

Senators Eye Vesco Link to Drugs Hush-up

By Morton Mintz
Washington Post Staff Writer

A Senate hearing is set for today on why federal narcotics authorities ended a major heroin investigation after the name of Robert L. Vesco came up in a tape recorded telephone conversation. The Washington Post learned yesterday.

As its first witness, the Senate Permanent Investigations subcommittee plans to call Frank Peroff, a 36-year-old undercover narcotics man. He will testify under oath in executive session, subcommittee sources said. Public hearings also are likely.

Peroff told subcommittee investigators last year that he was forced into hiding to protect his life after he told the White House that Vesco purportedly was giving financial backing to a scheme for smuggling 100 kilograms of heroin, which would have a multimillion-dollar "street" value.

Peroff, his wife and their five children have been in protective custody, at an undisclosed location, since about Oct. 1. The protection is being provided by U.S. marshals at the request of the subcommittee, which is headed by Sen. Henry M. Jackson (D-Wash.).

After hearing from Peroff, the subcommittee intends to take sworn testimony from several federal officials, among them:

Vernon D. Acree, commissioner of the U.S. Customs Service. With Peroff's help, this Treasury Department unit in 1973 broke a major counterfeiting operation, seized 25 kilograms of heroin and trapped eight heroin smugglers. On July 1, Customs lost more than 500 narcotics agents—including Peroff's "control"—to the Justice Department's new Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). The "control"

since has returned to Customs.

• John R. Bartels Jr., administrator of the DEA, which collapsed the plan for Peroff's participation in the smuggling scheme, mainly by denying him use of a Lear jet. The plane was to have been flown to Costa Rica to pick up \$300,000, then to Europe to buy the 100 kilograms of heroin, and finally back to the United States.

• Paul R. Curran, the U.S. attorney in New York City. The Washington Post disclosed on Nov. 26 that Peroff, in addition to telling his story to subcommittee investigators, also had gone to a federal grand jury in New York and there had backed up his account by turning over tape recordings of phone conversations between him and Conrad Bouchard of Montreal, purported organizer of the smuggling scheme who since has been imprisoned on drug charges.

• John R. Wing, the assistant U.S. attorney in Curran's office who led the unsuccessful prosecution of former Attorney General John N. Mitchell and former Commerce Secretary Maurice H. Stans in connection with a secret \$200,000 cash contribution made by Vesco to President Nixon's re-election campaign.

In one of the tapes turned over to the grand jury, Bouchard told Peroff on July 3 that money to pay for the heroin was to be supplied by Vesco or Norman P. LeBlanc, a Vesco associate in Costa Rica.

One question troubling the subcommittee, the sources said, is whether the tapes indicated that Vesco might have committed an offense for which he could have been extradited from Costa Rica.

Vesco's successful avoidance of extradition turned out to be a crushing blow to the prosecution of Mitchell and Stans. "If we could have gotten Vesco back it would have been different," prosecutor

Wing said after a jury acquitted the defendants on April 28.

A second tape given to the grand jury is of a phone conversation between Bouchard and Peroff on July 8, while Peroff was in San Juan, Puerto Rico, in the company of his "control" narcotics agent.

In this conversation, Bouchard told Peroff that LeBlanc would be supplying \$250,000 to buy the heroin in Europe, plus \$50,000 to Peroff for flying Bouchard to Costa Rica.

The subcommittee sources said that staff investigators—three full-time and one part-time—have established the authenticity of the tapes during a wide-ranging, seven-month investigation. Other key elements in Peroff's account also have been confirmed by the probe, the sources said.

But, they emphasized hearings in which testimony is taken under oath are necessary to try to determine conclusively what significance there may have been in Bouchard's invocation of Vesco's name.

Most important of all, the hearings are looked to for definitive answers why the heroin smuggling investigation was abandoned, and at precisely whose order, after the name of Vesco came up, and why there was no vigorous pursuit of leads provided by Peroff.

Vesco, in a statement issued through a public relations firm in November, denounced any suggestion of his involvement as "a foul and sneaking lie." He also said that "no past

or present business associate," including Normal LeBlanc, has ever been involved in any way in narcotics traffic.

Vesco received support on Nov. 28 from George Brosan, the DEA's acting chief inspector, who said he knew of no involvement by Vesco. He had not yet seen written reports on the matter, he told an interviewer at the time.

Brosan also denied that the White House had been responsible for calling off the smuggling investigation.

After Vesco's name came up in the taped phone conversation, as was noted, the DEA suddenly denied Peroff use of the Lear jet and took other steps to halt the undercover investigation of the smuggling scheme.

Made fearful by these developments, Peroff told subcommittee investigators in October, he tried to protect himself by involving the White House.

Over a four-day period starting July 18, he initiated 10 phone calls to the White House, and received about six. Peroff has said that among those he talked with was J. Fred Buzhardt, special counsel to the President. A categorical denial of White House "knowledge or involvement" was issued by press aide Gerald L. Warren on Nov. 27.

The subcommittee sources said they have confirmed from Peroff's phone records that he made calls to the White House, but thus far have been unable to prove that he talked with everyone he claimed to have talked to. As of yesterday, it could not be learned whether White House officials including Buzhardt will testify, although some Secret Service officials probably will.