From "Punks" To Geopoliticians: U.S. and Panamanian Teenagers and the 1964 Canal Zone Riots

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The Americas, Volume 58, Number 3, January 2002, pp. 395-418 (Article)

Published by The Academy of American Franciscan History

DOI: 10.1353/tam.2002.0012

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FROM “PUNKS” TO GEOPOLITICIANS: U.S. AND PANAMANIAN TEENAGERS AND THE 1964 CANAL ZONE RIOTS

In 1964, U.S. civilian teenagers managed a rare feat by sparking a major foreign policy crisis. Even more remarkable, they were abroad when they did it, and they caused the crisis out of what many considered too much patriotism. The riots that rocked Panama beginning on 9 January of that year started as a scuffle between Panamanian and U.S. high school students in front of Balboa High School (BHS), a “Zonian” institution mostly for U.S. citizens. The immediate circumstances were complicated: teenagers from Panama City marched into the town of Balboa in the U.S.-controlled Panama Canal Zone to protest the fact that BHS was not flying the Panamanian flag. Balboa High students, in turn, were already demanding that their flag continue to fly. President John Kennedy had ordered that both nations’ flags be hoisted in the Zone, but implementation was slow. Then, local administrators decreed that neither flag would fly at BHS. The flag dispute seemed trivial, but its resolution could change which nation enjoyed sovereignty over the Zone. On 9 January, in the scuffle between Panamanian and U.S. students, the Panamanians’ flag was torn. Then came the crisis. Within hours of the altercation, thousands of adults unleashed a bloody violence that lasted four days and killed twenty-one Panamanians and four U.S. soldiers. The U.S. Army took control of the Zone and Panama suspended diplomatic relations with the U.S. government. Panamanians further insisted on the scrapping of the 1903 Treaty that had established U.S. control over the Canal Zone. After years of negotiations, these riots led to the Panama Canal treaties in the 1970s and to the transfer of the Canal from U.S. to Panamanian hands in 1999.1

1 The facts of the riots are highly contested, but the most accurate accounts are in William Jorden, Panama Odyssey (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984); Roberto Méndez, Panamá 9 de enero de 1964 (Panama City: Imprenta de la Universidad de Panamá, 1999); and especially International Commission of Jurists, Report on the Events in Panama January 9-12, 1964 (Geneva, Switzerland: 1964).
The riots are important for U.S.-Panama relations, but in a broader sense the crisis adds to the rich literature on the role of pre-adults as ideological vessels. This paper focuses mostly on high school-age teenagers but extends the definition of “pre-adults” to a larger group of children and university students whose political power was limited because of their youth. More important, it emphasizes the political leverage of average, non-activist pre-adults. Scholars have focused much attention on small groups of highly politicized students, especially in Latin America, noting that in fact these were often fully-grown adults, often trained and funded by adult political parties. The case of the Canal Zone riots contributes to an alternative body of scholarship, one that complements that on activists by dealing with a broader population of teenagers who were normally quiescent but who in some instances acted out political beliefs learned in their childhood or teenage years. Practitioners of such scholarship have taken a developmental approach to the learning of politics and have named their subject “political socialization.”

The study of political socialization has staked its prestige on the ability to reasonably predict the behavior of adults based on what they learned about politics before adulthood. Early U.S. scholarly surveys suggested that teaching children core values about public authority had a conformist impact on politics. Anthropologists and sociologists examined schooling, parenting, and civic training. They discovered that pre-adults overwhelmingly viewed politics in affective and consenting terms: they believed what they heard, and they wanted to please by going along with those beliefs. Teenagers, getting ever closer to the legal voting age, were thus poised to reproduce the political behaviors that parents and especially educators taught them.

Scholars used similar surveys and developmental psychology on children young and old in Latin America and came to similar conclusions.

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Political socialization, however, was difficult to pin down with great confidence. Without longitudinal studies, for instance, the link between ideation and behavior remained suggestive: how could one know how a twenty-one year old would vote by reading a questionnaire she filled out when she was twelve? Historians, limited to the evidence of the past, faced an opposite impasse: they could glimpse the workings of political socialization through educational reforms, textbook editing, or charitable foundations, but they could not poll their subjects accurately.5

Nevertheless, scholars eventually suggested ways in which political socialization might inform teenagers’ views of foreign relations. These scholars’ approaches moved from polling and Piagetian psychology into a more interdisciplinary dialogue involving, among others, Latin American and cultural historians. Researchers, for example, asked foreign children and adolescents about their perceptions of national identity and of other countries, namely the United States.6 Child psychologist Robert Coles, whose work zigzagged between Latin America and other areas, revised major findings from the early 1960s. He argued that youths worldwide, when approached with more than just questionnaires and more sensitivity toward the individual, proved to be no mere ideological sponges. They were selective in the “lessons” they absorbed and could yield spontaneous, original insights into topics such as nationalism, language, and ideology. Coles concluded that the uniqueness of each child made adult political behavior highly unpredictable. Research in Latin America complicated the picture further. It showed that ethnic or racial minorities tended to identify less with dominant national identities; that wealthier youths grew more critical of mainstream political values (and of the United States); and that boys tended to be more opinionated and divided along political lines than girls were.7 Yes, the new studies conceded, the young were impression-


able. But, like adults, they responded to politics both as members of groups and as individuals in a layering of identities.

Political socialization studies, however, have yet to influence diplomatic historians. Setting aside the studies of Latin American student movements, there is not much evidence of patterns of belief and behavior for average pre-adults when it comes to state-to-state relations. The Canal Zone riots of 1964 may provide such evidence. The incident transformed teenagers who were considered “punks” into geopoliticians almost overnight. The role of high school students in echoing and exacerbating the hostility between the U.S. and Panamanian governments was clear evidence of political socialization. Because U.S. and Panamanian civilian teenagers lived so close to each other in a geopolitically sensitive U.S. colonial outpost, they were in a position to do something about world affairs. This study will use diplomatic documents, interviews with teenage witnesses of the riots, and youth literature—from both the United States and Panama—to show how U.S. and Panamanian youths, who reflected broader social dynamics, assumed significant agency in making those dynamics part of interstate relations. For cultural historians, evidence about pre-adults is like a purifying tonic: it presents complex political adult behaviors as simplified “lessons” for children and adolescents. In the Canal Zone and Panama, pre-adults indeed absorbed prevailing insecurities and cultural prejudices about foreigners. But they also willingly defended their societies’ values and symbols, displayed candor and idealism, and hesitated less before using violence or abusive language. In short, teenagers, because they could and would become volatile agents in international relations, dramatized the tensions that in 1964 would pit governments against one another.

**DARK DANGERS: THE ZONE, ITS TEENAGERS, AND THEIR PERCEPTIONS OF PANAMA**

Zonian youths learned to live largely without contact with the people of Panama. Their parents were the tens of thousands of U.S. military or civilian personnel who ran or defended the Panama Canal since it opened under U.S. tutelage in 1914. The U.S. government conceived of the Zone as a legal entity separate from the Republic of Panama, easing the retreat of U.S. citizens into a self-imposed social isolation that reflected the policy and ideology of the U.S. government. In turn, the perceptions that Zonian teenagers had of Panamanians reflected that isolation.

From its inception, the Zone was an enclave rather than a colony, a place where U.S. citizens carved themselves an exclusive niche against their Panamanian surroundings. For several decades, taming the fauna and flora of
Panama was the task at hand. Explorers, scientists, and capitalists since the nineteenth century had perceived Panama’s jungle as the greatest foe they faced there. By struggling against heat, rain, snakes, malarial mosquitoes, and vigorous plant life, the builders of the railroad in the 1850s and the Canal from 1904 to 1914 learned to hate the limits of their power. Inspired by visions of sanitary and pleasant U.S. suburbs, engineers and architects landscaped the ten-mile-wide strip of land along the shores of the Canal as a paragon of orderly development, a victory of human over nature. The Zone was also what geographer Stephen Frenkel called “an antidote to American perceptions of Panama.” To the Zonians who came to be identified with the Canal, the waterway they worked on and the pretty towns they lived in were evidence of U.S. engineering genius. That genius contrasted with the muddy swamps and the wooden shacks of the Panamanians. Not incidentally, it overshadowed the manual labor of tens of thousands of West Indians, many of whom settled in the Zone. U.S. citizens assumed no responsibility for the administration of the Republic of Panama even if they often intervened in its internal affairs as the 1903 Treaty allowed them to do.

The security concerns of the Panama Canal Company (PCC), which ran the Zone after 1914 further regimented Zonian life. The military became less and less responsible for running the Zone, but its culture of discipline remained. The Zone ran like a military base, with purpose and precision. Locals spoke of living “on” the Zone (as “on” a base) rather than “in” it (as “in” a town). Unlike on a base, free speech was a privilege, not a right. Many could only complain in often anonymous letters to an English-language newspaper in Panama City. And many did complain. “If we on the Zone seem to be a self-isolated community,” one said,

the responsibility lies with the federal government here and in Washington, and not with us as individuals, or groups. . . . It is clearly indicated to us that our personal lives are expected to be above suspicion. One of the responsibil-

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ities of our jobs is to live up to the ideal of what an exemplary American should be.

Deviations from that ideal that provided grounds for dismissal, the writer added, included flirting with communism, extramarital affairs, illegitimacy, and homosexuality.11

Protecting the Canal against loose morals and loose lips fostered dependence and conformity. Many U.S. observers, eager to paint the Zone as an aberration, noted its socialistic features: the PCC, which ran the Canal, the schools, the hospital, and the groceries and commissaries, also operated such mundane institutions as laundries, bakeries, electric-light factories, an official newspaper, a YMCA, a theater, a baseball league, and women’s clubs. Many of these were subsidized to keep prices low.12 There was no private property; Zonians rented their homes from the PCC. As a result, “there were no poor, no homeless, no crooks, no bums, and no transients,” one 1964 BHS senior recalled.13 Another effect of a standardized, safe economy and society, many noted, was a dull citizenry. A Zonian woman wrote to the Panama American, again to complain: “When they set the limits for the 10-mile Zone, they also fenced in the Zonian’s attitude.”14 A dean at the University of Panama in 1960 described the Zonians with stereotypical, albeit not wholly inaccurate, attributes:

The Zonians aren’t real Americans and they’re not Panamanians. They have never experienced the challenges of private enterprise. They live just like robots, part of the machinery, without ambition or superior restlessness. No wonder such people don’t understand us erratic, emotional Latins.15

What resulted, however, was not a nightmarish society—most Zonians made a better living than they would anywhere else—but a tenser version of how the “American dream” was fading back on the mainland. Civilian Canal workers—from all over the United States and performing a variety of engineering and service jobs—lived segregated from thousands of black West

13 Charlie Belden, E-mail interview by author, 2 May 2001.
Indians in the Zone. One author called the white part of the Zone “a kind of tropical Levittown.” It was a place where the mid-century tensions of Organization Man—the stifling of individual expression in a free society, the increasing sameness amid consumer choice, the continuing racial injustice despite rising tides of wealth—reached a breaking point.16

To add to their long-term tensions, Zonians were increasingly unsettled by a feeling that their patriotism was artificially stoked. By the 1950s and 1960s, as second and third generations dug their roots deeper in the Zone, the paradox was becoming ever clearer: Zonians were so ultra-nationalistic precisely because they felt cast out to the edges of U.S. nationality. Even leaving the United States to work on the Canal temporarily uprooted and disoriented many. “When he moves to the Zone,” reported the *Panama Canal Review* in 1954, “an employee cuts off himself, his wife, and his children from day-to-day contact with close relatives, from friends, from community life as he knew it in the States, and from job opportunities. The Zone employee is, in fact, an exile, and the typical Zone employee definitely feels like one.”17 Zonians, including children and teenagers, did vacation back to the United States every year, but often as tourists. One Zonian remembered that, because his parents had two months paid vacation per year, “by the time I was 16 I’d been to every state but Alaska and Hawaii.”18 Vacationers came back with an intensified but diffused vision of nationality. They loved the mainland, but were not of it. One teenage girl remembered, “I was an American nomad, going ‘home’ to the States to visit grandparents infrequently and with no sense of belonging, just of passing through.”19 And the longer U.S. citizens lived in the Zone, the more the paradox of their lives hardened into a duality—an attachment to the Zone made stronger because of the distance from the United States.

The entrenchment provoked strong emotions. A Class of 1964 alum of Balboa High School remembered years later that “being born and growing up in a country other than the United States, while still a U.S. citizen, evoked a kinship that is hard to understand, unless you experienced it firsthand.”20 Others grew more anxious at their lack of national grounding. One Zonian was

forever teased by mainland friends as “a man without a country.” One man raised in the Zone found its inhabitants rendered “somewhat alienated and insecure” by their self-consciousness as nationalists without a nation. A Zone policeman blamed Washington for the alienation. “We’re not ugly Americans. We’re lost Americans—lost because we’re the victims of internationalism.”

Despite their complaints, Zonians largely accepted and reinforced the worldview of the enclave. On this narrow strip, surrounded by sprawling, poor Panamanian cities, U.S. civilians preferred to recreate U.S. society as best they could rather than interact with Panamanians. Canal employees were not diplomats, enterprising “banana men,” or missionaries. They were fairly ordinary middle-class U.S. citizens with no special interest in foreign conquests, foreign lands, foreign cultures, or foreigners. They lived comfortably in bungalows, often single family homes, frequently with the luxury of Panamanian maids. By the 1950s the spread of air conditioners further kept Zonians in their homes and out of Panama. They rarely needed to leave the suburban ersatz of the Zone to work, shop, or be entertained. And but for a few exceptions, U.S. teachers did not set out to educate Panamanian children.

Zonian parents and educators long tried to discourage any contact with the dark dangers that allegedly lay beyond the sterile boundaries of Zone neighborhoods. A literature specifically written for the Zone, for instance, aimed to impress upon young readers’ minds the need for isolation. One of the first books Zonians had access to was called *Panama Pattie and Other Children*. This book of poems featured “Zonianized” fictional children, including the title character:

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Pat hasn’t been to the States at all
She hasn’t seen spring,
Or the red gold fall,
She hasn’t seen snow
Nor ice nor sleet,
And she seldom has shoes
On her pink little feet.
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*Panama Pattie* reflected the political socialization of Zonian toddlers. Like Pattie, young children came to know the United States as a foreign place and

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21 Jim Hicks, E-mail interview by author, 3 May 2001.
heard about it mostly from older siblings who had first-hand knowledge. The book celebrated these children as “special” U.S. citizens. It was all right, the book told them, to have one’s loyalties divided between the Zone and the mainland.

*Panama Pattie* also illustrated and reinforced the cautious relationship of small children to their tropical surroundings. The author sanctioned children’s curiosity by showing them interacting with exotic animals—sloths, buzzards, and marmosets and other monkeys—that sometimes wandered out of the jungle’s wild foliage and on to the Zone’s manicured lawns. But she also hinted that seeing these wild creatures was more than enough excitement: Pattie and her friends never touched them or explored the jungle. (That was best left to Boy Scout troops, of which there were many in Panama.) Further circumscribing the worldview of *Panama Pattie* was the total absence of West Indian or Panamanian children in the book.25

Another work of fiction, *Runaway Balboa*, used a cautionary tale to warn away older children from enticements beyond the Zone. Its main protagonist was Balboa, one of the locomotives—or “mules”—that pulled ships through the Canal’s locks. Perhaps like many children (and workers), Balboa grew bored with his literal one-track life. He longed to “run away and see the world!” One day he broke free from his rails and ran through “Spotless Town,” named so “because it looks so clean and neat.” He clumsily terrorized “the old Spanish Town where the natives live” on the way to his true destination, the jungle. Once there, his adventure turned awry. “The wild things of the Jungle grew every which way. Balboa found it very different from on the spick-and-span Canal where everything was in its proper place. He didn’t approve of it at all.” Balboa ate too much wild fruit and got a stomach ache. He scared off jungle-dwelling natives.

Most perilous, his bulky chassis got caught up in vines. The jungle’s animals, most likely representing what were in Zonian eyes the worst traits of tropical peoples, gathered around Balboa to enjoy his predicament. “The Crocodile grinned his cruel grin, the Parrot smiled scornfully, and the Monkeys sat in a semi-circle waiting to echo whatever the Parrot or Crocodile said, for they had never learned to think for themselves.” The story’s climax exploited fears of a cultural rapprochement with Panamanians—or worse, a dependence on them. Balboa “was badly frightened. He tried to keep a stiff upper lip before all those jeering creatures, for it would never do to let them

see a Panama Canal Mule cry!” Freed by a pelican who befriended him back on the locks (perhaps a Zonianized Panamanian), Balboa returned, chastened, to his patriotic duty on the Canal. After all, “the President” was to visit in a few days. “‘My exploring days are over,’ he said solemnly. ‘I’ve seen the world now and I like home best. And besides, I have my work to do.’”

Such tales taught Zonian children to appreciate adult Zonians’ anxieties about nationality, cultural prejudices, and social norms. “We have to remember,” said one Zonian history teacher, “that stateside youngsters away from home are the same as they would be back in Ohio or New Jersey. The main factor in their lives is their isolation, their unfamiliarity with the language and customs and, above all, the feeling of not belonging. They reflect their parents’ homesickness.”

Like adults, youths offered little resistance to the fenced-in culture of the Canal Zone. After the 1964 riots, Zonian teenagers breezily revealed how they accepted parental stereotypes of Panamanians as vice-ridden, indolent, and ungrateful. “My father says we’ll fix them good,” said a sixteen-year-old boy. “We’ll build a better canal somewhere else and leave them stuck with this one. They couldn’t run this alone in a million years.” “The truth is,” added another boy, “the Panamanians my father works with are nearly always late to work, they’re lazy, they don’t study to get ahead, and when you’re out working hard and you look for them, you’re likely to find them asleep under a tree. Let’s face it, they’re not like us.” Few Zonian students bothered to learn Spanish, and those who did refrained from using it.

Teenagers at Balboa High School, especially, considered themselves the guardians of Zone privilege. Herbert and Mary Knapp, two teachers at BHS, recalled that the U.S. flag hung in every classroom and that students recited the Pledge of Allegiance daily and “tattled to the principal if a student ‘forgot.’” Half of BHS’s students had military parents, and the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) was their pride and joy. The cadets were charged with the solemn hoisting of Old Glory. “Each morning,” remembered a 1964 senior, “the flag was raised, with a certain amount of pomp and circumstance, by the ROTC cadets. . . . Each evening, students stopped where they stood until the flag was lowered, folded and carted away for the

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29 Bruce Quinn, interview by author, tape recording, Panama City, Panama, 11 October 1999; Trevor Armbrister, “Panama: Why They Hate Us,” *Saturday Evening Post*, 7 March 1964, p. 77.
night.”\textsuperscript{31} As scholars of political socialization Robert Hess and Judith Torney have suggested, when situations call for the affirmation of group affiliation, youths resort to early stages of acquisition of national identity. In such instances, flags usually are “crucial points of focus for attachment.” Balboa High students were certainly attached. “When our flag flies we don’t feel so far from home,” explained a fifteen-year-old boy.\textsuperscript{32}

Below the conformist, all-American surface, some teens did make trouble. Reproducing yet another U.S. postwar social pattern, youths increasingly rebelled against stifling suburban conformity. The Knapps remembered that the Zone “had its share of reckless teenage drivers, runaways, drug abusers, drunks, and teenage pregnancies.”\textsuperscript{33} Authors using pseudonyms like “Worried Parent” penned letters to a local paper to grumble about delinquents. “The prevailing school spirit at BHS seems to be that of drunkenness and disregard of even elementary good behavior,” wrote “Concerned Parents.” Motorcycle groups and vandals crashed events “public or private, athletic or social.” To somehow cure them of their alienation, the worst offenders were secluded in mental health hospitals.\textsuperscript{34} A 1964 BHS senior remembered that eviction from the Zone “was always the solution for ‘problem teenagers’ in our little Utopia.”\textsuperscript{35}

The cities of the Republic of Panama, often a short walk for Zonians, were outlets for teenage restlessness. Prostitutes and marijuana were available there, but teenagers did not seem to commonly purchase them. “Alcohol was the drug of choice,” according to one BHS senior. “Most of us spent weekend evenings in Panama City in bars, casinos and nightclubs.” “If you could get your money on the bar or the counter you could drink,” concurred another. Parents, seeing their fears of delinquency juxtaposed with those about Panamanians, worried about teenagers crossing the “border” and purchasing services better suited to sailors than to high schoolers. “We have seen sons and daughters, often of respected families, passed out over tables in night spots, not only at Carnival time but most any Friday or Saturday night of the year.”\textsuperscript{36}

To avoid such embarrassments, adults reinforced teenagers’ enclave mentality. “Our parents won’t let us go into Panama City,” said one young girl.

\textsuperscript{31} Howe, “Remembrance.”
\textsuperscript{32} Hess and Torney, \textit{Political Attitudes}, p. 33; boy cited in Robbins, “Children,” p. 112.
\textsuperscript{35} Diane Linfors, E-mail interview by author, 2 May 2001.
\textsuperscript{36} Linfors and Belden interviews, both 2 May 2001; parents’ letter to the “Mail Box,” \textit{The Panama American}, 11 October 1958, p. 2.
“I can’t even go there with some of the older kids. It’s kind of a wide-open town. Anyone can drink or gamble or go to the dirty movies. So it wouldn’t do any good to have Panamanian friends if I couldn’t go to visit them. Besides, what have foreign kids really got in common with Americans?”

A catch-22, however, was at work: taught that Panama was forbidden, teenagers expressed their rebellion precisely by going there. Taking a chiva, or local bus, into Panama City was greatly exciting to many of them. They transposed the curiosity of the forbidden jungle they learned as children onto their encounters with the naughty transgressions in Panama City. As another 1964 senior recalled, “us neighborhood kids walked into Panama regularly and had fun haggling with Hindu and Chinese merchants for switch blade knives [sic]—very cool things when your [sic] a new teenager.” By 1964 the structural isolation of the Zone, the lessons about the dangers of whatever lay beyond it, and the social tensions within it had molded a protective yet aggressive cohort of youths.

When Panamanians started making highly publicized incursions into the Zone to plant Panamanian flags, therefore, it was civilian teenage Zonians who waited for them. Unlike the military, who had to report to base, civilians were under little physical control. And unlike their parents, teenagers, who could not be fired by the PCC, were under almost no control at all. (Military teens were more controlled: one remembered how, during the riots, “my dad restricted us to base. We could hear the gunfire from our quarters on base, ratty-tat-tat into the night.”) In the words of one BHS senior, they were “children (though we would have argued with the term!) not yet numbed by the ‘system.’”

In 1964, BHS students became the literal standard-bearers of U.S. national identity. When, in response to increasing Panamanian pressures to fly the Panamanian flag in the Zone, Zone authorities forbade Zone schools from flying the U.S. flag to avoid also having to fly the Panamanian flag, it seemed to many Zonians that Washington had finally abdicated sovereignty in the Zone. Defying the order, BHS students hoisted their own makeshift flag on their front yard. Teenagers were being more patriotic than their government wanted them to. “A North American Mother” expressed to a local paper her dismay at the disconnect in political socialization:

38 Charlie Belden, E-mail interview by author, 28 April 2001.
39 Kay Jones, E-mail interview by author, 2 May 2001; Howe, “Remembrance.”
This is just the saddest thing I’ve ever seen in my long life. American children walking with their flag, singing the ‘Star Spangled Banner,’ not loud, because the school they go to, supported by their government, is not allowed to fly their American flag—tears are in my eyes. Mob spirit is being engendered into our children instead of true patriotism and love of the United States of America.\textsuperscript{40}

In such an environment, parents and students pushed each other to a crescendo of patriotism. One Zonian father complained that the Panamanian “punks” and “hoodlums” who planted flags in the Zone were “fully instructed and urged into this action by mature adults.” Why should Zonians not do the same? Here was political socialization at its purest: he “directed” his seventeen-year-old son “to enlist the assistance of his friends, and should these Panamanian students attempt to repeat their stunt, my son and his colleagues are to descend upon them.”\textsuperscript{41} Most teenagers, it seems, were acting out the conformism of the Zone and proving their patriotism to adults. Parents, in turn, proudly acted through their sons and daughters. When, right before the riots, the students held a two-day vigil around their flag, parents were there with sandwiches, sodas, blankets, and moral support. So were local citizens’ groups such as the Elks Club and the Veterans of Foreign Wars.\textsuperscript{42} One senior “remember[ed] wondering where the teachers were. Was there quiet complicity to our student charge?” Another senior asked her parents if she could join her friends in guarding the flagpole. “My own mother said ‘Go for it. Someone needs to defend the flag and better the students than the adults in this case’” (see Figure 1). To excuse her absence, her mother wrote her a note: “Vicki was sick today, as all GOOD Americans should be.”\textsuperscript{43} For a brief moment, the tactics of “good” and “bad” teenagers merged as they assumed significant agency and clarity of purpose.

\textbf{Forbidden Fruits: Panama, Its Teenagers, and Their Perceptions of the Zone}

Panamanian teens, formed by an even more didactic and consensual political socialization than Zonians, fully matched the patriotism of the Balboa students. Panama’s educational and political cultures blended almost seamlessly, and together they propelled children into even more potentially violent confrontations with Zonians.

\textsuperscript{40} Jules Dubois, \textit{Danger over Panama}\ (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1964), pp. 244-45.
\textsuperscript{41} “Whuz Wright” letter to the “Mail Box,” \textit{The Panama American}, 6 May 1958, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{43} Diamond, “Personal Memories”; Howe, “Remembrance.”
High school students in Panama joined more politically serious university students as the emotional center of the nation’s identity. As in many Latin American countries, student movements impressed the general public with their sincerity, idealism, and willingness to face physical danger. Unlike the church or the military, students were not corrupted by property, brutality, or contraband, and they shouldered the leadership of a poorly educated population. Furthermore, Panamanian teenage politics were highly masculinized. While Zonian teenage boys made up 58 percent of their cohorts, Panamanian boys made up 81 percent of theirs. However expressed—"virility," "a
vertical attitude,” “bared breasts”—Panama’s youth best displayed the macho virtues that legitimized politics.44

Like Zonians, Panamanians were unusually active in politics because they needed to define their national identity, and teenagers’ lives reflected that struggle. Teenagers grew up with a strong suspicion that Zonians had taken whatever was missing from their nationality. Their nationalism lacked an indigenous foundation; resentment of U.S. power largely defined it. A 1947 poll of students’ sources of pride found that the most common one was “national pride.” “They are proud of being proud!” exclaimed the poll-takers.45 Even more so than their Zonian counterparts, therefore, Panamanian teenagers found significant solace in the arms of nationalism. Planting Panamanian flags in the Zone became a revered semiotic act.

The National Institute (IN) taught nationalism and anti-Americanism to young, bright, ambitious teenagers. It was these teens who marched over to BHS on 9 January 1964 and sparked the riots. The IN was technically in Panama City, but literally a stone’s throw away from the Zone. Since 1909, it provided a quality education to talented students of modest means, and its list of alumni included important Panamanians.46 The IN spawned the first student union in Panama, formed after a humiliating occupation of the streets of Panama by U.S. soldiers in 1918.47 Its graduates prompted the building of the University of Panama (UP) a generation later, and both institutions developed a close relationship: UP professors taught at the IN and prepared the high schoolers for college. They also prepared them for politics. Proudly known as the “sphinxes” or the “eagles” of the nation, IN teenagers ritualized the handling of the flag, exalted the anthem, and protested against the Zone.48

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46 For example, historians Ernesto Castillero and Humberto Ricord, Canal treaties negotiator Juan Antonio Tack, statesmen Jorge Illueca, Manuel Solis Palma, and Ernesto de la Guardia, author Joaquín Beleño, and the infamous Manuel Noriega were all from the IN; Mary Alice Abrego Hayward, “Political Opinions of Panamanian Elite High School Youth: A Comparison of 1961-63 Students to 1989 Students” (master’s thesis, University of Texas at Austin, 1990).


48 For explicitly nationalistic teaching materials, see M. M. Alba, Estampas panameñas (Panama City: Departamento de Bellas Artes & Publicaciones, Ministerio de Educación, 1959).
Confirming studies of political socialization, the mostly lower middle class students who attended the IN easily internalized dominant political values. Institute students, again like Zonian teenagers, accepted socialization. They were not paid or manipulated into agitation. They were certainly not “professional” students, as several Zonians charged. Ascanio Arosemena, for instance, the first Panamanian fatality of the riots, was best known as the captain of his soccer team. He was no political activist. Institute students also had personal resentments against the Zone, mostly that of being kept out of it. Several of those who sparked the 1964 riots later recalled how as children they tried to pluck mangoes from trees or pick them off the ground in the Zone, only to be chased away by Zone police. They hated such parsimoniousness. They remembered the “tall, blond, blue-eyed” policemen who stopped vehicles without Zone license plates, did not let certain buses go to the Zone, and refused to speak Spanish. And, most often, struggles between teenagers were struggles between teenage boys: young Panamanians commonly resented U.S. soldiers who “took our women,” and radio commentators often derided Panamanian women who attended dances at U.S. posts. Overall, Zonians made Panamanians feel colonialism “in flesh and blood,” as one former IN student put it. The raising of an eight-foot cyclone fence around the Zone in late 1959 was an insult more damaging than Zonian authorities could have imagined because it rendered the fruits of the Zone—literal and figurative—even more forbidden. Panamanians called it the “fence of shame.”

Perhaps the clearest and most influential youthful Panamanian perception of the Zone was Joaquín Beleño’s 1950 book, *Luna verde*. The first novel ever set in the Canal Zone and a classic of teenage literature, *Luna verde* was a smash immediately upon publication. It won major awards and was translated into French, Russian, Chinese, Slavic languages, and English (but never published in the United States). It became compulsory reading for high schoolers, notably among those who started the 1964 riots. It is still widely read in Panama.

50 Jackson, “The Martyrs of 1964.”
51 “Radio Digest No.1,” attached to Duncan Mackay of the embassy letter to William E. Price of the Department of State, Panama City, Panama, 20 November 1956, folder 1956-U.S.I.A., box 3, Office of Central American and Panamanian Affairs (Panama), ARA Lot 60D667, RG 59, U.S. National Archives; Cesar Villareal, interview by author, tape recording, Panama City, Panama, 15 October 1999. Also Luis Vergara, interview by author, tape recording, Panama City, Panama, 27 October 1999.
52 Jackson, “The Martyrs of 1964.”
The novel denounces the disruptions brought about by the infusion of wealth into Panama during World War II.54 The protagonist, Ramón de Roquebert—white, of partly French heritage—leaves the interior for Panama City when his grandfather is threatened with expropriation from the lands near Río Hato where the U.S. government is building a base. Despite resenting U.S. disruption of his bucolic life, Roquebert takes a job in the Zone working for the PCC. And through his friendships with U.S. citizens, he climbs up the ranks of Zone labor and loses compassion for Panamanian and West Indian laborers. He is torn, however: he cannot stomach the indecencies of a materialistic economy: “Everything lives subordinated to the dollar, corruptor of all that is noble, human and dignified.”55 Disgusted at how greed consumes him, he joins the student movement. Shortly after, he dies heroically in an anti-U.S. protest at the hands of Panamanian policemen. Beleño explained that he highlighted the inhumanity and rapaciousness that greenbacks awakened in Panamanians—a madness captured in the title, “green moon.”56 More broadly he captured the ambivalence of young Panamanians who longed for the social peace and the wealth of Zonians yet could not tolerate their materialist values and racial hierarchies.

As an artifact of political socialization like Runaway Balboa, Luna verde presented youths with a mission to transform their various resentments against the United States into a self-sacrificial quest for national identity. The undertaking was greatly attractive to young Panamanians seeking peer, social, and parental approval through dramatic heroics. Fueled by narratives like Beleño’s, many believed in the catharsis of violence. One IN student recalled how, during the riots against U.S. Army troops, “the bullets of imperialism could not kill me.” At seventeen years old, he said, “self-immolation for the Fatherland did not seem like much.”57

By the 1950s, however, the dangers of socializing teenagers into politics became apparent. Just as Zonian parents pushed their children into civil disobedience but regretted their delinquency, so the government of Panama fostered a student radicalism from which it now feared competition. National Assembly Deputy Aquilino Boyd and other prominent Panamanians led flag-planting charges into the Zone in 1958. Boyd also led high school stu-

57 Villareal interview.
dents to the edge of the Zone on 3 November 1959. There, fighting broke out when a sixteen year old boy wrapped his flag around a Zone policeman’s head and said, “it’s dirty, now.”

Some officials were none too happy about this state of affairs. For one, the students were one-upping the government. In 1958, for instance, Minister of Foreign Relations Miguel Moreno wrote his president, arguing that they must take a strong stand when U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower’s brother, Milton, came to visit, because “the country must not get the impression that student groups are the only ones to protest.” After the riots of 1959, elder Panamanian statesmen privately acknowledged that they were negligent in holding back the rioters.

However, they agreed to keep quiet about it and to “demonstrate emotion” to the U.S. government instead. In other words, while they eventually put down the rioters, at the same time they sanctioned the street-level strategies of teenagers. “We believe that demonstrations of this kind are necessary and useful for the Panamanian cause,” Boyd and the other organizers of the march declared after the riots. “We congratulate the people of the capital city for their lofty and patriotic conduct.”

As with Zonian teenagers, political socialization among Panamanian youths was reaching a breaking point in the early 1960s. Governments were originally pleased to have young citizens be so patriotic and active in politics. Especially since teenage protests were aimed at a foreign government, private citizens and government officials were in tune with each other’s goals, at least in public. Yet as the core of political activity increasingly moved from the boardrooms of adults to the streets and the schools of adolescents, both societies seemed to have created monsters that their governments would one day have to control.

**SUFFER THE CHILDREN? RIOT DIPLOMACY**

In 1964, the challenge to policymakers in both the United States and Panama was to capitalize on the actions of teenage agents while reducing...
their political independence. During and after the riots in January, officials realized how much teenagers assumed the passion and violence of social tensions invested in the flag issue. While the U.S. government firmly re-established its authority over Zonian youths, Panamanian leaders had invested far more political meaning into their teenagers and seemed hesitant to stop them. Regardless of their motivations, both governments continued to treat their teenage population as swords to be brandished or sheathed rather than youths to be protected.

BHS students committed little violence after the scuffle on their high school grounds, but became objects of debate and policy in the weeks that followed the riots. Some U.S. magazines focused their attention on senior James Jenkins. It was he who had prompted a vigil at BHS by climbing its pole and attaching a U.S. flag to it. To U.S. observers he was the quintessential riot diplomat because he walked the line between “good” and “bad” teen political behavior: with the best of intentions, he created the conditions for violence. One classmate described Jenkins as “neither bad nor misbehaved.” Jimmy was the kind of boy whose mother preferred that he not “go into Panama . . . because you get robbed and beaten.” She described her son as “a good boy, decent and kind and generous. He never tore any flag. He is a good American and a Christian.” True enough, Jenkins stood out neither as an overachiever or a troublemaker. “Jimmy was what you might today call a nerd,” said one fellow student. “He played the accordion, thin and lanky, with large ‘dumbo’ ears. He was 100% ‘gringo,’ not a ‘half-breed’ like some of us.” Another described him as “an awkward kid without much going for him.” He was, she said, “at the right or wrong place at the right time.”

Jenkins was an average teenager who found a temporary spotlight in politics. He was an ROTC sergeant whose patriotic zeal earned the public approval of his father. Appearing in a Life magazine photo sitting on cases of U.S. Army tear gas ammunition and smoking a cigarette, he looked like James Dean. He talked like him, too: “I guess you could say I’m the guy that started this whole thing,” he told Life. Jenkins also suggested that he regretted the loss of U.S. but not Panamanian lives. Most interesting, he made clear that his actions were in reverence for social norms, not in defiance of

61 Bob Fisher, E-mail interview by author, 3 May 2001; mother cited in Ambrister, “Why They Hate Us,” p. 77.
62 Robbins, “Children,” p. 110; William Singleton, E-mail interview with author, 16 May 2001; Linfors interview.
them: “I think we’ve won our point. I sure hope this proves that teen-agers aren’t juvenile delinquents and that we’re patriotic.”

The Panamanian press also focused on Jenkins, but with an unrestrained ire that indicted much of U.S. society in its sweep. *La Prensa* called the teen “a seed of evil and cruelty . . . his soul is filled with pus, refuse and incurable pustules. . . . The face you see here caused 22 deaths [sic]. . . . With his dirty claws he tore our sacred flag. Jenkins is a cruel monster who has inherited all the viciousness of the Zonians. His is the arrogance of a Southern slaver.” A week later the paper addressed him directly, commenting on the *Life* photograph. “That plays boys [sic] pose, that Rock and Roll-esque disdain and that criminal indifference, you inherited it all from your ‘Zonian’ ancestors, those immigrants, arrogant and conceited, who never learned the difference between right and wrong; between respect and vassalage; between justice and injustice.”

Other Panamanians charged that the Ku Klux Klan was behind Jimmy’s action and that cigarette makers paid him to smoke in the *Life* photograph. Given Panama’s politicization of its young, no one suggested that it was inappropriate to demonize a seventeen year old who had committed no crime.

In dealing with Zonians, Washington quickly decided that freedom of speech was less important than the losses in prestige that it might suffer in the eyes of the world following any further civil disobedience. Under orders from Secretary of State Dean Rusk, the Zone’s authorities immediately raised Panamanian flags in all its schools and warned Zonians to cease all criticism and “control their children.” A few adults protested and were soon fired. Jenkins mysteriously left for the mainland. Classmates remember him being expelled or, as they put in terms that speak of their sense of objectification, “deported” or “shipped,” by the PCC. Zonian voices abruptly fell silent. For the teenagers who remained, “we were advised to

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64 Armbrister, “Why They Hate Us,” p. 79.
68 Since the 1950s the PCC reorganized from an independent government agency into a non-profit business corporation. Knapp and Knapp, *Red, White, and Blue Paradise*, p. 43.
stay out of Panama. As one could live in the Zone totally self contained, it was easy enough to do so." The loss was indeed minimal: one major disappointment was missing the celebrations of Carnival in Panama City that year, “the traditional ‘rite of passage’” for many teenagers. “We returned to our lives as young people,” recalled a senior, “concerned about the prom and [our] next economics test.” The post-riot cooling down was a sharp reminder that Zonians and their teenagers had taken political socialization too far for their government.

In Panama, however, extricating teenagers from the process of diplomacy was not only more difficult but not entirely in the interest of the Panamanian government. Some high school students had lost their lives in the riots, and no one denied their daring and patriotism in confronting the “cannons,” as some said, of the mightiest nation on earth. Protesters as young as fourteen died in the riots—as well as younger children who were in the crossfire. The memory of the “martyrs of 1964” had to be respected. Complicating matters further for the Panamanian government, the IN students lost control of the political process to older pre-adults and adults. Mere hours after the riots had begun, the national student federation (FEP), run by university students, held a mass gathering on the UP campus. FEP leaders together with union representatives, professionals, and intellectuals called for a break in diplomatic relations with the United States, a revocation of the 1903 Treaty, and the dismantling of the Canal Zone.

As the university students marched in front of the IN students, so Panama’s president hurried to the front of them all. According to both his political allies and opponents at the time, Roberto Chiari (whose family owned La Prensa, the paper that excoriated Jenkins) was genuinely offended at the U.S. “aggression” against Panama’s youths, yet he remained aware of the political might of the university groups. He acted quickly to outdo them. Minister of Education Manuel Solís Palma remembered that at around 9 P.M. on the first day of rioting he met with Chiari at the Presidential Palace. The president was “outraged” that young Panamanians were dying at the hands of U.S. soldiers. He considered calling his cabinet together to discuss tactical options. Solís Palma was wary of both the radicalism of students and the conservatism of cabinet members. He wanted to suspend relations with Washington before any controversy emerged. Chiari followed his advice and made the announcement

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70 Linfors, Fisher, and Geret DePiper, E-mail interviews by author, respectively 2, 3, and 5 May 2001.
71 Fisher interview; Diamond, “Personal Memories.”
73 Manuel Solís Palma, interview by author, tape recording, Panama City, Panama, 28 October 1999.
the following morning. He then invited various student leaders to the Palace, where he posed for photographs with the torn flag. U.S. observers ridiculed Chiari as a pawn of “political delinquents.” Yet the president was simply following the tradition of give-and-take between the government and teenagers that had long marked Panama’s political socialization. Within a few weeks, he and Solís cut the school year short and fanned out 95 percent of teachers around the country to teach Panamanians “the government’s actions.”74

Even after both countries restored relations in April 1964, Chiari remained responsive to students. There was, for instance, another flag incident. When General Douglas MacArthur died, U.S. officials lowered both the U.S. and Panamanian flags at half-mast, as Panamanians did when they mourned their own heroes. But Panamanian students would not hear of it and protested. Chiari buckled and demanded that the Panamanian flag be hoisted. U.S. administrators indulged him, but found his actions “lamentable and petty.”75

The “textbook affair” during that summer also indicated that socialization remained vigorous in the schools. As it did every few years, the Ministry of Education updated a civics textbook for grade schoolers called Educación cívica. The authors admitted they were inspired by the January riots to rewrite a 1964-1965 edition that glorified planting the Panamanian flag in the Zone, and featured a cartoon of a GI machine-gunning a Panamanian youth in front of a peacefully assembled crowd (see Figure 2).76 The Archbishop of Panama called it “godless,” a doubtful accusation since it carried the same religious exhortations as previous editions. The U.S. ambassador too complained.77 In response, Solís Palma explained that the previous minister had approved the textbook, not him. The authors had another story. They claimed that the minister told them to rewrite it with an anti-U.S. tone

74 Ahumada, 9 de enero, p. 15; Summary of Panama City Riots, 16 mm, 1 reel, Panama Canal Commission, 1964, NWDNM(m)-185.4, RG 185, U.S. National Archives; CIA report to the National Security Adviser, 15 January 1964, folder Panama-Riots Vol. II Part D 1/64-2/64, box 64, Country File, Latin America, National Security Files, Lyndon B. Johnson Library; speech by Solís Palma, Panama Hilton Hotel, Panama City, 13 February 1964, Serie 9 de enero 1964, Expedientes No. 9 Sucesos del 9 de Enero 1964, Archivo del Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, República de Panamá.
77 Southern Command telegram to Department of State, 2 July 1964, folder POL 23-8 PAN 1/1/64, box 2560, Central Files 1964-1966, RG 59, U.S. National Archives; Ambassador Jack Vaughn telegram to Secretary of State, 6 June 1964, folder POL PAN-US 5/1/64, box 2564, Central Files, 1964-1966, RG 59, U.S. National Archives.
after the riots. Solís Palma pledged to remove the textbook, but months later it still lay on school shelves.  

By the summer and fall of 1964, however, Chiari’s successor-elect, Marco “The Rifle” Robles, restored the rule of elite adults over largely lower middle class students. Robles gathered that there had been enough martyrdom and that Cuba-trained agitators and communists were exploiting the martyrdom of January for their own sinister purposes. This was no longer about teenagers at all. La Prensa now criticized “confused rebels” who held July 4th protests, and drew a fuzzy distinction between the “patriotism” of January and the “chaos” now caused by students. It warned, “Repression by competent authorities needs to be unleashed this time with-

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out hesitation.”

It was. Robles’s security forces beat and arrested students for the rest of 1964 and 1965. U.S. embassy officials “wryly noted . . . the change in public and governmental attitude toward the rioters,” who were now “regarded as hoodlums.” As with Zonians, Panamanian students’ sudden starring role as geopoliticians had played itself out and they returned to their former billing as a supporting presence—“hoodlums.”

CONCLUSION

The riots of 1964 revealed just how deep could be the involvement of ordinary teenagers in international relations when they found themselves in geopolitically sensitive situations. Although Zonian teenagers receded from the political scene after that year, Panamanian teenagers continued to demand the devolution of the Canal. Thirty-five years later, with many of the rioters in prominent positions in Panamanian society and Zonians but a historical footnote, Panama gained full sovereignty over the Canal Zone. Up to 1964, however, the roles of both groups of pre-adults were similar. Youths in Balboa and Panama City lived close physically but far from each other culturally and materially. The tension fostered an isolation that teenagers of the Canal learned to cherish and teenagers of Panama learned to hate. In both societies, adolescents accepted their parents’ perceptions. Yet they transformed them into more unpredictable and violent forces. Adults on both sides faced the consequences of having allowed their children to develop into ideological time bombs. As a historical case study of political socialization, therefore, the 1964 riots suggested that teaching political norms could effectively shape behaviors, but also that teenagers exercised enough agency so that their actions could not easily be controlled.

As an examination of the broader relations between teenagers and international relations, moreover, the riots perhaps most interestingly revealed pre-adults to be a particularly clear prism through which to view the relationship between social norms and political strategy, or, in slightly different terms, between ideology and diplomacy. The role of pre-adults in diplomacy may reveal a largely unexplored nexus where social, cultural, and psychological realities had a fleeting impact on international relations but a persistent meaning for the intercultural relations that were so important to diplomacy.

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79 “Rebeldía desorientada,” La Prensa, 7 July 1964.
80 First Secretary of the Embassy Henry Taylor airgram to Department of State, 10 July 1964, folder POL 2 General Reports & Statistics PAN 7/1/64, box 2557, Central Files 1964-1966, RG 59, U.S. National Archives.