Book Review: The Future of Panama : Are U.S. Troops Coming Back?

Marco A. Gandásegui

Latin American Perspectives 2011 38: 86
DOI: 10.1177/0094582X10388625

Book Review

The Future of Panama

Are U.S. Troops Coming Back?

by
Marco A. Gandásegui Jr.
Translated by Mariana Ortega Breña

John Lindsay-Poland *Emperors in the Jungle: The Hidden History of the U.S. in Panama.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003.

Peter M. Sánchez *Panama Lost? U.S. Hegemony, Democracy, and the Canal.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007.

This decade has seen the publication of two books on U.S. military policy in Panama: *Emperors in the Jungle: The Hidden History of the U.S. in Panama,* by the human-rights advocate John Lindsay-Poland, and *Panama Lost? U.S. Hegemony, Democracy, and the Canal*, by Peter Sánchez, an officer in the U.S. Army and a political science specialist. Both present extensive bibliographies that chart the evolution of U.S. foreign policy in terms of military expansion. Lindsay-Poland denounces the "collateral" environmental damage of U.S. presence in the isthmus. Sánchez re-creates the ideology that underlies U.S. foreign policy and outlines what he thinks are the good and bad decisions taken during Panama's U.S. military occupation.

An examination of these books is timely given recent developments in U.S./Panamanian relations. While the United States evacuated the very last of its many military bases in Panama on December 31, 1999, it has continued seeking to extend its military presence on the isthmus in spite of bilateral agreements that expressly forbid this. In 1996 it (unsuccessfully) proposed the creation of a multilateral antidrug center that was to operate from the old Howard Air Base adjacent to the Panama Canal. During the first years of the twenty-first century, U.S. ambassadors signed six military cooperation agreements with the Panamanian government, but only one of these was legally approved. Today the United States is dealing with a Panamanian government eager to reproduce the old military relationships. All indications are that, in the short term, the United States will build, operate, and undertake missions from several naval air bases on Panamanian soil.

Both Sánchez and Lindsay-Poland foresaw this remilitarization of Panama. According to Sánchez, "The US-Panamanian relationship demonstrates a US obsession with 'hard' rather than with 'soft' power. Washington appeared to be

Marco A. Gandásegui Jr. is a professor at the University of Panama and an associate researcher at the Centro de Estudios Latinoamericanos. Mariana Ortega Breña is a freelance translator based in Canberra, Australia.

LATIN AMERICAN PERSPECTIVES, Issue 177, Vol. 38 No. 2, March 2011 86-91
DOI: 10.1177/0094582X10388625

more interested in short-term realpolitik than in long-term American influence" (208). He adds that "the so-called Global War on Terrorism upon which the U.S. has embarked has the potential of alienating the countries of Latin America" (209). He points out that, in its relationships with Panama, the United States tends to privilege "alliances with nefarious characters and antidemocratic forces. . . . Washington must ensure that it forms relationships with truly democratic leaders, accepting their decisions even if they appear contrary to U.S. interests in the short term" (209). He is aware of the dangers implicit in the remilitarization of the region: "Panama's democracy is weakened by the fact that its policy options are severely limited, owing to the existence of hegemony at the international level" (210). The asymmetrical relationship between the two nations could lead to populist, anti-imperialist scenarios and even put an end to democracy (211).

Sánchez's conclusions are relevant to an understanding of his examination of U.S. policy toward Panama. The book's main focus is not on the relationships between the two nations but, rather, on U.S. foreign policy. It tends to adopt a paternalistic approach toward that policy: if the United States does not take Panamanian interests into consideration, "paradise will continue to be an elusive goal both for Panama and for the U.S." (211). It could, in fact, be called *Paradise Lost?* instead of *Panama Lost?* Panama once was and could continue to be a link in the vast empire built by Washington across the globe. The United States and its army used the country as a center of operations for their Pacific campaign during World War II and the Vietnam War. They also transformed the former Canal Zone into a natural laboratory in order to demonstrate how "real" civilization could be established in the midst of the terrible tropical "jungle." Sánchez's allusion to "paradise" refers to this project, which transcended military conquest, political domination, and global commercial expediency. The global U.S. military strategy that made Panama a key component of its worldwide fortress and its military presence on the isthmus, including what it believed to be its all-important "civilizing" component, are recurrent themes of this book. The new U.S. civilization in Panama was "an engineered tropical paradise. . . . Zonians enjoyed an idyllic environment where buildings and nature were meticulously maintained" (67). Ultimately, victory over nature was the goal.

Sánchez questions Panama's ability to subjugate nature and dominate ("civilize") the surrounding wilderness. The civilization model envisioned by the United States, which in the book is framed by the concept of "democracy," is, he believes, beyond Panama's capabilities. In spite of the existence of the structural requisites for the flowering of democracy in Panama, the United States never favored this option and in fact opposed it: "Principally, U.S. power was a major influence in slowing movement toward democratization on the isthmus" (200). Sánchez in fact subordinates Panama's (and the rest of the world's) progress to U.S. intervention. This confusion between "civilization" and democracy leads him to conclude that "Panama's democratic development suffered initially from a lack of national unity. While racial and cultural diversity is something to celebrate, a weak nation-state like Panama will find it more difficult to establish national unity in a diverse environment" (201). He insists that, in spite of a "consensus" on the meaning of democracy, "Panama still lacks strong, comprehensive national unity. This

national fragmentation is to a large extent the product of ethnic and racial divisions" (204).

DEMOCRACY AND MILITARISM

A more careful reading of the Panamanian social fabric would have taught Sánchez something about the prevailing Panamanian class structure, and an analysis of the contradictions arising from this structure in the framework of international relations would have led him to very different conclusions. He devotes the first chapter of his book to the concept of hegemony, an excellent theoretical tool for the understanding of complex social relations and their contradictions. However, his application of hegemony on an international level is mechanical: The United States is very powerful, therefore hegemonic. He does not stop to consider the multiple contradictions that arise from international relations or the different forms taken by hegemony. He does not set out to study the role of social relations in Panamanian society, and he draws many incomplete conclusions from scattered readings lacking a theoretical guide. If he had used the concept of hegemony to analyze the complex Panamanian social structure, he would have discovered that what he calls "ethnicity" or "race" is just another way of establishing "consensus" among the different social groups so that the dominant class can carry out its functions.

As many of the U.S. texts examined by Sánchez point out, the Panamanian population was seen as intrinsically lazy, malevolent, and inferior by the U.S. soldiers, business entrepreneurs, and even engineers and scientists who built the Canal and controlled it during the twentieth century. He quotes an official who complains that "in the interior the people have no ambition beyond the needs and pleasures of the immediate morrow. The masses live from hand to mouth—happily enough, maybe, but uselessly" (43). In his first chapter he underlines the prevailing ideas in U.S. elite circles, which, then as now, held that Panama would be unable to exploit the isthmus for the world's benefit (*pro mundi beneficio*). He also quotes Teddy Roosevelt, who was U.S. president when the Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty was signed: "I took Panama and gave the people of Panama self-government." Racism runs rampant in the analysis of U.S. global policy, and the case of Panama is no exception. The United States, according to Sánchez, considered the Liberal Party the party of "the mulattos and negroes." His notion of hegemony prevents him from understanding the Liberal Party's role in Panamanian politics.

The book has six chapters. The second focuses on the U.S.-led Panama offensive during the nineteenth century, while the following three explore the twentieth-century military occupation. The last deals with the author's vision of the United States in Panama during the twenty-first century. Essentially, the United States sets out to conquer and unsuccessfully devotes itself to building nations; however, it fails to contribute to economic development, democracy is not consolidated, and there is no cultural transference. Vis-à-vis Panama, Sánchez concludes that the United States failed to establish democracy (38). He also introduces some drama to his book when he points out that Panamanian presidents were forced to resign "at gunpoint." Despite this conclusion, he

believes that "democracy has roots in Panama's social structure. The main roadblock, however, to democracy is the existence of ethnic differences and mistrust among those groups. Education is the solution." Sánchez doubts that a country like Panama can reach democracy "if its economic policy is being determined externally" (207). "U.S. policies have undermined democracy as a consequence of (1) military intervention, (2) choice of 'unsavory characters' for its allies, and (3) support of oligarchic or military leaders."

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPERIALISM

Lindsay-Poland's book is a first in U.S. research on the environmental toll of the U.S. occupation of Panama. Drawing on numerous U.S. government sources, works by Panamanian writers, and Paul Sutter's pioneering article, Lindsay-Poland denounces the environmental disaster caused by the United States in the isthmus while unveiling the ideology of political, ethnic (i.e., racist), and environmental superiority that characterizes the United States and is embodied in its army.

According to Lindsay-Poland, Panama became a U.S. center for military experimentation in areas ranging from weapons to the environment and human testing. The goals were tied to global expansion and conquest. As far as weapons and human beings were concerned, Panama became a "test tube" in which to examine and compare endurance and environmental contexts. The assumption underlying these socio-environmental experiments was that nature had to be transformed in order to be colonized: "The U.S. Army in Panama was also responsible for a different kind of intervention that was not strictly military: the transformation of the Canal Zone to make it biologically safe for white men" (27).

This environmental ideology, created by U.S. propaganda and researched by the army, manifested itself in the purported establishment of a human superspecies in charge of subordinating the (inferior) "native" inhabitants to a system of domination: "The U.S. introduced a racial caste system into the Canal Zone that strictly segregated workers. . . . The book examines how Panama served as an instrument for grander U.S. aims and the role of ideas about race and the tropics" (3). Ethnicity and the tropics, in fact, became a dual obsession for the U.S. government, which sought to colonize the tropics with groups of European stock that would displace other ethnicities or to create a plantation system in which "the northern white sojourner" could reign "with the assistance of native tropical labor and artisans" (39). This is the classical "farmer/junker" dichotomy, with specific racial contents adapted to the tropics.

The phrase "Emperors in the Jungle" is, according to Lindsay-Poland, a reference to the dynastic vision espoused by high-ranking U.S. officers. Thinking themselves superior to the Panamanian natives, they created a supposedly aristocratic world in the Canal Zone that was closed off to other social groups. It is no coincidence that many of these officers hailed from the U.S. South, which had recently suffered a military and moral defeat at the hands of the North during the Civil War. One of the "heroes" of the Canal endeavor, Colonel William Gorgas, said, "Our work in Cuba and Panama will be looked

upon as the earliest demonstration that the white man could flourish in the tropics and as the starting-point of the effective settlement of these regions by the Caucasian" (11).

The notion of "the jungle" is crucial in the context of the European conquest of the world. Imperialist powers used it in their discourse as they proceeded to divide Africa up among themselves, creating a wild and savage image for people who were seen as both inferior and "Other." The British had already employed it with considerable sophistication in India, a subcontinent ostensibly populated by savage tigers and superstitious humans ruled by a caste system. The United States would later use it to dehumanize the Japanese soldiers who crouched in "the jungle" waiting for U.S. soldiers. It was the same in Vietnam and Korea, where the wars were justified not just by military enmity but by a higher goal of bringing civilization to the depths of the wilderness. Lindsay-Poland's examination of twentieth-century U.S. policy with regard to Panama shows that, in spite of the support of the world's most powerful military apparatus, its ideologists were incapable of building this vision, the result of a twisted imaginary mired in its own contradictions. With Sánchez, who admits that democracy is not viable if a regime is subject to a foreign military power, Lindsay-Poland concludes that sustainable development is impossible under a foreign military presence.

Lindsay-Poland divides his book into seven chapters. In the first three he denounces U.S. failure to devise an environmental policy that avoided the collateral damage caused by military practice. Although the United States left its military bases in the region ten years ago, there are still areas close to the Canal and nearby islands that contain unexploded bombs and chemical pollutants. In the following two chapters he highlights the United States' role in drug-traffic manipulation in order to guarantee its presence in the region and its attempts to hide its environmental blunders. The final two chapters focus on the present and the future. Lindsay-Poland is not optimistic, concluding that U.S. policy with regard to Panama is conditioned by "market mania" and a mentality that echoes Giuseppe di Lampedusa's *Il Gattopardo*: things have to change in order to remain the same. During the past 30 years (1979–2009), three proposals for the use of the areas abandoned by the United States have been debated. Washington has not been absent from these discussions, and it has always privileged the option of adapting the areas adjacent to the Canal for military use, either by U.S. or by Panamanian forces, with the proviso that they remain available to the United States. The Pentagon is still strongly interested in this option. A second proposal is to develop economic activities that benefit U.S. corporate interests, a favored option among the Panamanian governing class, especially since the 1989 invasion. The Canal and related activities are seen as highly profitable investment opportunities. There are some who would not rule out the privatization of the water sources feeding the Canal and its terminal cities, Panamá and Colón. Finally, there is the option of using these areas and the Canal itself as tools for national development and for the benefit of the Panamanian population, but this project has been shelved by the governing class, which negotiates with the United States on the basis of the latter's military interests as long as these do not damage the speculative activities that fuel the business sector.

IDEOLOGY

Both writers express concern about U.S. perspectives on the issue. The U.S. capitalist class sees itself as aggressive, possessive, and with a clear imperialist project. The U.S. government sees the region and Panama in particular as countries lacking a project (hegemony). In exchange for a few contributions, their leaders appear willing to surrender their raw materials and other geographical advantages. In the absence of social classes with national projects, U.S. policy makers and ideologues envision a multiethnic, hybrid, and scattered population that can be shaped any way they wish. In this context (clearly informed by theories of biological superiority and economic imperialism) both authors describe the acts of empire imposed upon a land supposedly populated by masses that can only stand by and watch the advance of a superior civilization.

POLITICS, DEMOCRACY, AND THE ENVIRONMENT

According to these writers, Washington policy makers consider Latin American democracy an impossibility because of the nature of its population. Latin Americans— and Panamanians in particular—are considered unprepared for self-government, and therefore it is necessary to maintain strict surveillance of the region. Disorder and opposition to "modern" policies (such as a free market focused on extracting profits for foreign profit) can be avoided in most cases only by the establishment of military regimes. As a result, neoliberal economists and military officers must be trained in schools managed by U.S. specialists.

Both Lindsay-Poland and Sánchez conclude their books ambiguously. In their attempts to find a solution for Panama as a project, they fall victim to the ideological weight of the dominant U.S. consensus. According to Lindsay-Poland (205), "the U.S. relationship to the Panamanian isthmus will also depend on the evolution of its own self image as a civilizing force and of its attitudes toward the tropics and dark-skinned people." Sánchez also leans toward a similar idealistic view (211): "Democracy [in Panama] may be able to survive in such an asymmetrical international context, but if at some point this power differential prevents the average Panamanian from improving his or her life, then calls for populism, anti-imperialism, and even an end to democracy will rise again." These are valuable contributions to the literature on twentieth-century U.S. military policy as seen by its own specialists. They are the more interesting for dealing with the question of empire and the challenge of the tropics—whether it is a matter of idealistic colonization or of material capitalist profit.