THE ROLE OF THE UNITED STATES IN PANAMA'S JOURNEY TOWARDS INDEPENDENCE

LaVerne M. Seales Soley

Department of Languages and Cultures,
California Lutheran University, California, USA

ABSTRACT

Panama's geographic location as the "Crossroads of the Americas" has played a significant role in its history and journey to independence. Even after Panama's independence from Colombia, the construction and later operation of the Panama Canal had the power to keep the United States on the isthmus for almost one hundred years. This article attempts to chronicle Panama's path toward independence by briefly exploring Panama's history as a colony of Spain and as a province of Colombia. However, its focus is Panama's relationship with the United States, which proved to be the most complex and complicated at the international level. In addition, the circumstances of the signing of the Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty and the unusual relationship that came with it are also focal points. The article concludes with the disputes stemming from the United States' jurisdiction in the Canal Zone that led to the signing of the Torrijos-Carter Treaty and Panama achieving total sovereignty over its territory on December 31, 1999.

KEYWORDS

Canal Zone, Panama Canal, Torrijos- Carter Treaty.

1. INTRODUCTION

Panama is the narrowest strip of land in the Americas and has always played a strategic role in the history of the Western Hemisphere. Initially, it was the crucial crossroads between Peru and Mexico and later became an essential part of the Spanish conquistador's route to move the Inca treasures from Peru to Spain. Moreover, Panama's location between two oceans continued to be crucial as later, during the Gold Rush, the Panama Railroad was essential for transporting gold seekers from the east coast of the United States to California. Later, the need to transport people and goods across the isthmus more effectively led to the Panama Canal's construction, making Panama a key player in global trade.

As for the U.S., Panama's unique location proved to be vital to the U.S. and its national security. On the one hand, Panama was crucial to U.S. prosperity as a central land and sea transit route since it offered the U.S. an effective and economical alternative to move goods from one coast to another. On the other, Panama's geographic location made it ideal for the U.S. to establish military bases that allowed the U.S. to have a presence in the region and quick access to the Caribbean and South America.

This interest in Panama by the U.S. initially led to the U.S. signing a series of treaties and agreements with Nueva Granada since Panama was one of its provinces. Later, the U.S. entered diplomatic negotiations directly with Panama to support Panama's independence from Colombia, which allowed the signing of the Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty. However, over the years, the terms

of the Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty, which allowed the C.Z. (Canal Zone) and the U.S. intervention in Panama's affairs, created a petulant relationship between the U.S. and Panama.

After the Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty was signed and its terms unfolded, it became clear that because of U.S. interference, Panama was not a sovereign nation. As a result of the treaty, Panama did not have supreme authority over its territory; this led to several additional treaties, agreements, and diplomatic efforts. Finally, the Torrijos-Carter Treaty permanently removed the U.S. from Panama and made Panama a sovereign nation.

2. DISCOVERY AND CONQUEST OF THE ISTHMUS OF PANAMA BY SPAIN

At the time of the Conquest, the Spanish first arrived in what is now the Republic of Panama in 1501 with the expedition of Rodrigo de Bastidas, who explored the Caribbean coasts of the eastern part of the isthmus. The following year, on his fourth and last voyage to America, Christopher Columbus proclaimed Spain's sovereignty over that region. Then, in 1530, Vasco Núñez de Balboa (1474-1517), one of the prominent figures in the conquest of these areas, crossed the isthmus and, on September 25th of that year, reached the Pacific Ocean, which he would call the "South Sea" (LaFeber 4). Due to its privileged location between the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans, as early as 1534, Emperor Charles V considered the construction of opening an interoceanic corridor through the isthmus (Elder 115).

Panama City, which became the capital of the isthmus, was founded on August 15, 1519, by Pedro Arias Dávila, the governor of that region of Central America; at that time, the city was called "Castilla del Oro." For years, Panama City was one of the main ports from which numerous expeditions departed for the exploration and conquest of the Pacific region. From the 16th century to the middle of the 18th century, the isthmus was a strategic point on the route from Spain to Lima.

At the beginning of the 19th century, the Spanish colonies in America began to fight for their independence. On November 28, 1821, Panama declared its independence from Spain and, a few weeks later, voluntarily became part of "La Gran Colombia," a union of Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, and Panama. By the beginning of 1830 there was political instability in Gran Colombia, and soon after, the union collapsed; Panama and Colombia then became New Granada. However, the centralization of economic activities in Bogotá was detrimental to Panamanian interests, and this encouraged separatist movements that led to Panama's multiple failed attempts to separate from Colombia in 1830, 1831, and 1840.

2.1. The Game Changer: Manifest Destiny and the Monroe Doctrine

The U.S.' expansionist goals appeared early in the country's history; the U.S.' ideology and geopolitical beliefs were the driving force. As for the Americas, in the 19th century, the "Manifest Destiny" was a key factor; cultural belief held that God had destined the U.S. to expand its territory and spread capitalism across the continent.

In 1823, American President James Monroe crafted the Monroe Doctrine, which became the best-known U.S. policy toward the Western Hemisphere. The Monroe Doctrine intended to prevent the European powers from obtaining colonies or influence in America, which could harm the interests of the U.S. in the region (Keen 520). Besides keeping the Europeans out of the Americas, the Monroe Doctrine justified the U.S.' intervention in the internal affairs of the new republics in the Western Hemisphere.

3. THE BEGINNING OF THE UNITED STATES IN PANAMA

3.1. The Mallarino-Bidlack Treaty

The U. S.s' "formal" intervention in the Isthmus of Panama began very early. On December 12, 1846, the Mallarino-Bidlack Treaty was signed; it was a treaty between New Granada and the U.S. According to John Major in *Prize Possession: The US and the Panama Canal 1903-1979*, the treaty's immediate objective was to prevent Great Britain from monopolizing the isthmus's traffic and, simultaneously, preserve the interests of the U.S. (12).

The treaty determined that the U.S. and its citizens would have transit rights and free access to any communication route built in Panama through the isthmus. Also, it provided for the abolition of discriminatory tariffs against the U.S. trade. In return, the U.S. agreed to ensure the neutrality of the isthmus and Colombia's control over that area. Reciprocally, they also examined the payment of the tariffs on the products that Colombia exported to the U.S. (Major 12).

3.2. The Stephan-Paredes Contract

In 1850, after the Mallarino-Bidlack Treaty was signed, the Republic of New Granada signed the Stephens-Paredes contract, which granted the Panama Railroad Company, a North American company, the right to build a 47.6-mile-long railway line across the Isthmus of Panama, linking the Atlantic and the Pacific oceans in Central America.

In 1855, the railway line between the cities of Colón and Panama was inaugurated (Dubois 23). Although the railway line fulfilled its role of connecting both oceans for many years, it soon became apparent that a canal was necessary.

In 1868, the secretary of state of the United States, William H. Seward, entered negotiations with New Granada to construct a canal in Panama. The treaty gave the U.S. total control of the Panama Canal with the exclusion of the political sovereignty of Colombia. Although a treaty was signed on January 14, 1869, the Colombian Senate refused to ratify it (Dubois 23).

Instead, in 1878, a French company led by Ferdinand de Lesseps secured the rights to build a Trans-Isthmian sea-level canal through Panama. On January 10, 1880, work officially began and continued for ten years. Still, in the late 1880s and the early 1890s, construction was suspended due to technical setbacks and epidemics of malaria and yellow fever, which devastated the workers (LaFeber 13-14). Eventually, these problems led the company to a deep economic crisis, which favored the intention of the U.S. to initiate negotiations with Colombia to continue the construction of the canal with the sole purpose of exercising control over it (Moffett III 19-20). In the late 1890s, Philippe-Jean Bunau-Varilla, a French engineer and critical figure in the decision to construct the Canal, successfully lobbied American lawmakers to buy the French canal assets in Panama.

4. PANAMA'S INDEPENDENCE FROM COLOMBIA AND THE CANAL ZONE

4.1. The Herrán-Hay Treaty

At the end of the 18th Century, the U.S. was still interested in building a canal in Panama and was eager to take on what the failed French canal company had initiated. In the first days of August 1903, the U.S. proposed to Colombia the basis of a treaty called the Herrán-Hay Treaty. This treaty would have authorized the failed French canal company to sell and transfer its rights

and properties in Panama to the U.S. government. But on August 12, 1903, the Colombian Senate unanimously rejected the proposed treaty.

It is crucial to point out that at this time, relations between the Department of Panama and Colombia had deteriorated, and the Panamanian separatist desires were in a moment of great agitation (Anguizola 223-30). To make matters worse, when the U.S. made the offer, although the Panamanians agreed that the U.S. should continue the construction of the Panama Canal, they had no power to accept the Herrán-Hay Treaty. Instead of trying to convince Colombia, the U.S. focused on Panama's independence efforts by proposing and ultimately signing a treaty with Panama that allowed them to build and operate the proposed Panama Canal; in return, the U.S. supported Panama's independence from Colombia.

In 1903, the provisional governing board of the Republic of Panama appointed French engineer Philippe Bunau-Varilla, the main shareholder of the failed French canal company, to be their representative to Washington D.C. to negotiate a treaty to continue the construction of the canal. However, the Panamanians did not consider Bunau-Varilla's interest in recovering the money he had invested in the French canal company (Dubois 33).

4.2. The Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty

On November 3, 1903, Panama declared its independence from New Granada, U.S. president Theodore Roosevelt immediately recognized the new republic. In less than two weeks, the U.S. had the arrangement it wanted: the Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty (Seales 15). As Panama's representative in the negotiations with the U.S. authorities in Washington D.C., Philippe Bunau-Varilla signed a pact that would benefit him. Regarding the Panamanians and the Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty, William D. McCain notes the following: "They were the victims of a pact negotiated and signed on November 18, 1903, by an American who knew little of their interest and needs and by a Frenchman who probably cared less" (225). After Panama’s independence, construction of the Canal continued, and ten years later, on August 15, 1914, the project was completed.

Panamanians were never happy with the treaty. In addition to giving the U.S. the right to build, operate, and defend the transoceanic canal this treaty determined the creation of a Canal Zone under the total control of the U.S. "in perpetuity" (Lipski 296). The critical question surrounding this treaty was whether the Republic of Panama was sovereign in the CZ or not, as Panama saw this as a threat to its sovereignty. Problems around the treaty’s interpretation would haunt the country for years. Many even viewed Panama as a U.S. colony (O’Reggio 153). Symbolically displaying the Panamanian flag on the CZ would become a point of controversy and ultimately change history.

4.3. The Arias-Roosevelt and Eisenhower-Remón Treaties and the Chiari-Kennedy Agreement

After multiple controversies between Panama and the U.S. over Panama’s sovereignty in the CZ, on March 2, 1936, the president of Panama, Harmodio Arias, and the president of the U. S., Franklin D. Roosevelt, signed the Arias-Roosevelt Treaty. This treaty began the revision phase of the Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty. Several years later, in 1955, the Eisenhower-Remón Treaty was signed. Although both treaties established essential modifications to the Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty, the Panamanians were unsatisfied with the amendments, and Panamanians felt the treaties had not addressed all their concerns.

As negotiations continued around Panama's sovereignty in the CZ, the raising of the Panamanian flag in the CZ became a key symbol of sovereignty for the Panamanians. After several riots and demonstrations of discontent, on September 17, 1960, Panama negotiated an agreement with the U.S. that resulted in an order by U.S. President Eisenhower for the Panamanian flag to fly alongside the American flag in the CZ (Liss 66). However, even after President Eisenhower's specifications, the Panamanian flag was not raised. This led to the Chiari-Kennedy agreement, which demanded the raising of the Panamanian flag in the CZ; yet again this mandate was not followed.

5. THE TURNING POINT FOR THE UNITED STATES IN PANAMA

The discontent reached its breaking point in January 1964. January 9 and 10, 1964, marked a turning point in Panama's relations with the U.S. Panamanian students, joined by Panamanian citizens, who entered the CZ to raise the Panamanian flag alongside the U.S. flag in public areas of the CZ and were confronted by U.S. troops. Twenty-two people died, and more than five hundred were injured (Davis 43). The Panamanian government immediately broke off diplomatic relationships with the U.S. Based on the incidents in the CZ and the instability in the country, the U.S. declared a "state of war," allowing it to exercise its right to protect the canal; the U.S. interrupted the traffic on the bridge of the Americas and in the Colón Corridor, basically paralyzing the republic.

With the events of January 1964, there was no turning back, and the revisionist stage of the Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty culminated; Panama began advocating for the annulment of the treaty that would ultimately lead to the Torrijos-Carter Treaty (Krob 56). To help in the negotiations, the Organization of American States established a commission to deal with the controversy. After multiple rounds of negotiations between Panama and the U.S., the diplomatic relations between both countries were re-established. During this period, president L. B. Johnson formally expressed his willingness to begin talks to settle issues around the controversies, eventually resulting in a new treaty; Panama's president at the time, R.F. Chiari, agreed to this. R.F. Chiari's, successor, Marco Aurelio Robles, maintained close relations with the U.S. during his presidency. But in 1968, Robles was prosecuted over political infighting and went into exile. The Panamanian presidential elections to replace Robles were contentious, and Arnulfo Arias Madrid emerged as the winner. This was Arias' third time in the presidency; he had been the president of Panama from 1940 to 1941 and again from 1949 to 1951. During his presidency, Arias had warned about the Panamanian military's increasing influence in Panamanian politics. Ten days after Arnulfo Arias won the election, the National Guard staged a coup (Conniff 13). This coup marked the beginning of the military period in Panama, which lasted for 21 years, from October 11, 1968, to December 20, 1989.

In this group of soldiers who controlled the country after the 1968 coup, one stood out as a national hero—Omar Torrijos; he was in power from 1969 to 1981. Torrijos was a great nationalist. From 1970 to 1977, he worked in Panama's internal government, and he used his position in the government to fight for the vindication of the Panamanian rights over the Canal. On the international stage, Torrijos portrayed a positive image of Panama so that the world would know its story, especially surrounding the Canal and the U.S. involvement in the country.

5.1. The Torrijos-Carter Treaty

After lengthy negotiations, on September 7, 1977, Torrijos, who was chief of the National Guard of the Republic of Panama, and U.S. president Jimmy Carter, signed a new treaty that the U.S. Senate reluctantly ratified in 1978 (Conniff 1). The Torrijos-Carter Treaty finally recognized the

Panamanian sovereignty in the CZ; it eliminated the perpetuity clause and established the gradual cession of the U.S.' rights over the Canal and the CZ. However, this was not the end of the U.S. in Panama.

Ten years after the Torrijos-Carter Treaty was signed and ratified (from mid-December 1989 to late-January 1990), under the code name "Just Cause," the George H.W. Bush administration invaded Panama to depose the de facto Panamanian leader, General Manuel Noriega. The U.S. government extradited Noriega to the U.S. to face money laundering and drug trafficking charges and restored the democratically elected government of Guillermo Endara. After Noriega's extradition, as agreed by the Torrijos-Carter Treaty, on December 31, 1999, the U.S. withdrew all its military bases, and officially handed the Panama Canal over to the Panamanian government, ending a relationship that had started over a hundred years earlier. As a result, Panama was finally officially independent and had its coveted sovereignty over the CZ.

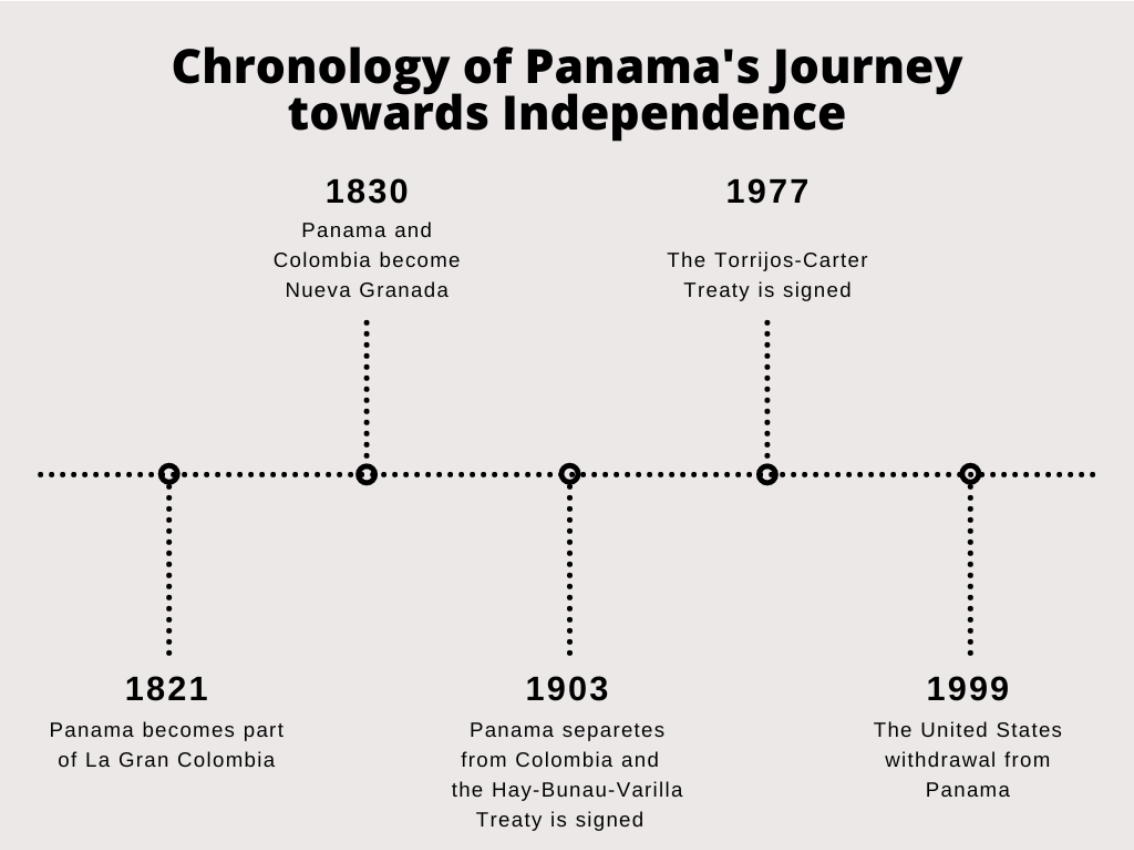

Figure 1. Chronology of Panama's journey towards independence

6. CONCLUSION

Panama's history of colonization is like many Latin American countries; nevertheless, its geographical location led- to a longer journey toward independence, and the U.S. played a vital role in that delay. The relationship between Panama and the U.S. officially started in 1903 with the signing of the Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty following Panama's declaration of independence from Colombia. However, in addition to granting the U.S. the rights to build, operate, secure, and defend the Panama Canal, the Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty also allowed the U.S. total and indefinite control of a Canal Zone, a situation that Panamanians never accepted. The U.S. interest

and permanent military presence on the isthmus created a unique situation that resulted in several treaties and agreements for Panama's independence and sovereignty over all territory contained in its borders. That day came on December 31, 1999, when the U.S. officially ended its presence on the isthmus.

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AUTHORS

Dr. Seales is an Associate Professor in the Languages and Cultures department at California Lutheran University. She holds a doctorate in Latin American Literature. Her areas of research include Afro-Caribbean and Afro-Hispanic literature, education and culture, postcolonial theory, neo-colonialism, race, and identity. Dr. Seales is the author of numerous articles and conference papers. Her book *Cultures and Customs of Panama* is part of The Greenwood Press series: Cultures, Customs of Latin America, and the Caribbean. She teaches courses that range from Spanish language classes to senior seminars on literature, history, culture, race, and ethnicity in the Spanish-speaking world.