

Out of the paper

Noriega Plea Touched Him, Judge Says

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MIAMI, July 19—The judge who presided over Manuel Antonio Noriega's trial says he was touched by Noriega's impassioned three-hour sentencing statement and agonized over the 40-year prison term he imposed.

U.S. District Judge William M. Hoeveler also defended his decision to keep all political issues out of the historic case. He said the eight-month-long trial would have degenerated into a "free for all" of vicious charges and countercharges.

Hoeveler spoke during an informal interview in his chambers last week.

"I was moved by his statement. There were times when he almost got to me. . . . Well, he did get to me," Hoeveler said, referring to comments made by Noriega before his sentencing on July 10.

The speech was Noriega's most detailed statement since being toppled as de facto leader of Panama during the U.S. invasion ordered by President Bush in 1989.

Noriega professed his innocence of drug trafficking and racketeering charges and accused Bush of orchestrating a political vendetta against him because he refused to help the White House in efforts to topple the Sandinista government in Nicaragua.

The deposed Panamanian dictator recounted how he had been considered a valuable U.S. ally until he clashed with Washington over the future of the Panama Canal, the stationing of U.S. troops in Panama and efforts to assist Nicaragua's contra rebels.

The bitter speech prompted Hoeveler to reply from the bench, "Whatever happened outside the four corners of this courtroom is somebody else's burden, not mine."

Hoeveler said that he made the comment to emphasize to Noriega that a judge's role is narrowly defined.

"All that he was saying was interesting and, in some cases, moving, but it really had nothing to do with the case before me," Hoeveler said.

The judge said that if he had decided to allow Noriega to introduce politics into the trial, he also would have had to allow prosecutors to introduce evidence of Noriega's alleged involvement in human rights abuses and violent actions ordered against Americans in Panama in 1989.

"Actually, Noriega had less to show probably from a political standpoint than the government had to show about Noriega," Hoeveler said.

He declined to talk about why he sentenced Noriega to 40 years rather than a lesser sentence or the 120-year maximum he faced. The judge said only that he suffered with the decision. "I always do, but I suffered more with this one than I usually do. Mostly after I did it," he said. "And I probably will [continue to suffer] from time to time."

Hoeveler, who will turn 70 next month, said: "I always have difficulty with sentencing. I sometimes wonder who are we to judge what happens to the lives of others."