

Noriega Guilty on

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MIAMI, April 9—Manuel Antonio Noriega, the self-proclaimed "maximum leader" of Panama who was toppled from power and arrested after 27,000 U.S. troops invaded his country, was convicted today of collaborating with the world's major drug lords to smuggle cocaine into the United States.

After deliberating 35 hours over 4½ days, a jury of nine women and three men found Noriega guilty on eight of 10 counts of racketeering and drug trafficking. U.S. District Judge William M. Hoeveller set sentencing for July 10, when the ousted Pan-

amanian leader faces a maximum of 120 years in federal prison.

As the verdict was read in a hushed courtroom, Noriega sat stone-faced. He was clad, as he has been throughout the trial, in a brown Panama Defense Forces (PDF) uniform. Two of his daughters wept in the row behind the defense table, while his wife, Felicidad, looked sternly at her husband with hands clasped in front of her.

At the White House, President Bush immediately hailed the verdict as a "major victory against the drug lords" and said it should "send a lesson to drug lords here and around the world that they'll pay a price if they continue to poison the lives of our kids. . . ."

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8 of 10 Counts

Bush, who at one point authorized secret negotiations with Noriega to drop the drug-related charges if he would leave Panama for a third country, said the U.S. invasion of Panama in December 1989 was "worth bringing [Noriega] to justice . . . it is certainly worth it when you protect the lives of American citizens and, when part of the result of that is democracy in a country, it makes it doubly worth it."

Noriega's chief lawyer, Frank Rubino, emerged from the federal courthouse angrily vowing to appeal the verdict. In a statement, he also denounced the U.S. government and the Bush administration for acting as the "world's policeman" in invading Panama and arresting his client.

"This, in our opinion, is the modern-day version of the Crusades, that the United States will now trample across the entire world, imposing its will upon so-called independent, sovereign nations," Rubino said. "Unless the foreign governments are willing to kneel once a day and face Washington and give grace to George Bush, they too may be in the same posture as General Noriega."

The verdict ended an exhausting trial marked by controversy and allegations of government misconduct.

Despite combing through thousands of documents seized by U.S. troops in Panama and conducting one of the most expensive

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drug investigations in U.S. history, federal prosecutors ultimately were forced to rely on circumstantial evidence and verbal testimony of dozens of convicted drug traffickers and pilots. All were offered lucrative plea bargains that included reduced sentences, dropped counts and other incentives to testify against Noriega.

"We are surprised at the enormity of the victory," Michael Patrick Sullivan, assistant U.S. attorney and chief federal prosecutor, told Cable News Network tonight. "We knew we had some counts weaker than others. We had some doubts."

Today, Rubino also complained that Noriega's defense was stymied by Hoever's decision to exclude all "political" evidence, such as Noriega's extensive dealings with the Central Intelligence Agency and other U.S. agencies. "This was not a drug case," Rubino said. "This was a political case. It always was, it always will be. We only wish we've been allowed to present the evidence to address this case."

Despite defense complaints, however, federal prosecutors had expressed concern about a possible mistrial until the end. On Wednesday, jurors sent Hoever a note saying "we are deadlocked" because one juror had "made up their mind" before entering the jury room. Hoever strongly implored them to try harder.

Today, the jurors appeared somber as their verdicts were read. Then they were taken immediately to a nearby hotel, followed by reporters and camera crews.

Jury foreman Lester Spencer, accompanied by seven jurors, made a brief appearance, saying only that "our decision was based upon what was presented in the court by both the U.S. government and the defense attorneys. It was a decision that was debated heavily back and forth."

Juror James Hogan read a statement: "We've examined all the evidence, and the verdict we reached speaks for itself. We are all looking forward to returning to a normal life."

Of the 10 counts, the two most critical were racketeering and conspiracy to commit racketeering, and Noriega was found guilty of both.

The broad-based charges alleged that, from 1981 to 1986, Noriega

was part of a "criminal enterprise" in which he took millions of dollars in bribes from leaders of Colombia's Medellin cocaine cartel in exchange for turning his country into a virtual free-trade zone for cocaine smuggling and money laundering.

Six lesser counts on which he was found guilty involved various portions of the racketeering conspiracy, including conspiracy to distribute and manufacture cocaine, actual distribution of cocaine and aiding a flight carrying drug profits. He was acquitted on two counts involving the most recent acts alleged in the indictment—participation in a 1986 conspiracy to exchange M-16 assault rifles for 708 pounds of cocaine to be smuggled from Colombia to this country aboard the Krill, a yacht.

The Krill counts were widely viewed as the weakest part of the government's case since Noriega's only alleged role was giving cryptic verbal approval over a speakerphone. None of the acts for which he was convicted occurred after summer 1984, a determination supporting the contention of critics who said the Bush administration had little direct evidence that Noriega was involved in drug trafficking at the time of the invasion.

The verdicts climaxed a four-year legal and political odyssey virtually unprecedented in U.S. law and almost certain to produce fodder for appeals for years.

First charged by two federal grand juries in February 1988, Noriega became the first sitting foreign leader indicted for violations of U.S. law. After he defiantly spurned U.S. efforts to negotiate his departure from office, Bush ordered Operation Just Cause, a lightning assault by U.S. troops that conquered Noriega's PDF forces within days, left hundreds of Panamanians dead and produced widespread denunciations throughout Latin America. Twenty-three U.S. troops died, and more than 300 were injured.

After the invasion, Noriega took refuge at the Vatican Embassy, where he was surrounded by U.S. forces and subjected to blaring rock music and other novel psychological warfare techniques that forced his surrender. Arrested by the Drug Enforcement Administration, he was flown here Jan. 4, 1990, and imprisoned without bail in a specially constructed cell at the Miami Correctional Center.

Bringing Noriega to trial proved