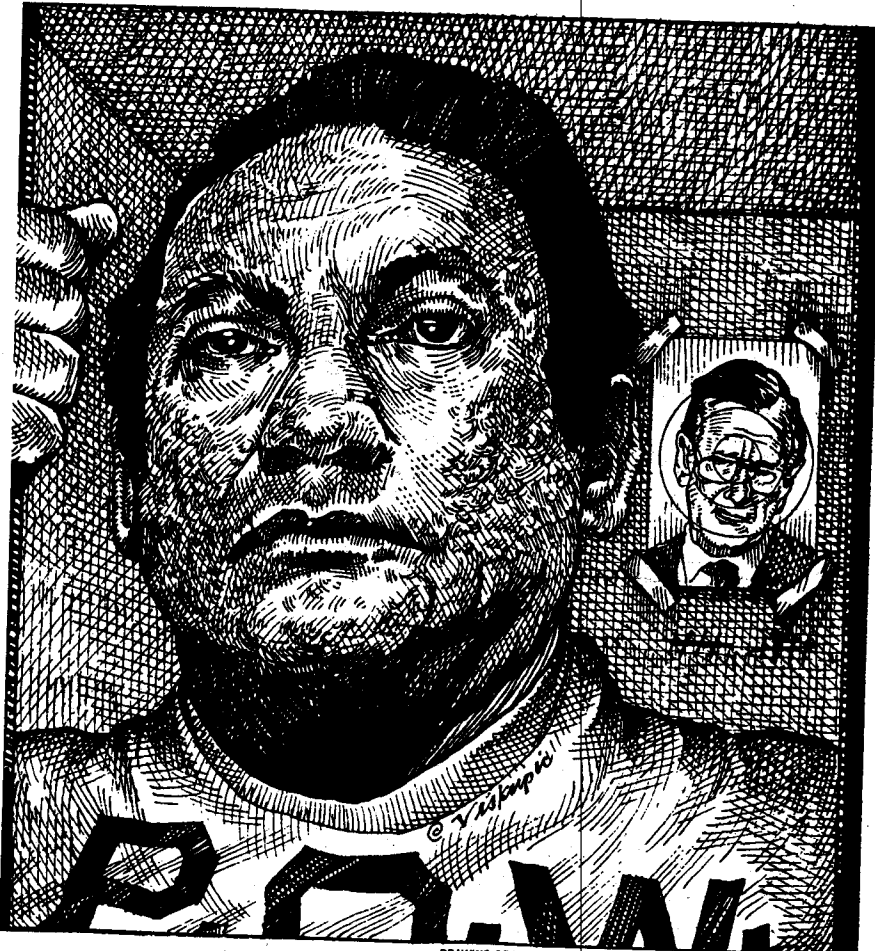


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World



DRAWING OF MANUEL NORIEGA BY GARY VISKUPIC FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Book

The Strongman's Own Story

AMERICA'S PRISONER

The Memoirs of Manuel Noriega

By Manuel Noriega and Peter Eisner
Random House. 293 pp. \$25

By Eugene Robinson

HE IS one of America's most famous prison inmates, and the only one certified as a prisoner of war. Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega, the bantamweight Panamanian strongman who delighted in thumbing his nose at the United States, also has the distinction of being the only convicted felon in the U.S. prison system whose capture required the invasion of a sovereign country, an action that cost hundreds of lives.

The Dec. 20, 1989, invasion of Panama seems almost a distant memory now, an event belonging to another time. The Cold War was still on back then, although it was petering out, and one of its last remaining battlegrounds was Central America. Contras, Sandinistas, Guatemalan generals, Honduran airstrips, Salvadoran death squads—the characters have the musty air of history

Eugene Robinson is foreign editor of The Washington Post.

around them now, but back then they were front-page news. Central America was hot, and one of its most incendiary figures was a wiry, pockmarked little man who delighted in taunting then-president George Bush, his defiance highlighting the perceived presidential deficiency that was being called "the wimp factor."

Panama was invaded; Noriega was captured, tried and convicted on drug trafficking charges; and now he sits in a prison cell, apparently convinced that someday he will win release. His memoirs are no apologia: Noriega isn't the least bit apologetic, except perhaps about a few tactical errors that left him more vulnerable than he otherwise might have been. With veteran journalist Peter Eisner, who covered the Panama invasion for Newsday, Noriega has written a fascinating book in which he doesn't give an inch: Throughout, he insists he was robbed, he was bullied, he was framed, he was right.

Eisner has taken on the unenviable task of giving voice to a thoroughly unattractive man. The ugliness lies more in what Noriega fails to say. He doesn't deal substantively with allegations that he essentially rigged a presidential election except to say that he was following the "Mexican political model," in which Mexico's ruling party has doled out patronage and

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stuffed ballot boxes for years—with no complaints from the Americans. He has nothing to say at all about human-rights abuses and the way he suppressed political opposition.

At one point, he notes that, however he ran his country, those actions did not qualify as crimes under American law. His criminal offense, as alleged and proven in a U.S. courtroom, was drug trafficking. Noriega stridently denies the charge; and Eisner, in a section of the book he researched and wrote independently, examines the evidence and finds it wanting.

Eisner's conclusion is based on the welter of conflicting evidence presented at Noriega's trial, which he covered, and the fact that the most damning testimony came from convicted traffickers—including Colombian drug lord Carlos Lehder—who stood to win better prison conditions or lighter sentences if they implicated Noriega. That's all true. But it's important to note that most drug convictions rely on testimony from shady characters, since upright citizens tend not to be around when drug deals are made. Still, Eisner notes that U.S. drug agents in Panama gave much less credence to the charges than their superiors in Washington.

THE FASCINATING passages in the general's memoirs are his accounts of secret meetings, clandestine operations and other occult dealings in the U.S. crusade to fight Cuban and Soviet influence in Central America. He describes meeting Bush when he was CIA director—they had a nice lunch, he writes, and exchanged cryptic comments in a kind of spymasters' code. Years later, when Bush was vice president, they met again; Noriega alleges, without support, that

Bush made a "subtle" request to use the Panama Canal Zone as a base for counterinsurgency operations in El Salvador.

He charges that the Americans went on to use a base in Panama to train Salvadoran death squads. He describes a secret U.S. installation called "the Tunnel" that he says was used for high-tech surveillance of Cuba. He describes his own frequent contacts with the CIA, including with the Reagan-era spy chief William Casey, and portrays them as mostly involving messages the Americans wanted him to pass on to Cuban leader Fidel Castro, whom Noriega knew well. "As a result of these dealings, it is always inferred that I was some sort of U.S. agent," Noriega writes, "which was never the case."

Bush is clearly Noriega's obsession, and he writes about him in an obsessional tone, as if describing a nightmare image that time won't erase. He blames Bush for all that has befallen him. Noriega has other scores to settle, too, and he lashes out at former Costa Rican president Oscar Arias, whom he accuses of hypocrisy and double-dealing. Noriega charges that Arias, a Nobel Peace Prize winner, regularly asked him for money; he claims to have given Arias thousands of dollars, delivered to him personally at his home.

The question about these and other charges, of course, is credibility. Eisner examines the drug charges in detail, and throughout provides footnotes when Noriega's version is directly contradicted by others. In the end, though, the story is Noriega's own—and while it is not always believable, it is ultimately compelling. ■