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U.S. soft on heroin smugglers to help get along with Panama

WASHINGTON — For the sake of better relations with Panama, the United States has gone soft on Panamanian heroin smugglers.

This is revealed in the secret transcript of a recent House hearing. The hearing was

Jack Anderson

called by the Panama Canal subcommittee after we reported that high Panamanian officials had sanctioned dope smuggling.

We named dictator Omar Torrijos' brother, Moises, and Panama's sophisticated Foreign Minister Juan Tack. Their sanctioning of the dope traffickers, we wrote, had been confided by federal agents to subcommittee chairman John Murphy, D-N.Y.

Our story infuriated Tack, who summoned American ambassador Robert Sayre to the foreign ministry. The ambassador, eager to placate Tack, agreed to repudiate the story.

First, they prepared a letter for the signatures of two U.S. narcotics agents, Wilbur Plase and Ruben Monzon. The letter swore that the agents hadn't mentioned to Murphy "either the Foreign Minister of any relative" of dictator Torrijos. Both agents, who are subject to the ambassador's orders, signed the letter.

Sayre delivered the letter, along with a "Dear Tony" note and a State Department slap at our column, to the foreign minister. Meanwhile, the State Department, instead of standing up to these tinpot tactics, asked federal narcotics officials to tread softly hereafter even in the Canal Zone where the United States has police powers.

Story of backdown

The story of the State Department backdown was drawn out of witnesses at the secret hearing. Here are excerpts from the transcript:

Federal Narcotics chief John Ingersoll,

an honest lawman more at home on the beat than in the hearing room, was caught in a crossfire between Murphy and Rep. Paul McCloskey, R-Calif.

"Do you have any feelings that the State Department . . . is in any way hampering your efforts," demanded McCloskey.

"I think it is a fact of life, Mr. McCloskey, that we have to coordinate our activities with the State Department," fudged Ingersoll.

"You understand my question?" snapped McCloskey.

Slams his fist down

"I understand your question perfectly," shot back Ingersoll, by now so angry at his questioners that he slammed his fist on the table. "I am saying there are times when we have to yield on overriding priorities. . . Obviously, you do not want to . . . permit the Canal Zone to be jeopardized."

Murphy drew from Ingersoll the admission that the State Department was giving top priority to good relations with Panama, not to the narcotics fight.

Murphy recalled that Foreign Minister Tack had hollered when the United States arrested a Panamanian airport official and notorious drug hustler named Him-Gonzalez. The State Department, instead of raising the roof over the official's heroin dealings, stroked Tack's ruffled feathers.

What would happen, demanded Murphy and McCloskey, if another high Panamanian official was caught hustling drugs in the Canal Zone?

No more arrests

Ingersoll, growing angrier by the moment over his uncomfortable role, blurted out candidly: "I doubt if we would arrest another Panamanian citizen in the Canal Zone again, because of the flap that the previous arrest created."