

# FREE BUT FRUSTRATED

BY MICHAEL KONIK

**O**n the night of December 20, 1989, Rogelio Thirwall, a freelance cameraman for Panama's TV-4, was taping footage of America's invasion of Panama City for ABC News. Accompanied by several other Panamanian journalists, he was able to slip out of the Marriott Caesar Park Hotel, where most of the foreign correspondents were being either sequestered or held hostage, and record a video that would convey to the rest of the world the devastating power of America's aerial attack.

Shortly after leaving the relative safety of the hotel in search of evocative images, he saw something that would forever remind him of Operation Just Cause's human consequences. Caught in a gun battle between U.S. forces and members of Manuel Noriega's Dignity Battalion, Rogelio Thirwall watched a fellow photographer and close friend take a bullet in the head. His friend died instantly.

Today, more than 15 months later, Thirwall still isn't sure if the shot came from an American or a Panamanian. And in many ways he doesn't care.

"It was the worst thing I've ever seen," he tells me. "This was my friend. But you have to understand, this invasion had to happen. We Panamanians are sad about the lives that were lost. But the son of a bitch had to go. When it happened, everyone was happy." To illustrate the extent of Panamanians' initial joy, many residents like to tell the story (perhaps apocryphal, probably not) of a woman they viewed on CNN shortly after the attack. Lying in traction in a chaotic hospital ward with two broken legs, she smiled into the cameras and told her nation that she considered her fractures a small price to pay for Noriega's ouster. She said she would have given her life.

It was this kind of unbridled gratitude that, days after the invasion, typified most



Guillermo Endara has found that governing Panama is more difficult than picking a ripe pineapple.

Panamanians' attitude toward Operation Just Cause. Though at least 139 civilians died during the shelling—in the week following the attack, neither *The New York Times* nor *The Washington Post* was able to verify official counts—and thousands more were wounded or left homeless, Panamanians were exultant. The invasion, according to White House spokesman Marlin Fitzwater, was "designed to restore democracy to Panama," and despite the looting, despite the thuggery of never-say-die Noriega supporters, despite the assassination attempts against members of the newly installed government, democracy, it seemed, had indeed returned to Panama.

**A** recent visit there revealed a country whose initial euphoria has been tempered—but not quashed—by time. More than a year after their country's ostensible liberation from an arrogant dictator, Panamanians remain jubilant about Operation Just Cause and hopeful about the future. Nearly everyone I talked to, from students to corporate managers to taxi drivers, spoke glowingly of America's forceful removal of a man they now call "pineapple head." They reveled in new-found freedoms—especially of

speech and the press—and they pointed to exponential growth in construction starts and private industry as indications of how necessary and, in retrospect, productive America's incursion was. Nonetheless, Panama is a country that harbors deep reservations about its current government.

"The invasion was the best thing that could have ever happened," says Ted James, editor of a Panama City paper, *The Bulletin*, and a correspondent for the London *Daily Telegraph*. "But it has had no effect whatsoever on daily life. None. The violence and drugs that were formerly the sole province of the mili-

tary have simply been passed on to the racketeers who used to work for Noriega." The new police force is weak, and street crime has increased since the government of Guillermo Endara took power. Many Panamanian businesses—from banks to restaurants—post guards armed with shotguns to deter robbers. "I think Endara's biggest error," James says, "was not making any radical changes in the months following Noriega's overthrow."

Panama's president, chosen in a May 1989 election that Noriega declared void, is legitimate. But he is not a popular leader. His wife, the former Ana Mae Diaz Chen, has been an unusually prickly source of domestic controversy. Outspoken and many years her husband's junior, Ana Mae Endara is considered low-class by many of Panama's aristocracy. One man, a major figure in the capital's business world who asked not to be identified, told me, "She isn't low-class. She has *no* class. The woman is stupid and loud. She should be his mistress, not his wife."

While Ana Mae Endara is often a source of official embarrassment, a more substantive problem, and one far more damaging to the Endara administration, has been its bureaucratic incompetence.

That few of Noriega's cronies have been brought to justice has left many Panamanians feeling unfulfilled. Only retribution for the guilty, they say, will effectively end a dark chapter in their country's recent history.

The United States concentrated most of its heavy shelling on the Chorillo section of Panama City, a neighborhood that once served as a Noriega stronghold, a desperately poor, arson-plagued concentration of squalor that housed many willing recruits for his Dignity Battalion. Operation Just Cause left Chorillo flattened. "This was a perfect opportunity for Endara to make a fresh start," says John Mann, an expatriate American who has lived in Panama for more than 30 years. "What was once a cancerous growth on the city was now more or less a huge vacant lot. They could have built new homes, they could have revitalized the whole area. But in 15 months they haven't done anything. A lot of people still live in vertical slums."

It's not clear who actually owns the property in Chorillo, but the government has to give the go-ahead for any development. When I passed through the neighborhood, it was impossible to tell that it had recently been the target of an intense artillery barrage. And it was impossible to tell that thousands of people once lived there. Chorillo is emptiness awaiting action—something the Endara administration is notoriously incapable of.

**C**arlos Navarro, a photojournalist for *The Pan-American*, a daily newspaper, says that the benefits of Noriega's removal are obvious—increased civil liberties, the end of the *sapo* ("toad") system of civilian spying, freedom to criticize the government—but the practical results have left him and many other Panamanians disappointed. "Basic services like electricity and water and telephone have all declined. The poor people are much worse than before." Navarro and many other Panamanians, urban and rural dwellers alike, repeatedly complained to me of America's delinquency in providing a promised aid package. "Endara says there is not enough money to take care of the services," Navarro says. "But the

United States promised us millions! Where is it?"

While Panamanians used to say, "We were liberated!" some now say, "We were invaded!" Several business leaders told me that even though their respective industries have enjoyed remarkable growth since Noriega's departure, they resent the United States for "creating"

Noriega and then "attaching too many strings" to promised aid. (The Bush administration has been pressuring Panama to amend its Swiss-like banking laws, which protect drug barons and tax evaders.)

Pedro Heilbron, vice president of Panama's largest privately owned airline, COPA, says, "I think there is some resent-

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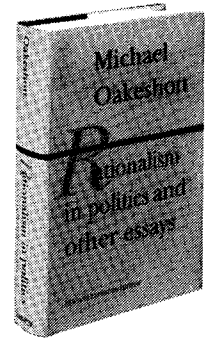
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## PANAMA

ment over the aid issue, but Panama has always been America-loving, and more now than ever. Two years ago we had gone as low as we could go. The private sector was crippled. The people were crippled—psychologically, if not literally. Now, it's true there is more poverty and begging, but the private sector is really taking off. Yes, I think many people would like to see justice served faster and the government work better, but now," he says, smiling, "the people can vote for someone else if they're not happy. Two years ago that was impossible."

**While Panamanians  
used to say,  
"We were liberated!"  
some now say, "We  
were invaded!"**

It seems likely the people will do just that in 1993, when Panama is scheduled to have its first free election since 1968. Within Endara's cabinet, Guillermo "Billy" Ford and Ricardo Arias Calderon have already begun jockeying for political power, and the PRD (Partido Revolucionario Democrático), Omar Torrijos's old party, plans to provide some token opposition, despite enjoying virtually no popular support.

Whoever assumes power will inherit a host of domestic problems. He'll also have a singular opportunity to guide his country to international preeminence. (In 1997 Panama will be home to the largest free port in the world, which, coupled with the canal, makes for an awe-inspiring economic one-two punch.) Most important, the next leader of Panama will represent a constituency that has been touched by the exhilarating power of liberty. "There's a lot to make better," Rogelio Thirwall says. "But we can do it now because we're free. The changes will come, my friend, because now they can come. We're free."

*Michael Konik is a playwright and freelance writer in New York City.*

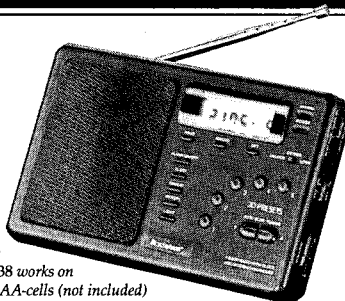
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# A FEW RESERVATIONS

BY JAMES BOWMAN

Among some marvelous pictures of the American West in an exhibition at the National Museum of American Art in Washington, D.C., last spring there were before-and-after photographs of a Dakota Indian maiden called Zie Wie (Yellow Moon). "Before," a grim-faced girl stares into a camera as she sits on the ground wrapped in a blanket. "After," the same girl, in a European-style dress but with exactly the same expression on her face, stares at us from a chair with a basket of sewing on her lap.

The exhibition's accompanying commentary reads, "The impact of acculturation was in reality far more devastating than works such as this [a painting by William Fuller called *Crow Creek Agency*] suggest. Before and after photographs of Zie Wie...taken at an Indian boarding school in 1878 reveal the price of progress as loss of cultural identity."

Alas, poor Zie Wie! We can only guess from her stunningly impassive features what that dress, that chair, and that box of sewing cost her in cultural identity. But let it not be said that the creators of the exhibition, "The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier," were shy about guessing—or about revealing the political motivation for their conjectures.

"One often attains a clearer perception of period bias through what was not painted rather than what was," observes William Truettner, the curator principally responsible for the exhibition. The statement is a pretty good general indication of both his methodology and his own period bias—according to which all of American history can be understood in terms of the maxim: Red man good, white man bad.

The exhibition catalogue is full of the same kind of tendentiousness. Of a portrait by Charles Bird King of a beautiful Indian woman in European dress, Julie Schimmel writes that she "must have appealed to her white viewers as a morally



Alexander Edouart's *Blessing of the Enriquita Mine, New Almaden, California, 1860*: Does the scene's suspicious tidiness reveal a hidden ideology?

inferior savage who was yet ennobled by simplicity and nature."

Must have? What kind of scholarship is this, where that which is not in the paintings can be used to interpret them in exactly the same way as that which is? Truettner tells us that it was significant that painters did not paint "the telling chaos of abandoned mining towns" or "barren and abandoned homesteads." Of Joseph Lee's pleasant painting of a homestead near San Francisco, the main thing Truettner notices is that it ignores the "less attractive aspects of urban life." Most people would think that these things are pretty hard *not* to ignore in painting a picture of a farm.

Of course, every picture that is about something is therefore not about something else. It takes a bold interpreter to pick with such confidence from among the infinity of things something is not about the one that is significant for being ignored.

Truettner can do other tricks, too. In a seemingly unremarkable courtroom scene by George Caleb Bingham, he no-

tices that "the legal system, some now believe, upheld laws that curbed democratic practices; surely the defendants (the ordinary citizens) in these courtroom pictures received less than their full share of justice."

You can tell that from a *picture*? I couldn't even tell what the case was about.

But Truettner and his merry band of historical revisionists prove themselves whizzes at this kind of thing. From the suggestion of imperialism in the rectilinear frames to frequently observed crucifixion imagery in portrayals of white explorers and settlers, in image after image of the Old West they discover a project of "mythologizing," whose purpose was to provide a justification of the white man's rapacity in the name of "progress." As Schimmel explains, "White Americans perceived Indians through the assumptions of their own culture. As a result, Indians were seen in terms of what they might become or what they were not—white Christians."

Every culture perceives others in terms of its own. So what? Schimmel's