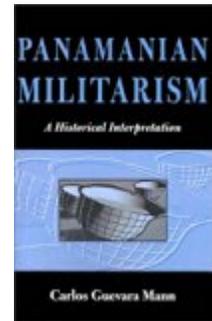


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Carlos Guevara Mann. *Panamanian Militarism: A Historical Interpretation*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1996. xxi + 221 pp. \$23.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-89680-189-9.

Reviewed by Michael L. Conniff (University of South Florida)
Published on H-LatAm (February, 1998)



From Army to Public Force: Militarism in Panama

Originally an M.A. thesis at Ohio University, this study has been expanded and reworked into an overview of military and police affairs in Panama throughout the country's 150 years of independence from Spain. The author, a Panamanian, provides a dependable and balanced account of the various institutions and mandates for keeping the public order in the "crossroads of the world." As the book leans more toward political science than history, it tends to increase its attention with the passage of time, so that the years of Omar Torrijos and Manuel Antonio Noriega (1968-81, 1983-89) occupy the most space. The nineteenth century coverage is cursory.

Panamanian Militarism takes the reader through many periods of civil-military relations, beginning with the era when Panama formed a province of Colombia (1821-1903). Even then, regular armies, guerrilla forces, foreign occupiers, and caudillos continuously destabilized isthmian life. The longest period of sustained military presence occurred after the inauguration of the Panama Railroad in 1855, when the U.S. patrolled and intervened frequently to protect American property and lives.

After independence from Colombia, the U.S. presence became oppressive. The tiny army inherited from Colombia was disbanded in favor of a National Police, lightly armed and usually subject to U.S. supervision. It gradually gained more authority and firepower in the 1930s and then in 1953, was transformed into the National Guard. In 1983 Noriega pushed through its conversion into the Panamanian Defense Forces. Finally, in the wake of the

1989 U.S. invasion, the military was replaced by the Public Force, a police service under civilian command.

The book abounds with characters, none too fully portrayed but still colorful. From Jose Antonio Remon at mid-century, to Torrijos in the 1970s, to Noriega in the 1980s. Basically, we find these men motivated by greed, hunger for power, and inchoate ambition, which vaguely derive from patrimonial traditions in Spanish culture. We are better served by Guevara Mann's helpful legal and institutional analysis to understand what the various military organizations actually did.

Inevitably the author comes to judgment on the officers who ruled during the twenty-one-year military era. He condemns them as retrograde, illegal, and opportunistic. About Torrijos, he says that whatever positive outcomes he accomplished, the balance weighs heavily toward the negative. Noriega he judges even more harshly.

Oddly, the United States government comes out as an accomplice to many episodes of militarism yet is not blamed for the ultimate wound, the 1989 Christmas invasion. Guevara Mann says, "Noriega must be held responsible for Panama's destructive conflict with the United States" (p. 183). I disagree, because as the author himself shows, the U.S. government cultivated and financed Noriega throughout the early 1980s. Second, we now know that the Reagan administration negotiated Noriega's departure from power in May 1988, a deal that the Bush camp killed as harmful to their election campaign. That choice by Bush made the 1989 invasion almost inevitable.

The author made good use of the large secondary literature on Panama's history and relations with the United States, plus he delved into published primary sources from both countries. He missed some titles that weaken his case (esp. books by Jordan, Major, and Phillipps). Still, his account of the 1968 coup and the military era is basically solid and well-presented. The book

may certainly be assigned to undergrads as general background on Panama, with an emphasis on military affairs.

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