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Political Psychology Primer: Puerto Rican Nationalists and Clemency

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Abstract. This article contrasts public policy discourse, policy deliberations, and policy analysis on awarding clemency to nationalists supporting a politically violent organization.

Much heat but less light was generated over the recent controversy on United States (US) President Clinton's awarding clemency to a group of Puerto Rican nationalists. The individuals in this group had been convicted of crimes supporting the FALN--an organization that had engaged in political violence. The individuals awarded clemency had not, however, been directly involved in perpetrating such violence.

Public policy discourse on the clemency decision seemed to focus only on a very few number of criteria. For example, the vast preponderance of law enforcement personnel was against clemency based on the notion that individuals should serve their time if they do the crime. Or that clemency would encourage other would-be criminals to engage in crime. Other opponents attributed the Clinton decision to a guided or misguided attempt to help his wife in a probable run for the US Senate in New York. Supporters of clemency based their position on implicit notions that the criminal sentences awarded reeked of racism and ethnocentrism. Or that compassion through clemency is somehow intrinsically the right thing to do.

One can only surmise the content of the actual policy deliberations leading up to the clemency decision. Documents released by the US Executive Branch suggest that a significant criterion was one of mercy: that the prisoners had served enough time. On the other hand, it certainly is possible that the most significant criterion might have been the probable US Senate campaign or even the ongoing US Presidential campaign being run by Vice President Gore. In any case--based on intimations of Clintonian policymaking afforded by observers and ex-staffers--one might well surmise that the analysis of many criteria was not effected.

In contrast to the above, comprehensive policy analysis should entail a consideration of clemency along a host of strategic, value-oriented, and domestic political criteria. Strategic criteria would include (1) the threat from the FALN and the prisoners subject to early release, (2) the impact of clemency on antiterrorism policy, (3) consequences for the ongoing Puerto Rican discourse on statehood, independence, or commonwealth status, (4) linkage with other strategic Issues facing the US, and (5) linkage with the waxing and waning of strategic political considerations. Values-oriented criteria would include (1) the ethics awarding clemency in a particular case; (2) the morality of the crimes committed by the Puerto Rican nationalists; and (3) the compatibility of these ethical and moral stances with ethical and moral stances that are promulgated as characterizing universal, international, regional, US, and local human and civil rights. Domestic policy criteria would include (1) the US Presidential and Senate races; (2) racial and ethnic politics; and (3) other domestic Issues from crime, abortion, through labor, to the environment that might be affected by the result of decisions related to clemency.

An interesting question is whether a White House administration should publicly acknowledge the nature of a comprehensive policy analysis if one indeed occurred-or, indeed, even if it did not? For there

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are times when public policy discourse is such that the admission of close reasoned analysis becomes incendiary-other times when its admitted omission becomes so. In any event, the receding furor over the clemency decision seems to reflect more negatively on the quality of discourse and deliberation than the ends of that decision. (See Bell, D.B., & Bell, B.W. (1977). Desertion and antiwar protest: Findings from the Ford Clemency Program. *Armed Forces and Society*, 3, 433-443; Leary, M.R., & Schreindorfer, L.S. (1997). Unresolved Issues with terror management theory. *Psychological Inquiry*, 8, 26-29; Lewis, N.A. (November 9, 1999). Report by House Republicans says clemency for Puerto Ricans was campaign move. *The New York Times*, p. A20; Tabak, R.J. (1986). The death of fairness: The arbitrary and capricious imposition of the death penalty in the 1980s. *Review of Law and Social Change*, 14, 797-848.) (Keywords: Clemency, Clinton, FALN, Puerto Rico.)