

... And About Gen. Noriega

JURY SELECTION has begun in the case of Gen. Manuel Noriega, and soon testimony will begin in what is probably the most important narcotics trial ever held in an American court. The former Panamanian dictator has already been in custody for 20 months and faces a possible sentence of 140 years if he is convicted on counts of drug trafficking, money laundering and racketeering. The more fascinating aspects of the case, however, go beyond one man's guilt or innocence, for the defense has promised a thorough, public review of U.S. policy in Central America in an effort to demonstrate that this government condoned any actions the defendant may have taken. From the beginning, there has been a succession of side issues that could have derailed the prosecution. Because the government had frozen all the defendant's foreign bank accounts, he had no money to pay for lawyers. A compromise was reached, and money was made available for lawyers. A second controversy arose over the taping of the defendant's conversations with his lawyers, but the trial judge ruled that he had not been harmed by the disclosures. Then, because of a blunder by an experienced customs agent, a key witness was recruited to work undercover in Colombia and was allowed to leave this country. There have been further, complicating disputes about the government's involvement with one of Gen. Noriega's

former lawyers, the defendant's status as a prisoner of war and access to certain classified documents the defense says it needs. At every turn, a record is being created for use on appeal.

What can we expect to learn during the trial? Testimony will provide details of the general's relationship with the CIA. He was on the payroll. What services did he provide and was he ever authorized, as the defense may claim, to engage in a narcotics conspiracy? What were his connections to President Bush, to Oliver North and William Casey, all of whom met with him at one time or another? What part did he play in helping the contras, and is that relevant to the criminal charges? What does he know about the conduct of the drug war in Latin America? And what bearing does Fidel Castro, whose testimony has been taped by the defense, have on this case?

Neither the State Department nor the drug enforcement agencies were enthusiastic about indicting Gen. Noriega in this country in the first place, and it is reasonable to assume that the intelligence agencies have similar misgivings. But that bridge has been crossed, and like any other defendant in an American court the general is entitled to all the rights afforded to an accused. That remains true no matter how inconvenient or embarrassing the trial may turn out to be for any of those involved.