

# Operation Just Cause



Manuel Noriega

**Operation Just Cause**, U.S. military action (December 1989–January 1990) that centred on the invasion of Panama for the purposes of removing Gen. Manuel Noriega, the country's dictatorial de facto ruler, from power and extraditing him to the U.S. to face charges of drug trafficking and money laundering.

Foreign relations between Panama and the United States had grown increasingly strained during the 1980s. Following the death of Panamanian leader Omar Torrijos in 1981, Lieut. Col. Manuel Noriega, who had participated in the military coup that paved the way for Torrijos's rise to power, consolidated military and then civilian power in the Central American country. For decades Noriega had served as a paid informant for the Central Intelligence Agency. He also was a supporter of the contras, the counterrevolutionary force that sought to overthrow Nicaragua's left-wing Sandinista government. It became known, however, that, in addition to monopolizing power in Panama, Noriega had lined his pockets by smuggling illegal drugs into the United States. Moreover, in the mid-1980s, allegations grew regarding Noriega's involvement in the brutal murder of an outspoken opponent, Hugo Spadafora.

When more evidence surfaced regarding Noriega's laundering of drug money and sale of restricted U.S. technology and information, conflict between the Panamanian strongman and the U.S. government appeared inevitable, especially given the imminent transfer of control of the Panama Canal under the terms of the Panama Canal Treaty (1977). In 1988 Noriega was indicted on drug trafficking charges by a U.S. grand jury. The administration of U.S. Pres. Ronald Reagan offered Noriega a deal: if he agreed to relinquish power and depart Panama, charges against him would be dropped. Noriega wanted no part of the bargain.



George Bush

Despite the presence of international observers (including former U.S. president Jimmy Carter), Noriega annulled the results of the May 1989 Panamanian presidential election when it appeared that it had been won by a wide margin by Guillermo Endara, the opposition civilian candidate. In addition to overturning

the results of the election and installing a former classmate, Francisco Rodríguez, as a puppet president, Noriega had Endara and his supporters beaten in the streets. The Organization of American States (OAS) responded by calling for a “peaceful transfer of power” to an elected government, and U.S. Pres. George Bush dispatched 2,000 troops to U.S. bases in the Panama Canal Zone. In the meantime, having survived a coup attempt in October, Noriega persuaded the Panamanian National Assembly to name him “maximum leader” on December 15, 1989. At his behest the Assembly also declared that a state of war existed between Panama and the United States. Within days an unarmed U.S. Marine officer dressed in civilian clothes was ambushed and killed by Panamanian soldiers.



U.S. invasion of Panama

Bush responded quickly. On December 17 he ordered 11,000 troops to be airlifted from the United States to Panama, further reenforcing the already-augmented contingent of troops in the Canal Zone to bring to 24,000 the number of U.S. troops that invaded Panama with the stated objectives of capturing Noriega to face drug charges in the United States, protecting American lives

and property, and restoring Panamanian liberties. The initial attack, which took place in darkness during the wee hours December 20, was focused primarily on Noriega’s headquarters in Panama City. On that first day of combat, Endara and his two vice presidents were sworn in to head the government of Panama. Although U.S. forces overcame most organized resistance in short order, Panamanian civilians and soldiers looted shops in Panama City and Colón during the next few days. An additional 2,000 U.S. troops were flown in to restore order.



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In the meantime, Noriega eluded capture for four days before taking refuge in the papal nunciature (embassy). He remained there until he surrendered on January 3, 1990, having succumbed to a sonic assault by U.S. forces who blasted rock music nonstop at deafening levels at Noriega’s sanctuary (among the recordings that were played were “I Fought the Law” by the Clash, “Panama”

by Van Halen, “All I Want Is You” by U2, and “If I Had a Rocket Launcher” by Bruce Cockburn). Noriega was then transported to Miami, Florida, where he was tried, convicted of a raft of charges, and sentenced to a U.S. prison. In the wake of the invasion, the OAS voted

20 to 1 to condemn what seemed to many Latin Americans an unwarranted yanqui intervention.

It was estimated that 200 to 300 Panamanian combatants (soldiers and members of paramilitaries) and more than 300 civilians were killed in Operation Just Cause. Twenty-three U.S. soldiers also were killed. Hundreds on both sides were wounded.

The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica This article was most recently revised and updated by Jeff Wallenfeldt.

#### Citation Information

Article Title: Operation Just Cause

Website Name: Encyclopaedia Britannica

Publisher: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc.

Date Published: 16 March 2023

URL: <https://www.britannica.com><https://www.britannica.com/topic/United-States-invasion-of-Panama>

Access Date: May 07, 2023