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Congress Back Then: Big-stick Diplomacy in Panama



by K. Daniel Glover
Thursday, November 25, 1999
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The wee hours of Dec. 31 by tradition are a time of celebration for people everywhere. Complaints of nitpicking numerical purists aside, that tradition becomes all the more significant when the last digit of the calendar year is changing from nine to zero -- the unofficial end of a decade, a century and/or a millennium.

We are fast approaching one of those milestone dates -- Dec. 31, 1999 -- and the world is preparing for one big party. Some countries have more reason to celebrate than others, though, and Panama is one of them. At the start of 2000, new millennium or not, Panamanians will be rejoicing at their new-found freedom to control the canal that cuts through their nation.



Panamanians will rejoice their new-found freedom to control the canal

That date will mark the official end of American imperialism in Central America, an era that arguably reached its zenith 96 years ago this month, with the signing of a hastily negotiated treaty giving the United States the right to build and control the Panama Canal "in perpetuity." How the United States managed such a one-sided treaty is a fascinating tale indeed -- and one worth examining as a subsequent 1977 treaty that promised to relinquish the canal to Panama is about to take effect.

Choosing the best route

Long before President Theodore Roosevelt selected the then-Panamanian region of Colombia as the site for a canal connecting the Pacific Ocean and Caribbean Sea, the U.S. government desired such a waterway. *Congressional Quarterly* pegged federal interest to the presidency of Andrew Jackson, who in the 1830s sent Charles Biddle to explore canal routes through Nicaragua, two countries to the north of Panama.

The 1855 construction of a railroad across the Panamanian Isthmus, made possible by an 1846 deal between the United States and Colombia, heightened pressure for action. Commercial interests dreamed of a more direct oceanic trade route. And in 1898, with the United States warring against Spain in Cuba, Americans recognized a military need for the canal -- to get battleships from one U.S. coast to the other, without having to go around South America.

The voyage of one ship in particular, the *USS Oregon*, changed the dynamics of the canal debate. Newspapers chronicled the *Oregon's* 12,000-mile journey around Cape Horn for more than three months, and canal advocates noted that a canal would have cut 8,000 miles from the trip.

In the wake of the *Oregon's* expedition, Congress created the Isthmian Canal Commission (ICC) in 1899 to study potential canal routes. Then in 1900 and 1901, the United States and Britain negotiated two treaties that gave the United States the exclusive right to build a canal through Central America, abrogating an 1850 treaty that would have required joint U.S.-British action.

Meanwhile, the preference for the path through Nicaragua -- a route longer than through Panama but without the need to move mountains and build expensive locks and dams -- began to change. A French company earlier that had failed to build a canal through Panama sought to sell its assets and rights to the United States, after a bankruptcy and subsequent reorganization in 1894.

U.S. officials initially balked because of the $100-million price tag. The ICC's November 1901 report called the price "unreasonable" and recommended the Nicaraguan route instead. The House backed the Nicaraguan route on a 308-2 vote Jan. 9, 1902.

But five days before House lawmakers had voted on the measure, the French company had lowered its asking price to $40 million. The U.S. government quickly reversed its opinion, with the ICC issuing a new report in favor of the Panama route, deemed superior by engineers in congressional hearings, on Jan. 18.

Rejected by Colombia

The debate moved to Congress that summer. A Senate committee on March 10 backed a Nicaraguan canal because Colombia, known as New Grenada when it assumed control of the Panama region in 1821, had not made a firm commitment to allow U.S. construction of a canal in Panama. By mid-April, though, Colombia had presented a draft treaty. The debate moved to the Senate floor in June.

There, in a series of speeches, Sen. Mark Hanna (R-OH) made an impassioned pitch for the Panama route. Roosevelt's lobbying also influenced the debate. So did Philippe Bunau-Varilla, a Frenchman involved in the earlier failed canal effort. Days before the Senate vote, he sent to each senator a Nicaraguan stamp featuring a volcanic eruption and thus suggesting that the country was not safe for a canal.

The lobbying and speechifying worked. On June 19, the Senate passed, on a 42-34 vote, a bill that agreed to let the federal government buy out the French company's canal rights in Panama if Colombia agreed to deed the necessary land. The House passed the bill June 26.

Next came the diplomatic haggling -- and it was not pleasant. Roosevelt was suspicious of Jose Marroquin, the Colombian leader

following a 1900 coup. Colombia, furthermore, went through three negotiators, one of whom, according to the *Chronological History of United States Foreign Relations*, "spoke no English and had a nervous breakdown because of pressure from both Bogota and the Americans."

The talks took a sudden turn Jan. 21, 1903. Aggravated by Colombian demands for more money and sovereignty in the proposed canal zone, U.S. Secretary of State John Hay intimidated negotiator Tomas Herran by threatening to reconsider Nicaragua as the canal route. The next day, against explicit orders, Herran signed a treaty without first getting approval from Bogota.

The treaty called for the leasing of a six-mile-wide zone to the United States for 99 years, with renewal options. It offered a $10-million payment to Colombia and annual payments of $250,000 to begin nine years out. The Senate ratified the Hay-Herran treaty on a 73-5 vote March 17. But the Colombian Senate, to the surprise of observers who agreed with the *New York Sun's* assessment that the deal worked "greatly to the advantage of Colombia," rejected the treaty on a 24-0 vote Aug. 12.

A treaty crafted in rebellion

Colombia's rejection of the treaty infuriated Roosevelt. He considered building the canal without Panama's approval, citing the 1846 treaty as justification. Another option he mentioned in a mid-September letter to Hay: "in some shape or way to interfere … so as to secure the Panama route without further dealing with the foolish and homicidal corruptionists in Bogota."

That letter and other factors eventually would raise questions about exactly how the United States did secure the Panama route. For on Nov. 3, 1903, Panamanian rebels, apparently encouraged by Bunau-Varilla's pledge of U.S. military assistance, began a bid to gain independence from Colombia. With an assist from two U.S. battleships, the Republic of Panama declared its independence Nov. 6 and named Bunau-Varilla as its "confidential agent" in Washington.

The United States recognized the republic the same day, and Hay and Bunau-Varilla quickly negotiated a canal treaty and signed it Nov. 18, before any other Panamanian emissaries could arrive in Washington. The treaty included the same financial provisions as the Hay-Herran Treaty rejected by Colombia, but it expanded the width of the canal zone to 10 miles and gave the United States perpetual control of the canal. In exchange, the United States agreed to guarantee Panama's independence.

Some Democratic senators, led by Arthur Pue Gorman (MD), tried to kill the Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty. Ultimately, though, lawmakers could not resist the logic of Sen. Hernando de Soto Money (D-MS), who had said this after the treaty was signed: "[W]e have never had a concession so extraordinary in its character as this. In fact, it sounds very much as if we wrote it ourselves."

The Senate ratified the treaty on a 66-14 vote Feb. 23, 1904, and the Panama Canal officially opened Aug. 15, 1914.

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Visit the Panama Canal Commission, the agency that monitors the operations of the canal. Stop by the Discovery Channel's in-depth look at the canal. Click here to learn key dates in the history and life of the canal. Recently the United States and Panamanian officials set a date for security cooperation talks. Here's another look at the history behind the canal. Visit this museum, and get a live camera view of the canal.



How important has it been that the United States controlled the canal? What will be the effects of letting the canal fall under local rule?

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11/24/99 10:50:33 PM
WELCOME THE CHICOMS, OUR COMPETITORS

11/26/99 12:32:34 AM Boldy Lox
very very funny! :)

11/26/99 11:42:13 AM apeepo
I can just see the headlines: .... "TANKER STUCK IN CANAL" All trafic through the Panama canal has been halted due to the breakdown of .....

11/26/99 3:53:22 PM stomp stomp@icq.mail.com
If Panama had thought this through, they could become the Hong Cong of South America. But the result is the same, they are under the control of the PRC.

11/28/99 11:20:18 PM Academie
Well, if your average Panamanian, uh, Juan Does are smart, they won't be "rejoicing at their new-found freedom to control the canal." They'll realize they have about the same control over the canal that I do right now: none at all. :: But here's an interesting question, if speculative: in what sense will the Panamanians control the Canal? Will the US allow them to run it as they please? to refuse US shipping? to rent the PRC a naval base right next to it?

11/29/99 9:22:31 PM James jamesbeus@aol.com
The Panamanian people may not celebrate at all. The opportunities present are ripe for politicians of the United States. Obviously, the U.S. will not allow the canal to fall into disrepair, nor be run by incompetents. The pork that will come from U.S. taxpayers will be enormous. All in the spirit of "Save the Canal" campaigns. Once allocated by congress, the money will disappear off taxpayer's radar screens. Unless 60 minutes or it's successor gets government permission to do an "expose", taxpayers will never understand where the millions if not billions of taxdollars are going and for what purpose. Secret training camps for Panama's secret police? Army? CIA operations to bring down or de-stabilize Central and South American governments? Whether or not to intervene in the operation of the canal will become a topic for federal and state politicians and probably figure prominently in all presidential campaigns begining in the later half of the next decade.

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