

Officials say U.S. reserves right to pressure Panama

WASHINGTON -- The Bush administration said Wednesday it was not asked and did not promise to aid in Tuesday's failed coup against Panamanian leader Manuel Antonio Noriega but reserves the right to use military force on its "own timetable."

Amid sharp criticism from Congress that the United States should have stepped in to help topple Noriega, officials said the administration was in the dark Tuesday about what was happening in Panama.

U.S. officials, asking not to be identified, said the rebels had Noriega in custody for four to five hours but then let him go, an account substantially confirmed by Noriega aides in Panama.

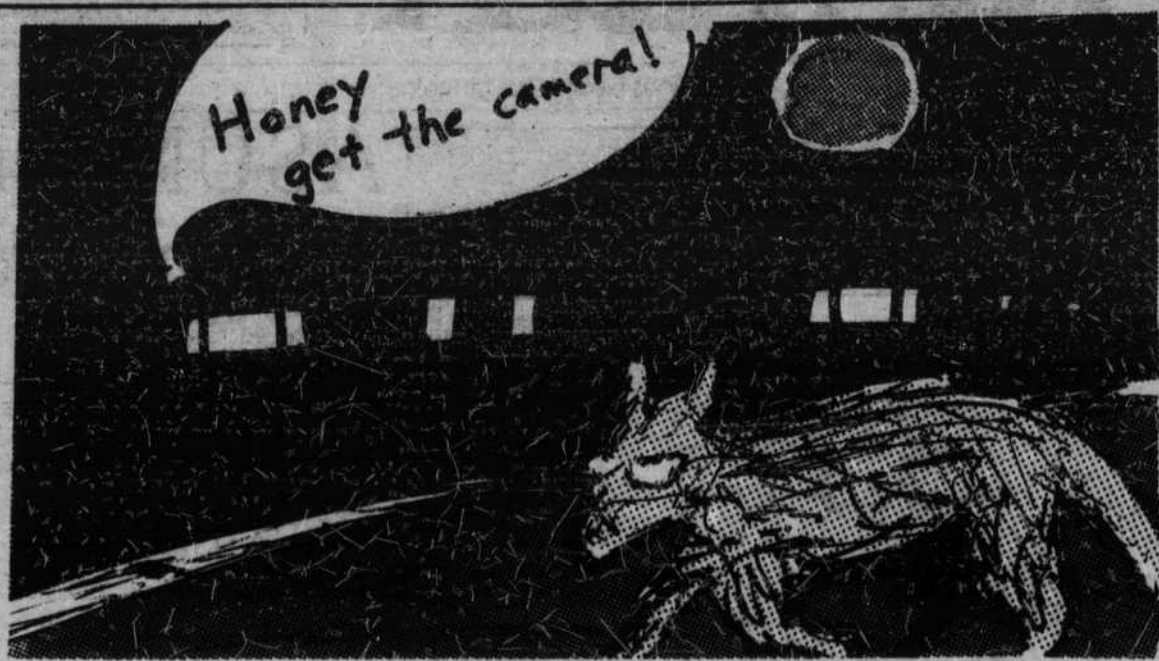
In the Senate, Jesse Helms, R-N.C., proposed an amendment to an anti-drug bill to authorize Bush to use U.S. troops to forcefully remove Noriega from power and bring him to trial in the United States on the drug charges already pending against him. The move was seen as symbolic, since Bush already has such powers.

Noriega blamed the uprising on the United States, saying, "The proof is that American troops closed access routes to the barracks, just as they closed the Pan-American Highway."

Fitzwater said Wednesday, "We did move forces in a position to secure the causeway and the bridge of the Americas as a means of protecting U.S. citizens who were on the base. Those are the major access routes to our base."

Defense Secretary Dick Cheney told reporters on Capitol Hill that it was not clear at the time that Noriega was being held, but the Bush administration now believes that was the case.

"Clearly they were not of the mind to turn him over to us," Cheney said.



Coyotes found in New York suburbs

KENT, N.Y. -- Apparently following the call of the not-so-wild, coyotes are being sighted in New York City's northern suburbs, officials say.

Anthony Cazzari, supervisor of the town of Kent, said Tuesday night that when he walked out of his house that morning, he found "a strange-looking dog" staring at

him. On a second look, he said, he realized there was a coyote in his yard. He ran inside to get a camera but the animal was gone when he came out.

Coyotes are small wolves native to America's western prairies. They are up to 4 feet long.

The supervisor said police told him they had seen coyotes in the Gypsy Trail and Farmers Mills sections of town and two coyotes were killed by cars in the past few nights.

Cazzari said no one had been attacked, but said residents should be careful.

Noriega captured, held during coup attempt

PANAMA CITY, Panama -- Rebel officers trying to depose Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega captured him and held him for hours but released him after loyal forces warned the rebels would "face the consequences" if he was harmed, a Noriega aide said Wednesday.

Later, thousands of people, many of them public employees, demonstrated in front of the building to show him support. Noriega leaned out a second-story window, hanging onto a grating, as he smiled and

waved.

Lt. Col. Amulfo Castrejon, director for the Defense Forces Security and Defense Committee, told reporters that while being held Tuesday, Noriega "had tried to calm his captors... trying to avoid bloodshed."

Lower-ranking officers attempting the coup were defeated after loyal

forces surrounded Defense Forces headquarters and counterattacked.

"The surrender came when the loyal officers took command of the combat units and gave the rebels a last chance to release the commander and members of his staff or face the consequences," Castrejon said. "The general was a hostage for four hours."

Flag burning ban slowed

WASHINGTON -- Senate Democrats put the brakes on a bill to ban flag desecration late Wednesday, saying a pair of Republican-sponsored changes in the wording would leave it vulnerable to a Supreme Court challenge.

"The one thing we are required to avoid doing, or giving the court an excuse to suggest we are doing, is to proscribe any communicative ideas... any speech," Sen. Joseph Biden, D-Del., said as the Senate postponed action.

He said, however, that the court might well interpret the proposed

changes as an effort to limit freedom of speech.

Sponsors had expected to pass the bill Wednesday afternoon but instead ended up hoping to win approval today.

The bill is a response to the uproar that followed a decision by the Supreme Court that overturned a Texas flag-burning ban last June.

Lawmakers also acknowledged that the bill represents a move to head off a proposed constitutional amendment against flag-burning, set to come before the Senate in mid-October.

Salinas plans drug war

WASHINGTON -- Mexican President Carlos Salinas de Gortari told a joint meeting of Congress on Wednesday his nation intends "to eradicate drug trafficking at its very roots."

But Salinas, who is on a state visit to the United States, warned that "at the world level, we are losing." He said that was unacceptable and called for greater cooperation between governments to turn the tide.

The Mexican president also used the speech to renew his appeal for greater Mexican access to U.S. markets, saying that while Mexico has eliminated most non-tariff barriers to U.S. products, "we continue confronting them in the United States."

Salinas described this as an "inequitable paradox" and said Mexico must have "greater and more secure access to the world's greatest market, the United States" to obtain the economic growth that is needed to improve the lot of its people.

Specifically, he said Mexico wants greater access to U.S. textile and steel markets.

U.S. officials disagree with Salinas' portrayal of the United States as a protectionist nation. They say two-thirds of Mexico's exports come to

the United States and that Mexico had a \$2.7 billion surplus in its U.S. trade last year on total two-way trade of about \$44 billion.

While vowing an all-out effort to curb drug trafficking, Salinas firmly ruled out joint U.S.-Mexican military operations to fight the traffickers.

"The responsibility for the fight in our country is exclusively ours," he said. "There will be no joint military operations on our soil."

E. Germans make last-resort effort to emigrate West

PRAGUE, Czechoslovakia -- East Germans jammed Western embassies, swam rivers and lined railroad tracks in at least four Soviet bloc nations Wednesday in a desperate bid to catch what could be the last freedom trains to the West.

The flood of would-be East German emigres in Czechoslovakia, Poland, Bulgaria and East Germany came as the beleaguered government in East Berlin said it would allow one more exodus of disillusioned citizens.

The agreement covered an estimated 11,000 weary refugees who had converged on the West German Embassy in Prague, but there were reports thousands of others throughout the East bloc were hoping to take part.

In Prague, the first of 15 trains began carrying East Germans to the West late Wednesday. Cheering and waving, whistling derisively, other refugees hurled their now-worthless East German money from the windows.

A crowd of Czechoslovaks applauded as the first group left the embassy area to board buses to the train station. Helmeted riot police arrived and pushed the onlookers back, stifling the cheers.

Two East Germans who boarded the first train said they had arrived in Prague after illegally crossing the heavily guarded East German-Czechoslovak border.

They said they were part of a group of six people who managed to sneak across but were spotted by Czechoslovak guards who opened fire. In the confusion, the two escaped but the other four have been unheard of since.

East Germany, hoping to end the embarrassing exodus of its young, skilled citizens before the Communist nation celebrates its 40th anniversary this weekend, on Tuesday closed its border with ally Czechoslovakia to keep its people home.

"We knew it was our last chance," one East German refugee said about fleeing to Prague. "We were right, now the border is closed."

Because Czechoslovakia was the only nation where East Germans could travel without receiving special permission, thousands had streamed here to seek asylum.

The clampdown on travel also was likely to severely curb the number of East Germans going to reform-minded Hungary. The shortest route to Hungary from East Germany is through Czechoslovakia.

East Germans were frantically trying other avenues to catch what they feared would be their last chance to reach West Germany, where they are granted automatic citizenship.

In East Berlin, police Wednesday scuffled with about 50 East Germans trying to enter the U.S. Embassy, witnesses said. Eighteen others made it inside the compound Tuesday, U.S. diplomatic sources said.

"This is our last hope," said one refugee in the group of 10 adults and eight children. "We're not going to budge until we know we'll be able to leave."

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