

PANAMA: *An Historical Perspective*

To understand much of the debate over the proposed treaty to return the Panama Canal to Panama the issue must be placed in an historical perspective.

Panama became independent from Spain in 1821. In 1832 it was annexed as a part of the Gran Colombia Federation formed by Simon Bolivar.

Panamanians always resented being governed from the remote capital of Bogota, Colombia, by people equally remote from the problems and sentiment of Panama. More than 30 times, Panamanians tried to break away from Colombia before succeeding in 1903 with the aid of the United States.

Meanwhile, the French, beginning in 1880, were trying to build a canal across the Isthmus of Panama. Philippe Bunau-Varilla, a Frenchman, worked for the private company which had the rights. The project was of great importance because any such canal across Central America would save ships the 7,000-mile voyage around Capr Horn when traveling between the Atlantic and Pacific.

Contention existed, however, as to whether muddy and mosquito-infested Panama was the optimum choice for such a canal. Many in the U.S. felt that Nicaragua was a better site. Though 131 miles longer than the 51-mile isthmus, the weather was better and most of the extra distance would have required no digging, since Lake Nicaragua and the San Juan River were natural waterways that could be used.

But the French, under Ferdinand deLesseps who built the Suez Canal, preferred Panama. Certain technicalities of deLesseps' plan were questioned by his countrymen. And they were right. After nine years and 20,000 deaths the project went bankrupt and the French gave up on the ditch. The company's creditors hoped, however, that the U.S. would buy the rights to the project. Bunau-Varilla began to lobby to that end.

First he convinced the powers that were that

Panama was preferable to Nicaragua. Soon after, President Theodore Roosevelt and Secretary of State John Hay offered Colombia \$10 million, plus an annual rent of \$250,000 for the rights. Colombia would retain sovereignty over a six-mile-wide zone but the U.S. would have the right to enforce its own regulations. The Senate approved the treaty but, to Roosevelt's chagrin, Bogota rejected it. Shortly after, news began to surface that Panama might secede from Colombia in which case the U.S. would recognize the new state.

Bunau-Varilla set himself as negotiator between the U.S. and the Panamanian insurgents, particularly Dr. Manuel Amador Guerrero, who eventually would become Panama's first president. Whether he had U.S. authorization or not is unclear, but Bunau-Varilla told Amador that the U.S. would support the revolution if its leaders would appoint Bunau-Varilla envoy to Washington to draft a canal treaty. At about that time, it was learned that Colombian troops were on their way via ship to Panama. The U.S. sent a cruiser to seal off Panama, thus ensuring the success of the revolution.

Bunau-Varilla stepped up his negotiations. He sweetened the pot to the U.S. He expanded the canal zone area from six to ten miles and granted the U.S. sovereignty "in perpetuity" instead of in renewable periods of 100 years as the U.S. had asked. The financial offer remained as was. The treaty was approved in just seven days, some scant two hours before Panamanian officials arrived to discuss it. But word was sent to the provisional government that U.S. support of the revolution rested on their acceptance of the treaty.

Thanks to the medical and technological expertise of the Americans, they succeeded where the French had failed. Dr. William Gorgas introduced programs that managed to rid the isthmus of the mosquitoes causing yellow fever. Malaria also was conquered. Nonetheless in the 10 years it took to build the canal,

5,600 deaths were recorded due to accidents and illness.

The U.S. spent \$352 million and put 50,000 to work to build the canal. Because of the work of Gen. George Goethals and John Stevens who headed the operation, the project was completed ahead of schedule in 1914 at a cost that was \$23 less million than anticipated.

Present-day negotiations to revise the treaty have been proceeding for some 13 years. Talks have been bitter but recently "principles of agreement" were signed by negotiators. Details have not been made public but the essence of the proposal has been made known. It calls for gradual return of the canal to Panama. The U.S. will not relinquish complete control until the year 2000. The U.S. will continue the canal and 14 military bases in the zone. The bases will be phased out by the U.S. over the life of the treaty. A later treaty reportedly will have the U.S. guaranteeing the neutrality of the canal and its accessibility to all the world's shipping even after 2000. If the safety of the canal is endangered the U.S. could send in military forces.

Once the treaty is approved the present Panama Canal Co. will be replaced by a board of directors consisting of five Americans and four Panamanians. The latter will be chosen by Panama but appointed by the U.S. Until 1990 the administrator will be American and his assistant Panamanian then the roles will be reversed.

As soon as the treaty goes into effect more than half of the 648-square mile Canal Zone will be handed over to Panama which has several developments ready. The U.S. will raise the rent it pays from \$2.3 million to \$10 million and will add another \$10 million from canal revenues, business permitting.

But all that is supposition if two thirds of the U.S. Senate and a plebiscite in Panama fail to ratify the agreement.

Editorial: Back Canal Treaty

The bishops of the United States have left no doubt as to their position on a new Panama Canal Treaty. They have been urging one since November of 1976 when they approved a policy statement of their administrative board issued a year and a half earlier.

The bishops endorsed this stand: "It is a moral imperative — a matter of elementary social justice — that a new and more just treaty be negotiated."

"We continue to believe," the bishops added, "that the moral imperative exists to fashion a new treaty which respects the territorial integrity, sovereignty and economy of Panama and dissolves the vestiges of a relationship which more closely resembles the colonial politics of the nineteenth century than the realities of an interdependent world of sovereign and equal states."

The bishops quoted John XXIII's *Pacem in Terris* in which he said, "Each of them (nations), accordingly is vested with the right to existence, to self-development and the means fitting to its attainment, and to be the one primarily responsible for this self-development."

Archbishop Marcos G. McGrath of Panama who has long urged a new treaty has supported "the post colonial issue of a nation's right to control its natural resources, a right affirmed by the United Nations and in papal encyclicals."

The Constitution requires that two thirds of the Senate must approve any treaty with a foreign government, thus the proposal will be fully aired. Many with conservative leanings will support Ronald Reagan's view: "We paid for it, we built it, we own it, we should keep it."

Archbishop McGrath in an interview with the *Courier-Journal* in April warned against slogans. "Americans are against colonialism," he said, "but don't recognize it in Panama" because they feel the canal is theirs and "they are emotional about it," and he added they will say things like "it was built by Teddy Roosevelt." The archbishop countered such talk by pointing out that "what Panama is striving for is simply an affirmation of its sovereignty over the whole territory." He pointed out that the canal zone has acres of unused jungle in the midst of an overcrowded city. It doesn't leave much to the imagination to picture the resentment Panamanians must feel toward this far away and rich nation.

Archbishop McGrath rightly pointed out that since the colonial days of 1903 times have changed. The principle of national self-assertion has become a part of U.S. foreign policy in such places as Africa and Asia.

Though there is much opposition to the canal treaty, the Reagan position is not espoused by all conservatives. Sen. Barry Goldwater, for one, has taken a "we might as well give it back" position. Sen. S. I. Hayakawa has joked "we stole it fair and square" but he is reportedly able to accept the terms of the new treaty.

Speaking for the proponents, Sen. Hubert Humphrey has made an important point. He feels that those who are for the treaty are armed with moral arguments against the hard value of real estate.

So the arguments will be long and caustic. Some may say that we must keep our military bases to protect the canal. But the fact is that our forces were never really there to protect the canal. Indeed almost everyone agrees that it would be impossible to prevent sabotage to the canal. Our forces are there for "defense" of the hemisphere and to train Latin American military forces.

Even the Pentagon admits that the canal no longer has strategic value.

We may hear that the Panamanians do not have the expertise to run the canal efficiently. But about 80 per cent of all present personnel are Panamanian. What they don't know can be taught. The construction of the canal was a major engineering feat but running it is relatively simple mechanically speaking.

An ounce of pragmatism should be added. To those who think that a small nation such as Panama cannot defy the wishes of the U.S. we caution not to forget our lesson from Vietnam. Panama has great support from the United Nations and from the Organization of American States as far as the question of sovereignty goes.

And Archbishop McGrath sees the situation as a golden opportunity for the United States to show Latin America and the world that a new day of American policy has arrived whereby the natural rights of little nations will be respected.

The new treaty is moral. The new treaty is just. It serves the interests of both signatories. It deserves the support of all Americans who believe in a nation's self-destiny, even as our forefathers secured for us.

It is a Communist ploy that if historical facts are unpleasant, merely revise them to fit an acceptable mold. This is not the American way. But if historical facts point up an injustice, we must correct it.

All signs point to a bitter fight in the Senate. We urge letters to our senators to support the treaty.

Opinion

Prison Forgotten Grateful

Editor:

This letter can only be a small token of gratitude for some voiceless persons in our State prison. On July 15 and 16, Sister Maria Cristina, Sister Maria Cobbas, Jose Irizarry and Father Peter Deckman very generously spent many hours conducting a mini-Jornada or Cursillo for Youth at the Elmira Reception Center. Twenty-seven Spanish-speaking residents participated: young men from the ghettos of San Juan or New York City, and at least one from an urban parish in Rochester. For most of them who feel that the Church has forgotten them, if indeed it ever thought of them, this expression of concern and support was a moving experience.

Beyond the team of the Spanish-speaking persons, this program was aided greatly by the prayers and support of many Cursillo people in the Elmira area. The inmates are grateful to all who sent their prayers and other tokens of their love to them.

What makes this very brief and simple event more significant is that it can focus the attention of a wider Catholic community upon members of the community incarcerated in State prisons and county jails. Amid their differences of language, culture, etc., the common characteristic of Black, Hispanic and White inmates is their alienation from society, minimal employment skills or just plain poverty. As the weekly news magazine noted recently they are the minority of the minorities, the sub-culture of our

society. The increasing number of such persons presents a new challenge to traditional Catholic ministry, whether in jail or in society. As creative programs are needed for inmates, so also programs are needed before they reach jail and again after their release from jail.

The young Hispanic inmates at Elmira Reception Center are grateful to his handful of people outside the walls who have shown this interest and concern for them this summer.

Father Daniel P. Tormey
Chaplain
Elmira Reception Center

More Letters on Page 5

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Courier-Journal 1