

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

MDD-1
Panama

February 12, 1964.
Bogotá

Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs,
366 Madison Avenue,
New York 17, New York

Dear Mr. Nolte:

"It has happened before; it will happen again". Such was the opinion on both sides of the line.

Moods differed. In the Zone, I found much weary resignation — "It's nobody's fault" was a surprisingly frequent comment. Where there was anger, it was often undirected. An article in a Charleston paper, occupying five whole columns, contained little but this aimless rage. The author described his armory — extensive; his family, his house, his garden and his car. Zonians, he said, were normal human beings; he was angry at what had happened. But the nearest he came to finding a focus for his anger was in those North Americans who maintained that Zonians were not normal human beings, but a race apart.

Some Zonians are very sensitive to this charge. It is often said that they are "mostly from the South", the innuendo being that they are racialists who deserve all they get. The original canal-builders may have been Southerners, but the formation of the Zonian mentality has many more obvious and more likely explanations. Many have lived all their lives in that colonial atmosphere. Those who stay in the Zone and those who come to the Zone are essentially practical men — work in the Zone is practical work — and diplomacy, public or private, is not their business. Their cast of mind is more familiar to an Englishman than to an American, for they are like the technicians of an empire. They feel misunderstood, and they have a fear of betrayal.

In the Republic, I noticed in the people a justified technical pride of a different sort: they had burnt what they meant to burn, and they had burnt it well. In Panama, their targets were conspicuous, but in Colon/Cristobal, where Company buildings are mixed up with others, foreign-owned and Panamanian, they had both discriminated neatly and wrecked thoroughly; they saw in this proof of diplomatic efficiency. They were, in the language of riot, making a few specific points.

Panamanians were also at great pains to make it clear that their hostility was towards the Zonians. I heard again and again "We have nothing against Americans". That Zonians are not liked, they are fiercely disliked, was known and expected — being mistaken for a Panamanian by a Zone customs official gave me a share of this dislike. He knew no Spanish, or if he did was not prepared to waste it, and ordered me around with brusque and incomprehensible gestures, which he expected to be immediately obeyed. The contrast between Colon and Cristobal is so sharp that when I crossed from one to the other I thought that the sun had gone in; it had remained shining the whole time, but the effect of poverty, dirt and depression was like a cloud. That Zonians are not liked needs no explanation, but it was strange to hear the United States referred to as their ally.

Money, in lower Panamanian circles, is not mentioned at all. The issue is one of sovereignty and dignity. President Chiari is billing himself as "El Presidente de la Dignidad Nacional". His opponents reply that it is not dignified to make politics out of the nation's dignity. Another expression of the sense of offended dignity was the large red-painted slogan close to the unguarded and neglected shell of the Pan-Am building: "Panama no es burdella Yankee". I was offered more women in Panama than would be needed by a desperate battleship — another aspect of dignity was that I was always assured that they were foreign as the nice Panamanian girls did not sink so low. Perhaps a reflection of comparative living standards in the Caribbean — and this must be taken as a criticism of the narrowness of the American idea of the Republic. Cuba too had similar objections.

The patriotism of the Panamanians with whom I talked was sincere to the point of tedium; their plaintive cries of "Justicia, justicia", their demand that I find them allies in Europe and my soothing promises could easily last a whole afternoon. Perhaps the depth of Panamanian nationalism is not underestimated, but its respectability and its history are. There were references to "pseudo-nationalism" a not very useful term meaning, I suppose, the nationalism of the poor — in the American press, but these were few. Its attitude was, by and large, the candid one of "Teddy Roosevelt made Panama and his methods were not honest." But this is not as candid as it looks; it is not the whole truth of the matter; to a Panamanian it is insulting in a way that does not occur to most Americans, who regard it as an honest owing to past sins.

Under its various names, Colombia in the nineteenth century was not a very united nation, and the Isthmus was the department least united to it; it showed a more persistent spirit of independence to Bogotá than any other region. Attempts at secession began early. Panama behaved as a separate entity in the confused politics of the 1820's; in 1840 it proclaimed itself independent until such time as it was satisfied with the Colombian constitution, not then sufficiently federal for Isthmian taste. Apprehensively, Colombia began a diplomatic search for guarantees of her sovereignty in the area. She obtained them in Washington in 1847, the motives of the United States being predominantly strategic and anti-British. From the signing of that treaty to the signing of the treaty with Panama in 1903 the Isthmus experienced fifty-three "revolutions, rebellions, riots or other outbreaks", and over a dozen American interventions. There was one characteristic vicious circle: Panamanian separatist scheming led to disorder, which brought American intervention; this would alarm Colombia, Colombia would protest, and support her protests by bringing her own order to the Isthmus; the natural result was to strengthen Panamanian separatist feeling, preparing the way for further disturbances and further American interventions.

America had a growing appetite for intervention, for her involvement in Panama was increasing in ways not directly foreseen when her right to intervene was granted. Many Americans crossed the Isthmus to get to California during the Gold Rush of 1849; a railway was built, and brought with it the same sort of friction over transit taxes as there has always been over canal dues. It made a good profit. In 1856 a riot against Americans led to the suspension of re-

lations with Colombia for two years. During the Civil War the North claimed that the passage of troops was an "obvious right" under the treaty; a claim that was strongly denied. In all these disputes Panamanian politicians were ready with their own offers of better contracts and better treaties than could be made with Bogotá.

The 1903 revolution was a quiet one, but quiet in large part because it had been so long mooted: Panama was not Roosevelt's idea. American attitudes are unjustifiably paternal — Panama being seen as a now full-grown and blackmailing bastard. America pays, but thinks it hard that the sins of youth should be so long held against her; she waves the threat of an alternative canal — a threat much used already and of no diplomatic force — and warns that this style of bargaining cannot go on forever.

But perhaps it can. There are many deals that have yet to be made, and it is hard to think up one that looks very new. President Johnson can afford no large concession — perhaps the reason why the American papers offered so much understanding, along with their sketch maps showing the distance from Havana to the Canal. It is unlikely that any Panamanian government would consent to any genuine internationalization of "our geographical resource": it is a greater political resource in its present American state. Initiatives of this sort have certainly been studied, but the difficulties are great and the precedents bad. The right political and diplomatic weather is rare. Much might still be done by the Company, which is an excessively mysterious body, but it has no fundamental solution within its power.

It is clear, therefore:

- to the diplomat, that treaties in perpetuity, except for small plots of land for international agencies, belong to an earlier era.

- to the Zonians, little. In their worried moments, they appear slow animals on the verge of extinction through over-specialization in a freak environment. They know what happened, that it had happened before and would happen again.

- to the Panamanians, that the Zone is still there; so are the American Embassy and the Hilton Hotel, the last the most inviting target of all.

Who will say with sufficient force and decision that this cannot go on forever? That it has gone on a long time may be evidence to the contrary.

Yours sincerely,

Malcolm Deas
Malcolm Deas.