
Abscam in Court

Sen. Williams vows to keep up his fight

by Mary Jane Freeman

Senator Harrison Williams, victim of an Abscam frame-up by organized-crime elements in the Justice Department, was formally sentenced Feb. 16 by Federal District Court Judge George C. Pratt. Pratt, who withheld evidence during the trial that led two jurors to subsequently regret their guilty verdict, gave Williams concurrent two- and three-year sentences on each of nine counts, plus a \$50,000 fine.

Warren Hamerman of the National Democratic Policy Committee (NDPC), which has spearheaded a battle to exonerate Williams nationally, immediately stated that "the sentencing poses America with a day of mortal danger to constitutional law; Pratt has rubberstamped the government's methods of frame-up in the Abscam conviction of a 23-year veteran of the Senate who is innocent of all charges against him."

Senator Williams will now initiate an appeal of his May 1, 1980 bribery and influence-peddling conviction. He addressed George Pratt in court just before the sentencing: "Judge Pratt, I entered this courtroom over a year ago knowing that I was innocent, and I leave it today knowing that I am still innocent." Williams continued: "The day I learned that there was a thing called Abscam . . . I knew that the first principle of American justice—that a man is innocent until proven guilty—had been turned on its head. Also at that moment I knew my burden was to prove my innocence."

In a subsequent statement released on his behalf by the NDPC, the Senator stated: "Today, I am certain of eventual victory, as I fight on every front available to me—in the courts, in the Senate, and to the American people. A true political leader must have the courage never to stop fighting when he is correct. . . . I found it no coincidence that the chief government operative used against me, convicted felon Melvin Weinberg, boasts . . . that he funded the Italian Red Brigades. . . . At that very hour General Dozier was being held by these same terrorists. This irony should drive home to all of us the deeper issues involved in Abscam."

Puccio's harangue

As Judge Pratt prepared to announce sentence, defense attorney George Koelzer pointed out to him

that there were at least eight prejudicial mistakes in the pre-sentencing report, asserting that Williams said things or confirmed things which even FBI tapes verify he never said.

Abscam field-coordinator and Williams's prosecutor, Thomas Puccio of the Brooklyn Organized Crime Strike Force, made a play to his hand-picked judge to be harsh. "Senator Williams, acting confident and brazen, went to seven different meetings throughout the Abscam investigation, putting his office up for sale." Then, said Puccio, Williams "boldly lied" on the stand. "And now that same confident and brazen man is engaged in a massive media campaign in an attempt to put this process on trial."

The prosecutor, who was once himself investigated for ties to a heroin dealer, and is still under private investigation in connection with international drug-traffickers, concluded: "He is still in the U.S. Senate!"

Defense Attorney Koelzer quickly retorted: "I find most offensive the insinuation that the Senator is conducting a media campaign," pointing at Puccio's well-known trial-by-press tactics. "Is it Williams who leaked to the press back in February 1980 the stories? Is it Williams who called the press here today?" Unlike Puccio, the Senator "chooses to stand and fight like a man."

The case of Pratt

On Feb. 22, before Federal Judge William Bryant in Washington, D.C. the government will be forced to answer charges of serious government misconduct in Abascam—the Justice Department having delayed such a hearing by assigning a new U.S. Attorney to the case, and then pleading for an extension. Such evidence includes documents and affidavits bearing on the Williams case, sufficiently damaging to Puccio that no informed person believes the Williams conviction will stand. But this did not deter George Pratt.

In point of fact, it has been revealed that during Williams's trial Judge Pratt personally withheld exculpatory Justice Department documents from the defense and jury. One document concerned an FBI meeting in which all agreed that after a full year of entrapment efforts, no case existed against their target, and they would have to "recontact Senator Williams." Upon seeing this document one juror swore in an affidavit that he would not have convicted the Senator.

The late Marie Weinberg, wife of the FBI's "sting man" for the Williams case, appeared recently on ABC's "20/20" program to recount her husband's acceptance of kickbacks during the Abscam caper. Subsequently she signed an affidavit confirming that her husband had lied in Judge Pratt's courtroom, and "wrapped the judge right around his finger. . . . They [Puccio and the FBI] did a lot of judge-shopping. . . ."