

IRS Silent On Any Role In Break-In

By Douglas Watson
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Internal Revenue Service officials testified yesterday that a filing cabinet stolen during a 1972 burglary of a Miami congressional candidate's campaign office was found at the home of a former IRS informant and now is in possession of the IRS.

The reason for the burglary remains a mystery.

The IRS officials told a House subcommittee they would not discuss whether the Nov. 14, 1972, break-in at the office of Evello S. Estrella involved IRS agents or was ordered by an IRS agent, because it is being investigated.

The Miami Herald reported in March that Nelson Vega, a 22-year-old Miamian, gave a sworn statement that month to Dade County State's Attorney Richard Gerstein that he and another IRS informant, Roberto Novoa, had stolen the four-drawer filing cabinet, carrying it away from Estrella's office in a government-leased car.

Vega said that he and Novoa were among the confidential informants working for IRS Special Agent John T. Harrison as part of "Operation Leprechaun," an IRS undercover project that collected sex and drinking-habit information about public officials in Florida.

The Miami Herald reported that Vega repeatedly declined to say whether the campaign office break-in had been ordered by Harrison, who IRS officials have said far exceeded agency regulations in his information-collecting.

Top IRS officials appearing yesterday before a House Government Operations subcommittee said the agency's probe of "Operation Leprechaun" uncovered the filing cabinet in the home of Novoa, who was killed in an accident since the break-in.

The IRS officials said that

papers found in the filing cabinet were returned this year to Estrella, a Republican and Cuban exile who lost overwhelmingly in his race against Rep. Claude Pepper (D-Fla.).

Estrella has said the filing cabinet, which was stolen after the election, contained only campaign reports and personal documents and he didn't know why anyone would want them.

Vega was quoted by the Miami Herald as saying an IRS lawyer had ordered him not to testify about the break-in. An IRS spokesman yesterday denied that any such directive had been given to Vega, who never was an IRS employee.

The Miami Herald quoted the IRS lawyer who accompanied Vega to his session with the states attorney as saying that the burglary was "a lark." The IRS spokesman said yesterday this meant it was an individual and not a government project.

Several subcommittee members charged that activities of "Operation Leprechaun" between 1972 and 1974 clearly were illegal. However, IRS Commissioner Donald C. Alexander and his aides said only violation of IRS regulations has been established, though some "Leprechaun" matters have been referred to the Justice Department.

Alexander acknowledged that IRS' own audits failed to even note the existence of "Operation Leprechaun" when it was operating.

A report on that IRS undercover project, which was submitted to the subcommittee yesterday, says that 135 of 594 items found in Special Agent Harrison's file related to sexual or drinking activities of 90 unnamed tax suspects.

Warren A. Bates, assistant IRS commissioner for inspection, said only 64 of the file items "had tax value." He said about three-fourths were newspaper clippings.

The subcommittee also received proposed new guidelines for IRS' Intelligence Gathering and Retrieval System (IGRS), which Alexander said seek to assure that henceforth only tax-relevant information is placed in that national computer file.