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Research Article

APPLYING FOREIGN POLICY DECISION-MAKING THEORIES/MODELS TO THE DECISION ON THE USE OF FORCE BY THE U.S. IN PANAMA IN 1989

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ABSTRACT

Panamanian General Noriega, a valuable asset for the U.S. intelligence and law enforcement bodies in the 1970s, by mid-1980s turned into a liability and headache for the U.S. Administration because of his involvement in international drug trafficking. First, Congress members were the first to take harsh stance toward the Panamanian in the mid-1980. Later, in February 1988, the federal court in Florida indicted Noriega for drug trafficking charges. From early 1988, the Reagan Administration condemned the Noriega regime and imposed harsh political and economic sanctions against the dictator. Despite repeated attempts first by the Reagan Administration and then by the Bush Administration to force Noriega's resignation and departure, the General demonstrated an uncompromising position. Eventually, the U.S. Administration made a decision to use military force in December 1989, invaded Panama and took General Noriega into custody. The Bush Administration's decision on invasion is analyzed through three foreign policy decision-making analysis tools - the Rational Actor Model (RAM), Prospect theory and Governmental politics.

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INTRODUCTION

The central topic of this article is the analysis of the Bush Administration's decision on the use of force and military invasion to Panama with subsequent capture of General Noriega in 1989. The decision making process is analyzed through three foreign policy decision-making (FPDM) analysis tools - the Rational Actor Model (RAM), Prospect theory and Governmental Politics.

Rational Actor Model (RAM) is one of the pillars of FPDM which "depicts states as unitary actors negotiating in an anarchic international system and constantly taking stock of their security status vis-à-vis rivals and other threats while maximizing their goals" (Mintz & DeRouen, 2010). The RAM principle states that the major objective of the foreign policy actor is to *maximize the gain by minimizing the cost*.

Although both President Reagan (at the end of his second term) and President Bush (even before his Presidency) were interested in removing the Panamanian dictator, their views and approaches how to achieve this objective substantially differed. From the mid-1980s, Manuel Noriega turned from an asset on U.S. intelligence agencies' retainer into a liability routinely involved in human rights violation and drug trafficking. However, despite strong Congressional position, growing anti-

drugs sentiment in the United States culminating in the Federal Court indictment of Noriega in February 1988, and then Vice President Bush's emotional reaction supporting the indictment, President Reagan sought for ways to quell the indictment and "smoothly" remove the Panamanian strongman applying mostly diplomatic tools.

The situation changed with George H.W. Bush elected as the President whose one of the first decisions was to fund covert operations in Panama and support Noriega's political opposition for the May 1989 elections. The options considered by the Bush Administration from February 1989 (the first month of Bush's Presidency) included a greater level of economic, diplomatic and political pressure and, if those turned futile, the military solution. Ergo, as Secretary Baker notes (James A. Baker, 1995), the military solution was seriously considered as an option from the very beginning by the Bush Administration. Even though the economic, diplomatic and political pressure was opted for in the first instance as the leverage against dictator Noriega, reinforcement of U.S. troops deployed in the Canal Zone and large-scale military exercises could have suggested that the U.S. was prepared to apply military power to achieve its objective.

According to Powell (Powell, 1995), by fall 1989, as the chosen mechanisms seemed to be inefficient, Noriega's

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removal and replacement by a democratic government was gaining priority in the Bush Administration. A great deal of priority was attached to *who* would replace Noriega and the U.S. officials had considered and interviewed a number of potential candidates mostly failing “an adherence to democracy test.” It is obvious that removing Noriega was only one part of an objective of President Bush, with the second part being his replacement with a democratic government. The significance of the latter principle was vividly demonstrated by the U.S. non-support of a military coup staged by the Panamanian officers against dictator Noriega who asked for American assistance in their endeavor.

The realist vision of the Rational Actor Model implies that decisions of the actor in a chaotic world setting are affected and to a varying degree shaped by the other actor (Allison, 1971). In the Panama intervention case, General Noriega himself did everything to bring the standoff with the U.S. to a state of open confrontation: he removed the President, factually appointed himself the “Maximum Leader” and *declared the country in the state of war with the United States*. Also, assaults (in some cases with lethal results) on the U.S. servicemen deployed in the Canal Zone in early and mid-December 1989 by the Panamanian soldiers were clearly viewed by the U.S. as a hostile act. On December 17, 1989, President Bush made a critical decision of the full-scale U.S. intervention into Panama and later on December 21 listed four goals of the military operation: to safeguard the lives of Americans; to defend democracy in Panama; to combat drug trafficking; and to protect the integrity of the Panama Canal Treaty.

The decision-making process by the Bush Administration in the Panama intervention case satisfies the RAM criteria, as (1) the U.S. continuously demonstrated *rationality* in its approach to decision-making (from the realist foreign policy perspective, the only doubt can be cast only on the rationality of the decision by the South Florida federal court indicting a foreign nation’s leader), (2) had clearly formulated goals (listed above), (3) obtained primarily through the intelligence and military sources on the ground and processed accordingly information *available*, and (4) weighed all options in a *calculated* manner choosing, after the previously chosen options of lesser intensity did not produce an expected outcome, the one (military intervention) that eventually led to a *desired* result.

In order to explain the Panama intervention case through the Prospect theory approaches, one should determine the *reference point* beyond which the U.S. Administration found itself in the *losses domain* with possible aggravating factors necessitating a full-scale intervention – an extreme option in the foreign policy alternatives by an actor (Beach, 2012).

The evidence indicates that Noriega’s increasing involvement in illegal drugs trade from Latin America to the United States and growing concern of the American public regarding drugs turned General Noriega from the mid-1980s into a liability for the Administration. Public pressure was reflected in the Congressional statements or resolutions and the Reagan Administration was pushed into the *losses domain* and had to respond to these demands.

As the foreign policy tool, the Reagan Administration chose the mechanism of economic sanctions and political pressure against the Panamanian regime. In the public perception

context, the Southern Florida District Court indictment further pushed the U.S. Administration into the *domain of losses* and forced it to seek the ways of solution to the “Noriega problem”, which President Reagan and his aides tried to settle diplomatically by quelling the indictment and offering General Noriega a “safe exit” to a third country, the option rejected by the dictator.

A full-scale military invasion was *one* of the options considered by the Bush Administrations as a utility to remove General Noriega from February 1989 and the military commanders were instructed to prepare scenarios and train forces for that possibility, but at first other options were preferred, such as covert support of Noriega’s political opposition in spring 1989 and tightened economic and political sanctions. Despite the mounted pressure, General Noriega showed no signs of concession, but instead his chosen tactics in these circumstances was demonstrated in full concentration of power, *announcement about Panama’s state of war with the United States*, and blatant physical assaults on political opponents and individual U.S. servicemen. We can presume that these signals were sending the U.S. Administration’s perception further down the *losses* line. In response, on December 17, 1989, President Bush made a decision on a full-scale military intervention into Panama with the four clear objectives (see above).

As for the *reference point* for President Bush and his Administration two events seem to have played a crucial role in perceiving the United States in the *losses domain*. First, Vice President Bush’s conversation with LAPD Chief Gates during his campaigning in California in 1988, which had such a great emotional impact on George H.W. Bush that he returned with a resolute conviction on the need to bring General Noriega to justice in the United States that it made him openly confront President Reagan protesting his quest for a diplomatic solution on the problem of Noriega’s indictment (Powell, 1995). This meeting apparently turned the “Noriega problem” for Vice President Bush into his personal fight for justice for the reign of which *any means* can be applied.

As for senior Administration officials, the turning point was the realization in mid-December 1989 that none of the coercive diplomacy tools applied (economic, diplomatic and political measures) had any effect on General Noriega whose actions were becoming only more vicious: he openly announced himself the “Maximum Leader” of Panama, ordered brutal assaults on his political opponents and had Panamanian Defense Forces (PDF) soldiers attack American military. Thus, in mid-December 1989, from the perspective of the Bush Administration, the intervention was imperative and could lay the ground for the possibility of returning to *status quo*.

The third model applied in this my research is Governmental Politics originally proposed by Allison as Governmental (Bureaucratic) Politics in 1971 and later reformulated by Allison and Zelikow in 1999 (Allison, 1971), (Allison & Zelikow, 1999). The government politics model has held a special place in the FPDM by studying and attaching a great deal of importance to the bureaucratic battles of key decision-makers being based on the presumption of *pulling and hauling* in governmental decision-making as a critical factor.

Although State Secretary Baker and other senior Department leaders came to understanding that the military solution could be the only eventual option to solve the “Noriega problem” in February 1989, while the Defense Secretary and Defense Department officials were against this idea, the Governmental Politics Model cannot be used to explain the Panama intervention as, despite their initial opposition, per President Bush’s instruction, the Defense Department and senior military sent additional units as reinforcement to the troops deployed in the Panama Canal Zone, conducted military maneuvers and developed the plans for a full-scale intervention scenario.

Both the primary and secondary sources demonstrate that neither in the initial period of planning a military intervention nor during a crucial decision-making session of the key members of the Bush Administration on December 17 there were no dissenting voices and no governmental leader had an agenda differing from that of any other cabinet member. A statement by General Powell, Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff, at that critical meeting on the possible high number of casualties cannot be unequivocally associated with *bargaining* - traditional for the Governmental Politics Model - but can be thought of more as a precaution on the part of a Commander sending his troops to a battleground with inevitable losses. As in all other critical foreign policy decision-making processes by the Bush Administration, the President’s voice was crucial in the Panama intervention case with no substantial *pulling and hauling*.

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