

U.S. probes hampered by 'persecution complex'

Louisiana Politics

By BILL LYNCH

of The States-Item Staff

BATON ROUGE — One of the most difficult tasks the federal government is facing in prosecuting state officials and local office holders in connection with organized crime is convincing the public the motivation is not political persecution.

There is an election year in the state now and one in the nation next year, two items to bear in mind.

State Atty. Gen. Jack P. F. Gremillion, who beat one set of charges and is faced with another, already has sounded his political defense in his bid for re-election by claiming federal persecution of a state official who tried to help his people.

Why the task is tough

When one considers the people of Louisiana are somewhat hostile to the federal government, chiefly because of the desegregation-issue over the years, then it becomes recognizable why the task of prosecuting is tough.

Not only will this apply to persons at the state level who are caught up in the spreading investigation of organized crime's influence, but to the local level as well.

There is some indication that it will be almost necessary to educate the public to the idea that the federal task force on organized crime is investigating the Mafia and not conducting a political probe.

Dist. Atty. Jim Garrison, for a prime example, has dismissed the federal bribery charges against him by answering that the Feds were retaliating because of his investigation of the Central Intelligence Agency and the Kennedy assassination.

With a federal grand jury about to convene in New Orleans to begin taking up the Garrison and pinball machine charges, the extensive work done by the federal task force may be about to unfold.

Concerned legislators

While it is in this process, many an office holder is slightly concerned.

"I'm glad I voted right on that bill," one legislator commented in his 1970 vote on the legislation that would have outlawed the

gambling-type pinball machine.

Many did not and it is known that the federal agents are taking a close look at the vote and those who were actively opposed to it. U.S. Atty. Gerald Gallinghouse has already indicated that legislators may be caught up in the pinball machine investigation.

Sometimes it seems almost beyond belief that the legislation could have been defeated in the face of all the testimony from law enforcement officials that pinballs represented a major source of revenue for organized crime.

The only real hope

But in reviewing the history of the Legislature and the administration in their approach to combatting organized crime and corruption among public officials it becomes evident that the only real hope for a resolution of the difficulties is that the federal government is able to carry it off.

Local district attorneys, including Garrison, Sargent Pitcher of Baton Rouge and Sam Cashio of Iberville Parish, have consistently been accused of failing to enforce the law.

During the height of the legislative committee's somewhat lackluster probe, Pitcher was furnished information on pinball gambling produced by the Public Affairs Research Council as part of its research into the subject for the Governor's Crime Commission. However, nothing came of it.

The state police have formed an organized crime section, but thus far nothing has come of it either—with not even all of the allowed positions being filled. Under the current superintendent of public safety, the state police have become more of an intelligence gathering unit that passes on information than an active crime combatant.

A cry for a cleanup

The cry for a cleanup of corruption in the state already has been sounded by a number of candidates for statewide office, with Gov. John J. McKeithen staunchly defending his administration of the past seven years.

What the impact of the federal investigation into organized crime's influence in government may be is uncertain now, but it can be expected at least to lend impetus to the anti-corruption theme as the campaign progresses.