

Radio Ambulante: La Zona

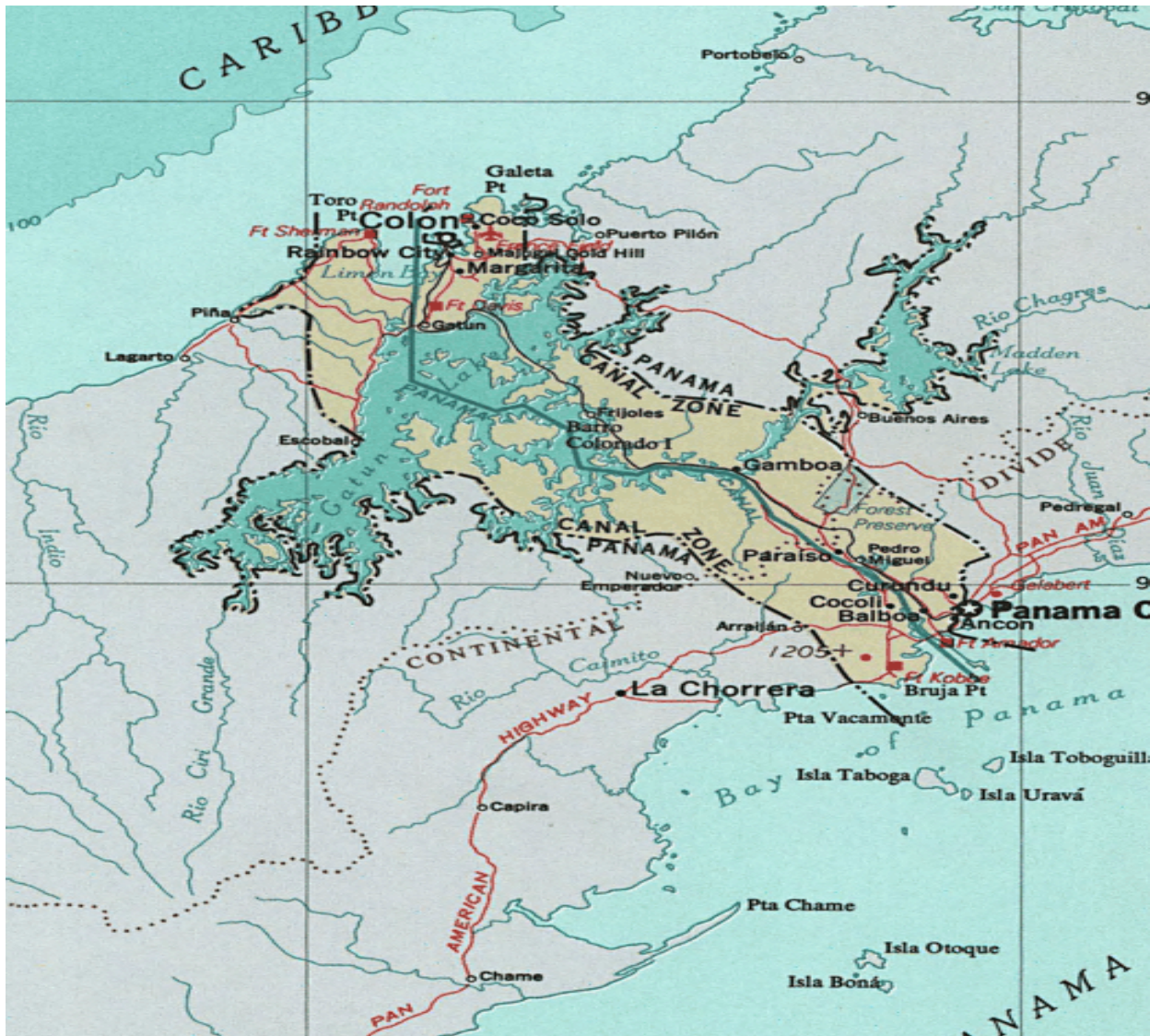
Episode Web page: <https://radioambulante.org/audio/la-zona>

This podcast episode is about the Panama Canal Zone, a territory in Panama controlled by the United States, the varying opinions about the United States's involvement in Panama, and the conflict that led to the United States turning control of the canal over to the Panamanian government.

Here are my (5) takeaways.

- 1) **La Zona Canalera:** The Panama Canal Zone, which was more simply known by Panamanians as *La Zona*, was territory in Panama that was controlled by the United States starting in 1903, when the United States took over construction of the Panama Canal. Construction of the canal was completed in 1914, but the United States maintained its control of the canal and the Panama Canal Zone for 65 more years until 1979.

Here is a map that shows *La Zona*:



- 2) **Zonians:** This is how Panamanians referred to Americans living in *La Zona*.
- 3) **More evidence of segregation in U.S. history:** The episode tells how segregation prevailed throughout the Canal Zone. People were essentially classified as “native” or “non-native.” But, “natives” weren’t only those people who were native to Panama. “Natives” were anyone who was non-white. “Non-natives” perceived “natives” as dirty, or carriers of disease. Canal authorities started to pass laws that led to segregation, such as one that required a minimum distance between Canal Commission buildings and “native buildings.” Eventually, there was essentially a Jim Crow society operating in the Panama Canal Zone. Workers were put into categories based on race. The “gold” category represented white U.S. workers, while “silver” was the color of the non-white, non-U.S. workers. Neighborhoods were segregated. There were even separate entrances for the different groups of people at the Post Office.
- 4) **Opinion and history depend on perspective:** The storyteller interviews Richard Waino, an American who was born and raised in the Panama Canal Zone. He acknowledges the controversy of the Panama Canal Zone, but says this about it:

[Before U.S. involvement, Panama] was barely a livable place up until the arrival of the Americans in 1904. [The canal] literally created Panama as a country and helped [it] develop into, arguably, the most advanced area in Latin America at the time.

Meanwhile, Maritza Lasso, a Panamanian historian and anthropologist who is also interviewed in the episode, says that Panama had a vibrant history long before U.S. arrival in 1904. She and the storyteller talk about how the Spanish Empire identified Panama City as an important location and built a port and walled city there because it would link the north and southern portions of the American continents. They also talk about how in the 1800’s during the Gold Rush, private American companies built the first interoceanic railroad, a railway that connects two oceans, through Panama because it was easier to access California through the oceans and Panama than it was across the entire United States by land. As a result, there was already development—towns, economies, and diverse populations—throughout Panama, especially in and around the area that became the Canal Zone, far before U.S. arrival.

Here is an article about the history of Panama’s interoceanic railway:

<https://www.panamaviejaescuela.com/historia-ferrocarril-panama/>

Also, it looks like Mexico is working on building one, too. As of March 2023, it is 80% complete:

<https://www.bnamericas.com/en/news/mexicos-interoceanic-corridor-said-to-be-80-complete>

- 5) **Día de los Mártires (Martyrs’ Day):** This is a day of national mourning in Panama that occurs on January 9 to honor Panamanian students who were killed by Canal Zone Police officers during anti-American riots in *La Zona*.

Over time, tension between Panamanians and Zonians developed. In January 1963, the U.S. governor of the Panama Canal Zone passed a decree that prohibited the flying of any national flag—neither the U.S. nor Panamanian flags—anywhere in the Canal zone. Many Zonians reacted angrily, seeing this move as a renunciation of U.S. sovereignty over the Canal Zone. A group of Zonian students responded by raising the American flag at their high school in *La Zona* in protest. In reaction to this, a group of Panamanian students from a nearby high school marched into *La Zona* with the intention of raising the Panamanian flag next to the American one. They were met by a group of Zonian police who

tried to stop them and in the resulting scuffle, the Panamanian flag was torn. Word soon spread and by nighttime, the scuffle had escalated to a conflict of 80-some police officers versus thousands of Panamanians. The United States then deployed an army brigade. In the ensuing violence, 25 people died—21 Panamanians and four Americans, and hundreds more were injured. This event ultimately led to the United States ceding control of the Canal to Panama through the Torrijos-Carter Treaties in 1977.