

American presence in Panama challenged

By DON KNISLEY

The emergence of Panama as a nation in 1903 was closely related to construction of the canal. After the French had tried unsuccessfully to build a canal, the US negotiated a treaty with Colombia — of which Panama was a province — to continue the project. The Hay-Herrán Treaty gave the US one hundred years of administrative control over the land required for construction and operation. When the Colombian Senate hesitated to ratify the treaty, a plot to secede was formulated and carried out by a group of Panamanians who feared to lose the canal to Nicaragua. Panama then hurriedly signed an inequitable canal treaty in exchange for US military protection from Colombia.

The treaty was written by neither Americans nor Panamanians. It was a Frenchman who managed to secure the appointment of Panamanian Minister in Washington and who railroaded the treaty through both governments in an incredible display of political maneuvering. The US Secretary of State, John Hay, readily admitted that the terms of the treaty were, "not so advantageous to Panama".

The main issue of contention in the treaty is that it gives the US control in perpetuity over a 50 by 10 mile strip of land, "as if it were the sovereign." In effect then, the canal zone became a US colony bisecting Panama. This problematic situation has been worsened by the relative opulence which US zonians enjoy within a small, developing country.

PHYSICAL PRESENCE

However, it is more than the physical presence that disturbs the Panamanians. At present the US pays a paltry \$2.3 million per year in canal zone annuities to Panama. Given that Great Britain receives \$35 million per year for the US military base in Malta, it is surely an injustice to pay one-seventeenth that amount for 550 square miles containing the canal and 14 military bases. Though the US State Department maintains that a substantial proportion of Panama's GNP is derived

directly or indirectly from the canal zone, it is also true that low tolls have meant that Panama in effect subsidizes world shipping. Moreover, the chief benefactor of these low rates has been the US for nearly 70 per cent of the traffic passing through the canal is bound for or coming from that country.

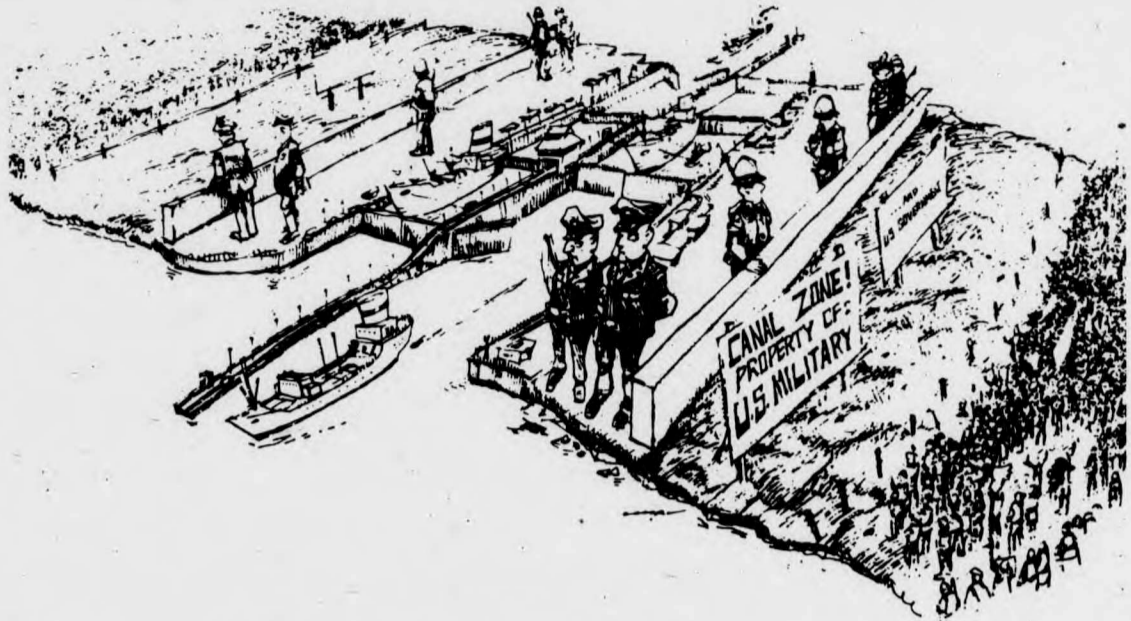
Panamanian resentment of the massive military installations within the zone is particularly strong. There are some 12,000 US troops currently stationed in the area. There seems to be no justification for this level of military occupation, as virtually all observers agree that defence of the canal is nearly impossible whatever the troop size. One can only conclude that this force serves as a symbol and reminder of overt action such as that taken in the Dominican Republic in 1965.

The most hated of these military bases is that euphemistically called the School of the Americas. It has been the training ground for a number of repressive Latin American regimes and its existence violates the 1903 treaty which authorized only those bases needed for canal defence.

In January 1964, antipathy toward the US over the canal resulted in riots in Panama City which left 24 dead including 21 Panamanians. Diplomatic relations were cut, only to be quickly re-established by President Johnson. By 1967 both administrations had agreed on the terms of a new treaty, which were prematurely made public, creating a furor in both countries. As a result, the proposed treaty was shelved until General Omar Torrijos came to power following a military coup later in the same year. Torrijos found the document totally unacceptable and proceeded to make the acquisitions of Panamanian control over the canal his political *raison d'être*.

LITTLE PROGRESS

Little progress toward a new agreement was made until 1973, when an incident in the UN Security Council recharged the issue. A motion which would have promptly restored sovereignty to Panama was



defeated by a US veto. The victory was clearly Panama's however, as the incident attracted much international attention and caused great embarrassment to the US State Department.

The appointment of Ellsworth Bunker as chief negotiator shortly thereafter indicated that the US was serious in working toward a new treaty. Bunker, an experienced elder statesman, is highly respected in diplomatic circles. This appointment set the stage for Henry Kissinger's visit to Panama in February 1974, when he and Panamanian Foreign Minister Juan Tack signed an eight point statement to serve as a beginning point in any new negotiations. In essence the statement concedes the use of land necessary for canal operations to the US and returns the rest of the canal zone to Panama.

Some observers have speculated that Torrijos may not be as ready to gain control of the canal as he says. The zone issue may be the one that has most solidified his support, but Panama has many pressing problems. As long as the canal remains a national cause, attention is somewhat diverted from deficiencies of Torrijos' rule.

The emergence of the canal as a US political issue will probably

delay agreement on outstanding problems. A sizeable group of congressmen have seized the issue as one in which the US is about to give away sovereign territory, said to have been "bought and paid for." Their arguments are largely false as the zone was never purchased, nor is it sovereign. Such rhetorical campaign proclamations serve only to appeal to the American voter's sense of nostalgia. Any new treaty will ultimately require congressional approval.

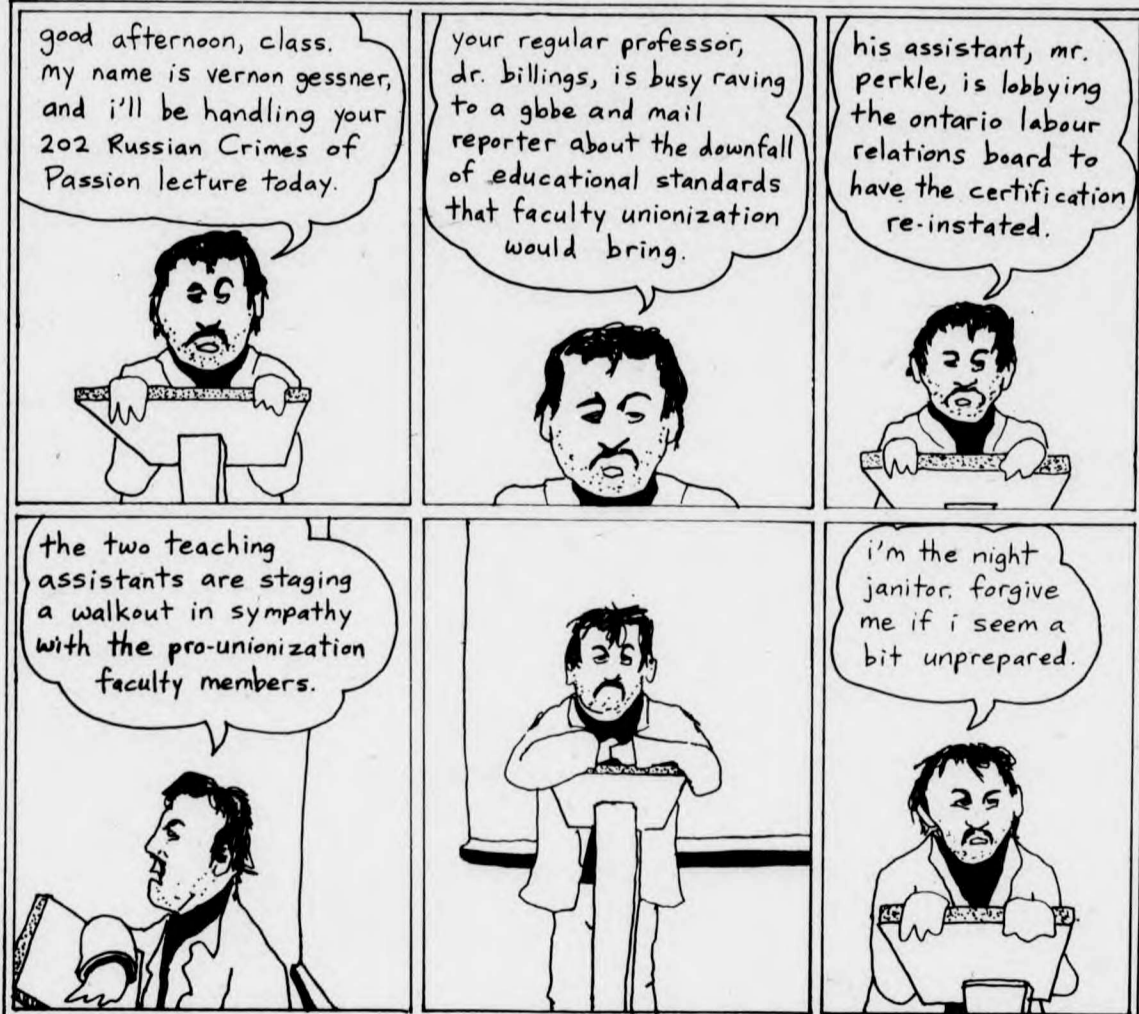
On the other hand, the US State Department (supported by a portion of Congress and more recently by the business sector) has urged that negotiations proceed toward giving Panama a major responsibility in, if not outright control of the canal. In addition to pointing out that the current treaty is unfair and outdated, the State Department maintains that the canals is of decreasing importance to the US and to the world. Today's sophisticated weaponry has to a large extent negated the strategic significance of a waterway between the Atlantic and Pacific. Most American carriers are too large to even pass through the canal. Changing world shipping routes also makes the canal less necessary.

It must be concluded that the

conciliatory stance adopted by Kissinger is not the product of altruism, a sense of justice, or realization of the declining significance of the canal. It is based rather on hard economic and political realities. Latin America is united behind Torrijos in the canal dispute. There are a number of possible ways of putting economic pressure on the US to give up the canal. Latin America is an area of extensive US foreign investment, and threats to nationalize industries are likely to have a substantial effect. Panama also has a new economic carrot to dangle before the US with the discovery of what has been referred to as the world's richest copper deposit. An assured supply of copper might figure prominently in a new canal treaty.

In view of this situation it should come as no surprise that US business is allied with the State Department in the effort to negotiate a new and more equitable treaty.

The real aim is not "to demonstrate the qualities of justice, reason and vision that have made and kept our country great," but rather to sacrifice one form of imperialism for the sake of another. **Reprinted from the DALHOUSIE GAZETTE**



Letter To The Editor

All letters should be addressed to the Editor, c/o Excalibur, room 111 central Square. They must be double-spaced, typed and limited to 250 words. Excalibur reserves the right to edit for length and grammar. Name and address must be included for legal purposes but the name will be withheld upon request. Deadline: Mon. 4 p.m.

Arrogance towards gays must stop

I strongly support Paul Trollope in his condemnation of York anti-gay housing policies. I don't believe you Mrs. Corbett (Residence Manager) when you dismiss all Trollope's charges. Further your defence of the housing policies is a 'snow job'. It is no defence to say that 60 per cent of furnished apartment accommodation is available to the unmarried student community. 100 per cent of furnished apartment accommodation is available to unmarried heterosexual couples (common law) 0 per cent is available to ('unmarried') homosexual couples. The injustice has already been made quite clear to you in Excalibur but you have done nothing. It is your responsibility to initiate change to end such unjust discrimination, not to suggest gay people plead their case. Mrs. Corbett, the days of such arrogance towards we gay people are over — I suggest you try to learn from your mistakes.

**Jim Quixley,
Head Librarian,
Glendon College.**