

Justice on trial: the case of Dr. Jeffrey MacDonald

by Carol White

The U.S. Fourth Circuit Court plays a special role in the United States judicial system because of its location in Richmond, Virginia, adjoining the federal capital of Washington and extending to North Carolina. Cases involving the federal government, the Pentagon, intelligence agencies, and special forces fall naturally under its jurisdiction. It is one of the contentions of Lyndon LaRouche and his co-defendants that their trial was transferred from its original Boston jurisdiction to Alexandria, Virginia—seat of the Eastern District of Virginia, which falls under the Fourth Circuit—in order to railroad them to an unjust conviction. (Formally the Boston case was a separate case from that tried in Alexandria, but this is a transparent legal fiction.)

The emergence of the Eastern District as the “rocket docket,” where the speed with which a trial is prosecuted takes priority over the constitutional rights of a defendant, has made it an anathema in legal circuits; however, the case of Dr. Jeffrey MacDonald reveals a more longstanding record of deliberate abuse of justice within the Fourth Circuit.

The case

Dr. MacDonald's wife and two children were murdered on Feb. 17, 1970 in what appeared to be a reenactment of the brutal Manson family killings of Sharon Tate and her guests, just six months earlier. MacDonald was serving as a captain in the Special Forces, stationed at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. According to his account, he was at home at the time of the attack, which occurred in the wee hours of the morning. Asleep on a living room couch, he was awakened by his wife's cries, only to be overcome by a group of crazed killers.

On returning to consciousness, he found his wife and children dead. He himself suffered a punctured lung and several other more superficial wounds. The word “pigs” was written on a wall of the house.

MacDonald was able to describe the members of the group, particularly one young woman who had long blond hair and wore a floppy hat. These people were seen in the vicinity of the MacDonald house at the time of the crime. Despite circumstantial evidence which supported Dr. MacDonald's story, he became the prime suspect. The search for a band of Manson-type killers was not pursued.

Initially the case came under the jurisdiction of the Army's Criminal Investigation Division. On Sept. 12, 1970,

the case against MacDonald was dropped because of insufficient evidence. It had been shown that the crime scene itself had been tampered with by the first investigators on the scene, with evidence of struggle in the living room being obliterated by Army personnel who tidied up the disorder. This had originally undermined Dr. MacDonald's account.

While Mrs. MacDonald's parents had originally supported their son-in-law, subsequently they turned against him, and were active in keeping the case alive. On Aug. 1, 1974, the Department of Justice directed the FBI to investigate the unsolved murders and six months later on Jan. 24, MacDonald was indicted by a federal grand jury in North Carolina. Because he could claim double jeopardy, and for assorted other legal reasons, the case only came to trial on July 16, 1979.

Dr. MacDonald was found guilty by a jury of two counts of second-degree murder—against his wife and one of his children—and one count of first-degree murder of the other child, and was sentenced to three life terms to be served consecutively. He won an appeal on the basis of denial of speedy trial, but this was overturned by the Supreme Court, and he is presently serving his sentence. (Judge Albert Bryan—father of Albert J. Bryan, Jr., who presided in the LaRouche case—was the one dissenter in the three-judge appeals court panel which had upheld MacDonald's appeal.)

A Satanic cult

Dr. MacDonald has persisted in demanding a new trial. In the years since his conviction his defense team has assembled a convincing amount of documentation showing that the government deliberately suppressed evidence in his favor, while introducing a supposed reconstruction of the crime which they knew to have been flawed.

Most incredible of all is the fact that the group of attackers described by him was known to police authorities as a practicing Satanic cult which was heavily involved with drugs. Initially, information was made available by a police informer who was a member of the cult, and who was present at the murder scene. Her name was Helen Stoeckley.

A taped interview with her, taken some years ago—before her death under extremely suspicious circumstances—was shown by Fox television network in July, in a two-hour documentary account of the MacDonald case, which

supported Dr. MacDonald's call for a new trial.

Two other members of the satanic cult have also been reported to have confessed the murders to friends. These individuals are now also dead. Before her death, Stoeckley told investigators that the cult of which she had been a part had been loosely organized on a national basis, in covens. Wherever she moved, she was under constant surveillance by them, and she had been warned of the consequences to her should she reveal information about them.

As a police informant, Stoeckley was responsible for bringing over a hundred drug dealers at Fort Bragg to justice. She herself was a drug user, but received police protection because of her role as an informant. She described the transport of drugs from Vietnam to bases in the United States which were used as transshipment points; heroin was placed inside the stomach cavities of dead soldiers being shipped home for burial. According to Stoeckley, there was high-level protection inside and outside the Army for this drug operation. (Her account of the use of corpses in this way is substantiated from other sources unconnected to the case.)

Dr. MacDonald's medical responsibilities at the base included the treatment of soldiers who were habitual drug users. As an Army doctor he was required to inform his superiors about any soldiers known to use drugs—a responsibility which accorded with his own tough position against drug use. As a result there was considerable resentment against him by the addict population on the base. According to Helen Stoeckley, the intention of the cult was to warn Dr. MacDonald by threatening his family; but under the influence of the drugs which they had taken, they worked themselves into a satanical frenzy and committed the murders.

Perhaps there was more to the story than Stoeckley knew or wished to tell. It is possible that higher-ups in the operation feared that Dr. MacDonald was in a position to inform on them. In any event, after the murder, a coverup would have been in their interest, and that is precisely what occurred. It would appear that the Justice Department was fully cooperative in this.

One hypothesis mooted by the legal defense team was the possibility that some of the individuals involved had had prior involvement with earlier experimental LSD testing which was done on Army bases. This was suggested by the case of a psychiatrist—one Dr. James A. Brussells—who is circumstantially linked to one such experiment which took place in the New York State Psychiatric Institute, when Brussells was a director there. A toxic mescaline derivative was tested on a subject without his knowledge and resulted in the man's death. The experiment was performed under the aegis of the Army Chemical Corps. While it is possible that the two doctors directly involved in the experiment, were acting without their superior's knowledge or approval, this is highly unlikely.

The MacDonald case was prosecuted by Bryan M. Murtagh, Deputy Chief of Strike Force 18, of the Organized

Crime and Racketeering Section of the Criminal Division of the Department of Justice. This seems on the face of it an odd deployment.

The evidence

Much of the forensic evidence collected by the Army at the time of the incident is called into question, by sloppy laboratory procedures. Questionable assumptions were made on blood and urine typing, all to the disadvantage of Dr. MacDonald. Certain vital evidence such as tissues samples found under Mrs. MacDonald's fingernails, and clothing worn by Dr. MacDonald on the night of the murder, mysteriously disappeared. Only a partial analysis of fingerprints found on the scene was accomplished. Blood tests made by the Army were later disputed by the FBI, but evidence of the disagreement was not made available to the defense, although it would have materially affected the prosecution case. Evidence has now been uncovered showing that fiber samples supposed to have come from MacDonald's own pajamas may actually have been of wool rather than silk, substantiating the presence of outsiders.

During the trial itself, the judge prevented Dr. MacDonald from introducing psychiatric evidence on his own behalf. The judge's pretext was a counter-evaluation by Dr. Brussells, in which the latter claimed that MacDonald was lying about the events of that night. The judge ruled that the jury would only be confused to hear contradictory testimony. Likewise the evidence of 35 witnesses who could have substantiated evidence connecting the Satanic cult to the murder was withheld as hearsay. Finally, Helen Stoeckley requested immunity so that she could testify to what really occurred that night, but this request was rejected out of hand by the government, who claimed that her testimony would be irrelevant.

The MacDonald case should be reopened, not only so that justice is done on his behalf, but so that the role of the FBI and the Justice Department is brought to light.

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