



# ACSC Quick-Look

*Catalyst for Air & Space Power Research Dialogue*



## ***Panama: Operational Lessons From a Successful Regime Change***

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**Discussion.** It is relevant to study Operation Just Cause, the liberation of Panama, because the goal of that operation was essentially identical to that of the current operation in Iraq; namely to depose a dictator and to help the country become free, prosperous and secure. It is also relevant because in Panama US forces achieved strategic and operational objectives at with relatively low costs in terms of time, blood and treasure. While the situation in Panama was clearly easier, strategy played a decisive role in that success. There are elements of that strategy that prove instructive for current operations.

The US helped Panama gain its independence from Colombia in exchange for its acceptance of US plans to build a canal. While US/Panamanian relations had generally been good, the extra territorial nature of the Canal Zone was a source of tension, in Panama and throughout South and Central America. After the US agreed to turn over the Canal to Panama but before the transfer, Manuel Noriega first took over the Panamanian Armed Forces then overturned a democratic election to consolidate his control of the government. While Noriega tried to wrap himself in the Panamanian flag and justify his actions through anti-US nationalism, he was seen by many, if not most, Panamanians as a gangster. As the scope of his corruption became clear and his attacks on Americans became extreme, the US decided to act.

The initial strategy for Panama was not appropriate for the goal. The plan was, after a buildup of forces at Panamanian bases, US forces invade the country, defeat Panamanian forces in combat, and progressively occupy the remainder of the country to secure access to the Canal. Wargaming revealed several problems with the initial strategy. The plan's long buildup phase would sacrifice the element of surprise. The slow pace of the operation would afford the enemy time for hostage taking and sabotage. Also, friendly, enemy, and civilian casualties would be high, because of the densely populated urban and semi-urban battlespace. Finally, Noriega or a lieutenant could break off the conventional fight before capture and initiate a guerilla operation.

General Maxwell Thurmond, US SOUTHCOM Commander tasked a new planning staff from the XVIII Airborne Corps to propose an alternative strategy. Their proposal, heavily influence by Special Operations experience, more closely resembled a counter coup than a conventional invasion. The plan emphasized speed, simultaneity and legitimacy. Plans for post-combat operations emphasized the same principles and were developed concurrently.

Just prior to the initiation of combat the US discreetly acted to ensure individuals important to the post-combat functioning of Panama were in safe locations. In particular, the legitimately elected Panamanian leaders were invited to a secure location on a US base. Just before military operations began, they were sworn into office. To preserve operational and tactical surprise some deployments were conducted secretly while several units deployed from out of theater straight into combat. Surprise and airpower compensated for the apparent lightness of the force. Most targets were hit nearly simultaneously and on the first night. Many forces protected US civilians and key infrastructure. While a few Panamanian units put up an effective fight, US strategy and tactics attempted to minimize all casualties and usually resulted in surrenders without a shot being fired. Psyops teams with Spanish language capability were instrumental in most of the bloodless surrenders.

Before combat began, units specifically selected for recovery operations began deploying. All US post-combat actions were designed to support the transfer of power to the legitimately elected democratic Panamanian government. The US worked to ensure that all recovery aid reached the people through Panamanian government agencies, increasing the government's legitimacy. The US quickly publicized seized evidence of Noriega's crimes further diminishing the legitimacy of his regime.

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In addition, US combat forces acted quickly to stop looting in the interim between the invasion and the establishment of legitimate Panamanian governmental authority. However, reinforcements staged out of sight of the Panamanian civilians to minimize the appearance of a US occupation and the US acted fast to reconstitute a Panamanian law enforcement capability.

The US immediately began reviewing the record of each member of the Panamanian military and security forces. Thugs, thieves, and those with blood on their hands were jailed to await trial. Those who had clean records and swore allegiance to the elected government were quickly incorporated into new units. Within days these units replaced US combat units on duty keeping the peace, though US units remained on standby for several weeks. Because the campaign plan consciously sought to limit collateral damage, and post-conflict security measures constrained lawlessness and widespread looting, there was relatively little reconstruction to do. However, any rebuilding took place as fast as possible, including cosmetic work, to make Panama look back to normal. This cosmetic work actually had a powerful psychological effect.

To date, Panama remains democratic and friendly to the US. To achieve this end state only 23 Americans were killed, almost all of those the first night.

**Analysis.** Clearly Panama was an easier situation than the current situation in Iraq. In Panama there was no religious or ethnic dimension to complicate campaign planning, execution, or reconstruction efforts. Further, Panama's infrastructure had not deteriorated under the compounded effects of a kleptocracy and long-term international sanctions. Perhaps most importantly, an election, that had already taken place, established the legitimacy of the Panamanian government before the operation began. An effective campaign strategy made a significant contribution to achieving the desired end state. Consider the difference in friendly, enemy, and civilian casualties if the first strategy was followed. Wargaming identified the deficiencies in the first plan before damage was done. Yes, the situation made the final strategy's objectives of speed, minimum harm, and maximum legitimacy to the new government easier to achieve but they would not have been achieved at all if they had not been key elements of their strategy. Finally, Noriega's regime received no external support. Still, some situational differences are somewhat smaller than they may seem. While the Iraqis do not have the long tradition of democracy present in Panama, Hussein held sham elections, thus establishing familiarity with electoral procedures and technologies among the Iraqi population.

**Relevance for Current Operations.** While elements of the situation make achieving success in Iraq significantly more difficult than success in Panama, it also appears adopting relevant processes and objectives could make a positive difference. Here are a few specifics that can be reasonably drawn from the above discussion:

1. Wargame alternative COAs, this helps identify alternatives before investing in potentially harmful strategies.
2. Limit outside support, this includes both not provoking intervention and sealing borders.
3. Protect our friends and key infrastructure by creating a prioritized protected *assets* list.
4. Win the legitimacy fight, by simultaneously emphasizing the legitimacy of democratic representatives and institutions and emphasizing the illegitimacy of adversaries—i.e., *information operations, not traditional combat arms, are the primary war winning elements.*
  - Publicize the misdeeds of the past regime and the current insurgents
  - Ensure benefits reach the people through the *Iraqi* government and keep a low profile
5. Looking back to normal may discourage some of the criminals that are passing as insurgents.
6. Continue to wargame branches and sequels even as the campaign plan is executed, updating it to depict new realities and new enemy innovations, allowing counters to be developed faster.