

What happened when the US military invaded Panama? Overwhelming force and deafening non-stop rock.

Kelsey Baker

President Donald Trump has taken a strong interest in seeing the US retake control of the strategic Panama Canal amid growing concerns over Chinese influence. Trump has signaled that all options are on the table in his Panamanian pursuit and said earlier this month that the US is "*going to take it back*," or "*something very powerful is going to happen*."

It's unclear what that might be, but the US has a long history of political and military intervention in Panama, including an invasion nearly 40 years ago that culminated in a dictator being driven out of an embassy with deafening rock music. **Operation Just Cause**, a 1989 military intervention, saw 26,000 American troops pour into the country.

The lead-up to the invasion

Originally, American interest in controlling the Canal Zone was **less about economics and more about naval warships**, said Alan McPherson, a professor of US-Latin American relations at Temple University. While the US more or less accepted handing control of the canal over to Panama, it maintained a consistent presence of troops there.

"*You could call it whatever you want*," McPherson said of the longtime American presence and interest in the canal. "*But it was always this imperial enclave*."

Days before Operation Just Cause launched in late 1989, Panamanian Defense Forces harassed four US troops stationed there, killing one and injuring another. The skirmish wasn't the reason the US invaded, but **it fueled tensions**. American officials began to worry that Panama's dictator might be **heading toward an alliance with Soviet Russia**. The Bush administration wanted to oust dictator Manuel Noriega from power in favor of a democratically elected leader.

Noriega had benefited the US for years before, having served as a **secret CIA informant** on other regional drug traffickers. He'd grown increasingly powerful, and the Cold War-era American officials feared Noriega would eventually find Communist Soviet Russia to be a better ally than the Americans.

But the idea of a military invasion to push out a dictator didn't appeal to all US government officials. "*What's really interesting is that the United States government was not united on taking out Noriega*," McPherson said. "*Noriega definitely was a drug dealer, but he was more of like a protector than an actual mover of drugs*," he said. His role in the drug trade allowed Panama to function as a facilitator for drug movement by other regional powers, like the Colombians or Cubans. Because of his deep familiarity with drug networks and proven track record as an informant for other criminals, **the CIA and DEA didn't actually want to dismantle Noriega's position**, McPherson said. "*They opposed any plans for Operation Just Cause*."

The US had paid Noriega for information on other networks like the Cubans for decades, said Robert Harding, professor Latin American politics at Valdosta State University, but US officials grew **increasingly worried that as Noriega's grip on power held strong he would inch closer to supporting the Russians** instead.

Operation Just Cause

In describing Just Cause, Harding says the US "*used a hammer to kill a fly*."
"*The Panamanian Defense Force was only about 3000 [strong] or so. All they had were machine guns and maybe mortars and rocket launchers*," he said. "*But we went in there with the stealth fighters and with the helicopter gunships and just completely obliterated not just the [Panamanian Defense Forces], but sections of the city of Panama*," he said, sharing that during his visits to Panama, locals have recounted stories to him **about the destruction**, including seeing **mangled bodies in the street during the American bombardment**.



US Soldiers, 4-6th Infantry Battalion, 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized) during Operation Just Cause in Panama in 1989 stand in front of an M113 armored personnel carrier. South Carolina National Guard

A couple of other factors were at play for invading with such overwhelming force, Harding noted, including inklings of "Vietnam syndrome," in part an aversion to military intervention without the tremendous use of force. **Marines and the Army annihilated parts of the city. Navy SEALs kneecapped any possible escape for Noriega by blowing up his yacht and "disabling" his private jet.** And to drive Noriega out of his refuge at the Vatican Embassy, US troops played loud, non-stop rock music. The playlist is now available online.

Major military operations lasted only five days, according to the Army, culminating in **Noriega's surrender to Americans on January 3, 1990.** Eventually, Noriega tired of hearing American rock, including Guns 'n Roses and Van Halen's classic, "Panama."

The aftermath

While the mission was a resounding strategic success and Noriega's removal paved the way for Panamanian democracy, McPherson said the invasion left the international community feeling uneasy.

"It flies against national sovereign, the principle of national sovereignty," McPherson said. *"That nations should be able to have whatever kind of leader they want... and dictators can't just be taken out of power at the whim of a foreign power."* *"It degrades the value of national sovereignty,"* he said. *"And so that's the sort of legal and political problem with it."*

Washington, however, embraced a different lesson from the Panama invasion and applied it to future military operations and warfighting campaigns, including the Global War on Terror.