

THE OPPENHEIMER REPORT

When looking at news events, remember the 'human factor'

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The news that former Panamanian strongman Manuel A. Noriega will be released from his Miami prison Sept. 9 reminded me of the most important journalistic lesson I learned while covering his downfall in the late 1980s: When analyzing political events, never forget the human factor.

Indeed, when we talk about world events -- whether it's the war in Iraq or Venezuela's narcissist-Leninist leader -- we in the media tend to assume that everything is motivated by ideological clashes. But, very often, events are triggered by religious revelations, personal hatreds or business clashes that have little to do with politics. It's the human factor.

The events that led to Noriega's political demise and the 1989 U.S. invasion of Panama are a case in point. They were triggered by religious-mystical revelations by the then No. 2 official in Panama's Defense Forces, Col. Roberto Díaz Herrera. At the time, he was a devout follower of Sai Baba, an Indian guru who produced magical ashes by circling his index finger in the air.

Díaz Herrera, who is now Panama's ambassador to Peru, first told me the behind-the-scenes story of the events that led to Noriega's downfall in a long interview at his exile home in Venezuela in 1989.

According to Díaz Herrera, he had grown increasingly disenchanted with his boss since 1985, when Panama was rife with rumors that Noriega had ordered the killing of Hugo Spadafora, a former guerrilla fighter who had accused Noriega of drug trafficking and human rights abuses.

Sure, Díaz Herrera was also frustrated by the fact that he had not been appointed to Noriega's job. He had been a much brighter student at the military school both had attended in Peru, and was recognized by his peers as much more sophisticated than Noriega.

But it was Sai Baba and his yogis who gave the final push to Díaz Herrera to hold his now famous public confession in June, 1987 about Noriega's rampant corruption and human rights abuses. Díaz Herrera's statements led to massive street protests, drew international attention to Panama's crisis and moved U.S. prosecutors to look into Noriega's drug ties.

Díaz Herrera had become interested in the Indian guru during a vacation with his wife in Buenos Aires in 1986, when a popular Argentine singer named Piero introduced him to his spiritual mentor, an 87-year-old Russian-born Argentine yogi named Indra Devi. Devi had stunned the couple with her wisdom -- and her tales about the alleged miracles performed by Sai Baba.

Díaz Herrera and his wife ended up spending much of their vacation at Devi's offices. There, they met a California psychic named Shama Calhoun. Soon, he invited both Devi and Calhoun to visit him in Panama, all expenses paid by Panama's armed forces.

On one of these trips, during a session in which she was reading Díaz Herrera's aura, the psychic said, "You have a big mission in life. A big cause is calling for your help."

Noriega, who had his intelligence apparatus spying on Díaz Herrera and his visitors, flew in his own spiritual advisor: a Brazilian astrologer named Ivan Trilha. But Trilha couldn't do much: On June 6, 1987, Díaz Herrera went public with his charges against Noriega. The rest is history.

Last week, I called Díaz Herrera in Peru. I hadn't talked with him in nearly two decades. He seems to have put some distance between himself and Sai Baba, while remaining "extraordinarily" fond of Asian religions. And he suggested that he may have used "a bit of esoteric psychological warfare" in his public campaign against Noriega.

But Díaz Herrera conceded that what had triggered him to come out publicly against Noriega was "a spiritual commotion" influenced by his yogis.

And he remains proud of that, "even if many people thought that I was crazy."

My opinion: As skeptical as I am of gurus who perform magic tricks, I wish that more government officials everywhere had "spiritual commotions" like Díaz Herrera's.

And regarding the lessons I learned from this story, it makes me wonder whether many of today's events -- from President Bush's invasion of Iraq to Venezuela's President Hugo Chávez's grandiose statements purporting to carry out the wishes of independence hero Simón Bolívar -- are influenced by religious or mystic visions. I can only tell myself: Never forget the human factor.