

POLITICO



Panamanians celebrate at the Panama Canal transfer ceremony in Panama City on Dec. 31, 1999. | AP Photo

Panama takes control of the Canal, Dec. 31, 1999

By **ANDREW GLASS** | 12/30/2016 11:31 PM EST

At noon on this day in 1999, the U.S. government, in keeping with a pair of treaties signed on Sept. 7, 1977, by President Jimmy Carter and Omar Torrijos, commander of Panama's National Guard and the country's de facto ruler, turned over control of the Panama Canal to the Panamanians. Torrijos

had seized power in a 1968 coup.

Throngs of Panamanians celebrated the transfer of the strategic 51-mile waterway that connects the Atlantic Ocean with the Pacific Ocean. The canal remains one of the chief revenue sources for the Caribbean nation.

Carter headed a 29-member U.S. delegation in a ceremony that had taken place in Panama City on Dec. 14 so that it would not interfere with year-end millennial celebrations. President Bill Clinton was notably absent as was Madeleine Albright, the secretary of state. "It is yours," the former president said.

The 1977 treaties abrogated the Hay-Bunau Varilla Treaty of 1903 under which Panama granted the United States the right to build and operate the canal, including a five-mile strip of land on either side of the cut, in exchange for an annual payment. Under the new deal, the United States also retains a permanent right to defend the canal from any threat that interferes with its service to ships of all nations.

Although the Senate ratified the treaties by a one-vote margin in 1978, they remained a source of controversy among many conservatives.

Sens. Strom Thurmond (R-S.C.) and Jesse Helms (R-N.C.) viewed the pacts as a surrender of a valuable U.S. strategic asset to a hostile regime. They were unable, however, to persuade President Ronald Reagan to abrogate them. In 1976, in his nearly successful bid for the GOP presidential nomination, Reagan denounced the idea of turning over the canal to Panamanian control.

Earlier in 1999, Rep. Helen Chenoweth-Hage (R-Idaho) introduced House Joint Resolution 77, which, if enacted, would have declared the treaties invalid because the Spanish text allegedly differed from the English one.



HISTORY DEPT.

The Problem With Trump's Admiration of General Patton

By ARTHUR ALLEN

The canal, which links the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, officially opened on Aug. 15, 1914, when the SS Ancon passed through it. Since then, nearly a million ships have passed through the waterway. Ships pay tolls to use the canal, based on each vessel's size and cargo volume. The most expensive toll for canal passage to date was charged on April 14, 2010 to the cruise ship Norwegian Pearl, which paid \$375,600. The smallest toll — 36 cents — was paid by explorer-author Richard

Halliburton, who swam through the canal in 1928.

A new third set of locks opened for commercial traffic on June 26, 2016. The original locks, now over 100 years old, are projected to continue operating indefinitely.

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