the bases depleted the two military commissaries, causing severe shortages of Twinkies, Pringles, and even Spam.

The hoarding turned out to be a good investment, because, as the elections unfolded, the opposition's apparent victory was annulled, its leaders were attacked, and the crisis worsened for all who lived in Panama.

*"If the US invades Panama, it will find a people who would welcome it with open arms out of sheer frustration or desperation . . . but 30 days later they would be throwing stones at US soldiers and telling them: 'Gringo go home!'"*

—Guillermo Endara, 1 May 1989

On 11 May 1989, President Bush decided to try to annoy Noriega by ordering nearly 2,000 additional combat troops to the US bases in the Canal Area, 700 more than President Reagan sent in April 1988. This time, however, the US Government also ordered all Embassy and military personnel and dependents to move from their downtown apartments to base housing. Because there was no available base housing, this meant families already housed on the bases had to share their dwellings with other families, who in many cases were complete strangers. This huge pajama party was scheduled to last "indefinitely." To complicate matters, "Personnel Movement Limitation Charlie" was implemented, which meant no one residing on base was authorized to leave the base area,

except for “essential business.” It soon became apparent to most families fighting over bathroom privileges and television viewing rights that it was “essential” to sneak back to their apartments, if for no other reason than to kick their own dog in the privacy of their own home.

Many Embassy and military dependents were so annoyed that they actually left Panama—a *de facto* evacuation. *The irony was not lost on Noriega or anyone else that after two years of constant US demands for his departure, here was a mass migration of US citizens from Panama.*

*“It was a remarkable revolution—I think the most remarkable I ever read of in history.”*

—US Senator Shelby M. Cullom, circa 1903

After our departure from Panama in the summer of 1989, the high-intensity annoyance conflict continued and even evolved into something worse. Following the violent failed coup attempt in October, the US military action in December led to Noriega’s ouster and subsequent surrender.

Living and working in Panama between 1987 and 1989 gave us a unique view of a “remarkable revolution.” Although we left Panama just before the Fat Lady began to belt out her final notes, we certainly had been “entertained” by quite a plot.

