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When there's a huge drug trial in Miami and no one watches it, does it even matter?

BYLINE: Tristram Korten

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If **Walter Reynoso** was apprehensive, he didn't show it. Reynoso was about to give his closing statement last week in the federal drug-conspiracy trial of six men, including his client, Fritz LaFontante. The handsome **lawyer**, in a dark suit and white shirt with cuff links, launched into an aggressive speech about defects in the government's case against LaFontante. "Their evidence stinks and their witnesses stink," he intoned.

Then, mustering imponderable confidence, he acknowledged a central problem with his defense. "Now, ladies and gentlemen, Fritz is not here; I'm not going to try and hide my head in the sand about that." LaFontante apparently didn't think the government's case so malodorous. In September, two weeks into the trial, the Haitian citizen fled, jumping a \$250,000 bond and leaving his **lawyer** the unenviable task of defending an empty chair. Reynoso argued with admirable gusto that LaFontante took off because he was a scared man wrongly accused by the most powerful government on Earth.

It didn't work. When the jury found all the defendants, including LaFontante, guilty last Friday, it capped a bizarre case that displayed the problems of prosecuting international drug conspirators: Defendants disappear, subpoenas are brushed off, and other countries' financial records can't be obtained.

In fact LaFontante is in good company on the lam. Three others who were indicted are also fugitives, including Joseph Michel Francois, the former police chief of Port-au-Prince and a key

player in the military coup that ousted President Jean Bertrand Aristide in 1991. (A 1994 invasion by U.S. troops restored Aristide.) Francois is now in Honduras, where a judge refused a U.S. extradition request in July.

Despite scintillating tales of international intrigue and wholesale corruption across the Caribbean, this was one of the least-watched drug trials in recent Miami history. After reporting on the indictment in 1997, the Miami Herald and most other media avoided proceedings that were perhaps too long and complicated for daily coverage.

The government claimed the defendants were part of a conspiracy orchestrated by the Colombian drug cartels to use Haiti as a transfer point for United States-bound cocaine. Officials from Port-au-Prince to Miami were bribed for that purpose. Found guilty: Joel Audain, a U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Services agent, stationed at Miami International Airport; Marc Valme, appointed by Francois as security chief for the Port-au-Prince International Airport; Fernando Burgos Martinez, a Colombian who the feds say was cocaine overlord Pablo Escobar's representative in Haiti; and Reginald Molin and Luckner Guillaume, two Haitians accused of coordinating drug couriers.

The trial was a marathon two-month affair. It involved more than 800 pieces of evidence, 57 witnesses, and 427 kilos of seized cocaine. Witnesses included not only DEA, IRS, and U.S. Customs agents, but a man whose identity was so sensitive prosecutors asked Judge Federico Moreno to remove his name from trial transcripts. He described several key transactions, then disappeared into the federal witness protection program.

By trial's end even the five defendants seemed bored. They sat impassively behind their **lawyers**, on occasion smiling wanly at Moreno's puns and exchanging mints. Now and then one would perk up when prosecutor John Kastrenakes mentioned his name. Valme, an officious looking man in a blue blazer, listened on headphones connecting him to a Creole translator. Burgos, a small pale man with a forlorn face, listened to a Spanish translator. Audain made knowing glances to his mother, who sat in the audience.

Kastrenakes's complicated tale included some of the most notorious characters in the New World. He claimed that in June 1987, Colombian cartel leaders Escobar, Jorge Luis Ochoa, Jose Gonzalo Rodriguez Gacha, and others pooled their resources to open a drug route to the United States through Haiti. They appointed Burgos to bribe Haitian Colonel Jean Claude Paul, who then allowed drug-laden Colombian planes to land in Haiti. Burgos then teamed with Francois to smuggle the cocaine into the U.S. through the Port-au-Prince airport, where Valme was security chief. Drug couriers escaped detection at Miami International Airport with the help of INS agent Audain and a county airport security worker named Evens Gource, who pleaded guilty in November 1997 and testified against Audain.

Kastrenakes alleged Haitian police protected the enterprise, which he said had conveyed 33 tons of drugs into the United States since 1987.

The evidence was impressive: dozens of wiretapped conversations, bank accounts containing hundreds of thousands of unexplained dollars, and witnesses who confessed to helping the defendants move the drugs. Moreover Kastrenakes noted that Audain's civil service job paid between \$30,000 and \$40,000 a year (depending on overtime and raises), yet he had bank accounts in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands with balances of more than \$100,000. Audain's **lawyer**, Martin Roth, explained that his client diligently saved money, started a side business (with one of the other defendants as a partner), and earned extra income leasing a property.

LaFontante's cellular phone may have provided the key to his prosecution. The feds produced records showing 15 calls on August 22, 1995 to a man authorities caught with 22 kilos of cocaine.

The defendants who were present in the courtroom last week will face ten years to life when they are sentenced in February. Authorities will continue trying to round up those who couldn't make it.

Defending an absent client was a challenge, Reynoso concedes, but at least now he doesn't have to slog through the appeal process. And despite the guilty finding, he made out okay. "I got paid in advance," he says.

tristram_korten@miaminewtimes.com

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