A Brief History of the Panama Canal

Designed by the French and completed by the Americans a century ago, it is one of the largest public construction projects in US history. The canal was built to ease the movement of water vessels, such as marine and cargo ships, between two of the world's largest bodies of water - the Pacific and Atlantic oceans. It would be President Theodore Roosevelt who would oversee the realization of this long-term United States goal.

To that end, in 1850 the United States and Great Britain negotiated a treaty to reign in rivalry over a proposed canal through the Central American Republic of Nicaragua. The titled *"Anglo-American Canal,"* however, never went beyond the planning stages. French attempts to build a canal through Panama (at that time a dprovince of Colombia) advanced further. Led by Ferdinand de Lesseps—the builder of the Suez Canal in Egypt—the French began excavating in 1880. Malaria, yellow fever, and other tropical diseases conspired against the campaign and after 9 years and a loss of approximately 20,000 lives, the French attempt went bankrupt. In spite of such setbacks, American interest in a canal continued. A new Treaty of 1901 was to license the United States to build and manage its own canal. The financial terms, however, were unacceptable to Colombia's congress, and it rejected the offer.

President Teddy Roosevelt responded by dispatching U.S. warships to Panama City (on the Pacific) and Colón (on the Atlantic) in support of Panamanian independence. Colombian troops were unable to negotiate the jungles of the Darien Strait and Panama declared independence on November 3, 1903. The newly declared Republic of Panama immediately named a French engineer who had been involved in the earlier de Lesseps canal attempt as its new new diplomat and negotiated the Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty of 1903, which provided the United States with a 10-mile wide strip of land for the canal, a one-time $10 million payment to Panama, and an annual annuity of $250,000. The United States also agreed to guarantee the independence of Panama. Completed in 1914, the Panama Canal symbolized U.S. technological prowess and economic power. Although U.S. control of the canal eventually became a major issue for U.S.-Panamanian relations, at the time it was heralded as a major foreign policy achievement.

Nowadays, more than 40 ships pass through the canal. But despite it's 6000 mile saving convenience, Panama needed to expand the canal to accommodate a new generation of container ships, which are becoming too big for the old canal locks.

To cater to these larger transit ships and global shipping demands, Panama decided to take its two-lane canal and add a new third lane. The new canal designs are set to improve upon the current functionality, such as with the new gates that slide across the channel chambers as opposed to the traditional "open and shut" gates. Reinvented basins are also a new feature, helping move ships across the canal chambers using water-saving methods.

The Panama Canal expansion is projected to double the capacity of the canal and hence considered a major boon for ports and the Panamanian government. However, the economic promise of the canal runs alongside environmental concerns. Many now question how will the canal's expansion affect Panama's current ecosystem?

Please answer the following questions in your *"Activities & Homework"* Section in complete and detailed sentences

1) What was the purpose of building the Panama Canal? Explain what the alternatives were.
2) Why are they currently expanding the canal? What are they specifically doing to expand it and why is this needed?
3) Even the the initial completion of the canal was "heralded" as a success, why do you think Panama and the U.S. have had a strained relationship over the years since the project was completed?