

The Simple Life Pleases

By Laurence Stern
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Robert Lee Vesco is living proof that a fugitive American tycoon can find happiness in a tropical Arcadia.

He is here with his family, his money and a burning sense of outrage at what is befalling his co-defendants, John Mitchell and Maurice Stans, in the New York courtroom from which Vesco has decided to distance himself.

"It is terribly frustrating to see the trial go on and not be participating," he said, holding a sheaf of news clippings on the proceedings. "There's poor Mitchell and Stans and the President going through this terrible harassment. They don't deserve it," says Vesco.

But the frustrations are tolerable.

Vesco lives in the security of his \$500,000 rambling house, surrounded by an eight-foot concrete wall, the swimming pool and an assortment of bodyguards.

Vesco and his millions have stirred a controversy in Costa Rica reminiscent of the Watergate scandal at home. It centers on his financial dealings with the country's diminutive, flamboyant President Jose (Don

Pepe) Figueres, whose business interests have been nourished with more than \$3.5 million from Vesco associates.

There have been editorial outcries in the opposition press about the influence of Vesco's free-flowing wealth on Costa Rica's Lilliputian economy and its institutions.

Nonetheless, insists Vesco, "I wouldn't go back now if they granted me total immunity. Everybody is happier here — my wife, my children and myself. Otherwise I assure you I wouldn't be here."

Despite his frustrations, the gringo multi-millionaire has opted for the sunny hospitality afforded him by Figueres rather than face the uncertain perils of a New York court. He has beaten two extradition attempts by the U.S. government, one here and one in the Bahamas.

Between President Figueres, who styles himself as "an ADA liberal," and the expatriate American tycoon, a lifelong Republican, there has grown a bond of mutual admiration nurtured by Vesco's cash and Figueres' power to shield him from the U.S. marshals.

On March 21, the Figueres-controlled Legislative Assembly virtually guaranteed Vesco an extra-



ROBERT LEE VESCO
Extradition-proof

dition - proof status by steamrolling into enactment a new extradition law, custom-tailored to Vesco's needs.

"Morally we don't object to what Vesco did in helping Nixon," Figueres said during an interview in the Casa Presidencial, his modest official quarters here.

"If the Democrats had the chance," said the president in a tone of certitude, "they would have wiretapped the Republicans."

During a 45-minute interview, Vesco unburdened himself of bitter thoughts about the Watergate case,

the plight of President Nixon, the grand jury system and the string of civil and criminal actions that drove him into exile.

"Here is the President of the United States, whose any single decision could affect more than half a billion people," he said in tones of measured outrage. "... and some son of a bitch is worried about the shrubs in front of his house."

"Why should Nixon be the one president to pay the price for what every S.O.B. before him has done? If they want to change the power base in the United States by destroying the office of the presidency, why not just do it — why try to reverse a public election?"

Bureaucracy in the U.S. is in a state of "decay," he said.

Agents of the Internal Revenue Service and the Securities and Exchange Commission are running roughshod over private citizens like himself. (He is accused of trying to obstruct the SEC's \$224 million mutual fund fraud case against himself and 40 others by means of a secret \$200,000 cash donation to President Nixon's campaign.) Even in Costa Rica, CIA agents are watching and molesting him, he complained.

The bodyguards and the

Vesco

concrete wall are testimony to his fears that he or his family might be snatched away by kidnapers or U.S. government agents.

"The prosecutors in New York," Vesco went on, "offered me all sorts of deals. But they wanted programmed testimony. I said I would be glad to tell them what I knew, but not what they wanted me to know. They've had about 24 witnesses and at least 20 of them lied or shaved the truth."

"It's very disturbing to be down here and not up there."

But "down here" is where Vesco's controversial fortune and future lies. By his own admission, he has already expended more than \$25 million in assorted Costa Rican real estate deals, government bond purchases, in-

vestments in Figueres family enterprises and other undisclosed ventures.

Vesco is channeling his money into Costa Rica through a complex puzzle box of interlocking corporations in which the names of President Figueres' relatives and political allies, as well as Vesco's own business cronies, appear, disappear and reappear. The transactions are further obscured by the murky regulatory atmosphere of Costa Rica's securities laws.

Through all the squalls of controversy in this green and sunny land that Vesco once called an "American Arcadia," political friends and business associates portray Vesco as a model citizen whose first thoughts are for family and home.

He gave \$60,000 to the Costa Rican Symphony. He helps his three resident children with their homework and drives them to school. His technical status is that of a pensioner, a status

which confers exemptions on car and household goods to foreigners, chiefly American retirees, with income of more than \$400 a month.

Vesco's principal current interest outside of business is the financing of a new plant for the Country Day School, a privately run institution attended mainly by children of the U.S. enclave. Vesco's interest in supporting the school and a new special learning program stems from the learning disability of one of his children.

Once when a Country Day parent complained about the unseeminglyness of Vesco's involvement in the school, Marion Baker, the school's operator, recited the remark of a Methodist minister in Kansas who began a Sunday school with money donated by a bootlegger.

"The money," she quoted, "may have come from the devil, but now it's going to be used for the glory of God."

Figueres describes Vesco as "mellowing" in his third year as Costa Rica's richest and most controversial guest. "He's less defensive and less aggressive," said Figueres. "Maybe he has a sense of security now."