

Roger Noriega

Washington's Man in Latin America

By Tanya I. Garcia | February 24, 2005

Roger Noriega's steady climb through the ranks of U.S. diplomacy has been based not on his skills as a statesman or diplomat, but rather on a willingness to do what's necessary to defend U.S. elite interests abroad. In many instances, those actions have included shady dealings of questionable legality and morality.

Bush's Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs is no stranger to the U.S. policy of aligning itself with unsavory Latin American leaders to further its own interests. Since the early 1980s, Noriega has played instrumental roles both in Congress and the White House. In July of 2003, he replaced the controversial Otto Reich in his current post. (1)

Noriega has long been an operative for U.S. policies of direct and indirect intervention abroad. In the late 1980s, he worked in the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), where he managed "non-lethal" aid in Central America. Both the Pentagon and USAID established "humanitarian aid offices" in 1985 after Congress prohibited U.S. military aid to the Nicaraguan Contras, based in Honduras, Costa Rica, and in parts of Nicaragua itself. Much of this aid was delivered to the Contras by right-wing evangelical and political groups, working closely with the executive branch. (14) It was later shown that Noriega was directly in charge of channeling this aid to the Contras—sometimes laundering the aid through an operative of Colombia's Medellin drug cartel residing in Miami. (9)

Noriega also played a key role in abetting the fall of Haiti's elected President Jean-Bertrand Aristide in March of 2004. The Center for Cooperative Research provides evidence that Noriega, who was a vocal critic of the Aristide government, circulated demands for the removal of Aristide in the Organization of American States (OAS) in February 2004. (4) (5) After the U.S. helped to overthrow President Aristide, Noriega quickly applauded the ascension of Prime Minister Gerard Latortue, who came to office despite the fact that he was living in Florida at the time and was therefore ineligible for the presidency under Haitian constitutional law. (2) Amid rampant violence and chaos, Noriega celebrated the overthrow of Haiti's government, stating to Congress: "Now we can make a new beginning in helping Haiti to build a democracy that respects the rule of law and protects the human rights of its citizens." (3)



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Prior to 2004, Noriega laid much of the groundwork for Aristide's removal from office. While working for New York Congressman Benjamin Gilman on the House International Relations Committee, Noriega worked diligently to frame Aristide's security guards in various political killings. (9) Later, as the U.S. Ambassador to the OAS, Noriega collaborated frequently with the International Republican Institute in their efforts to build the Haitian opposition, even against the wishes of the U.S. Embassy in that country, which was trying to mediate among all parties involved. (10) IRI's Haiti chief, Stanley Lucas, received Noriega's support, including support in events that led to the 2004 coup. (11) Noriega remained mute whenever asked of the IRI's role in the country. (12)

Following his steps in Haiti, Noriega's latest *raison d'être* is the ouster of Fidel Castro. As the major spokesperson for new measures to tighten the embargo against the island—outlined in the 2004 Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba report—Noriega announced plans "to bring an end to the regime of Cuban dictator Fidel Castro and to prepare to assist a post-Castro Cuba". The Bush administration's new round of sanctions toward the island will cost Americans \$59 million and very likely be counterproductive to any legitimate aim to enhance human rights and democratic transition. (6)

Noriega has spent years developing rightwing policies to punish Cuba. He served as Jesse Helms' senior staff member on the Committee on Foreign Relations that eventually drafted and passed the notorious 1996 Helms-Burton Act. Human rights advocates, international jurists, and foreign governments have protested the act for its aim to economically strangle the island and force other countries to impose the U.S. embargo. (8)

Noriega's lack of diplomacy in the hemisphere has offended many Latin American leaders. Following Noriega's criticism of Argentina for visiting Cuba and leaning leftward in economic policy, President Kirchner responded angrily



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that his country was “no longer the doormat of the United States.” (13)

Former Secretary of State Colin Powell’s replacement in January 2005 with Condoleezza Rice, who has repeatedly sided with the neoconservative and anti-multilateralist faction of the administration’s foreign policy team, will likely strengthen Noriega’s role in hemispheric policy. The new team ensures that Washington’s unilateralist policies will continue in Latin America, and Roger Noriega has proved himself a faithful foot soldier of those policies. Powell and Noriega publicly clashed when Noriega applauded the short-lived coup d’état in Venezuela, forcing Secretary of State Powell to distance himself from Noriega’s comments after President Hugo Chavez was returned to power. (7)

The shared political perspectives of Rice and Noriega will likely prevent confrontations between the two if Noriega remains in his high State Department position. But having Noriega continue as the U.S. government’s point man for Latin American and Caribbean relations will do nothing to alleviate the deepening tensions between the region and the United States.

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The Americas Program

“A New World of Ideas, Analysis, and Policy Options”

Recommended citation:

Tanya Garcia, “Roger Noriega: Washington’s Man in Latin America,” Americas Program (Silver City, NM: Interhemispheric Resource Center, February 24, 2005).

Web location:

<http://www.americaspolicy.org/articles/2005/0502noriega.html>

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