

Congressman Levels With Constituents

A weekly news-letter by Rep. Paul Simon, D. Ill., to his conservative district

The headline in the Salem (Ill.) Times-Commoner reads: "Poll Indicates Salemites Oppose U. S. Giving Away Panama Canal." The sub-head reads: "Carter to Appeal to People for Give-away Treaty."

Salem is the county seat of one of the large counties in my district, and if the question is posed in terms of a "giveaway" as that newspaper posed it to the people in my district or anywhere else, the results will be the same.

But let me ask the question differently: "Do you believe this nation should follow the advice of U. S. Military leaders on the only practical way to keep the canal open, a treaty with Panama?" My guess is that the answer might be different from the people of Salem.

We are not observing a movie with the villains on one side and the heroes on the other. We are making a fundamental decision about the security of the United States, and I hope enough of my colleagues in the Senate and the House — and enough of the people in the nation — will look at the hard facts, and make a decision based on them.

Here are a few questions and answers that I hope will be helpful:

What is our main interest in Panama?
It is to keep the canal open. While the canal cannot take the largest ships, it continues to be important to the United States and other nations.

Don't we have a treaty that gives us the right to stay there?

Yes, there is a treaty, but it is not one we can be proud of. As conservative columnist James J. Kilpatrick wrote the other day, it "is a matter of national shame." Panama was created as a nation (formerly part of Colombia) through a revolution with our indirect help. Fifteen days after the revolution, a French citizen seeking personal enrichment signed a treaty for Panama with the United States that gave us the Canal Zone. As a form of apology, a few years later the United States paid Colombia \$25 million as a gesture of goodwill.

Interestingly, "The Great Commoner," William Jennings Bryan, who was born in Salem, Ill., and for whom the newspaper there is named, called our seizure of property in Panama "immoral." While creation of the canal was a great feat, the treaty itself is not one we can be proud of.

But even if the treaty were valid, that was more than 70 years ago, and we have to recognize that colonialism is now dead. We cannot take a strip of land through the middle of another country and expect that country to like it.

What do our top military leaders believe?

The new treaty is supported not only by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, but also both publicly and privately by all the top U. S. military people in Panama. I went there about 1 1/2 years ago and met with Lt. Gen. McNair and all the top Army, Navy and Air Force people. I spent enough time with them to get their candid views. They feel that for us to jail to work out a treaty would invite the closing of the canal.

How many nations favor the United States' keeping the canal?

None.

The shippers have the most at stake economically. What do they favor?
The organization that represents the largest number of shippers favors a treaty. They recognize that without a treaty there may be no canal.

Doesn't Panama have a

military dictatorship? Yes it does, unfortunately. We have to deal with the facts as they are, not as we would like them to be. But it has been a stable regime. They have had fewer changes of leadership in recent years than we have.

Is there a danger that we would play into the hands of the Communists by having a treaty?

One of the persons I visited in Panama was the top Roman Catholic churchman, Archbishop Marcos McGrath. He said that nothing could play into the hands of the Communists and other extremists more than our failure to have a treaty. It is worth nothing that in Panama the Communist elements now oppose the treaty. It is an interesting partnership. It is also interesting to note that the Republic of Panama does not recognize either the Soviet Union or Mainland China, and judging by that flimsy standard we are more of a "Communist" nation than it is.

Why would the canal be in danger if a treaty is not agreed to?

Earth slides now close the canal occasionally. More than 75 per cent of the 13,000 people who work on the canal are Panamanians. Any one of them with a hand grenade can close the canal. The territory is tropical with terrain like Vietnam. If Monday-morning quarterbacks here believe we can keep the canal open despite the feelings of the people of Panama, they are living in a dream world. We could try, but it would mean the blood of Americans — including those from Southern Illinois — and Panamanians spilled needlessly. And the chance of success would be slim.

Who supports a treaty? Among the supporters of a treaty are not only President Carter and former President Ford, but conservatives like Sen. Barry Goldwater (R-Ariz.) and columnist William Buckley and liberals like Sen. Hubert Humphrey (D. Minn.). There are, however, many who conscientiously oppose the treaty, and the vote in Congress probably will be close.

One final word. Whether we like it or not, the United States is the leader of the Free World. If we take a position of refusing to give back their own land to the people of Panama by the year 2000, our effectiveness in leading the world will be hampered. From any logical viewpoint, we should move ahead as our nation's leaders ask. But emotions are strong on this, and we will know in about six months whether the sensible answer emerges.

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