

JOSÉ ANTONIO REMÓN CANTERA – POLICE CHIEF AND ASSASSINATED PRESIDENT

José Antonio “Chichi” Remón Cantera (1908 – 1955) has an important place in Panamanian history. He was an important officer in the *Policia Nacional*, became its leader, allowed himself to be made President, only to be the first (and, so far, the only) President to be assassinated. He was also the first of the country’s three military leaders, albeit that he was elected unlike Torrijos and Noriega. His name was also alongside that of President Eisenhower in the title of a 1955 treaty that made important changes to the relationship between the US and Panama.

EARLY DAYS AND WIFE

Remón was born in Panama City on 1 June 1908, his parents’ sixth son, but his father died when he was six, leaving his widowed mother with limited resources.

As a boy was educated at the Manuel José Hurtado School, a state school in the San Felipe district, moving on the *Instituto Nacional de Panama*, also in Panama City, the first higher education institute in the new Republic, obtaining a baccalaureate.

His first job was at a bank where the manager was the father of the future President Guardia during World War 2, seen as an important factor in Remón’s later rise in political power.¹

The 44-year-old Remón married 36-year-old Doña Cecilia Pinel de Remón on 4 May 1952. The couple would have no children. Born in 1916, she grew up in the US. She would play a prominent part in his election campaign (distributing food and other goodies, apparently using *Policia Nacional* funds), and became a notable First Lady, nicknamed *Doña Ceci*, the Miami Herald saying that she was a ‘new symbol of the Latin American woman’.² She involved herself in the Panamanian Red Cross, a mutual aid society, a rural aid project, and a campaign against child delinquency.³ This was

¹ <https://www.panamaamerica.com.pa/variedades/remon-se-transforma-en-factotum-de-la-politica-0-410365>

² The Washington Post christened her the “*heiress of Evita Perón*”.

³ Today, the Cecilia Pinel de Remon Municipal Nursery can be found in Chorrera, a town in West Panama.



apparently something new for the wife of a President, for her to take on her husband's community programs.

Mrs Remón in 1953

She been a member of the national swimming team, and had represented the country in the Pan American and Caribbean Games in 1938.

Other accomplishments fencing and ballet, and had been involved in the founding of the National School of Dance, and was its first director in 1948.⁴

Following her husband's death, President Ricardo Manuel Arias Espinosa, who would see out the remainder of the presidential term to 1956, she became Panama's second woman minister, appointed to the Ministry of Labor, Social Welfare and Public Health. In 1956, she was elected to the National Assembly. She would die in Panama City in 1966, at the age of 50, and buried in Idaho.⁵

PREWAR CAREER

Having obtained a scholarship in 1928, Remón studied at the Military Academy of Mexico, the Azteca Military College, where he received the title of cavalry officer in 1931, and was the first Panamanian to attend the Academy.⁶

Joining the *Policia Nacional* in 1931 with the rank of captain, he would progress to become a lieutenant colonel and the deputy commander. His beginning in the force came during the interim presidency of Ricardo Joaquín Alfaro Jované, which followed the 1931 coup.⁷ One of the first things this administration had done was to take

⁴ <https://www.laestrella.com.pa/vida-y-cultura/cultura/escuela-danzas-celebra-75-anos-DELE497499>

⁵ <https://www.laestrella.com.pa/panama/nacional/dama-remon-pinel-cecilia-primera-EJLE115515>
<https://ancestors.familysearch.org/en/LKJ1-7MF/cecilia-helena-pinel-mart%C3%ADn-1916-1966>

She had remarried, as was now Mrs Newell.

⁶ https://www.ecured.cu/Jos%C3%A9_Antonio_Rem%C3%B3n_Cantera

⁷ In which a prominent participator, who detained the President in his offices, was Arnulfo Arias Madrid, who would be a later opponent of Remón.

control of the police and appointed a number of new officers, to replace those who had opposed the coup.⁸

In the 1930s, the *Policia Nacional* and its officers became involved in the turbulent politics of that decade, and Remón was no exception, and this saw him dismissed in 1936 (by President Harmodio Arias Madrid, brother of the Arias Madrid who would be closely linked, as opponent and sometime ally of Remón, over the next 15 years).

In the various roles he performed at the police headquarters, rising through the ranks, he gathered friends and loyalists. He also took pains to hire from the working classes, and this gave him much support and influence with the poor and West Indian communities, especially during the hard times of the Depression.⁹

Despite the dismissal, the connections he had made meant he was able to take up a scholarship offered by the US War Department to attend a cavalry course in Kansas.¹⁰

THE RETURN OF REMÓN AND REMOVAL OF ARIAS MADRID

The 1940 elections were convincingly won by Arnulfo Arias Madrid (helped by his opponent effectively withdrawing from the contest) on a blatantly nationalist and anti-American platform – alarming the US authorities. However, and not for the last time, his presidency would not last for long.

Soon many groups that had supported him had changed their positions, including the *Policia Nacional* – but he needed its support. He rehired Remón, by now 33, in November 1940, but sent him to a military school in the US for training, in a sort of semi-exile, perhaps fearing his support in the force. It is reported that Remón was

⁸ Known as “*Chiaristas*”, as they were regarded as supporters of former President Chiari – father of the man Remón would defeat in the 1952 election.

⁹ *We Answer Only to God: Politics and the Military in Panama 1903-1947* by Thomas L Percy (University of New Mexico Press, 1968).

¹⁰ Included in improvements Remón is said to have introduced in the police force was including radio car patrols, motorising the traffic department. However, its cavalry had acquired a reputation of being a feared force, used to suppress or prevent rioting.

<https://www.panamaamerica.com.pa/variedades/remon-se-transforma-en-factotum-de-la-politica-0-410365>

involved in the disorder incited by Arias' supporters that had caused Arias' opponent in the 1940 election, Dr Ricardo Alfaro, to be discredited, with his supporters subsequently boycotting the election.¹¹

Nevertheless, many in the force remained opposed to the new President and, in June 1941, a US State Department memo said that *"it is very probably that a large part of the police force would revolt against the present government if promised American backing"*.¹²



Arnulfo Arias Madrid in 1941

As an attempt to counter opposition in the *Policia Nacional*, in June 1941, Arias Madrid created a separate secret police, the *Policia Secreta Nacional*.¹³ This was made to be independent of the *Policia Nacional*, and was answerable only to the President and the Minister of Government, which only heightened the force's distrust and resentment.¹⁴ Meanwhile, Arias Madrid strengthened his own private militia.¹⁵

¹¹ <https://scholarsrepository.llu.edu/etd/535>

¹² *We Answer Only to God: Politics and the Military in Panama 1903-1947* by Thomas L Percy (University of New Mexico Press, 1968).

¹³ Law No.72 on 18 June 1941.

This continued as a separate force after Arias Madrid was deposed. In 1943, the then President commented that *"...its personnel have been carefully selected to face the difficulties caused by the war"*: *Panamá durante la Segunda Guerra Mundial (1941-1945)*:

<http://bdigital.binal.ac.pa/rdd/historicolist.php>

¹⁴ This minister would be the man who would replace Arias Madrid, and see out the rest of the war, Ricardo Adolfo de la Guardia.

We Answer Only to God: Politics and the Military in Panama 1903-1947 by Thomas L Percy (University of New Mexico Press, 1968).

¹⁵ *The Legacy of the Three Presidencies of Arnulfo Arias Madrid* by Sandra Blackman (Loma Linda University Electronic Theses, Dissertations & Projects, 1985):

<https://scholarsrepository.llu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1539&context=etd>

On 7 October 1941, Arias Madrid left the country without official permission, on a Pan American flight to Cuba,¹⁶ allowing opponents to invoke Article III of the Constitution to depose him, and then to see to it that the pro-US businessman, and Minister for Government, de la Guardia became President - this appointment receiving swift approval from the US.¹⁷ Arias Madrid left for exile in Mexico and Central America until October 1945, when he returned to once more seek power (as we shall see). Whilst Remón did not return to Panama until 16 days after Arias was deposed, it is still claimed that he had a hand in his fall.¹⁸



When Arias Madrid did return in 1945, he would give a speech pledging vengeance on those who had behind his removal from the presidency – ironic given his later, albeit temporary alliance with one of those, i.e. Remón.¹⁹

WORLD WAR 2

During the war, Remón would benefit, both in terms of power and of wealth. He and another officer, for example, were shareholders in the National Cooperative, which held the monopoly for the slaughter of cattle in Panama City, and which had benefitted from the US expansion in the country during the war.²⁰

In 1943, a US State Department memorandum entitled “*Nepotism in Panama*” said that “*most Panamanians believe that too many Government positions are being given to members of the favored de la Guardia and Estripeautl families*”.²¹ This referred to Remón by name, at this time deputy commander of the *Policia Nacional*, as a friend

¹⁶ Although travelling incognito, the airport was at Albrook Field in the Canal Zone and US officials recognised him and notified others in the Panamanian administration.

¹⁷ *We Answer Only to God: Politics and the Military in Panama 1903-1947* by Thomas L Percy (University of New Mexico Press, 1968).

¹⁸ <https://www.laestrella.com.pa/panama/nacional/jose-remon-amigos-cantera-aliados-LLLE138524>

¹⁹ *We Answer Only to God: Politics and the Military in Panama 1903-1947* by Thomas L Percy (University of New Mexico Press, 1968).

²⁰ This created difficulties during the popular protests postwar that resulted in the many wartime defence sites outside the Canal Zone being vacated by the US forces, as he suffered financially from any withdrawals and downsizing of the US military presence.

²¹ Estrpeaut was the maiden name of the President’s wife.

and collaborator of President de la Guardia (1941-45). It also remarked that the police commander was another personal friend (and a member of one of the country's elite families), and the minister responsible for the force, the Minister of Government, was the President's brother.²²

During the war, and until becoming the commander in 1947, Remón was responsible for discipline and structure of the force, increasing its professionalism and taking advantage of the additional equipment made available by the US.

THE *POLICIA NACIONAL*²³

After its army was disbanded in 1904, a police force was established in 1905 as only armed force in the Republic,²⁴ the US providing defence of Panama, as its protectorate and in order to thus safeguard the Canal. Even then, until the 1930s, it was only lightly armed, with pistols and shotguns – it seems neither the US authorities nor Panama's government trusted the force with anything more.

Shortage of funds during the Depression saw the force reduced to only around 200 officers, but in 1935 its commander, Colonel Manuel Pino restructured the force on a more stable internal framework.

It was re-established as an independent organisation in 1941, and received more arms and equipment from the US during and after the war, making it a more capable body, it having already been made a more professional and effective force during the troubled 1930s, when successive administrations had relied on it (and their own armed supporters) to maintain power and suppress opposition (the threat of US military intervention having receded under the Roosevelt administration).

It was President Jiménez Brín (he had succeeded de la Guardia in 1945) who, in 1945, had set out to make the National Police "an expanded military unit", with a military

²² *We Answer Only to God: Politics and the Military in Panama 1903-1947* by Thomas L Percy (University of New Mexico Press, 1968).

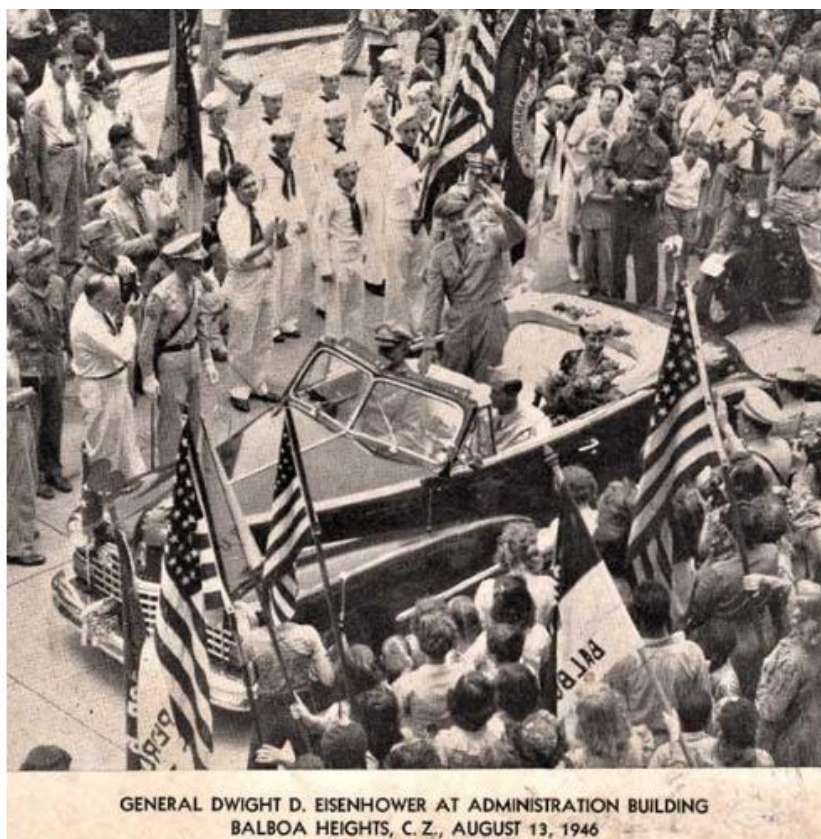
²³ <https://www.policia.gob.pa/historia.html>

²⁴ The Canal Zone had its own, better paid and better equipped Canal Zone Police.

battalion, a military police company and horse cavalry company. He also requested equipment from the US to establish “a modest air force”, with 50 police patrol cars and an expansion of the US military mission by then training officers in Panama City.

Its role as supporting ruling administrations evolved in deciding what those administrations should be by the end of the war, its support being essential for any incoming President.²⁵ So that, by the end of the 1940s its new commander, Remón, had become a *de facto* kingmaker (as we shall see in the case of the “election” of Arias Madrid in 1949).

Before his death in 1955, Remón would see the force renamed as the *Guardia Nacional* in 1953.²⁶ The following years would see further professionalism of the force, with training (in the Canal Zone) and equipment supplied by the US.



Remón with General Eisenhower in 1946

²⁵ Each incorporated their own supporters into the force during the 1930s.

²⁶ For more on the story of the *Policia Nacional*, see <https://raytodd.blog/2025/10/11/panama-in-world-war-2-the-national-police/>

BECOMES POLICE CHIEF

In February 1947, he became head of the *Policia Nacional*, succeeding Rogelio Fabrega, who had resigned (with some doubt as to the reason, apparently), leaving the country to become Consul General in New York.²⁷

In 1949, a media campaign denounced what was said to be the involvement of Remón and his deputy in the monopoly in meat supply, and guaranteeing the businesses of friends and associates, including in cantinas, casinos and other vices. It was following this campaign that new President Chanis demanded Remón's resignation (see below).²⁸

THE UNLIKELY ALLIES (FOR A TIME) – REMÓN CANTERA AND ARIAS MADRID

The administration of President Jiménez Brín (1945-48) remained unpopular, even after the draft agreement for the retention of US defence sites outside the Canal Zone was thwarted by popular protests.²⁹ In the turbulent state of the country in the late 1940s it was apparent that the *Policia Nacional* were the only group in the country with any semblance of focus, cohesion, and organisation; having been once more called upon to subdue political opposition (albeit not wholly in the case of the defence sites) and restore public order. Thus, it was seen as probably the most important *political* player as well.



A state of siege, put in place during the protests, was maintained even after the defence sites issue was settled, with the US withdrawal from

²⁷ <https://www.panamaamerica.com.pa/variedades/remon-se-transforma-en-factotum-de-la-politica-0-410365>

²⁸ <https://www.laestrella.com.pa/panama/nacional/jose-remon-amigos-cantera-aliados-LLLE138524>

²⁹ For more on these sites, and their rejection and abandonment, see <https://raytodd.blog/2025/10/10/panama-operating-outside-the-zone-the-1942-agreement-and-the-1947-row/>

the sites by January 1948. This came as another unpopular agreement with the US (on commercial air traffic) saw more protests, with two people killed. Nevertheless, the force continued to support the ruling administration. Following the violence in December, both the President and Remón were quick to allege communist agitation, and President Jiménez Brin related this allegation to the US.

Then came the 1948 elections, the first in eight years. Once again, Arnulfo Arias Madrid, returned from exile, would stand, and still having considerable popular support, as he had had in 1940. However, for this election it seemed that *Policia Nacional* and its new commander, Remón, would decide the “winner”, not the electorate. The campaign saw several clashes between rival, armed supporters, and the revelation of a plot by Arias’ supporters to overthrow the government and gain control of the police. As a result, President Jiménez Brin suspended constitutional rights.

Eventually, the *Policia Nacional* came down in support of Domingo Díaz, the candidate selected by the elite families of the country, and not Arias Madrid, the apparent man of the people and hero of the 1931 coup. This support effectively handed the election to Díaz. Early in his presidency, Díaz signed the controversial air traffic agreement, resulting in more protests, suspension of rights and a new state of siege declared from 25 April to 29 July 1949.

However, President Díaz died in August 1949 and his would-be successor, First Vice-President Daniel Chanis, fell out with Remón³⁰ and sought to dismiss him.³¹ As Remón took refuge in the central police barracks, the police surrounded the *Palacio de las Garzas* (the Presidential palace) and demanded that Chanis resign. Remón persuaded the Supreme Court to swear in his cousin, Roberto Chiari, as provisional President, but

³⁰ Seemingly over Remón’s control of a cattle slaughtering monopoly in Panama City, of which the police chief was co-owner.

³¹ Standing up to the police was to make Chanis popular with students and other activists, so that they would then protest in support of him when he was forced to stand down.

Chanis renounced his previously announced resignation.³² Strikes broke out, with the protests suppressed by the *Policia Nacional*, but then the Supreme Court, perhaps surprisingly, ruled in favour of Chanis. Chiari said he would abide by the Court's decision, angering his cousin, forcing Remón to find another "solution".

To everyone's surprise, Remón turned to Arias Madrid and, notwithstanding their longstanding conflicts, he reconvened the board that oversaw elections and this "found" enough votes to declare Arias Madrid the actual winner of the election after all. Remón then organised an emergency session of the National Assembly, which proclaimed Arias Madrid as President, taking up the office on 24 November 1949. To be on the safe side, perhaps, the police went as far as arresting the Chief Magistrate of the Supreme Court, whom they later released.³³

The alliance between Remón and Arias could never last, and the latter attempted to undermine the former's power base by reorganising the secret police (a body Arias had created during his first, brief presidency). He also became increasingly dictatorial, seeking to increase his term to six years,³⁴ and jailing hundreds of his political opponents.

Matters came to a head in May 1951, when Arias attempted to suspend the National Assembly and reinstate *his* 1941 Constitution (which had been largely replaced by a new one in 1946). This came after a banking crisis, which the government blamed on Communist conspirators and opposition deputies. He ordered his secret police to arrest several opposition deputies and politicians (including former President de la Guardia), but was faced by a general strike, with even the Catholic Church joining the protests.

³² *Historia y Biografía de la Justicia Panameña en sus primeros cien años* (Órgano Judicial de la República de Panamá, 2003).

³³ *Historia y Biografía de la Justicia Panameña en sus primeros cien años* (Órgano Judicial de la República de Panamá, 2003).

https://www.organojudicial.gob.pa/uploads/wp_repo/uploads/2010/06/libro1.pdf

It is likely that Arias had, in fact, gained more votes during the election; but the facts are unclear.

³⁴ By replacing the 1946 Constitution with the one he had forced through in 1941.

Eventually, on 9 May, the National Assembly impeached Arias, and appointed his Vice-President in his place. There were public protests in support of Arias, and he resisted the decision and, on 10 May, Remón sent a detachment of *Policia Nacional* to speak to him. When Arias Madrid continued to resist standing down, the police surrounded the *Palacio de las Garzas*. After a prolonged shootout that left nine people dead (some sources say 11, with another hundred or so injured), Arias and his followers were removed, with Arias, his wife and other relatives, taken to the police headquarters.³⁵



*Arias Madrid leaving the
Palacio de las Garzas in 1951*

Interestingly, Remón, despite being in command of the *Policia Nacional*, did not involve himself personally in the removal of Arias, as he had his eye on the 1952

elections, but this time as a candidate in his own right.

Oddly perhaps, in the 1952 election Arias Madrid, banned from politics himself,³⁶ switched his support to Remón from his opponent when he recognised the likelihood of a win by Remón, but then changed his mind once more and called on his supporters to boycott the vote. Remón won with 55% of the vote.

³⁵ <https://www.panamaviejaescuela.com/golpe-estado-10-mayo-1951>

³⁶ He had been impeached and tried by the National Assembly in May 1951, with his political rights suspended, and sent into exile (again). The political rights would be restored in 1960 by Remón's cousin, and loser of the 1952 election, Roberto Chiari.



Remón with Queen Elizabeth II during her visit to Panama in 1953

PRESIDENT

Having removed Arias Madrid, Remón showed his power and authority – choosing ministers for a new cabinet, and judges for the Supreme Court. He also manipulated his political allies into key positions in the National Assembly.

On 8 September 1951, in another example of his status, he was appointed by the Executive as a delegate to the Peace Conference in Japan as Minister Plenipotentiary.³⁷ In the subsequent elections, his candidacy for President was supported by a coalition of five political parties, the *Coalición Patriótica Nacional*. His opponent was his cousin, Roberto F Chiari.³⁸

He was inaugurated on 1 October 1952 for what was intended to be a normal four-year term.

³⁷ https://www.ecured.cu/Jos%C3%A9_Antonio_Rem%C3%B3n_Cantera

³⁸ Roberto Francisco Chiari Remón, whose father had been President 1924-28, had been briefly President for four days in 1949 (as explained in the section on the 1949 crisis), and was the President at the time of the anti-US riots in 1964. He was linked to Remón through his mother, Ofelina Remón.



Visiting the UN in 1953

As President, Remón adopted a pro-US policy, repressing communist groups and opposition political parties. By now, with the Korean War underway, and the Cold War well and truly in place, the US Government saw the appeal of a “strong man” who was anti-communist, could restore and maintain stability in Panama, and assure the security of the Canal. This included tight control of the press, restricted individual freedoms, and removing left-leaning groups from the political scene.³⁹

One of the first things the new President did, in 1952, was to rename the *Policia Nacional* as the *Guardia Nacional* (National Guard).⁴⁰ He also created the Institute of Economic Development (IFE) in 1953.

It is also said that Remón further increased his personal wealth, through control over gasoline, real estate, transportation, and (in shades of the later Noriega perhaps) drug trafficking.⁴¹

Meanwhile, he adopted populist policies, as well as negotiating changes in the relationship with the US in a new treaty (which included better terms for Panamanians working in the Canal Zone). He also focused on areas less developed, such as agriculture and the rural economy, seeing an increase in capital for development. In

³⁹ https://www.ecured.cu/Jos%C3%A9_Antonio_Rem%C3%B3n_Cantera

Aside from the National Political Coalition that had supported Remón, the only opposition party tolerated was the National Liberal Party. This followed a law saying that any party which had not received at least 45,000 votes in the 1952 election would not be recognised (*ley de los 45.000 adherentes*). The left-wing People's Party was outlawed.

<https://portal.critica.com.pa/archivo/historia/f11-03.html>

⁴⁰ In 1983, Manuel Noriega renamed the National Guard as the Panamanian Defense Forces (PDF). The national police force is now, once more, the National Police (*Policia Nacional*).

⁴¹ <https://launiversidad.up.ac.pa/node/4468>

The suggestion that the mafia was linked to his murder involved a consignment of drugs that had been seized by Panamanian authorities.

addition, he promoted racial equality and better opportunities for Afro-Panamanians.⁴² On the other hand, a 1953 law was used to purge public employees with suspected communist sympathies.⁴³

Economically, and after the downturn that had followed the war, the economy improved under Remón, with national debt reduced considerably, the tax system



reformed and tax take increased, while favouritism and bribes were said to have been eliminated.

During Remón's presidency Panama celebrated its 50th anniversary as a republic, albeit one still divided in two by the Canal Zone. To mark the occasion

a large sign with the dates "1903–1953" was installed on the eastern slope of Ancon Hill, ironically within the Canal Zone and overlooking the Canal Administration Building in Balboa, "capital" of the Zone. It seems that it was placed by the US authorities – and was not mentioned in the review the official program of commemorative events, presided over by the President between 30 October and 5 November (the latter date marking independence from Colombia).⁴⁴

THE TREATY

Although signed 25 days after his death, the 1955 treaty with the US bore Remón's name. While a 1936 treaty had made important changes to the US-Panama relationship (including ending Panama's status as a US protectorate, and abolishing the US right to peremptory acquisition of additional territory for the Canal and its security), the Remón-Eisenhower Treaty signalled another stage step. For the negotiations, Remón coined the slogan: "*Neither millions nor aims, we want justice*".

⁴² <https://www.laestrella.com.pa/panama/nacional/jose-remon-amigos-cantera-aliados-LLE138524>

⁴³ <https://portal.critica.com.pa/archivo/historia/f11-03.html>

⁴⁴ <https://www.prensa.com/historias/el-cerro-ancon-y-el-medio-siglo-de-panama-como-republica/>



Among the headline results of the new treaty were an increase in the annual payment made by the US, from \$430,000 to \$1.93 million; sales at commissaries in the Canal Zone being restricted only to US persons residing

there; the return of various buildings and land to Panama; Panamanians employed in the Zone being required to pay income tax in Panama; a commitment to equal working conditions and pay for US and Panamanian workers in the Zone; and a 75% reduction in import charges for alcoholic drinks from Panama into the Zone. In return, the US received a lease on the important airbase at Rio Hato for 15 years.

However, the US rejected some proposals, including one that might have prevented the increasingly protests of the late 1950s that culminated in the riots and violent confrontations of 1964 - that the Panamanian flag should next to the US flag in the Canal Zone.⁴⁵

ASSASSINATION

On 2 January 1955, he was shot and killed by several men while attending the Juan Franco racetrack, later renamed the *Hipódromo Presidente Remón*. His own horse had won in the New Year Classic, and he had been celebrating with friends in the Presidential box

⁴⁵ <https://portal.critica.com.pa/archivo/historia/f11-03.html>



city's Santo Tomás Hospital in Panama City at about 9.20 pm.

At around 7.30 pm, shots had been heard and Remón was hit several times, before his bodyguards were able to react. Two others died in the same attack, while Remón passed away at the

In the immediate aftermath of the killing, rumours circulated that Arias Madrid was behind it.

Three days of official mourning followed, and constitutional guarantees were suspended for 10 days as a precaution against unrest.⁴⁶ Acting President Guizado called in investigators from Cuba, Venezuela and the US to assist in the inquiries.



More drama followed the murder. Remón's successor as President, José Ramón Guizado⁴⁷ was implicated 10 days later by a lawyer who confessed to having been the killer⁴⁸ – after an American had been the

⁴⁶ <https://www.panamaviejaescuela.com/asesinato-jose-antonio-remon-cantera/>

⁴⁷ Until his death in 1964 he maintained his innocence. He and his lawyers described the killing and aftermath as a *coup d'état*.

⁴⁸ Rubén Miró Guardia.

initial suspect.⁴⁹ There was no evidence that this was true, but the National Assembly nevertheless dismissed the acting President. Even after the claimed assassin retracted his confession during his subsequent trial, claiming coercion, the President remained dismissed. The trial saw the former President found guilty and jailed; whereas the lawyer was acquitted in his trial in 1957. Shortly after the lawyer was acquitted the jailed former President was also released, after which he went into exile in the US.⁵⁰ Oddly, the cleared lawyer was himself shot dead, in similarly mysterious circumstances, on 31 December 1969.⁵¹

The death of Remón saw his deputy at the *Policia Nacional* take charge. However, Bolivar Vallarino came from one of the country's wealthiest families, allowing the urban commercial elite to once more regain control of Panama – something that the 1931 coup had upset. Nevertheless, the National Guard continued to increase in size and in 1968 a coup (said to have been tolerated by the US) saw the National Guard (which would be renamed the Panama Defense Force in 1983)⁵² gain *de facto* power until the US invasion in 1989.⁵³

On the other hand, it is also said that his death allowed opposition, nationalist forces he had suppressed to revive, together with the students (who had been at the forefront of protests since the war), as well as leftist movements.⁵⁴ This would see a

⁴⁹ Martin Irving Lipstein. Later CIA documents suggested that Remón had been killed on the orders of US mafia leader, "Lucky" Luciano; and as a signal to Latin American leaders from the CIA. Lipstein had been visiting Panama from Mexico, where he lived, and where he would himself be murdered a few years later.

<https://www.laestrella.com.pa/panama/publicando-historia/nacional-remon-mataron-pregunta-recurrente-BWLE49223>

⁵⁰ https://www.ecured.cu/Jos%C3%A9_Antonio_Rem%C3%B3n_Cantera

<https://www.panamaviejaescuela.com/asesinato-jose-antonio-remon-cantera/>

⁵¹ <https://www.panamaviejaescuela.com/asesinato-jose-antonio-remon-cantera/>

⁵² Law No 20 of 1983 refers.

⁵³ *Civil-Military Relations in a Civilianised State: Panama* by Ronald D Sylvia and Constantine P Danopoulos (University Press of Florida, Journal of Political and Military Sociology, Vol 33 No 1, Summer 2005)

⁵⁴ Despite this, the President elected in 1956 became the first in 24 years to complete his full term. He was also a cousin of his predecessor, Remón Cantera, as was the next President, Roberto Francisco Chiari Remón. In fact, each President from Remón Cantera in 1952 to Marco Aurelio Robles Méndez in 1964 were all related.

<https://launiversidad.up.ac.pa/node/2987>

rise in nationalist protests in the late 1950s that would culminate in the anti-US riots in 1964.

Ray Todd

Panama City

Republic of Panama

14 October 2026