

Trial will revive Thornburgh scandal

by Steve Komm and Jeffrey Steinberg

Barring a delay, a former top aide to Attorney General Richard Thornburgh is scheduled to go on trial on Feb. 4 in federal court in Scranton, Pennsylvania on charges of cocaine use and perjury. Henry Barr, who was Thornburgh's special assistant in charge of all major federal drug prosecutions from August 1988 through May 1989, was indicted in 1990 as part of a Harrisburg federal grand jury probe into drug use among state officials during Thornburgh's two terms as governor (1979-87).

Barr is charged with repeated cocaine use between 1983-89 and of lying to federal investigators who conducted a background check following his appointment as a special assistant to Attorney General Thornburgh. During Thornburgh's tenure as governor, Barr was his general counsel.

Barr is one of at least three top Department of Justice (DoJ) Thornburgh aides who are either indicted or suspected of cocaine use. According to Pennsylvania sources, Murray Dickman, who is Thornburgh's administrative assistant, has received a letter from the grand jury indicating that he might be indicted on drug charges. And Ronald Stern, another member of Thornburgh's "Harrisburg Mafia," resigned his post as special assistant to Thornburgh late in 1990 in order to avoid a perjury felony indictment. Stern had failed to complete FBI questionnaires required for security clearances because the forms contained questions about drug use.

Up until Barr and Stern departed Washington, they shared a house in Alexandria, Virginia with Dickman and a fourth Thornburgh aide, Richard Weatherbee, who is Thornburgh's personal liaison to the Drug Enforcement Administration. As head of the Pennsylvania State Police anti-narcotics division under Thornburgh, Weatherbee had been responsible for suppressing a state investigation into drug-trafficking allegations against another former Thornburgh man, state chief prosecutor Richard Guida.

In May 1989, Guida was indicted by the same Harrisburg grand jury on cocaine charges. He eventually pleaded guilty to cocaine trafficking as part of a plea agreement in which he became a cooperating witness. Guida identified Barr as a cocaine user.

Crimes of omission or commission?

Last autumn, before the Thornburgh scandal was buried under news coverage of the Persian Gulf crisis, Thornburgh's son had been identified as a suspected cocaine user. Within

less than 24 hours, the FBI had dispensed with the allegations, apparently by strongarming two key witnesses and by issuing an unprecedented public statement absolving Thornburgh's son.

But now, on the eve of the Barr trial, new questions are surfacing about Thornburgh's links to Pittsburgh area cocaine traffickers and organized crime circles. According to several Thornburgh adversaries, the Attorney General has been associated with western Pennsylvania mob elements since the 1960s when his law firm, Kirkpatrick and Lockhart, served as a bridge between the Mellon family-centered bluebloods and the crime syndicate.

Typical of Thornburgh's role was his involvement with the Investors Security Leasing Corp. (ISLC). In the late 1960s, shortly before he was appointed by Richard Nixon as the U.S. Attorney for the Western District of Pennsylvania, Thornburgh incorporated ISLC and a second company, Investors Security Corp. (ISC). Both firms engaged in securities sales and mutual fund investments. A local Pittsburgh businessman with longstanding mob ties, William H. Brown, ran both corporations.

In November 1976, a Securities and Exchange Commission probe of the two companies resulted in federal indictments against Brown on charges of fraud and illegal securities sales. Brown and two other corporate officers were convicted and packed off to federal prison.

In addition to his involvement with ISLC and ISC, Brown had also been a longtime business partner of Pittsburgh mobster Frank Romani in a hotel management firm, Xpressway Motels, Inc. In 1987, Romani was sentenced to 30 years in jail for cocaine trafficking. He was named as one of the major drug wholesalers in the Pittsburgh area, and his corporations were accused of laundering cocaine profits. Last year, Romani was convicted on a second series of charges, including arson and insurance fraud. He apparently arranged the torching of several of his own motels in the Johnstown, Pennsylvania area.

Thornburgh cried foul when his links to Brown were brought up during his run for the statehouse in 1978, but Harrisburg sources say that his mob links run deep and that the relationship with Brown was symptomatic. These sources report that in January 1979 when Thornburgh became governor, among the honored guests at a private inaugural ball was Youngstown, Ohio "businessman" Edward DeBartolo, a suspected crime boss of eastern Ohio and western Pennsylvania. For years, DeBartolo owned the Metropolitan Bank of Tampa, Florida, which was investigated by federal authorities for laundering drug money in conjunction with the World Finance Corp. of Coral Gables, Florida—a notorious Meyer Lansky front operation. When things got hot at Metropolitan, DeBartolo sold off the bank to another Ohio man, convicted money launderer Marvin Warner.

With such friends, it is no wonder that one of Thornburgh's first acts upon becoming Attorney General in August 1988 was to dismantle the DoJ Organized Crime Strike Forces.