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Fighting in Panama: The Chief of Staff; Vital for the Invasion: Politically Attuned General

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The ascension of the general, Gen. Colin L. Powell, as the nation's top military leader marked an important turning point in the attitude of the American military toward intervention in Panama.

General Powell's predecessor, Adm. William J. Crowe Jr., publicly expressed skepticism about plans in the Reagan Administration to use force against General Noriega. But General Powell, who formally assumed his post shortly before a coup attempt in Panama failed, has exhibited no such hesitance.

Even before he assumed his new duties, General Powell had reviewed the United States plans for an attack on Panama and found them deficient, a senior Pentagon official said. Together with Gen. Maxwell Thurman, the new commander of the United States Southern Command, he changed the plans to allow for a quicker operation. Capabilities and Intentions

There is an old saying in strategic philosophy that capabilities create their own intentions. By changing the war plans, General Powell made it more feasible for President Bush to order a full-scale attack on Panama.

And once the attack was launched, General Powell calmly explained the mission to a packed room of reporters, addressing them by their first names as the Bush Administration sought public backing for its intervention.

In a recent closed-door seminar at the National Defense University, General Powell reportedly stressed that to be effective, military commanders need to develop a public relations strategy, an axiom at the White House but a thought that does not sit easily with some military leaders who are accustomed to developing plans in secret and who tend to be wary of reporters.

Supporters of General Powell say that his previous Washington experience, most notably his service as the national security adviser in the Reagan Administration, makes him sensitive to the foreign policy objectives of the White House. But his background also raises the question of whether General Powell might be overly conscious of White House policy considerations when the President considers using military force.

General Powell, 52 years old, is the son of Jamaican immigrants and was born in Harlem. He won a Bronze Star and a Purple Heart in the Vietnam War and later was a White House fellow. General Powell served as Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger's top military assistant and then commanded one of the two Army Corps in Europe for six months. No Link to Panama

General Powell replaced Frank C. Carlucci as Mr. Reagan's national security adviser when Mr. Carlucci became Defense Secretary. President Reagan later appointed General Powell the commander of Army and tactical Air Force units in the United States.

In August, President Bush selected him over more senior officers to be the chairman of the joint chiefs, saying that it was important that the new chairman be a person of breadth and experience.

When General Powell was picked in August there was no particular reason to believe that his first major test would be to oversee an attack against General Noriega. But just days after he assumed his duties in October, the failed coup attempt accelerated the military planning by General Powell and General Thurman that was used in the American attack last week.

A military official familiar with General Powell's thinking said that after the coup in Panama failed "it became increasingly clear that more decisive action might be needed to bring change to Panama."

Under General Powell's direction, the attack plans were changed so the United States would be ready to begin a full-scale attack on short notice. Tanks and helicopters were secretly moved to Panama, and parts of the operation were rehearsed. Plans Influence Decision

A senior Pentagon official said the new plans developed by General Powell strongly influenced President Bush's decision to order the attack.

The plans in place before General Powell took over, he said, would have required a longer buildup, which the President might have been reluctant to order.

"The earlier plans were fairly unresponsive," the senior Pentagon official asserted. "There is something to the notion that the military had tried to make the operation appear impossible."

This official said that General Powell's Army background made him more comfortable with plans to use ground forces in a large-scale attack than his predecessor, Admiral Crowe. Admiral Crowe has publicly argued for a cautious approach, noting for example that plans considered in the Reagan Administration for establishing an alternative government of Panama on an American base there would hurt the United States effort to negotiate military base rights around the world.

But the attack plan developed by General Powell and approved by President Bush has been criticized for not taking sufficient account of the political dimensions of the operation: the need to help in quickly establishing the legitimacy of the new Government, as well as maintaining order.

After staying all night with Defense Secretary Dick Cheney in the Pentagon's command center to oversee the attack on Wednesday morning, General Powell voiced confidence that the United States would eventually apprehend General Noriega.

"We will chase him, and we will find him," General Powell said. "I'm not quite sure he's up to being chased around the countryside by Army Rangers, special forces and light infantry units."

General Noreiga proved to be more elusive than General Powell suggested and was never captured.

But this evening when General Noreiga went to the papal representative in Panama and asked for political asylum, it appeared that General Powell's military task was made dramatically easier.