

a tyrant with acne

America's foreign policy towards Latin America often defies explanation, and is a source of external ridicule and internal embarrassment. Perhaps this is why *Noriega: God's Favourite*, a fictionalised film account of the Panamanian tyrant's downfall, is being released on cable. According to Variety magazine, the film was shown around the film festival circuit but failed to be picked up by any US theatre distributor (Showtime. Sunday April 2, at 8pm).

The film opens with deceptive innocence, featuring a political map of the Americas with Panama marked in red. The scrolling text provides a condescending but necessary geography lesson about the strategic importance of the Panama Canal.

Cut to a confessional booth in the early 1980s where Noriega (played by Bob Hoskins), to paraphrase Oscar Wilde, has nothing to confess but his genius.

"I am God's favourite," he declares, as surprised as anyone that he has got away with slaying his adversaries and, according to this film, keeping their heads in jars of formaldehyde.

But even the self-anointed cannot withstand the wrath of the US, portrayed in uniformly goonish fashion. The film includes real news clips of former US president George Bush condemning Noriega, in which Bush is flubbing his speech: "The drug-indicted related Panamanian dictator, I mean, the drug-related indicted."

Also making an appearance is Ollie North, played with requisite corn-fed rigidity by Edward Edwards. It is now the mid-1980s, and North is a guest aboard Noriega's yacht, the *Macho III*, awkwardly drinking carrot juice and making a good Protestant effort not to ogle the bronzed topless stewardesses. North is there to thank Noriega for allowing the CIA to launder money in Panama for the purpose of illegally funnelling it into the Contra slush fund.

But, warns North, Noriega is about to be indicted for drug-trafficking by an American court, and the US government cannot be seen to be in cahoots with him. Noriega offers a deal: his forces will destroy the Sandinistas if the US drops the drug charges. North is tempted, but: "I can't do it. It's against the law." Counters Noriega: "Your whole war is against the law!"

jocks who regard Noriega as the ugly kid in the class who helps with their homework, but with whom they don't care to be seen.

To drive the point home, Noriega is shown consulting a New York public relations company about his image, apparently a real-life incident. The PR execs snidely tell him: "Americans see you as a pizza-faced fascist. I don't know where they get that impression."

We subsequently see him in a Geneva clinic having an acid peel for his acne, and conducting business with blood-soaked bandages on his cheeks.

Noriega: God's Favourite is based on a novel of the same title, by New Yorker staff writer Lawrence Wright. The film misses some of the book's satirical elements that highlight the absurd cognitive dissonance required to live under a regime such as Noriega's.

In the novel, a vocal opponent of Noriega is found dead, a presumed suicide. The priest who examines the body notes: "On [occasion], there may be some details that defy rational explanation. Such as why a man who intends to commit suicide would break his own nose." Replies the coroner: "It is a mystery."

The film's best scene is a carbon copy of actual CNN footage. It is 1989, and US troops bring out the big guns to extradite Noriega for drug-trafficking. Noriega is barricaded in the Papal Embassy in Panama, which the US cannot enter without more or less declaring war on Vatican City.

But there's no law against being obnoxious, so the US blasts Jimi Hendrix and heavy metal music at the embassy, around the clock. Noriega surrenders and the rest has been forgotten by history and the media.

Above all, this is a mob movie. It includes shameless allusions to the Godfather trilogy, such as a scene in which Noriega is at his granddaughter's christening, renouncing Satan even as his henchman continue to execute his enemies.

When one of Noriega's trusted colonels attempts a failed coup, Noriega kisses him full on the lips before slaying him - like Michael Corleone and brother Fredo.

But the Mafia continues to make big at the box office, whereas this well-crafted film about a Panamanian gangster-to-end-all-