

Features

Wood death sparks enforcement efforts

Narcotics are a big, violent business in Texas

United Press International
Hanging on the wall of U.S. Attorney Ed Pvrado's San Antonio office is a framed close-up photograph of a black Lincoln Continental with a windshield and hood mutilated by bullets. The picture is a graphic reminder — as if Prado needed a reminder — that fighting drug traffic in South Texas is definitely a hard-ball proposition. The photo was given to him by James Kerr, a former assistant U.S. attorney with a drug-busting reputation, who was lucky enough to survive the daylight attack in November 1978 that was attributed to the narcotics smuggling community.

The John H. Wood Federal Building in San Antonio — secured by sophisticated electronics — is another reminder. Wood, known as "Maximum John" because of his unmerciful courtroom approach to narcotics offenders, was shot in the back and killed by a sniper outside his apartment six months after the Kerr attack. The courthouse has been renamed in honor of the judge, but the grand juries investigating the slaying have been virtually lasting monuments in themselves, having issued no indictments in their 2-year-old investigation.

When Rep. Henry B. Gonzales, D-Texas, heard about the attacks on Kerr and Wood he was upset but not totally surprised. A month before Kerr was fired on from the back of a stolen van, Gonzales had been concerned enough about the audacity of Texas traffickers to warn that public officials might be endangered.

"I had said, 'I'm afraid that nothing is going to be done until we have an eventual attack on a law enforcement agent,'" Gonzales said from his Washington office. "I said, 'It's going to take an FBI agent or a district attorney or somebody like that before the impunity (of traffickers) is revealed.'"

"There's no question in my mind that every month that goes by the danger of it becoming another Jimmy Hoffa case is greater and that is an absolute confession of incapacity to do anything about it," he said.

This was an attempt to intimidate the judiciary. It's defiance, it's a challenge, a dropped gauntlet, and it pains me to see we're that limited to control it."

Narcotics agents and federal prosecutors have a formidable opponent. The dope industry in Texas is so large authorities have difficulty getting a handle on its largest magnitude.

There's no way to even estimate the dollar amount but it's easily in the multimillions," said Assistant U.S. Attorney Wayne Speck, who calls smuggling and illegal manufacture of drugs a monumental business in South Texas.

Marjuana remains Texas' No. 1 drug import with cocaine second and Mexican heroin making a comeback after a two-year slack period following a poppy eradication project, said Walter McFarland, commander of the Department of Public Safety's narcotics division.

With a 900-mile border with Mexico and hundreds of sparsely populated square miles in West Texas to land marijuana and cocaine-laden airplanes, Texas is a virtual playground for smugglers. McFarland said Drug Enforcement Administration statistics indicate air smuggling has declined worldwide except in Texas, where it has increased.

Texas is even more inviting to smuggling rings and organized crime because federal agents have concentrated their efforts and

appropriate law enforcement. Without ready and plentiful financing and some degree of sanction, drug trafficking could never have thrived, he said.

"The real, real organized crime moved into this racket about a year before the attack on Kerr," he said. "I do know that once your real organization moves in, you've got a big operation and it's a corporate operation. Some of the fronts themselves don't know they're involved."

"There are high-level connections. It's sophisticated, complicated. The involvement of the business element of the highest nature in Texas goes back to the credit crunches because of the very history of the beginning of organized crime, like the bootlegging when the Depression hit, is that they are the only ones with money in hard times. Same thing here."

"Law enforcement agents must be given a chance but, in the first place, the budget cuts are hamstringing. Law enforcement agents on the local and state level,

the most sophisticated aspects of the criminal population, we're going to have at best compromise law enforcement.

"My contention is that as long as we have that cozy cheek-by-jowl arrangement (using criminals in investigations and for information) and they tell us they can't solve crimes unless they go to bed with the criminal, I say that's tacit acceptance of crime."

Taking that theory even farther is Charles V. Harrelson, a convicted hitman who reportedly is the primary suspect in the Wood assassination. In a copyright interview with The Dallas Morning News, Harrelson said corrupt narcotics agents had the judge and El Paso attorney Lee Chagra killed because they were aware of their illegal dealings.

"Lee had documented evidence that there were corrupt DEA agents," Harrelson said. "Lee had the evidence to bust the DEA wide open. I saw it and Lee told me that Kerr and Judge Wood knew about it. They tried to scare off Kerr and it worked."

Charles Carter, chief of the DEA's San Antonio office, said Harrelson's claim was "hogwash" and an attempt to divert attention from himself and gambler Jimmy Chagra, Lee's brother, who is serving prison time for operating a drug smuggling ring and also is a target of the Wood grand jury.

Gov. Bill Clements hopes his efforts in the recently completed legislative session have given law enforcement sufficient new weapons to turn off the dope flow.

When he took the governorship Clements made it clear that he intended to give authorities wiretapping capability to snare traffickers — and he did just that. He also established the Texans War on Drugs Committee and named millionaire superpatriot H. Ross Perot to head it.

Clements also got a bill that raises narcotics fines to \$1 million. The wiretap measure, he said, would give the state an anti-drug climate that would send dealers

rushing to other states. "No legislative session in modern history has passed more potent, far-reaching laws to combat crime and the cancerous drug traffic in our state," Clements said after his anti-crime victory.

To McFarland, a new public awareness is just as important as the Legislature's legal help. "We feel we've got better public support," he said, "and we feel we'll see more vigorous prosecution because of public sentiment."

"There's quite a bit of the leadership that is from out of state," McFarland said. "There are Colombians and Cubans coming in and buying property and boats, moving out of Florida this way. There's a big increase of out-

of-state people moving into South Texas, West Texas and paying cash for big land purchases with no visible means of support.

"That's all organized, very organized, with legitimate businesses coming from dope money. They're buying things like restaurants, motels, hotels, real estate businesses, clubs."

Authorities may have a bigtime dope financier in Mexican millionaire Matias Montemayor, whom federal officials have called a major heroin and cocaine supplier for Chicago and Detroit. He is being held under \$3 million bond in Brownsville for illegal firearm possession.

The firearms were found in April when federal agents seized about \$1 million worth of property from two lavish McAllen homes owned by Montemayor, who has been convicted of cocaine dealing and manslaughter in Illinois and heroin delivery in Mexico, and his brother.

Because of a law allowing the confiscation of property bought with drug money, officials were able to take two homes and over \$10,000 worth of jewelry, among other items.

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terested in the banking community," he said. "Although it's not necessarily in Austin, we've known of several people in the banking business who got their start running drugs."

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