

1. Introduction: The Noriega Challenge to George Bush's Credibility and the 1989 Invasion of Panama

To be successful over time, the politician-diplomat also needs to win the confidence of others. That means words must be matched by deeds and promises must be kept.

James Baker III¹

'When Colin [Powell] came in here and said Noriega has gone over the line, everyone sat up straight,' one senior administration official said yesterday. Powell took the position that the killing was an outrage and an affront to the country...Powell has spent much of the last month dealing with proposals for sharp reductions in the U.S. defense budget. He has argued in administration circles that reductions are feasible but that the United States must remain a global power. According to sources, he has said, 'We have to put a shingle outside our door saying, 'Superpower Lives Here.'

The Washington Post, December 21, 1989²

On December 20, 1989, United States military forces under the direction of president George Bush invaded Panama, subdued its military, and quickly hounded the country's *de facto* leader—General Manuel Antonio Noriega—from power. The invasion—dubbed “Operation Just Cause”—was the end of a long, ignominious chapter in the Reagan and Bush administrations' foreign policy record. Relations between the United States and Noriega had started to sour early in Reagan's second term, deteriorated precipitously toward the end of his presidency, and were at an all time low by the time George Bush assumed power. By October 1989, Noriega's anti-American rhetoric, high-profile recalcitrance, and ability to endure an array of U.S. sanctions had called into question the potency of the United States' international clout and were provoking constant domestic criticism of the Bush administration's foreign

¹James Baker and Thomas M. Defrank, The Politics of Diplomacy: Revolution, War and Peace, 1989-1992, (NY: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1995), p. xv.

²Bob Woodward, “The Conversion of General Powell,” *The Washington Post*, December 21, 1989, p. A31.

policy. At a time when events around the world indicated that a watershed moment in twentieth century history was occurring—dramatic reforms in the Soviet Union, the seeming collapse of the Eastern bloc, a renewed and startling détente between the Cold War superpowers—Panama and Manuel Noriega loomed large on center stage. Why did events in this seeming backwater of a tumultuous world scene so occupy executive, media, and public attention? Why did the United States resort to the use of force to solve the Panama problem, mobilizing the largest overseas military operation since Vietnam in the process?

Manuel Noriega couldn't have happened to George Bush at a worse time. By 1989, after a petrifying 40 year deadlock between the United States and the Soviet Union, it was starting to look as if the Cold War was finally over. Events in the USSR and Europe seemed to support President Bush's May 12, 1989 assertion that "containment worked."³ All the trouble, worrying, and planning of the United States' Cold War leadership had paid off, apparently. The country finally seemed positioned to make real the Wilsonian vision of a Pax Americana which the Marshall Plan and the Bretton Woods agreements had augured at the close of World War II. By any estimation, 1989 was a major turning point in modern history, and the Bush administration was under tremendous pressure from both overseas allies and domestic players to step up and seize control of the situation.

The existing literature analyzing Operation Just Cause largely ignores this wider context. Prevalent opinion holds that the intervention occurred because the Bush administration let its Panama policy unravel blindly until the situation was beyond diplomatic

³"President Bush's Speech," *The Washington Post*, May 13, 1989, p. A15.

resolution.⁴ Others add to this analysis a description of George Bush's inimical treatment at the hands of the U.S. media, and paint Just Cause as the president's solution to the domestic political problem of his "wimp" image.⁵ Some accounts emphasize U.S. security concerns; political scientist Margaret Scranton stresses the U.S. desire for continued military base rights and the neutrality of the Panama Canal, for instance, while Andrew Zimbalist and John Weeks link U.S. Panama policy to the Reagan and Bush administrations' preoccupation with nearby Nicaragua's Sandinista regime.⁶ This thesis, while not ignoring regional and domestic U.S. concerns, endeavors to examine Operation Just Cause in a broader, more global context.

In 1989, the Bush Administration saw itself faced with the challenge of advancing U.S. interests in a changed and uncertain global environment. The collapse of the familiar Cold War framework heralded an era of increased international complexity, and it soon became clear to U.S. officials that life after the Cold War would be just as difficult as winning it had been.

As the Bush White House struggled to sort out the array of foreign policy problems and goals that this new global environment presented, it found itself severely hampered by a credibility problem. Operating in a noticeable vacuum left by Ronald Reagan's departure, and confronted by the burgeoning international stature of Soviet premier Mikhail Gorbachev, Bush and his top advisors desperately wanted to "show...the Western vision of the future" and

⁴Frederick Kempe, *Divorcing the Dictator: America's Bungled Affair with Noriega*, (NY: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1990).

⁵John Dinges, *Our Man in Panama: The Shrewd Rise and Brutal Fall of Manuel Noriega*, (NY: Times Books-Random House, 1991).

⁶Margaret E. Scranton, *The Noriega Years: U.S.-Panamanian Relations, 1981-1990*, (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1991); Andrew Zimbalist and John Weeks, *Panama at the Crossroads: Economic Development and Political Change in the Twentieth Century*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

convey an impression of strong U.S. leadership to both domestic and overseas audiences.⁷ Domestically, however, Bush was hampered by a combative Congress and was regarded in public, media, and even some GOP circles as a visionless “wimp.” Abroad, he was consistently outperformed by Gorbachev, whose foreign policy was, it seemed at times, more appealing to the NATO allies than Bush’s was.

Panama’s Manuel Noriega epitomized the Bush administration’s credibility problem. Noriega had been linked to George Bush’s credibility ever since the 1988 presidential campaign, when Bush used the Panama issue to alter public perceptions that he was Reagan’s passive underling and Democrats, in turn, accused the vice president of covering up his past involvement with the dictator. By October 1989, the White House’s inability to dislodge the vocally anti-American Noriega seemed to not only be damaging the administration’s credibility as a world leader at the most inopportune of times, but also threatened to seriously blacken Bush’s domestic political credibility. By December 1989—when Bush’s first meeting with Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev was colored by Panama’s unofficial “declaration of war” on the United States—the situation had become insufferable. It was time, as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell put it, for the White House to “to put a shingle outside [its] door saying, ‘Superpower Lives Here.’”⁸

As Powell and other key members of the Bush administration saw it, the success or failure of U.S. initiatives overseas could profoundly affect the way that the United States’

⁷George Bush and Brent Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, (NY: Vintage Books, 1998), p. 112.

⁸Woodward, *Conversion*, p. A31.

power and leadership were perceived by allies and enemies alike. Foreign policy failures like the Noriega fiasco could damage U.S. *international credibility* and, by doing so, weaken the overall position of the United States on the international level. Foreign policy successes, on the other hand, demonstrated to the world that Washington was a strong ally, a daunting opponent, and a suitable architect of the international system. The Bush team also believed that an American president's effectiveness as a global leader depended upon his ability to engender support at home, and that his ability to do so—his *domestic political credibility*—was in turn often largely dependent on whether or not Congress and the electorate thought he was managing U.S. international interests effectively. Noriega repeatedly and brazenly challenged the Bush administration's credibility on both fronts. With change in Europe and the USSR picking up pace and pressure for the administration to wake up and do something about it mounting at home, Bush found himself obligated to act in a decisive, convincing, and definitive manner.

A word on organization. This thesis is divided into eight chapters, of which this introduction is the first. The second chapter traces out a definition of international credibility as perceived by U.S. leaders at various stages of the Cold War. The third describes U.S.-Latin American relations during the same period, pointing out instances where U.S. concerns with international credibility played an important role. Chapter four develops a definition of domestic political credibility as an influential element in U.S. foreign policy during the Cold War. Chapter five analyzes the ways in which international and domestic political credibility

have intersected to drive U.S. foreign policy, using U.S.-Panamanian relations as an example. Chapters six and seven focus on the U.S.-Noriega confrontation, looking first at the initial decay of relations between the two countries and at Noriega's transformation into a credibility liability, and then at events during Bush's first year in office which aggravated U.S. credibility concerns and prompted the December invasion. Chapter eight, the thesis's conclusion, provides a summary overview.

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