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The death of George H.W. Bush has dominated the U.S. news for days, but little attention has been paid to the defining event of Bush's first year in office: the invasion of Panama. On December 19, 1989, Bush Sr. sent tens of thousands of troops into Panama, ostensibly to execute an arrest warrant against its leader, Manuel Noriega, on charges of drug trafficking. General Noriega was once a close ally to Washington and on the CIA payroll. In a nationally televised address, Bush claimed the invasion was needed to defend democracy in Panama. During the attack, the U.S. unleashed a force of 24,000 troops equipped with highly sophisticated weaponry and aircraft against a country with an army smaller than the New York City Police Department. An estimated 3,000 Panamanians died in the attack. We speak with historian Greg Grandin, prize-winning author and professor of Latin American history at New York University, on the lasting impact of the Panama invasion.

**JUAN GONZÁLEZ:** We begin today's show by continuing to look back at the legacy of George H.W. Bush, the nation's 41st president, who died on Friday at the age of 94. His body is now lying in rest at the Capitol. A funeral service will be held at Washington National Cathedral on Wednesday. Former Presidents Barack Obama, Bill Clinton, Jimmy Carter and Bush's son, George W. Bush, will attend, as will President Trump—who was not invited to speak. A second funeral will be held Thursday in Houston, where George H.W. Bush will be buried.

**AMY GOODMAN:** While President Bush's death has dominated the news for days, little attention has been paid to the defining event of Bush's first year in office: the invasion of Panama. On December 19, 1989, President Bush sent tens of thousands of troops into Panama, ostensibly to execute an arrest warrant against its leader, Manuel Noriega, on charges of drug trafficking. General Noriega was once a close ally of Washington and on the CIA payroll. In a nationally televised address, Bush claimed the invasion was needed to defend democracy in Panama.

**PRESIDENT GEORGE H.W. BUSH:** Last night I ordered U.S. military forces to Panama. No

president takes such action lightly. This morning, I want to tell you what I did and why I did it. For nearly two years, the United States and nations of Latin America and the Caribbean have worked together to resolve the crisis in Panama. The goals of the United States have been to safeguard the lives of Americans, to defend democracy in Panama, to combat drug trafficking and to protect the integrity of the Panama Canal Treaty.

**JUAN GONZÁLEZ:** During the attack, the U.S. unleashed a force of 24,000 troops equipped with highly sophisticated weaponry and aircraft against a country with an army smaller than the New York City Police Department. An estimated 3,000 Panamanians died in the attack. But the war was highly sanitized in the U.S. media. This is part of the trailer for the Oscar-winning documentary *Panama Deception*.

**PRESIDENT GEORGE H.W. BUSH:** One year ago, the people of Panama lived in fear under the thumb of a dictator. Today, democracy is restored. Panama is free.

**JOSÉ DE JESÚS MARTÍNEZ:** We are to say we invaded Panama because Noriega. I don't know how Americans can be so stupid to believe this. I mean, how can you be so stupid?

**MICHAEL PARENTI:** The performance of the mainstream news media in the coverage of Panama has been just about total collaboration with the administration. Not a critical perspective. Not a second thought.

**PETE WILLIAMS:** Our regret is that we were not able to use the media pool more effectively.

**REP. CHARLES RANGEL:** You would think, from the video clips that we had seen, that this whole thing was just a Mardi Gras, that the people in Panama were just jumping up and down with glee.

**VALERIE VAN ISLER:** They focused on Noriega, to the exclusion of what was happening to the Panamanian people, to the exclusion of the bodies in the street, to the exclusion of the number dead.

**REP. CHARLES RANGEL:** The truth of the matter is that we don't even know how many Panamanians we have killed.

**PETER KORNBLUH:** Panama is another example of destroying a country to save it. And the United States has exercised a might-makes-right doctrine among smaller countries of the Third World, to invade these countries, get what we want, and leave the people that live there to kind of rot.

**ROBERT KNIGHT:** The invasion sets the stage for the wars of the 21st century.

**AMY GOODMAN:** That, the trailer for *The Panama Deception*, directed by Barbara Trent, which won the Oscar.

Last month, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights called on Washington to pay reparations to Panama over what was widely seen as an illegal invasion.

For more on George H.W. Bush's legacy and the lasting impact of the Panama invasion, we're joined here in New York by Greg Grandin, prize-winning author, professor of Latin American history at New York University, his forthcoming book titled *The End of the Myth: From the Frontier to the Border Wall in the Mind of America*

. His previous books include

*Kissinger's Shadow: The Long Reach of America's Most Controversial Statesman*

and

*Empire's Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism*

. His latest

[piece](#)

for

*The Nation*

headlined “George H.W. Bush: Icon of the WASP

Establishment—and of Brutal US Repression in the Third World.”

Professor Grandin, welcome back to *Democracy Now!* Tell us about the Panama invasion.

**GREG GRANDIN:** Well, it was consequential in that it was the major deployment of U.S. troops since Vietnam War and it was done in a spectacular fashion. It was calculated to overturn what Bush said, clearly, was the Vietnam syndrome. It was a turning point in international law, in the sense that it overthrew the doctrine of sovereignty, which had been the bedrock of the international system since at least the 1930s, 1940s, the idea that countries can't invade or intervene in another country's politics without multilateral consent. The OAS condemned the invasion. The U.N. didn't support the invasion.

It was carried out, as George H.W. Bush said, in the name of democracy, which is another important significant motive. It came just a couple of weeks after the fall of the Berlin Wall. And U.S.—the United States had justified its previous interventions either in the name of anti-communism or national security or hemispheric security. This was a return to a certain kind of moralism to justify U.S. militarism.

And in all of those ways, it set the stage for the wars to come—the legal doctrine, the way it was executed, the spectacular nature of shock and awe, the sending 30,000 troops into Panama, and being covered. Just think of it. Just compare it to maybe Kissinger's secret bombing of Cambodia for years. That had to be done off the books because the U.S. public was opposed to—opposed to war, for the most part. And so, this was a real turning point in the public's acceptance of war, in the executive branch's ability to justify and wage war. It was consequential in numerous ways, that led directly to the catastrophe that we're in today.

**JUAN GONZÁLEZ:** And, Greg, in terms of the historical significance, there had been a prior, even smaller invasion, when Bush was vice president and Reagan was president, of Grenada—

**GREG GRANDIN:** Yeah.

**JUAN GONZÁLEZ:** —a country of less than 100,000 people.

**GREG GRANDIN:** Right.

**JUAN GONZÁLEZ:** But this was actually a more substantial nation. Panama at that time had about 2.4 million people. And it also, I think, set a lot of the direction in terms of how media covered the war, because I remember there was a big uproar among the press in the United States because initially the government wasn't allowing any press to cover the war.

**GREG GRANDIN:** Yeah.

**JUAN GONZÁLEZ:** Then, after much protest, they agreed to send one plane of reporters on the second day. And I was reporting for the *Daily News* back then and participated in that plane flight. We were held. The press was actually held by the military on one of the military bases, until several of us protested and were able to actually break free. We had to escape the American military base to actually be able to go out and cover the war. But most of the press treated this, as you say, illegal invasion as a liberation effort.

**GREG GRANDIN:** Yeah. Well, part of the remedy to overcome the Vietnam syndrome was figuring out how to control the press. There was an analysis that the press had gone off reservation in Vietnam, that they had developed their independent sources, that they weren't listening to the Pentagon, that they were critically analyzing the war, that a whole generation, a whole cohort, of investigative journalists—Sy Hersh, Michael Herr—cut their teeth in Vietnam and were critical of U.S. foreign policy. That was a problem that needed to be solved. And Panama allowed them to try out different ways. And you experienced it directly when you covered Panama. And they just got better at it, until they got to—until they got to the first Gulf War and the second Gulf War, where the press were kept in embedded coverage and all of that.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Juan, explain what it was like to be on that plane. And who was holding you on the military base?

**JUAN GONZÁLEZ:** Well, it was actually the—because, you have to understand, Panama was already occupied by the United States. There were several military bases in the Canal Zone, because the Canal Zone had not yet been returned to Panama. So the U.S. military was already there. But then, once the plane of the press landed on the second day, December 20th, we were basically held on the base. And they would bring out prisoners for press to interview, that they had captured—detainees, they called them, that they had captured—but they were not allowing the press to go out and actually cover the attacks on Panama City. And there was almost a near-rebellion of the reporters saying, “No, we’ve got to go out and see what’s going on.” So they finally allowed some people to go out in buses, all with—driven by the military, with military escorts. And then a handful of us managed to actually escape the buses. We demanded that we be let out and let out into the city, so that we could go out and actually cover what was going on.

**GREG GRANDIN:** Yeah, I mean, in Panama, in 1989, and through the early 1980s, the U.S. was watching a generation of reporters that had honed their skills and critical thinking in Vietnam applied to Central America—Ray Bonner’s coverage of El Mozote. And so, all of that—

**AMY GOODMAN:** Ray Bonner who was writing for *The New York Times*.

**GREG GRANDIN:** Right, who was writing for—and lost his—and was reassigned because he was too close to the story.

**AMY GOODMAN:** El Mozote being a massacre in El Salvador.

**GREG GRANDIN:** Massacre in 1981 in El Salvador. And there was also ways in which reporters were just developing their own independent sources. They were too autonomous. They were too critical. And all of that had to be controlled, and they had to be brought back in and re-established as a pillar of the national security state, whether as cheerleaders or as just uncritical commentators and catalogers of what was happening.

**JUAN GONZÁLEZ:** And the issue of Noriega's prior relationship to the CIA, and George Bush, having been a CIA director at one time, was well aware of Noriega's role?

**GREG GRANDIN:** Yeah, he was our man in Panama. He was a key asset in Iran-Contra, and Iran-Contra being not just one scandal but a broad policy of cultivating anti-communist allies within the region, whether they be drug runners, whether they be dictators, anybody who they can use to create this logistic network to support the Contras and anti-communist force. And Noriega was a key ally.

That changes in 1986, ironically. Sy Hersh publishes a story in *The New York Times* that details all of his connections with drug running and his deep involvement in narcotrafficking, and so he became too much of a liability. But he wasn't high on the agenda of removal in the last years of the Reagan administration, or even in the first years of the Bush administration. The Bush administration kind of fell into the invasion of Panama—

**AMY GOODMAN:** How?

**GREG GRANDIN:** —in some ways. Well, pushed domestically. There were social movements in Panama for democracy that had been repressed. And domestic politics within the United States was pressing the White House to do something, do whatever. And Dick Cheney appeared on *MacNeil/Lehrer* and said, "We're not in the business of democracy promotion." Dick Cheney being—I can't remember What was he in Bush? He was the secretary of defense under Bush, right?

**AMY GOODMAN:** Yes.

**JUAN GONZÁLEZ:** Secretary of defense, right.

**GREG GRANDIN:** And he said, "We're not in the business of democracy promotion. We're

going to let this play out.” And he got criticized. So, the Bush administration saw an opportunity to—and so it immediately escalates. And then it moves quickly from an effort to stop drug trafficking to—the democracy promotion justification moves high up on the justification within a couple of days, until Bush appears on TV and says that’s the reason why we’re invading Panama.

**AMY GOODMAN:** We’re going to come back to this discussion, and we’ll also be joined by other people. Greg Grandin, prize-winning author and professor of Latin American history at New York University, his forthcoming book, *The End of the Myth: From the Frontier to the Border Wall in the Mind of America*. This is *Democracy Now!*  
We’ll be back with him and others in a minute.