

Guilty Plea Entered in Threat Case

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Paul A. Coppola, a New Haven real estate dealer who the government contends has close ties to organized crime, pleaded guilty here yesterday to a charge of threatening to injure a Washington businessman.

The government had contended that Coppola made numerous telephone threats to the businessman to demand repayment of a debt, at one point threatening to blow up the man's warehouse and on another occasion threatening to break both of the man's legs.

In addition, according to the government, Coppola on at least one occasion last winter attempted to use his car, a black Cadillac, to bump or block off the businessman's car on the streets of Northeast.

The plea was entered in a brief proceeding before U.S. District Court Judge John Lewis Smith II. Coppola was released on \$20,000 bond pending sentencing. The count to which Coppola pleaded carries a maximum sentence of five years and a \$1,000 fine.

After the plea, the government dropped a more serious charge against Coppola—involving collection of extensions of credit by extortionate means—that carries of maximum sentence of 20 years and a \$10,000 fine.

Asked later whether Coppola is cooperating with the government, prosecutor John E. Drury III answered, "No. He's really not." Drury said he thought the disposition of the case was a fair one.

Coppola, 54, was arrested here by the FBI at a Holiday Inn on New York Avenue on Feb. 10, only a few weeks after the D.C. government, in a request for federal funds to fight organized crime, listed Coppola as one of six alleged mobsters operating in the Washington area.

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COPPOLA, From B1

An affidavit prepared by the FBI in requesting a warrant for Coppola gives a detailed description of Coppola's efforts to collect a debt from Bernard Semel, a Washington businessman who operates Eastern Import-Export, Inc., a fireworks firm at 1441 Okie St. NE.

Semel, 46, best known as the inventor and distributor of the plastic cherry bomb, had become delinquent in paying back loans of more than \$15,000 from Coppola, according to the FBI papers.

Quoting an unnamed informant, the FBI said that the loans by Coppola actually came from organized crime in New York City. "The inform-

ant stated that Coppola is heavily in debt and believes that he is under great pressure to repay monies owed by him to organized crime in New York City," the FBI added.

The FBI said it had learned from its informant that Coppola was closely allied with Frank Celano of New York City, who the FBI said was a close associate of the late Vito Genovese, a reputed underworld figure in New York.

The court papers also quote a secretary to Semel, who said that between last September and last January, Coppola made from 25 to 30 calls to Semel, demanding money and threatening to break Semel's legs or blow up his warehouse. "On one occasion while

Semel was in Hong Kong, Coppola told her that if he did not hear from Semel within the next few days, it would not make any sense for Semel to return to the United States," the papers report.

The woman told the FBI that after receiving the threats, Semel on several occasions told her to send Coppola a check of from \$1,000 to \$3,000.

On Dec. 11, the FBI said Coppola waited outside Semel's business to demand money from him, and after an argument, used his car to block Semel's escape. One witness said it looked as if the two cars engaged in "bumper tag."

Semel subsequently hired an employee whose job it was

to check the street outside Semel's warehouse for cars with New York, Connecticut or New Jersey tags.

When Coppola was observed by the FBI here in February, he was arrested.