

Uncle Sam Exits Canal in Battle Fatigues - Not Dress Blues

I was struck as I watched the news as the United States Army ceremoniously turned over the last American base in the former Panama Canal Zone to the Panamanian government.

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The army brass were decked out in jungle battle fatigues, no dress blues, no traditional army ceremonial change of command with honor, just a drab blur of military battle fatigues marching into history after nearly one hundred years of a proud history in Panama. Where were the brass bands, the large massing of troops, the dignitaries, where was American pride? It surely was not in evidence at this ceremony nor has it been as the end of a proud American Era in Panama draws to a close.

My mind turned to another historical withdrawal, that of the British from Hong Kong. What fanfare, what building crescendo as the turn over approached. What high level participation! What pomp and ceremony! There was the typical British withdrawal with pride, withdrawal with honor.

What a contrast as we see the United States demonstrate its withdrawal from a historical presence that brought untold benefits in terms of world trade to every country of the world. Certainly the conception, construction and operation of the Panama Canal that bridge two oceans is one of the great achievements of the twentieth century. The technology and science that went into the Panama Canal rivaled the later launch into space by US technological expertise.

One has to wonder why the British were able to march out of Hong Kong with pride and honor while the United States has chosen to slink out of Panama.

For one whose family was involved with the construction of the canal from its earliest days and who continued to participate in the proud history of the Panama Canal for three generations, the farewell to the Panama Canal is a terrible disappointment. I cannot dispute the ultimate disposition of the Canal to Panama, the partners in this enterprise from the start, but I surely can feel betrayed by the ignominious withdrawal by a once great nation.

The ultimate irony is that as the U.S withdraws its presence from this world waterway, built and operated on the blood and sweat of thousands of Americans, the successors to Hong Kong march in to take its place.