

By John B. Judis

WASHINGTON, D.C.

AT A FEBRUARY 11-12 MEETING OF THE Democratic Party's National Committee (DNC), the delegates chose Washington lawyer-lobbyist Ron Brown to be the party's chairman. But even the election of the first black leader of a major party could not rescue this event from the pits of boredom. For sheer lack of visual and auditory stimulation, this year's meeting was about as interesting as the world series of tetherball or the annual convention of the American College of Morticians.

In their speeches, Democratic officials expressed immense satisfaction about the party's congressional and state legislative victories last November. But they also appeared to be utterly bewildered by their continual defeats in national elections and seemed afraid to say anything that might alienate additional voters.

Brown himself did little to break the monotony. Having been touted as a protégé of Jesse Jackson, Brown acted as if he were Gov. Michael Dukakis' political understudy. In the dry style of his predecessor, Paul Kirk, Brown read dutifully from a prepared text, departing only to add an "and."

Except for a few predictable jibes at the Republicans, Brown made no mention whatsoever of national issues. Afterward, he declined to hold a press conference. When he appeared on a TV interview February 12, he refused to explain his own political beliefs. "This is not an ideological job," he said. "My job is to assemble a professional team."

Brown is certainly a competent man and a proven political mediator. The question raised by his performance and by the meeting was not whether the party is being taken over by a lightweight or by the Jackson revolution, but whether, after another national defeat, the Democratic Party has plunged hopelessly into political irresolution.

Japan lobbyist: Brown became nationally known last summer when, as Jackson's convention manager, he helped to broker peace between Jackson and Dukakis. At the time rumors were rife of a deal between Dukakis and Jackson making Brown the DNC chair if Dukakis won. But by December, when the contest for DNC chair began, Brown was merely another name in a crowded field that included former Reps. Jim Jones of Oklahoma and Michael Barnes of Maryland and the early favorite, Rick Wiener, the chairman of the Michigan Democratic Party.

With \$250,000 and the help of Carl Wagner, a former aide to Massachusetts Sen. Edward Kennedy, Brown put together a formidable campaign that ousted his rivals. He got early endorsements from Kennedy, whose 1980 campaign he worked on, former Arizona Gov. Bruce Babbitt, New York Gov. Mario Cuomo and New Jersey Sen. Bill Bradley. Babbitt and Cuomo said they were endorsing Brown because they didn't want to see the best man excluded because of his race. When the AFL-CIO followed suit, the other candidates dropped out.

Brown certainly deserved to win. The nasal-voiced Wiener bombed at the joint DNC forums. Brown has more experience in party affairs than fellow lawyer-lobbyists Jones and Barnes and has proven an able mediator. Temperamentally, Brown is also the man in the middle rather than the crusader on the wings. As such, he could also play a very important role preventing the party from splitting in two racially over Jackson's candidacy in 1992.

The 47-year-old Brown is the son of the former manager of Harlem's Hotel Theresa,

Brown inherits a deeply divided Democratic Party

where celebrities like Joe Louis and Lena Horne often stayed. Middle class in income, he was raised as part of the black upper class, and he acquired a kind of upper-class bearing and self-confidence that has stood him well in difficult situations. He went to

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predominately white private schools and to Middlebury College, where he was the only black in his class.

During the '60s, Brown was not a civil rights activist or anti-war protester. After graduation in 1963, he served in the Army for four years, rising to the rank of captain. In 1967 he began working at the business-oriented Urban League. He also began attending St. John's Law School in New York, where Cuomo was one of his professors. After getting his law degree, he went to work for Urban League's Washington office. In 1979 he became Kennedy's deputy campaign manager and ran Kennedy's successful primary effort in California.

In 1981 Brown became a partner in the prominent Democratic law firm of Patton, Boggs & Blow. One of Brown's first major clients was the government of Haitian dictator "Baby Doc" Duvalier, which he represented from 1982 to 1985. By last year, he had also become a major representative of 21 Japanese firms. According to one knowledgeable observer, the Japanese latched onto Brown after the scandal caused by former Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone's racist remarks.

Like his predecessors Kirk and Charles Mannatt, Brown is planning to retain his professional association and six-figure salary as a private lawyer while he is DNC chair. He will not formally represent clients, but he will be able to use his newfound clout to the advantage of Patton, Boggs & Blow. Brown insists that he will not be compromised by this arrangement, but one must wonder whether he will be willing to voice Democratic concerns on fair trade or taxes when they conflict with the interests of his law firm's most lucrative clients.

While Brown's race distinguishes him, his immediate background fits perfectly the profile of past DNC chairs from Robert Strauss to Kirk. Brown has the polish of a lobbyist rather than a politician. He is also a Washington insider—more at home at country clubs and power lunches than in bars and union halls.

Uneasy Jackson: Southern Democratic officials initially opposed Brown, but when Jones, their favorite, bowed out, they began to reconcile themselves to having a former Kennedy and Jackson aide as the party chair. Brown, they believed, would follow Kirk's example, and not be overly influenced by his liberal political mentors.

When Kirk was elected four years ago, after Walter Mondale's landslide defeat, he was actively opposed by Southern and moderate Democrats who feared that the former Kennedy aide would bow to the party's left and to interest groups organized in powerful caucuses. Kirk surprised his critics by abolishing caucuses and the party's fractious midterm convention.

Even before the DNC met, Brown gave his critics some reason for hope. He announced



New DNC Chairman Ron Brown

that he favored rescinding the agreement, reached last summer at Jackson's insistence, that DNC members not be automatic convention delegates.

Brown also declared that he would support the winner of Chicago's Democratic mayoral primary—even if he is running against the black independent, Tim Evans, whom Jackson is likely to endorse if Mayor Eugene Sawyer is defeated in the primary. In his resume to DNC members and in his acceptance speech, Brown did not mention Jackson.

White Protestant males: The DNC delegates did not publicly debate political strategy at the meeting, but in private discussions they displayed sharply divergent views on the party's future. Southern Democrats and moderates associated with the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC) believe that the Democrats have to win back alienated white

Temperamentally, Ron Brown, the first black leader of a major party, is a man in the middle rather than a crusader on the wings.

voters, particularly in the South and Midwest, while Jackson supporters argue for de-emphasizing white middle-class males and focusing on the minority vote.

These differences were epitomized in the views of two delegates, Birmingham, Ala., pollster Natalie Davis and former New York Rep. Bella Abzug. While Davis and Abzug

probably have similar long-term goals—Davis says that Abzug was one of her heroes—they disagree sharply about where the party should go.

Davis is concerned about the flight of white voters from the Democratic Party in the South. According to Davis' polls, taken last October, 52 percent of Alabama whites now identify themselves as Republicans, 33 percent as Democrats, and 15 percent as independents—a 100 percent increase in Republican support from spring 1987. Among white males aged 18 to 24, 68 percent now identify themselves as Republicans and 14 percent as Democrats. "The only saving grace," Davis says, "is that young voters are less likely to vote than their middle-aged counterparts."

Davis argues that the Democrats cannot win in the South without significant white support, and she wants the party to adopt programs and themes that appeal to, rather than scare off, middle-class whites.

"In the focus groups I run," Davis says, "the bottom line is always, 'I'm tired of paying for other people's problems.'"

Abzug takes the opposite tack. "We have to deepen the constituencies that we have rather than chasing after the white Protestant males," Abzug says. "We have to build a majority out of the East, Midwest and West. If Dukakis had gone after the votes of women and minorities, he would have won."

Right answers: Whether or not they are right about issues and principles, Davis and the DLC have the numbers on their side. In an impressive study of the 1988 election results, opinion analyst Ruy Teixeira shows that even if minority turnout had exceeded white turnout by 10 percent, and if all of these votes had gone to Dukakis, he would still have lost by 2.4 million votes and would not have reversed defeats in Illinois, Pennsylvania or California. Teixeira shows that a similar result obtains if one assumes lower-income turnout had exceeded turnout among the wealthy by 10 percent.

"Democrats may have an understandable urge to trade in the current electorate for a new one," Teixeira writes, "but it isn't advisable. They lost the presidency because they didn't have enough support in the nation as a whole, not because enough of their people failed to show up at the polls."

Abzug and the Jackson camp's arguments for writing off the South are both suspect. By losing the entire South, Dukakis began by ceding Bush 156 out of 270 electoral votes needed for victory. When the 1990 reapportionment occurs, the East and Midwest are expected to lose 16 more electoral votes to the South and West. Furthermore, as Davis argues, Northern whites are leaving the Democratic Party for the same reasons that Southern Democrats are. Writing off Alabama can be tantamount to writing off Ohio or Illinois.

Brown and the DNC leadership can, however, be expected to stay out of this controversy. Under Kirk the DNC leaders assumed a role of political technocrats attempting to achieve goals shared by the different factions. Kirk took great pride in suppressing rather than encouraging party debate—through the elimination of the midterm convention. Brown appears poised to continue along the same path of apolitical professionalism. This could mean that Brown will be in a good position to mediate a bitter factional split in 1992. But it could also mean that by 1992, in the absence of organized party debate, divisions within the party will have grown so wide that nothing can be done to mediate them. □

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Jesse Jackson

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parties' disdain for black voters. Their overtly insulting treatment jolted many black leaders into serious consideration of more independent political strategies. "As a former Democratic administration appointee, I would have found it incredible 10 years ago that I would have even entertained any conversation about options outside the Democratic Party," Roger Wilkins told *Boston Globe* columnist Derrick Jackson.

Wilkins is a senior fellow at the Institute for Policy Studies and was a member of both the John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson administrations. He added, "But white people have done their damndest to us. Both parties have shown us their contempt. So if nobody wants us, fine: Let's see if there are options to make people come to us." While Wilkins and others were studying the depressing November 8 election results, the victorious president-elect invited Jackson to a well-publicized "unity meeting."

Messianic politics: "A well-publicized photo opportunity was held, but Jackson didn't consult key members of the Congressional Black Caucus or many prominent state leaders inside the Rainbow before speaking with Bush," wrote Manning Marable in a critical study of the NRC. Marable, who is chairman of the black studies department at Ohio State University and author of several well-regarded books on African-American politics, has been one of Jackson's strongest supporters and still has a favorable opinion of the Chicago clergyman.

"To be critical of Jackson's role is not for one moment to minimize his crucial contributions to the ongoing battle for democracy

and social justice," Marable wrote. "But Jackson has never been a team player." Marable is one of a growing number who are questioning what he calls the "politics of a black messiah."

Taking action: Indeed, there are signs that various NRC chapters are setting their own political agenda without waiting for Jackson's word. In the Chicago election, in fact, some members of the group are defying Jackson by sitting out the primary and voting for Evans in the general election.

Yet the fact remains that Jackson is the reason NRC exists. His charismatic presence and political audacity created the cultural context for an interracial, black-led organization. Some analysts argue that Jackson's real contributions have yet to be realized.

"Jesse has opened up a space in the public dialogue that didn't exist before, and so far we've failed to exploit that space," explains William Strickland, co-chair of the Massachusetts Rainbow Coalition and professor in Afro-American studies at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. "When people argue about whether we should stay in the Democratic Party or start an independent party, they're missing the point. The question is: how do progressive forces best struggle to take power to represent the people's interests? Marginality is not necessarily in our best interest, and those on the righteous left who demand we remain marginal are not serious about taking power."

Strickland believes the NRC can make significant gains during this period of transition if it develops a workable non-ideological plan to achieve power, and stops "feuding over the esoteric points of ideology that have little to do with serving the people's interests." □

Jerry Brown

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off—money was the decisive factor. Brown has no legal obligation to report his spending, but estimates of his campaign costs range from \$300,000 to \$500,000, or \$200 or more for every vote he received. He put 13 campaign staff people on his payroll.

Enemies and friends: Many California Democrats were by no means enthralled with the return of Jerry Brown. Neil Eisenberg, a key Democratic fund-raiser who briefly sought the chairmanship himself before endorsing Westly, told *In These Times* Brown is "a megalomaniac, a Dracula." Although Brown promised that he will serve out his full four-year term as party chair, Eisenberg is convinced that he will run for president in 1992.

Many Democrats worried that Brown's controversial, high-profile media image will result in negative publicity for Democratic candidates. Brown parried this criticism by joking that he intends to serve as a "Brown hole," sucking up all the "negative feedback" and allowing the Democratic candidate for governor in 1990, for example, to slide into office unscathed by bad press.

Even more problematic was a controversy that erupted over abortion rights. After working as a volunteer for Mother Teresa, Brown gave an interview to a Catholic newspaper in which he said that "killing the unborn is crazy." For a time it seemed that this might be the issue that could prevent a Brown victory, as pro-choice activists reacted with outrage. On January 21 Brown defused the matter somewhat by sending all central committee members a letter stating that he believes that "government should not interfere

with the right of a woman to choose for herself on the question of abortion." He went on to say that the state ought not to "pressure anyone in this regard by withholding funding from government-sponsored health plans."

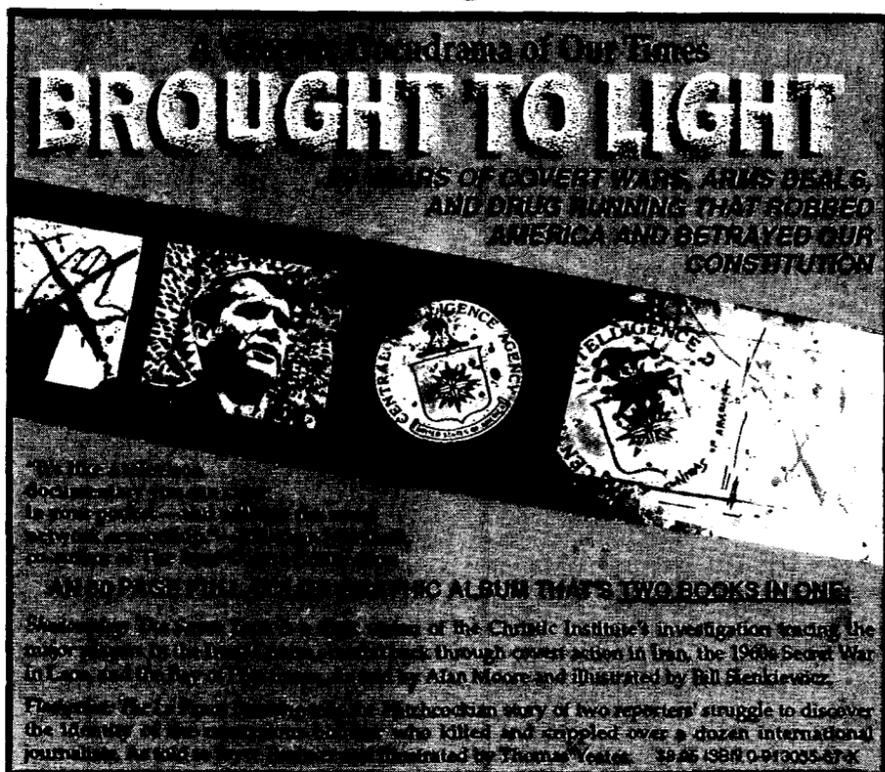
Despite this statement, key California leaders of the National Organization for Women, the National Women's Political Caucus and the California Abortion Rights Action League opposed his candidacy to the end.

All these assorted concerns enabled Westly to gather the support of about a third of the central committee. At that point his campaign stalled. Westly, a 32-year-old investment banker from San Jose and member of the Democratic National Committee, did not fare well at all with one key progressive constituency—the Rainbow Coalition. Roughly 10 percent of the central committee members are active in the coalition, which strongly endorsed Brown on the day of the vote. Although both candidates had sought the endorsement, it was by no means the decisive factor. Still, it may mark the start of a strong working relationship between the new party chairman and the coalition. As Brown explained, "They are a key group that's needed to energize the party. They will be a critical factor in winning close elections."

On the day Brown was elected, Jesse Jackson gave the only speech of the convention that commanded the attention of every delegate in the hall. He spoke very warmly of Jerry Brown, describing him as a friend and one of the moral centers of the Democratic Party. Jackson said that Brown was "a man who had been in the valley, but who is now climbing the mountain again." □

Jim Heaphy is a member of the California State Central Committee and the Rainbow Coalition.

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By David R. Dye

PANAMA CITY, PANAMA

JANUARY 20 WAS A DATE FOR REJOICING IN most of Latin America. In Panama City's May 5th Plaza, pro-government demonstrators burned you-know-who in effigy, complete with burial coffin, to celebrate the end of the "genocidist" Ronald Reagan's sojourn through the U.S. presidency. His successor in Washington may not have been pondering his Central America policy that day, but he will eventually have to deal with the shambles Reagan has left behind in his attempts to unseat Panama's wayward strongman, Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega.

Panamanians are not sanguine about immediate relief from the U.S. attempt to wreck their economy to get at Noriega, and beyond him, at the Panamanian Defense Forces. On the contrary, many indications point to a ratcheting up of the conflict, which began in 1986 with charges that the general was heavily into drug and arms dealing. Things got nasty in March 1988, when the Reagan administration slapped economic sanctions on Panama and insisted on recognizing a government headed by Eric Arturo Delvalle, which Noriega had deposed for its complicity in U.S. efforts to oust him.

The next stage of the anti-Noriega campaign, observers say, will revolve around elections scheduled for May 7, for which Panamanian political parties are busily gearing up. Though most Panamanians feel the elections are unlikely to decide who actually holds power, they may well serve as a convenient pretext for the U.S. to tighten the screws against Panama's government.

Last August, aging right-wing populist Arnulfo Arias, four times elected president but always prevented from serving, died, depriving the opposition of its drawing card. Brilliant minds then hoped to coax Arias' widow Mireya Moscoso, into the role of a Panamanian Corazon Aquino. When Doña Mireya turned out to be a simple housewife without political ambition, they had to settle for lawyer-businessman Guillermo Enarda, a colorless stalwart of Arias' *Partido Panamenista*.

Joining the ticket as a vice presidential candidate is philosophy professor Ricardo Arias Calderón, whose Christian Democratic Party is seen in Washington as the most potable of Panama's political forces. Two smaller groups round out the Opposition Democratic Organization (ADO).

Heartened solons: The opposition was jubilant over its unity ticket, announced January 20. Not, explained Christian Democratic vice presidential candidate Carlos Arellano, because of any real prospects of victory: "If we win," asserted Arellano, "Noriega will not hand over power, because he knows we will have to hand *him* over to the U.S." (Noriega is under indictment in Florida on drug charges.) The opposition has decided to run anyway to make the election into a plebiscite against Noriega. Most important, says Arellano, "The elections don't end on voting day.... We are organizing in defense of the vote," and to denounce the fraud they are convinced the government is preparing.

Assuming the elections are held, a seven-party, pro-government phalanx called COLINA, the Coalition for National Liberation, will be arrayed against ADO. The grouping has not changed much since the fraud-filled

The good news is that Reagan's gone, the bad news is that Noriega remains

election in 1984, but its label is new and hypernationalist; the government's current slogan, "COLINA vs. the Colony," indicts all those "unpatriotic" Panamanians who march to the Americans' tune. COLINA's presidential candidate, Carlos Duque of the Revolutionary Democratic Party (PRD), is a Noriega crony and business associate of the military.

Panamanian politics is a trap for the unwary. The government-controlled media is

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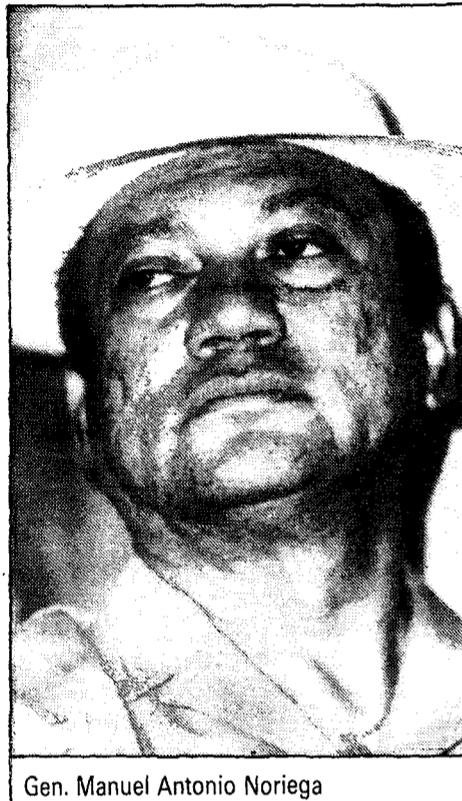
redolent with references to the alliance between the defense forces and the popular sectors to protect the national sovereignty against U.S. imperialism. It can make you think you're in Nicaragua. Addressing a seminar for junior officers January 14, Noriega remarked that the new generation of Panamanian military men had superseded their traditional fear of Marxism, or, as the general colorfully put it, "surnames that suggest a leftist line." To prove he wasn't kidding, Noriega invited high-ranking members of the Sandinista Popular Army to lecture Panama's captains on low-intensity conflict.

Despite his anti-imperialist speeches and support from Nicaragua, the general is anything but a revolutionary. Instead, Noriega is the bastard offspring of Omar Torrijos' 12-year reign of military-populist reform (1969-81). While Torrijos organized a popular coalition to demand return of the canal to Panama, Noriega served as the *caudillo's* intelligence chief, getting the figurative goods on people while amassing goods of a more tangible kind for himself.

The result is something akin to a Panamanian Somoza. U.S. auditing firms in Panama estimate Noriega's personal fortune to be above \$700 million. "Nothing moves in Panama without Noriega taking a cut," remarked one observer who preferred not to be named. As was the case with Somoza, the general's penchant for muscling in on lucrative investment opportunities has created enmity in much of the Panamanian bourgeoisie and has provided the U.S. with allies to manipulate.

Military swag: The largesse, however, is widely shared among Noriega's fellow officers, who from the rank of major upward enjoy ample access to illicit wealth. Noriega holds on, in fact, by convincing the colonels and majors that the gringos are out not just to liquidate Noriega but to end the graft for everyone. Says William Hughes, dean of economics at the University of Panama, "The military institution is defending its space. They will never accept having their privileges taken away. Anyone who replaces Noriega will have to defend what he has built."

Why, exactly, does the U.S. want Noriega out? The Panamanian nationalist argument—that Ronald ("We built it, we paid for it, we own it") Reagan wanted to revamp the 1977 canal treaties, at least far enough to get base rights in the Canal Zone after the year 2000—is undoubtedly part of the answer. But the



Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega

initial floating of drug charges against Noriega also stemmed from resentment over Panama's unwillingness to collaborate with the U.S. over the Sandinistas. (The 1988 sanctions, similarly, may well have been an attempt to compensate for the administration's defeat on contra aid.)

Once public, moreover, the drug charges took on a life of their own, with Congress taking up the cudgel against Noriega. Given the salience of the drug issue in U.S. politics, many now argue that Bush is boxed in and cannot make peace with Noriega even if he wants to. With Congress, the president and the Pentagon all having a say, Panama policy at present looks much like a driverless

Bush may not be in a position to make peace with Noriega even if he wants to. U.S. policy toward Panama looks much like a driverless car careening downhill.

car careening down a slope with no visible bottom.

If policy aims are unclear, the means are straightforward. In 1988 the U.S. froze Panamanian government assets in U.S. banks, causing a liquidity crisis in the economy, whose currency is the U.S. dollar. It also ordered U.S. firms not to pay Panama taxes, contributing to a 44 percent drop in government revenue through the first nine months of the year. By the end of 1988, Panama's GNP had slipped 20 percent, unemployment was rising and billions of dollars had drained out of Panama's once-thriving offshore branches of foreign banks.

All for one and one for nil: In fact, the main target of the sanctions are the Panamanian government's own employees,

whose union, the 100,000-strong National Federation of Public Servants (FENASEP), is a bulwark of the governing coalition's popular base. Despite its evident financial crunch, the government has gone to great lengths to avoid firing its public servants, fearing a devastating political backlash if it does.

FENASEP President Héctor Alemán defends his group's alliance with the government and the defense forces against criticism from other parts of the Panamanian left. Reaffirming his faith in the strategic legacy of Torrijos, Alemán argues stiffly that "we must unite with all those who agree on the objective of completing the formation of an independent national state in Panama." There's good reason for his stance—Alemán knows that without a civil service law his followers will all be cashiered if the opposition takes power. He insists that "the people, despite their unhappiness over the sanctions, will vote for national liberation."

That is doubtful. Nationalism may be a powerful latent force in Panama, but by fostering intense corruption and imposing governments that sooner or later follow unpopular International Monetary Fund-style economic policies, Noriega has devalued it as a political currency. On January 9, his government tried to muster its forces to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the 1964 canal riots in which 27 Panamanian students died at the hands of the U.S. military, but was unable to bring out more than a few thousand people.

Nationalist appeals, then, will not carry COLINA through a fairly contested election. There is always fraud, of course, traditional in Panamanian politics. But the opposition, along with the U.S. Embassy, is poised to condemn any deviation from political fair play, making sure that Panama is denied desperately needed financial support abroad.

So what comes next? Speculation about possible U.S.-Noriega deals is rife but appears to lack solid foundation (the U.S. Embassy denies that secret contacts with the general are being held). Some, like economics professor Hughes, think that U.S. sanctions may eventually succeed; he notes that the Panamanian government is likely to come to the end of its fiscal year March 31 with an empty treasury.

At base, what the Bush administration must decide is whether it will settle for just getting rid of Noriega. In Panama, serious voices argue that were Noriega out of the way, the Pentagon and the Panamanian Defense Forces could easily reach an agreement on a Spanish-style base accord, the minimum U.S. objective. Attempts to force the military as a whole out of power, however, are fraught with dangers. One of these, the hope of some Panamanian nationalists, is that, as the conflict goes on and on, Panama's young officers may start to take their anti-imperialist seminars seriously, take over the reins of power and make the alliance between the military and the people something more than rhetoric. □

David R. Dye writes regularly for *In These Times* on Latin America.

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