

Americans' influence likely to last in Panama With the canal turnover days away, Panamanians view U.S. departure with joy, worry
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Publication Date: **December 29, 1999** Page: **1** Section: **NEWS** Edition: **FINAL**

PANAMA CITY, PANAMA - Shania Twain's country-pop fills a bustling avenue where street merchants push perfumes, Pokemon toys and \$10 T-shirts depicting U.S. wrestler Steve "Stone Cold" Austin.

Down the street, a Panamanian child swings a Toy Story 2 Happy Meal prize as she passes a vendor selling sausage on a stick. Blocks away, fishermen speak frankly about global economics from a sunny spot overlooking a skyline that resembles Miami's.

Days before control of the Panama Canal is officially transferred to the Panamanian government from the United States, much of the talk on the street ranges from Panama's renewed sovereignty to the indelible marks the United States has made on Panama's physical and cultural landscapes. Though the vestiges of imperialism will disappear with the handover of the canal, a U.S. lifestyle is pervasive here.

"Panama hasn't known another type of lifestyle other than the American lifestyle," one Panamanian government employee said. "They've always been here."

That's why many Panamanians have conflicting views of the U.S. departure.

To generations of Panamanians, U.S. control of the Canal Zone was an affront. Many are celebrating autonomy from the United States with a national holiday this week. Billboards and graffiti trumpet the occasion with sayings such as "The Canal is for Everyone," "The Canal is Ours" and "Sovereignty."

But many Panamanians say they worry that economic opportunities will leave along with U.S. citizens.

"People are for this sovereignty, but you can't eat sovereignty. You need money," said a Panamanian government employee whose four sisters are married to U.S. residents.

The United States helped form Panama in 1903 and was crucial in ensuring its independence from Colombia, said Don Coerver, a professor of Latin American history at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth.

The U.S. legacy takes several shapes - from the consumer economy to lingering resentment about restrictions on citizens of Panama in the Canal Zone to anger about the destruction that resulted from the U.S. invasion of Panama 10 years ago, when U.S. troops toppled the government of Gen. Manuel Noriega.

The tangible legacies - the canal, government facilities and military installations - are being turned over to Panama, and are rapidly changing.

The former Canal Zone was a 50-mile stretch of land on both sides of the canal, controlled by the United States and inhabited mostly by U.S. workers. In the transition to Panamanian control, the once-pristine zone has become prime real estate.

"It's amazing," said Lennie Tristano of Pennsylvania, who was stationed in Panama during the 1970s and returned for this week's changeover. "You would never have seen billboards or McDonald's in the old Canal Zone."

Some military quarters at the former Albrook Air Force Base are being converted to private housing ranging from apartments to mansions. The airstrip is now a small airport serving private aircraft such as tourist planes.

Panama will try to find investors for about 90,000 acres and about 5,000 buildings that the United States is leaving behind, officials said.

At one point, 50,000 U.S. citizens lived in Panama. A decade ago, more than 11,000 members of the U.S. military were stationed there. Now, a few thousand U.S. citizens live there.

"You are going to find lots of empty buildings," said Ambler Moss, former U.S. ambassador to Panama.

The social, cultural and economic ties between the countries will be slow to change. They are obvious in the family trees of Panamanian-Americans, nightly Spanish-dubbed television shows and the U.S. currency that boosts Panama's economy.

"In Panama there are American products, and we have the U.S. dollar," said Rodrigo Molina, a maritime/commercial lawyer in Panama City, the nation's capital.

The canal spurred growth in services, technology and communications to support the international waterway. Panama City's financial sector has been described as a little Switzerland, boasting more than 100 international banks. Panama's Free Zone of Colon is the biggest free trade zone in the Western Hemisphere.

"Panama advanced very fast. It wasn't a progression," said Ramon Jimenez Velez, a Panamanian columnist and a professor of communications at Columbus University.

Panama's agricultural regions didn't advance as quickly. Clay houses and primitive dirt roads still characterize parts of the country's interior. Even in Panama City's Casco Viejo, pockets of tenements coexist near elaborately restored colonial European houses along narrow brick streets. At the ruins of one building, Spanish graffiti decries the American presence: "Titere del imperialismo yanky," or "Puppet of the imperialist Yankee."

But many Panamanians - even some who have deep patriotic feelings - acknowledge that the United States helped create the country's society of consumers. The U.S. citizens passed along the notion that with hard work, one can build a more prosperous future.

"That's part of the U.S. American dream," Velez said.

Across Panama City, streets are lined with signs for internationally known banks such as Chase Manhattan and Citibank. Food

franchises such as KFC, Outback Steakhouse and TGI Friday's vie for customers. Shoppers can buy bluejeans at Moda Saks or Sears.

"It's like the United States," said Henry Alberto, a 27-year-old Colombian immigrant who said he makes a good living selling American wrestling shirts in Panama.

"It's not as impoverished as other Third World countries. I think the U.S. has had a positive influence on the economy," said Victor Neil, 31, a Panamanian-American who lives in Fort Worth.

The country has a bilingual population, and it is not uncommon for people among Panama's elite to have U.S. business or graduate degrees.

"It's unusual to find a family here that doesn't have ties to family in the United States," said Clayton Schmitt, a retired American living in Chiriqui, a rural Panamanian province.

With the vast ties, some worry about diminished economic opportunities with the departure of U.S. citizens who rented apartments in Panama City, spent their money in the city's Avenida Central commercial district and employed Panamanian workers.

"There are a lot of humble people who worked with the Americans who have left. We are left more humble because we have no jobs," said Luis Alberto, 25, who makes \$280 a month distributing beer in the Cabo Verde neighborhood.

He said that many Panamanians living in the apartments there cleaned houses for U.S. citizens. A maid might be paid \$300 a month working five days a week for a U.S. family but will make only \$100 a month working six days a week for a Panamanian family.

Still, many Panamanians say they are ready for Panama to start a new chapter in its history. This time, they say, Panama's relationship with the United States will be an economic partnership.

Pedro Pacheco, 42, lost his \$11.69-an-hour job as a mechanic at a U.S. military base in 1998. Yet he said he is touched by the symbolism of the changeover.

"I'm proud that we are going to receive what belonged to us," he said as he added training wheels to his son's bicycle and watched workers place bleachers for ceremonies to be conducted near a ticking clock that marks the hours left until the changeover. The clock is next to the monument of U.S. engineer George W. Goethals, who helped design the canal.

Sitting by the monument, Pacheco said that when the area was part of the Canal Zone, Panamanians couldn't walk through it without being questioned by U.S. authorities. Today, he and his children can spend a relaxing Sunday there and stroll across a street to rent a copy of the latest James Bond flick from a Blockbuster video store.

"It's going to be a new experience," he said.