

[Global Histories]

A student journal

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Author: Holle Ameriga Meding

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/GHSJ.2018.240>

Source: Global Histories, Vol. 4, No. 2 (Oct. 2018), pp. 122-142

ISSN: 2366-780X

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Publisher information:

'Global Histories: A Student Journal' is an open-access bi-annual journal founded in 2015 by students of the M.A. program Global History at Freie Universität Berlin and Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. 'Global Histories' is published by an editorial board of Global History students in association with the Freie Universität Berlin.

Freie Universität Berlin
Global Histories: A Student Journal
Friedrich-Meinecke-Institut
Koserstraße 20
14195 Berlin

Contact information:

For more information, please consult our website www.globalhistories.com or contact the editor at: admin@globalhistories.com.



MURAL PAINTING DEPICTING THE FLAG RIOTS OF 1964. PANAMA CITY, 2015. PHOTO COURTESY OF: HOLLE AMERICA MEDING

The *Día de los Mártires*—Spontaneous Demonstration, Heroic Myth, or Political Instrument? The 1964 Panamanian Flag Riots in the History of US-Panamanian Relations

HOLLE AMERIGA MEDING

Holle Ameriga Meding is a graduate student of the interdisciplinary Master's program between the Latin American Studies and History departments at the Freie Universität Berlin. Currently, she is studying in the history doctoral program at the Colegio de México in Mexico City. Holle's wider research interests include the security policy between Latin America and Germany during the Cold War, as well as the history of sects. At the end of 2018 Holle's research about the Colonia Dignidad, a German sect that moved to Chile in 1961 where it cooperated with the Pinochet government's secret service, will be published by the Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Berlin (WVB).

On the 15th of August, 1914, the Panama Canal opened. Panama became a global center for commercial shipping, with the Canal as its economic lifeline. However, the economic upswing was accompanied by a loss of state sovereignty: Panama slipped from a colonial embrace into an imperial one, becoming increasingly dependent on the United States' 'dollar diplomacy' and the establishment of US corporations, such as the United Fruit Company. This led to tensions between Panama and the US. Additionally, the fact that the US administered the Panama Canal became a thorn in the side of the Panamanian government. Tensions exploded in 1964 after a dispute over raising the Panamanian flag manifested into the so-called flag riots of 1964. The Panamanian government had ordered that the flag of Panama was to stay raised in the Canal Zone next to the US flag to symbolically represent Panama's rights. But the students of the US-American Balboa High School refused and raised only the flag of the US, prompting 200 Panamanians to cross the Canal Zone border to raise the Panamanian flag. The situation escalated: the US military intervened and the riots resulted in more than 20 deaths and 300 injuries. This incident shows how even a comparatively benign event, like hoisting a flag in a high school, can have far-reaching consequences. It also demonstrates that the shared history of the region had lead both sides to be extremely polarized.

Introduction

The 15th of August, 2014, marked the 100th anniversary of the opening of the Panama Canal. The Canal was a milestone in the history of Panama and connected the country to world trade, but it also divided it in half. The geographically favorable location benefited the development of the isthmus into a transit area and with the construction of the Canal the interests of the United States (US) were inseparably interwoven with Panamanian history.

This paper reviews the tensions caused by the construction of the Panama Canal and the associated Panama Canal Zone. The conflict began over the lawful administration of the Panama Canal Zone and sovereignty over the Canal. The Canal and the Zone were administered by the US, but sovereignty rights were not clearly defined in the Canal treaty (*Hay-Bunau-Varilla-Treaty*). Finally, in the early 1960s, the Panamanian government ensured that the flag of Panama would remain raised in the Canal Zone next to the US flag to symbolically represent Panama's rights. However, there was resistance. On January 9th, 1964, students from the US-American Balboa High School marched up and raised the flag of the United States. In response to this provocation, a spontaneous demonstration was formed by students from various Panamanian institutions of education. About 200 people crossed the border of the Canal Zone to raise the Panamanian flag; escalating the situation. The US military fired on unarmed men and in the following three days over 300 were wounded; 24 Panamanians and 6 US soldiers were killed. The so called *Día de los Mártires* (Martyrs' Day) is still anchored in the collective memory of the Panamanians. As one of Panama's national holidays hundreds of Panamanians still celebrate it every year and visit the Monument of the Martyrs of January 9th.

To what extent can the *Día de los Mártires* be interpreted as a spontaneous demonstration in which students from various Panamanian institutes came together and demonstrated against the raising of the US flag at Balboa High School without prior planning? What role do schools and flag rituals play in this context? How were the flag riots presented in the media and how were they used politically? Was the mystification of the heroic epic a political instrument or rather an exaggerated journalistic representation of the actual events? This paper examines these questions on the basis of a comparison of various newspaper reports, such as the *Revista Lotería*, *El Panamá América*, and *La Estrella de Panamá*, as well as a report by an international legal commission established to clarify the events from January 9th to 11th. This analysis integrates the history of relations between the US and Panama with regards to previous tensions between the two states, as well as the history of the economic partnership. The paper reviews the establishment of ideas and representations depicting the US in Panamanian society and politics, especially in respect to the construction of the Panama Canal and Zone.

The US-Americanization of Panama: From the Mallarino-Bidlack-Treaty to the Riots of 1958

The spread of anti-US sentiment in Panama preceded Panama's declaration of independence from Colombia in 1903 and the simultaneous signing of the Canal

treaty with the US. This resentment was born from daily contact with entrepreneurs, workers, and travelers from the US.¹

When gold was found in California in 1848, thousands of Americans set out for the West.² The *Mallarino-Bidlack-Treaty*, which Colombia concluded with the United States on December 12th, 1846, gave the US full transit rights on the isthmus, as well as rights for future canal construction. In exchange, the US would protect Colombia from threats, pay a rent and guarantee Panama's stay in Colombia. Masses of US-Americans passed through the country and Panama prospered as a transit and trade zone.³ As a result, US-American influence in Panama grew, the dollar competed with the Peso and the English language became increasingly relevant in social and political affairs.⁴ In 1855, the construction of a railway that crossed the isthmus was completed. The railway changed the basic economic structure of the region permanently. Regional markets developed rapidly and a commercial bourgeoisie flourished. At the same time, foreigners, such as Asian contract workers, US employees of the railway company and entrepreneurs came to the country.⁵ However, the Panamanian government was not prepared for such a large wave of immigrants. The cities grew rapidly and due to a lack of urban planning, hygiene problems rose, illnesses spread and the crime rate increased.

Like other neighboring states, Panama was far from being a part of the United States; rather, the US presence generated increasing reluctance among the country's population.⁶ Disputes and violent clashes took place, "where Wild West lawlessness mingled with big-business ruthlessness."⁷ On April 15th, 1856, the US-American Jack Oliver accepted a piece of watermelon from a Panamanian merchant, but refused to pay for it and finally drew his weapon, provoking angry reactions of a local mob.⁸ The Panamanians' anger erupted and the crowd stormed the port and railway district. About 15 US-Americans and two Panamanians died in the riots.⁹ The US reacted vigorously, 160 soldiers invaded Panama and the first ever armed intervention on the isthmus took place. The phenomenon of the watermelon riots proved to become characteristic for the US-Panamanian dynamics in

¹ Alan L. McPherson, *Yankee No! Antiamericanism in U.S.-Latin American Relations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 79.

² Holger M. Meding, *Panama: Staat und Nation im Wandel: 1903–1941* (Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 2002), 62.

³ Ibid.

⁴ McPherson, *Yankee No!*, 79.

⁵ Meding, *Panama: Staat und Nation im Wandel*, 63.

⁶ McPherson, *Yankee No!*, 79.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Chong M. Moises, *Historia de Panamá* (Chitré: Ministerio de Educación—Dirección Nacional de Cultura, 1970), 163.

the twentieth century.¹⁰ Before the declaration of independence on November 3rd, 1903, the United States intervened fourteen times in Panama.¹¹

When the French project of a trans-isthmian canal—similar to the Suez Canal—failed, the US tried to conclude canal contracts with Colombia.¹² However, Colombia did not want a canal under US sovereignty and did not agree to the draft contract. The separatist tendencies, which had already become apparent in Panama shortly after joining the Republic of Great Colombia in 1821, reached a climax. The US under President Theodore Roosevelt supported the rebellion movement of the ruling elite on the isthmus and on November 3rd, 1903 Panama proclaimed its independence. About two weeks later, on November 18th, 1903, the Canal Treaty was ratified. In the treaty it was stated, among other things, that Panama left the Canal area to the US for a one-off redemption of 10 million US dollars and an annual lease of about 250,000 US dollars and granted them the rights to build a canal.¹³ In 1904, Article 139 of the Panamanian constitution stated that the US reserved the right to intervene “to reestablish public peace and constitutional order” which effectively turned Panama into a protectorate.¹⁴ To protect its lucrative business, the United States established the Canal Zone and increased its military presence. By the end of World War I, there were 14 US bases and 7,400 US soldiers on the isthmus.¹⁵

On August 15th, 1914, the Panama Canal opened. Panama, thus, became a global center for commercial shipping and the Canal became its economic lifeline. However, the economic upswing was accompanied by a loss of state sovereignty and Panama slipped from a colonial embrace into an imperial one, becoming increasingly dependent in the wake of the US dollar diplomacy and the establishment of US corporations, such as the United Fruit Company.¹⁶ Around the 16 km wide strip of land along the Panama Canal, the US government and Canal authorities built a high steel mesh fence, delineating the Panama Canal Zone from Panama. The US treated the Canal Zone almost like a US colony in the heart of Panama; they introduced a racial segregation system, which led to a strong delineation between US-American and West Indian workers in regards to unequal conditions in hospitals, leisure facilities, eating places, and wages.¹⁷ Therefore, two lifestyles

¹⁰ McPherson, *Yankee No!*, 81.

¹¹ Michael L. Conniff, *Panama and the USA: The Forced Alliance* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001), 34.

¹² Meding, *Panama. Staat und Nation im Wandel*, 51.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 74.

¹⁴ McPherson, *Yankee No!*, 81.

¹⁵ Sharon Erickson Nepstad, *Nonviolent Revolutions: Civil Resistance in the Late 20th Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 60.

¹⁶ McPherson, *Yankee No!*, 81. For the border disputes between Panama and Costa Rica over the Pacific region of Coto, in which the USA intervened as intermediary and decided in Costa Rica's favour, see: Meding, *Panama. Staat und Nation im Wandel*, 225.

¹⁷ John Lindsay-Poland, *Emperors in the Jungle: The Hidden History of The U.S. in Panama* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 3; Rüdiger Zoller, *Panama: 100 Jahre Unabhängigkeit* (Erlangen: Zentralinstitut für Regionalforschung, 2004), 214.

were created that were constantly reinforced at the wire fence in Panama City. This fence symbolized the tensions between the North American middle class and “the hungry South American have-nots.”¹⁸

The first sustainable movement against US influence emerged in the 1920s, a few years after the opening of the Canal. The *Acción Comunal*, a previously non-parliamentary social movement of mostly young doctors, lawyers, engineers, and smaller businessmen, called for a break with the country’s oligarchical structures and demonstrated against continued US-American dominance.¹⁹ The Panamanian youth were called upon to remedy this evil.²⁰ *Acción Comunal* was also strongly oriented towards young men of the middle class who wanted to break with the traditional “liberal power ideology of the ruling class” (*liberalismo oligárquico*) and the “triumph of the English language and US values” (*sajonismo*).²¹ Soon, however, the party experienced increasing right-wing pressure and a fascist ideology became prevalent. Until 1931, the *Acción Comunal* was a fully-fledged political party triumphing over the traditional elites. Especially through popular indoctrination in newspapers, demonstrations, and speeches with slogans like “*Panamá para los panameños*,”²² “*Habla español y cuenta en balboas*”²³ and “*Patriotismo, Acción, Equidad y Disciplina*”²⁴ the party experienced an enormous upswing.²⁵

Acción Comunal Chairman, Arnulfo Arias, consistently criticized the US and gave anti-US-Americanism great cultural resonance. Just one day after his inauguration, he explained that Panama, in the event of “bad will” on the part of the US, could very well have the opportunity to harm the interests of the US and make concessions to other “powerful countries that have the power to defend Panama.”²⁶ The nationalistic concept of *Panameñismo* was then, among other notions, propagated by the Panamanian government and, as expected, anti-US resentments gained popularity.

Newspapers advocated anglophobic attitudes more often and while Arias took the political lead in the 1940s and 1950s, an increasingly critical US movement was formed among Panamanian students and pupils. As in many Latin American countries, Panamanian students were strongly politicized and those who could

¹⁸ Own translation. Original: “dem hungrigen südamerikanischen Habenicht’s”; Alfred Schüller “Molotow-Cocktails aus Hollywood,” *Der Spiegel*, January 22, 1964, <http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-46162815.html>.

¹⁹ Meding, *Panama: Staat und Nation im Wandel*, 163.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Own translation. Original: “liberale[...] Machtideologie der herrschenden Klasse [...] Siegeszug der englischen Sprache und den US-amerikanischen Wertvorstellungen,” *ibid.*

²² “Panama for Panamanians, El golpe va,” *La Estrella de Panamá*, August 22, 2011.

²³ Own translation: “Speak Spanish and count in balboas”; W. F. Robinson, “Arnulfo Arias y Acción Communal,” *La Prensa*, June 9, 2013, http://www.prensa.com/Arnulfo-Arias-Accion-Comunal_0_3680632066.html.

²⁴ Own translation: “Patriotism, Action, Equity, and Discipline”; Orlando J. Pérez, *Political Culture in Panama: Democracy after Invasion* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 26.

²⁵ Michael L. Conniff, *Panama and the USA*, 186.

²⁶ Meding, *Panama: Staat und Nation im Wandel*, 194.

not yet vote “spilled out into the streets at a moment’s notice (even if, as one confessed, they might occasionally go on an anti-US strike just so they could skip classes and study for exams).”²⁷ In 1947, the students achieved unprecedented legitimacy with rallies and demonstrations that ultimately forced the National Assembly to reject the extension on the lease of US bases in Panama.²⁸

The schools became a central place of anti-US resentment and nationalist thought. Through a central education program instigated by the 1940s educational reforms of President Anulfo Arias,²⁹ uniform communication of behaviors, culture and stocks of knowledge emerged, together favoring anti-US-Americanism.³⁰ Teachers were now trained in the country, whereas they had usually studied abroad before or were themselves foreigners.³¹ This gave the new generation of teachers a stronger connection to the Panamanian culture. In addition, a general literacy program was implemented in Panama. Under President Chiari, who pursued this educational program as well, 1,300 schools were built in Panama between 1960 and 1964.³² This should make it possible to convey the basics of a Panamanian identity, the *panameñidad*, in school lessons, for example through the flag representing the nation, in fact as the “embodiment of a nation.”³³

In 1949, a law was passed that regulated the size, shape, and also the guidelines for raising and lowering of the flag.³⁴ The Constitution of Panama refers to this law in Article 6 with regard to national symbols. With the rise of nationalism, the Panamanian flag was increasingly staged on public occasions by government institutions. The raising and greeting of the flag had been established by the government at the beginning of the twentieth century. In the schools, children came together every day and sang the anthem before the flag. A common national identity was created in the central forecourts and inner courtyards of the schools, a united mass in which an individual student became part of the nation.³⁵ During the raising, the oath of allegiance to the Panamanian flag was given, demonstrating the significance of the Panamanian flag for the nation-state and its deliberate

²⁷ McPherson, *Yankee No!*, 85.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Krob and Davis, “El Día de los Mártires,” 62.

³⁰ Nicolás Arata and Verónica Oelsner, “Staat macht Schule, Schule macht Nation: Ein Gespräch mit Inés Dussel,” in *Was Macht Schule? Schule als gestalteter Raum: Fallbeispiele aus Argentinien*, ed. Ute Clement and Verónica Oelsner (Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien, 2016), 80.

³¹ Peter M. Sánchez, *Panama Lost? U.S. Hegemony, Democracy, and the Canal* (Tallahassee: University Press of Florida, 2007), 98.

³² Krob and Davis, “El Día de los Mártires,” 62.

³³ Tim Marshall, *A Flag Worth Dying for: The Power and Politics of National Symbols* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017), 8.

³⁴ Panamanian Law no. 24, 15.12.1949.

³⁵ “Símbolos Patrios de la República de Panamá,” Collaboration of the National Authority for Government Innovation in Honor of the Nation, last modified October 2010, http://www.innovacion.gob.pa/descargas/SimbolosPatrios_vOct2010.pdf.

establishment by Arnulfo Arias—under whom the 1949 law was enacted—and President Chiari, who continued this policy.³⁶

The meeting of pupils and students in the schools must also be taken into account. There was an increase in networking, in the development of group identities and, ultimately, a politicization took place as a result of the amended curriculum. Students organized internal school protests and wrote articles criticizing the US.³⁷

The flag was also the symbol of the nation for the US-American zone's population, especially for the students at whose high schools the US flag was raised. US-Americans established their own lifestyle in the Zone, strongly oriented towards the US: In the Canal Zone, high schools followed the US-American curriculum, they had their own American football teams and observed US holidays. From their perspective, the Zone was a part of the US and therefore the US flag should be hoisted as a representation of their nation.³⁸ Consequently, nationalist ideas were propagated and continued by the population in Panama and the Zone. Since both societies lived so close to one another—and yet did not live together—this distinction became fundamental, also in relation to the flag issue.

Simultaneous with the rise of nationalism in Panama and the politicization of students, there was a crisis on the international stage. Egyptian nationalist leader, Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser, initiated the nationalization of the Suez Canal in July 1956, as a result of which the US government feared similar developments in Panama. President Eisenhower himself told Charles Wilson, his Secretary of Defense, “[we] must be exceedingly careful that the future years do not bring about for us, in Panama, the situation that Britain has to face in Suez.”³⁹

This in turn was reflected in the schools: Especially in student groups the successful nationalization of the Suez Canal was discussed.⁴⁰ Thus the General Secretary of the *Federación de Estudiantes de Panamá* declared in a speech in February 1964:

El caso del Egipto es para nosotros aleccionador. Revela cómo un país pobrísimo, en virtud de la decisión de sus hijos y del patriotismo colectivo, logró recuperar su principal recurso económico para aplicarlo en beneficio de su propio progreso.⁴¹

³⁶ Ruperto H. Chue, *Bandera panameña*, 23.

³⁷ Krob and Davis, “El Día de los Mártires,” 61.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 60.

³⁹ Eisenhower to Wilson, quoted in: Foreign Relations of the United States Series, 1955–1957, no. 7: 281. See: John Major, *Prize Possession: The United States Government and the Panama Canal, 1903–1979* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 329.

⁴⁰ Melanie G. Krob and Stephanie Enseñat Davis, “El Día de los Mártires: High-School Student Revolution and the Emergence of Panamanian National Identity,” *The Latin Americanist* 58 (2014): 57.

⁴¹ Own Translation: “The case of Egypt is sobering for us. It reveals how a very poor country, by virtue of the decision of its children and collective patriotism, managed to recover its main economic resource to apply it for the benefit of its own progress.” Victor Ávila, *Panamá: Luchas sociales y afirmación nacional* (Panama City: CELA, 1998), 88. See: Krob and Davis, “El Día de los Mártires,” 57.

The Suez Crisis and the rising tensions with Panama challenged the US government and President Eisenhower stated in a meeting on November 27th, 1956, that the Panamanian flag should be flown “in some ceremonial spot along with the American flag.”⁴² However, this was not considered sufficient by the Panamanian government. Popular hostilities against US control of the Canal intensified by the First and Second World War, and the increased US presence in Panama led to an outbreak of these movements in the spring of 1958, when Panamanian students invaded the Canal Zone and raised the Panamanian flag. Although it was supposed to be a peaceful demonstration, the National Guard and US soldiers intervened; one student was killed and 120 injured.⁴³ The relations between the two governments were heavily strained. In addition, the success of the Cuban Revolution had such a radiance as a ‘liberation’ from the Batista government, which had been supported by the United States, that anti-imperialist discourses emerged in the Panamanian public. This was reflected in student debates, newspapers and the founding of associations.⁴⁴ These anti-imperialist discourses were a formative phenomenon on a global level for this epoch. In Latin America, they were mainly directed against US interventions in Central America, the Caribbean, and northern South America.⁴⁵ While Marxist-Leninist leaning regimes established themselves in the guise of liberation movements—as in Cuba—the US often supported right-wing authoritarian regimes or military dictatorships in Central and South America under the guise of ‘freedom.’ In these discourses, the US became stereotyped as an exploitative state power that was only interested in concluding the most lucrative deals possible with governments.⁴⁶

Indeed, in the context of the Cold War, the US government suspected the rise of nationalism and communist ideas in Latin America and since Panama had become a world center of trade, particular attention was paid to securing US-American power here. On the one hand, there was an increase in military presence in the Zone to secure the area, on the other hand, there were attempts to curb anti-US-American sentiments and appease Panamanian society.⁴⁷ However, most of the political rapprochements failed and the relationship between the US and Panama remained tense, thereby, giving the flag issue more relevance.

⁴² Foreign Relations of the United States Series, 1958–1960, no. 5: MS, 719.00/11-27559. DDRS, 1982, 1379. BD, 1046, 1047. See: John Major, *Prize Possession*, 332.

⁴³ Erickson Nepstad, *Nonviolent Revolutions*, 60.

⁴⁴ Krob and Davis, “El Día de los Mártires,” 61–62.

⁴⁵ Stefan Rinke, *Lateinamerika* (Darmstadt: Theiss, 2015), 232.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 58–59.

The Flag Riots

Political Agreement on the Flag Issue

On September 7th, 1960, President Eisenhower granted Panama nominal sovereignty rights and decided that the Panamanian flag should be hoisted alongside the US flags in the Canal Zone. The government of the US considered it a pro forma political act. It was “a gesture of friendship,” said an employee of the US Office for Inter-American Affairs.⁴⁸ “[It] does not affect our rights in any way in the zone,” Secretary of State Thomas C. Mann appeased the fears of US citizens, who were concerned that this was the first step toward Panama regaining sovereignty over the Canal Zone.⁴⁹

The first flag was raised near the Panamanian parliament building on 21 September 1960, and a storm of protests, “which ha[d] erupted into violence, anger and distortions,” rose in both the United States and in the Canal Zone.⁵⁰ The US responded with complaints and public pressure. The matter dragged on and it was not until January 10th, 1963, that the government of John F. Kennedy finally agreed to raise the Panamanian flag in the Canal Zone.⁵¹ Robert Fleming, governor of the Canal Zone, could only plan to hoist the flag after the last complaint was dismissed in 1963. Since the cost of building multiple additional flagpoles appeared excessive, the governor announced on December 30th, that the Panamanian alongside the US flag was to be raised only in 17 locations in the Canal Zone; for all other public places, including schools, the US flag was removed and the flagpoles remained empty.⁵² Previously, US flags had been omnipresent in the Canal Zone and the reduction to only 17 flags was a drastic change. While the governor justified these changes in terms of cost, the Panamanians suspected the reduction of the US flags hid the true intention of showing as few Panamanian flags as possible.⁵³

Por razones que desconocemos, las autoridades de la Zona del Canal demoraron cerca de un año en intentar dar pleno cumplimiento al acuerdo sobre las banderas. Más aún, con el fin de desplegar el menor número posible de banderas panameñas en la Zona, procedieron, en violación del acuerdo, a remover arbitrariamente varias

⁴⁸ “Defends Ike’s Order to Fly the Panaman Flag,” *Chicago Tribune*, September 19, 1960, <http://archives.chicagotribune.com/1960/09/19/page/44/article/defends-ikes-order-to-fly-panama-flag>, 8.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ “Canal Zone Storm Held Full of Lies: International Strife,” *Chicago Tribune*, January 17, 1960, <http://archives.chicagotribune.com/1960/01/17/page/249/article/cross-of-hate-once-luck-charm#text>, 7.

⁵¹ David N. Farnsworth and James W. McKenney, *U.S.-Panama Relation 1903–1978: A Study in Linkage Politics*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1983), 136.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 137.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

astas de sitios donde tradicionalmente había sido izada la bandera norteamericana; tales como frente a la residencia del Gobernador y frente al edificio de la Capitanía del Puerto.⁵⁴

The article published in the *Revista Lotería*, a popular Panamanian magazine, by the *Departamento Cultural de la Dirección de Desarrollo Social y Cultural*, the Cultural Department of the Directorate for Social and Cultural Development, is clearly nationalistic.⁵⁵ In terms of propaganda, the article implies that the Canal Zone authorities had no reason to not raise the Panamanian flags as early as 1963, when the United States government agreed to this demand. As mentioned above, however, there were very good reasons for this, such as the various court proceedings. The removal of the US flags was described as a violation of the agreements of January 7th, 1963 and an ostentatious insult to Panamanian national pride. Yet, the removal of the US flags was not a violation of the treaty, which only stipulated that wherever the US flag was hoisted, the Panamanian flag had to be hoisted as well.

Problems of the Implementation of the Flag Ordinance

There were clear problems in the implementation of Governor Fleming's flag ordinance. There was general displeasure in the Zone regarding the suspension of the US-flags. The removal of the flags was particularly noticeable in schools. On January 2nd, 1964, for example, the students of Balboa High School in Panama City prepared a petition to President Johnson protesting the flag decree. The petition was circulated the next day and had won more than 400 signatures after sunset.⁵⁶

On January 7th, the students of Balboa High School went so far as to raise the flag of the United States in front of their school without raising Panama's flag alongside it.⁵⁷ Already in the previous days, the school children had strongly complained about the removal of the flag in front of their school.⁵⁸ The US-American

⁵⁴ Own translation: "For reasons unknown to us, it took the authorities of the Canal Zone nearly a year to attempt to fully support the flag agreement. Moreover, in order to deploy as few Panamanian flags as possible in the Zone, they proceeded, in violation of the agreement, to arbitrarily remove several flagpoles from sites where the US flag had traditionally been hoisted, such as in front of the governor's residence and the port captain's building." "Narración de los Sucesos de Enero de 1964," *Revista Lotería*, Spring 1964, <http://panamapoesia.com/9enero01.php>.

⁵⁵ Luisa Sánchez, "Manual de Procedimientos de la Revista Cultural," *Revista Lotería*, June 2003, <http://www.lnb.gob.pa/sitio/transparencia/Procedimiento%20de%20la%20Revista%20Cultural%20Loter%C3%ADa.pdf>.

⁵⁶ William J. Jordan, *Panama Odyssey*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984), 34.

⁵⁷ A.D. Belinfante, Petrés Gustaf, and Vakil Navroz, *International Commission of Jurists: Reports on the Events in Panama January 9–12* (Geneva, 1964), 14.

⁵⁸ Conversation between General Taylor and General O'Meara on January 10, 1964. "Memorandum of Telephone Conversation," Foreign Relations of the United States Series, 1964–1968, vol. 31 (August 2004): 367, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v31/d367>. Johnson Library, National Security File, Country File, Panama II, Part B, January–

teenagers had been spurred by their parents to avoid the two-flag order, it became a real sport among them.⁵⁹ “Someone needs to defend the flag[,] and better the students than the adults in this case,” a mother supposedly said to her daughter when asked if she could assist her friends in guarding the flagpole at Balboa High School on January 7th, 1964. To apologize for her absence at school that day, the mother wrote in her message “Vicki was sick today, as all GOOD Americans should be.”⁶⁰

Aggravation of Events

As soon as the news of the events at Balboa High School spread, a wave of anger and indignation broke out in Panama City:

Profunda indignación ha causado en todos los círculos de la ciudad capital la actitud asumida por los estudiantes zoneítas de impedir que la bandera panameña sea izada, junto con la estadounidense, frente a las escuelas de la Zona del Canal.⁶¹

Throughout January 9th, the students of Balboa High School stood guard around the flagpole to prevent the police or teachers from taking the flag down. Their parents provided them with sandwiches, drinks, blankets and moral support. Local community groups, such as the Elks Club and Veterans of Foreign Wars, also supported the students.⁶² At 5 p.m. a group of 200 students from the *Instituto Nacional de Panamá* entered the Canal Zone and marched towards Balboa High School. According to the article in the Panamanian magazine *Revista Lotería*, the students immediately visited the local authorities of the US and obtained permission from them to raise the flag of Panama in front of Balboa High School and sing their national anthem there.⁶³ A report by an international legal commission, later set up to investigate the following events of January 9th to 11th and described as “the most balanced narrative of the riots,”⁶⁴ states that the students had entered the Zone without permission from their school, nor from the Canal Zone authorities, to hold such a demonstration. Yet, both reports emphasize the peacefulness

February 1964. No classification marking. Taylor was in Washington; O’Meara was in Panama.

⁵⁹ Schüler, “Molotow-Cocktails aus Hollywood.”

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Own translation: “The behavior shown by the students of the Zone to prevent the Panamanian flag from being hoisted, alongside the US flag, in front of the schools of the Canal Zone caused a deep outcry in all circles of the capital.” “Dijeron Estudiantes Zoneítas: La Bandera Panameña No,” *Portada del diario Crítica*, January 9, 1964, <http://panamapoesia.com/9eneroCritica09.php>.

⁶² Eric Jackson, “The Martyrs of 1964,” last modified May 4, 2009, <http://www.czbrats.com/Jackson/martyrs/martyrs.htm>.

⁶³ “Los Pasos del Agresor,” *Revista Lotería*, October 1971. Published in: Natalia Ruiz Pino and Juan Mantilla, *Los sucesos del 9 de enero de 1964* (Panama City: Autoridad del Canal de Panamá, 1999), 63.

⁶⁴ Belinfante, Gustaf, and Navroz, *International Commission of Jurists*, 15.

of the demonstration: “It is beyond doubt that the march of the students, dressed in uniform, into the Canal commenced in a peaceful and orderly manner.”⁶⁵

At 5:30 p.m., the students were stopped at the Zone administration building by Captain Gaddis Wall, head of the Balboa district Canal Zone police. Guillermo Guevara Pas, a chairman of the Panamanian students of the *Instituto Nacional de Panamá*, is said to have explained to the police captain that the students only wanted to symbolically represent Panama by showing the Panamanian flag at the flagpole of Balboa High School and singing their national anthem. Wall refused to let them approach the flagpole further. Instead he suggested sending a delegation of five students to the flagpole to show their flag and sing the national anthem. He guaranteed the students full police protection and assured them not to worry about their safety. After some discussion among the students, they agreed. Four students holding the flag and one carrying the banner approached Balboa High School, followed by a sixth with a poster demanding Panama’s sole sovereignty over the Canal. The group was accompanied by police.⁶⁶

The students were booed at first, but they were not deterred and continued to the flagpole. The report of the *Revista Lotería* states that the crowd of US-American students threw themselves at the Panamanian flag bearers and tried to snatch the flag from them:

[L]uego la multitud se lanza sobre ellos, tratan de arrebatarles la bandera y, al no conseguirlo, la desgarran y la pisotean [...]. Cuando los institutores tratan de defenderse con puños y punta-piés, los agentes de Policía de la Zona los repelen a toletazos. Con lágrimas de impotencia, los institutores se retiran hasta dónde están sus compañeros, perseguidos por los estudiantes zoneítas.⁶⁷

In this section of the text, the Panamanian students are portrayed as victims, who were attacked by US-American students and only wanted to return to their comrades. The scene is described in hyperbolic and emotional phrases.

The report of the Legal Commission gives a detailed account of the events: When the six students reached the flagpole, they argued that the Panamanian flag should have been raised next to the US flag, which was forbidden by Zone policeman Wall. In the meantime, about 400 to 500 US students and adults gathered in front of the school surrounding the Panamanian students.⁶⁸ The student groups roared down each other singing the country hymns. It was nationalism that met

⁶⁵ Belinfante, Gustaf, and Navroz, *International Commission of Jurists*, 16.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Own translation: “Then the crowd pounced on them, trying to take the flag away and, failing to do so, they tear it apart and stamp on it [...]. As [the Panamanian pupils] try to defend themselves with fists and foot kicks, the local police officers hit back. With tears of helplessness, the [pupils] fight their way through to their companions, persecuted by the students of the Canal Zone.” “Los Pasos del Agresor,” 63.

⁶⁸ Belinfante, Gustaf, and Navroz, *International Commission of Jurists*, 17.

nationalism. The Panamanians felt attacked by the disrespect of the US students, screams became pushes and the situation became more and more acute.⁶⁹ Wall decided to stop the demonstration of the Panamanian students and asked them to withdraw, but they insisted on showing their flag and singing their anthem. They accused Wall of not keeping his word and refused to retreat. Wall then instructed the police officers, who had accompanied the delegation of the six students to have their truncheons ready and drive the six students back to the main group. US-American students mingled with the police and a crowd of people formed around the six Panamanian students.⁷⁰ The US students tried to snatch the flag from the Panamanians and in this scuffle it was torn apart.⁷¹ In this context, “[s]ome of the policemen seem to have used their batons in a more aggressive manner against the retreating Panamanian students.”⁷² When the other Panamanian students saw their classmates surrounded by the US-Americans and driven back from school grounds, they started screaming and throwing stones at the police. Several US patrol cars came to support and drove after the police. The 200 Panamanian students now began to withdraw more quickly.⁷³

Violent Incidents in Panama City

The aborted demonstration caused panic and anger among the Panamanian students.⁷⁴ The 200 Panamanians are said to have been followed by US-American students, parents, and the police of the Canal Zone. Outraged by the perceived insult to their national flag, they threw stones at the US-American citizens of the Zone who pursued them. The first injuries occurred, as the *Revista Lotería* report states,⁷⁵ while the Panamanian students left considerable damage in the Canal Zone: they threw rubbish bins into the streets, probably to stop the police cars and smashed windows and street lamps.⁷⁶

Even before the Panamanian students reached the border, news spread “like wildfire through the City of Panama,” as a witness put it, and a mob formed and grew very quickly. Within half an hour several thousand people stood along the border, from Balboa Road to Ancon station.⁷⁷

The report of the *Revista Lotería* says:

⁶⁹ McPherson, “Courts of World Opinion,” 87.

⁷⁰ Belinfante, Gustaf, and Navroz, *International Commission of Jurists*, 18.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ “Los Pasos del Agresor,” 64.

⁷⁶ Belinfante, Gustaf, and Navroz, *International Commission of Jurists*, 15.

⁷⁷ “Flag Riot in Canal Zone. 6 Die, 91 Hurt—Panama Recalls Envoy,” *Chicago Tribune*, January 10, 1964, <http://archives.chicagotribune.com/1964/01/10/page/1/article/flag-riot-in-canal-zone#text>.

La avalancha de gente es tan poderosa, a pesar de no llevar armas, que la Policía de la Zona del Canal es doblegada por el número y pide la ayuda del Ejército de los Estados Unidos acantonado en la Zona del Canal.⁷⁸

But the Panamanians themselves attacked US-Americans with molotov cocktails, stones, and sticks. The article goes on to state that dozens of students had been killed by the Canal Zone Police by 7:00 a.m. However, the *Revista Lotería* report did not mention any background information: Near Ancon station, a group of Panamanians began to stop cars passing by, turn them over, and set them on fire. A small group of policemen tried to control the situation and keep the mob away from residential areas. First, they attempted to drive back the Panamanians with tear gas. As the situation got worse, however, the sergeant ordered the police group to use their pistols. He requested that the officers should only shoot over the heads of the crowd and on the ground in front of the mob, but some of the shots “seems to have been directed into the crowd.”⁷⁹

Considering the size of the mob and the small police force available in the Canal Zone, Lieutenant Governor Parker, acting Governor of the Zone, called General O’Meara, the commanding officer of United States troops. He demanded military support from the US forces in the Canal Zone, which they received. The article of *Revista Lotería* portrays an image of insensitive US-Americans shooting into the unarmed crowd with excessive violence:

Las fuerzas armadas de la Zona del Canal entran en acción con armas pesadas y de largo alcance. Fusiles, ametralladoras y tanques se extienden a lo largo de todo el sector limítrofe y disparan incesantemente contra la multitud indefensa. El número de heridos y de muertos crece incesantemente y muchos se desangran durante horas antes de que puedan ser recogidos bajo las ráfagas de las ametralladoras estadounidenses, que disparan incluso contra las ambulancias que portan la bandera de la Cruz Roja.⁸⁰

Concurrently, the nature of the conflict changed, when weapons were used on the Panamanian side as well and a firefight erupted between Panamanian and US-Americans.⁸¹ The shootings continued into the early hours of the morning and

⁷⁸ Own translation: “The avalanche of people is so powerful, despite not carrying weapons, that the Canal Zone Police are overwhelmed by the number and call for the help of the United States Army stationed in the Canal Zone.” “Los Pasos del Agresor,” 64.

⁷⁹ Belinfante, Gustaf, and Navroz, *International Commission of Jurists*, 22.

⁸⁰ Own translation: “The armed forces of the Canal Zone take action with heavy and long-range armaments. Rifles, machine guns and tanks are spread throughout the border area and they fire incessantly at the defenseless crowd. The number of wounded and dead people grows steadily and many bleed for hours before they can be picked up under the bursts of US-American machine guns who fire even at ambulances carrying the Red Cross flag.” “Los Pasos del Agresor,” 64.

⁸¹ McPherson, “Courts of World Opinion,” 88.

throughout the day there were sporadic clashes between the United States Army and the Panamanian masses. The number of dead reached thirteen and the number of injured amounted to more than three hundred.⁸²

Until that time, there was no evidence that the authorities of the Panamanian Republic had done anything to appease the situation or otherwise control the crowd. In fact, the opposite happened: “Indeed, on the contrary, from the materials made available, it would appear that statements made through the radio and the television were of an inflammatory nature.”⁸³

The situation finally calmed down between January, 10th and 11th, but it was not until January 13th, that the *Guardia Nacional* intervened, disbanded the crowds and tried to restore order.⁸⁴ In the riots 6 US-Americans and 24 Panamanians had died.⁸⁵

Political Consequences

The public description of the events in Panama quickly evolved to become a heroic saga.⁸⁶ Within a few hours in the media—especially through radio messages—the riots were presented as “*la gesta patriótica*,” in which unarmed Panamanians were attacked by the population of the Canal Zone.⁸⁷ *El Panamá-América*, a populist, US-critical magazine, published a radical article condemning the immense violence of the US “*contra niños, adolescentes, jóvenes y viejos, hombres y mujeres, sin más arma que su patriotism*.”⁸⁸

But President Chiari took the strongest political stance possible: He broke off political relations with the United States on the first night of the flag riots and asked the staff of the Embassy of Panama in Washington to return to Panama as soon as possible.⁸⁹ Never before had Panama broken off diplomatic relations with the US, although some interventions by the United States had meant far greater interference in Panamanian sovereignty than the flag riots.

Just a day after the violence in Panama City, President Chiari invited several student leaders to the presidential palace and had photos taken of himself with them and the torn flag of Panama.⁹⁰ In public speeches and interviews he demand-

⁸² “Los Pasos del Agresor,” 65.

⁸³ Belinfante, Gustaf, and Navroz, *International Commission of Jurists*, 21.

⁸⁴ Belinfante, Gustaf, and Navroz, *International Commission of Jurists*, .28.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁸⁶ McPherson, “Courts of World Opinion,” 89.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ Own translation: “against children, adolescents, young and old, men and women, with no other weapon than their patriotism,” Robert T. Buckman, *Latin America: The World Today Series* (Harpers Ferry: Stryker-Post-Publications, 1997), 326; “Cancelación Definitiva del Tratado de 1903,” *El Panamá América*, January 10, 1964, <http://panamapoesia.com/9eneroPanamaAmerica10.php>.

⁸⁹ McPherson, “Courts of World Opinion,” 90.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.* See for the published photos of Chiari with the students and the torn flag: *Los sucesos del 9 de enero de 1964: Antecedentes históricos* (Panama City: Autoridad del Canal, 1999),

ed the amendment of the 1903 Canal contract and emphasized that “*la sangre de los mártires que han perecido hoy, no será derramada en vano.*”⁹¹

Through this action Chiari fostered a symbolic proximity between himself and the Panamanian citizens. He followed the national consensus by strongly criticizing the United States’ approach and judging the intervention of the US military as a violent display of US power. By breaking off relations with the US, he assured himself the loyalty of the Panamanian people. This symbolic political move offered Chiari not just the support of the public, but also leverage in domestic and foreign affairs.



FIGURE 1: “THE SOLIDARITY INCREASES THE VALUE OF THE INDIVIDUAL.” CARICATURE BY ALFONSO PINCHO, IN *EDUCACIÓN CÍVICA*, ED. DIAMANTINA DE CALZADILLA AND ETNA DE MARTÍNEZ (PANAMA CITY, 1965).

The *Día de los Mártires* became an integral part of popular education. The Ministry of Education of Panama published a new textbook for the Panamanian high school students entitled *Educación Cívica*, Civic Education, in which the flag riots were glorified as a heroic myth and the US-Americans were presented as unscrupulous murderers. The caricature above is from this book, showing an indifferent soldier shooting at an unarmed Panamanian adolescent in front of a crowd of students with a machine gun. In contrast to the statements made in these

<http://panamapoesia.com/9enero.htm>.

⁹¹ Own translation: “the blood of the martyrs who had perished today would not be shed for nothing”; Roberto Chiari, Speech, January 10, 1964. See: Michael L. Conniff, *Panama and the USA*, 120.

account, Panamanians, as well as US forces fired at each other, while there is no proof that the US military used machine guns.⁹² There were several such cartoons published in various Panamanian newspapers.⁹³ Panamanians who wrote about the flag riots portrayed them as a heroic epic, with virtually no exception.⁹⁴

The Panamanian flag riots also came into the focus of international governments and the conflict was also taken up in the international press. The German news magazine *Der Spiegel* reported on January 22nd, 1964, that the Panamanians had been incited by communist agitators “sent by Castro.”⁹⁵ Furthermore, Western intelligence agencies regarded the flag riots in Panama as a communist-inspired movement.⁹⁶

A second international consequence played out on the field of decolonization. The Panamanian government referred to anti-colonial movements by staging the flag riots as an anti-imperial struggle. In the context of these global debates, the US government was confronted with enormous criticism “for continuing to hold colonial possessions.”⁹⁷

The moral staging of Panama’s national destiny had an impact. The Panama Canal transmission was characterized as Washington’s penance for massacring unarmed Panamanians and became the central image of public discourse in Panama. A ‘Memorandum of Unrest’ declared that the violence was “extraordinarily positive for the Panamanian nation.”⁹⁸ On December 18th, 1964, less than a year after the riots, President Johnson promised the United States would not permanently manage the Canal, as the 1903 treaty had posited. Johnson’s testimony proved to be an important breakthrough. In 1977, negotiations eventually culminated in the signing of treaties in which President Jimmy Carter promised to hand over the Canal to Panama by December 31st, 1999.⁹⁹

Conclusion

Relations between the United States and Panama from the mid-19th century up until the Canal was handed over in 1999 were characterized by constant economic dependence. Since the 1840s, the US had been present in Panama as a major power and protected its transnational interests there; sometimes diplomatically,

⁹² Roberto Chiari, Speech.

⁹³ McPherson, “From ‘Punks’ to Geopoliticians,” 416–17. See for more articles and caricatures: *Los sucesos del 9 de enero de 1964*.

⁹⁴ McPherson, “Courts of World Opinion,” 84.

⁹⁵ Schüler, “Molotowcocktails aus Hollywood.”

⁹⁶ Henry Raymond, *Troubled Neighbors: The Story of US-Latin American Relations, from FDR to the Present* (New York: Century Foundation, 2005), “Lyndon Baines Johnson,” 4.

⁹⁷ A. J. Christopher, “Decolonisation without Independence,” *GeoJournal* 56, no. 3 (2002): 218; John Major, *Prize Possession*, 327.

⁹⁸ Adolfo Ahumada, “9 de Enero. Testimonio y Significado,” (Panama City: Lotería Nacional de Beneficiencia, 1999); McPherson, “Courts of World Opinion,” 84.

⁹⁹ McPherson, “Courts of World Opinion,” 84.

sometimes by intervention. Since 1903 they were contractually bound to Panama and faced growing resistance from the local population and government.

In this tense story, the 1964 flag riots were a climax, they became a milestone and prompted the reassessment of relations between Panama and the United States. An attempt was made to find a new *modus vivendi* and at the end of the rocky road stood the *Cartas-Torijos-Contracts*, which assured the handover of the Canal to Panama at the turn of the millennium. Chiari's approach in the crisis can generally be regarded as quite successful. Cutting diplomatic ties with the US led to an enormous improvement in the government's image, and thus Chiari secured popular consensus on the domestic political side and brought success with regard to foreign affairs. In this context, the reference to the flag riots was later used as a political instrument.

Thus, the political pressure that Panama built up was mostly due to its government's rhetorical ability to shore up nationalism and unity on the one hand and, on the other hand, to present US-Panamanian relations as an anti-colonial struggle, even if this narrative did not fit the actual events. Thereby, it was commemorated as a dimension of the Latin American wars of independence, the *Thousand Day's War*, and the ultimate proclamation of independence from Colombia. The dispute boiled down to symbols. The flag stood for the nation of Panama and its claim to the Canal. This reduced the conflict to a symbolic level, which made it easier for the government to control its course.

On the international stage, too, the flag riots were portrayed by the Panamanian government and the media as an anti-colonial struggle. Within the framework of the global anti-imperialist movements, Panama also received international attention and the US hegemony at the isthmus was often criticized in newspapers, as well as by Latin American and European governments. This put the US under pressure and forced the US government to perpetually justify their basic policies in Panama. In the country itself, the struggle for sovereignty over the Canal was staged as a third independence in newspapers such as the *Revista Lotería*, *El Panamá-América*, and *La Estrella de Panamá* and the students were propagated as martyrs who courageously stood in the way of the US Army to fight for a free Panama. Consequently, the flag riots were stylized as a heroic myth.

However, this presentation did not correspond with actual events. One can rather speak of the radicalization of a spontaneous demonstration, since the Panamanian—and also US-American—students, although predominantly driven by national pride, did not seem to intend to become martyrs for Panama's freedom. In addition, the presentation of US-Americans as the enemy in the Panamanian newspapers was enriched with hyperbolic phrases and illustrated with simplified caricatures. The report of the International Commission of Jurists also concluded that excessive force had not been exercised by the US armed forces, although they had reacted vigorously.

The Panamanian government intentionally propagated an aggressive image of the US and political activism in newspapers and schools. They tried to put their own people up against the United States to exert political pressure. Often this was done on a symbolic level, which is why the question of flags is of great importance in this context. Pupils and students became a political mouthpiece for the government. With the *Acción Comunal* joining the government, critical US attitudes had become common amongst schools and at rallies. One strategy was to mobilize the population through indoctrination. The upswing of the *Acción Comunal* and the *Panameñismo* changed the climate of opinion in Panama and increasingly Anglophobic attitudes became a popular consensus. An attempt was made to get the public to believe that the Canal belonged to Panama or at least that the nation should be on an equal footing with the United States. This was actually brought to the population via schools, festivities, and parades. As shown in the essay, the *Revista Lotería*, published directly by the *Departamento Cultural de la Dirección de Desarrollo Social y Cultural*, became a propaganda outlet. Even before January 9th, 1964, there were many US-critical articles published, that demanded the Canal to be handed over to Panama. In the course of the unrests of 1964, these attitudes became increasingly radical and took on a life of their own. The result of this policy were the flag riots, in which the government did not have to intervene, nor did it have to trigger them at all. But the preparations—namely the polarization of US-critical attitudes—were initiated in the past by the *Acción Comunal* and Arnulfo Arias.

During the flag riots, schools had become places of mobilization, and the pupils had become geopolitical actors. The flag march of the Panamanian students into the Canal Zone was therefore a collective staging and representation of the Panamanian identity. It proved the affiliation of the Canal to Panama. At the same time, the US Zone population wanted to see its own flag flying in the Zone. The Zone was built in the image of US cities and daily life, especially in schools, was adapted to US standards. The tensions between the Zone's population and the Panamanians built up on a symbolic level. When during the riots in 1964, the Panamanian flag, which was not even allowed to touch the ground by law, was torn in a scuffle with the US-American students, an outcry went through Panamanian society. The national symbol had been dishonored. It came to the climax of the flag disputes, which represented the dispute over the jurisdiction and affiliation of the Canal and the Zone, and to a duel of nationalisms.

After the riots, the events were edited by the media and the Panamanian government. Through their glorification as a heroic myth and by cutting ties with the United States, the flag riots were used politically. An emotional consensus was created in which newspapers and government pulled together and the question of flags, which actually had more of a symbolic value, became a political discourse about the sovereignty of the Panama Canal. Thus, the flag riots, which had turned

from a spontaneous demonstration of students into a popular uprising, became the *Día de los Mártires*.