

Counsel for Foreign Relations

Our men
in Three Lakes
discuss
our problem
in Panama.

BY GEORGE VUKELICH

They were sitting around at the American Legion Bar up in Three Lakes the other night—"just toasting the Boys of Zimmer" is the way Steady Eddy puts it—and they got to discussing the most recent failed attempt to oust the Panamanian strongman Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega.

"Well, you know," Gene the bartender was saying, "at least Bush and his guys are on the right track here. When Carter was in there, he and those wimpy liberals were giving away the Panama Canal and trying to guilt trip us all because we were Americans and he was from outer space somewhere.

"The trouble in this Noriega deal is that he should be shot, and our government says yeah, they agree with that, but under the law we can't do that. I mean, we are talking one of the biggest drug dealers in the history of the whole universe, and our hands are tied to stop him. And who tied our hands? We did! God, it's like Carter never left office.

"They were on TV—Baker and Cheney and Scowcroft—and all of them are talking about how there's a presidential executive order that bars the CIA from political assassinations and how the Senate Intelligence Committee objects to associating with any plotters who might even be thinking of assassinating Noriega.

"I mean, get real. Reagan dropped a bomb on Khadafy's kitchen, and although it didn't kill him, you haven't heard boo from Khadafy since. I mean, we're telling the world we want Noriega out, these guys try to get Noriega out, and we're sitting around with our fingers up our noses watching the *beisbol!*

"So these guys are caught out there with their pants down and no backup from Uncle Sam. I mean, it's the Bay of Pigs all over again, only these guys aren't going to wind up in Miami. Then, surprise, surprise: There's old Noriega on the tube, holding a statue of Jesus and announcing to the world that he is ordering the execution of his disloyal army officers. Are we serious people or what?"

Gene waited for a reaction from his customers, all two of them: the good priest and the good doctor.

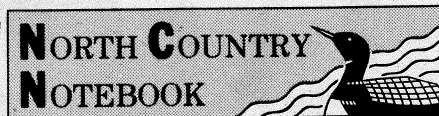
"Well, sir," Doc said, "we haven't heard such outrage since last week when the Toronto Blue Jays were complaining about Ricky Henderson

stealing everything but the clubhouse towels and their retractable dome.

"I didn't know that about Noriega clutching a statue of Jesus. My, talk about photo opportunities. Even our Old Gringo never went that far when he was in the White House doing the media. Oh sure, he'd clutch a flag now and then or a warmup jacket from the World Series or the Super Bowl, but it takes some kind of *cojones* to clutch God.

"I realize that the true church, like crabgrass, is all over the planet, and I will defer in such ecclesiastical matters to our esteemed friend on the next barstool, the Vatican's station chief in our little community, which otherwise could be called godforsaken. Which community, by the by, no longer deserves any kind of station because it no longer has any kind of train.

"Does it not seem passing strange that George Bush, when he was head of the CIA, employed Gen. Noriega as what they like to call a CIA 'asset'? And now that George Bush is president, he would like to bury not only that old relationship but, indeed, old Gen.



Noriega as well?"

Behind the bar, Gene threw a bar rag up toward the ceiling and it floated down, like an unweighted penalty flag, marking the general area of the specific infraction.

"The state trusts this man," Gene said to Father Himmelsbach. "It gives him a license to steal from sick people who don't know any better because they can't think straight, and what the state should really do is lock him up and make sure he doesn't get near the bookmatches. I mean, all kidding aside, aren't we talking treason here? I don't mean we. I mean him!"

Father Himmelsbach got that look he gets when the trout are on the rise and the Lutherans are not on the stream.

"Indeed, sir," Father Himmelsbach said. "You have hit the head on the nail. That is what he's talking: treason. And, if I may offer an observation from a lifetime of bearing witness, he is

talking the most treasonable treason since the traitor Perini promised us he wasn't going to move the Milwaukee Braves anywhere, and then moved them to Atlanta."

Gene threw the bar rag again, this time at Father Himmelsbach. It missed.

"This town's in terrible shape," Gene said. "We got a doctor who's a commie. We got a priest who's a joker—"

"—And we also got," Doc said, "a bartender who could pitch for his beloved Cubbies next year. What I'm trying to say is that we've got yet another president who has put out another contract on a foreign leader and what the congress is really saying is: 'You gotta find some better hitters!'"

"You can't beat fun at the old ball park," Father Himmelsbach said to Gene and passed back his rag.

Gene caught it on the fly and went for the brandy. ■

George Vukelich reads selections from North Country Notebook Sunday nights at 8 on Wisconsin Public Radio, WERN (88.7 FM).