

Church Says Indictments Near

Scientologists Take Public Offensive

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The Church of Scientology held an unusual press reception yesterday to introduce two of its top officials who the church says will be indicted for alleged crimes against the government.

Standing around fruit punch, soft drinks, cookies and open-faced sandwiches, church lawyer Philip J. Hirschkop told assembled reporters that the predicted indictments are part of a government effort "to break the back" of the church.

Hirschkop said that a total of 12 church members — including Mary Sue Hubbard, wife of Scientology founder L. Ron Hubbard — have been formally notified that they are under grand jury investigation here for alleged crimes including burglary, obstruction of justice, theft of government property, wiretapping, harboring a fugitive and conspiracy.

"We were told today [by the government] that there would not be indictments prior to Aug. 7... we expect them the second week of August," Hirschkop said. He added that the government has told him at least six church officials will be indicted.

Government prosecutors refused to comment yesterday on any indictment timetable, but have said in open court that some indictments of church members are expected in early August. Federal prosecutors have been investigating church activities for more than a year following the FBI seizure last summer of church files here and in Los Angeles.

The Washington Post reported in April that, according to informed sources, the church documents that were seized revealed an extensive Scientology campaign to identify, attack and discredit "enemies," including Justice Department investigators,

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other public officials and inquiring journalists.

The campaign, carried out by the church's Guardian's Office, has involved illegal surveillance, burglaries and many forms of harassment, the Post reported and included a number of examples.

Hirschkop yesterday called this reporting "lousy" and "slanted" and said he had encouraged the church to "open up" to the press in order to provide more "background" and "perspective" on the church's troubles with the government.

Yesterday the church took the unusual step of flying in from California two top officials that Hirschkop had told reporters "are gonna be indicted for sure."

The two officials, sitting behind a linen-covered table in the California Room at the Capital Hilton Hotel yesterday, are Henning Heldt, whose church title is deputy guardian of the U.S. and who is deputy church member in this country, and Duke Snider, Heldt's principal assistant whose title is deputy deputy guardian of the U.S.

Heldt, 33, a slender, mustachioed man with swept back hair, appeared in a three-piece suit. Snider, 31, occasionally puffed a pipe as Heldt talked at length about "literally a war going on between" the church and the government.

The current investigation stems from years of "outrageous oppression" by the government Heldt said. The origins of this "long-term campaign" are in false information the government has been distributing about the church, and has been exacerbated by church attempts to retrieve and correct the false reports through Freedom of Information Act requests, Heldt said.

Their appearance apparently is part of a new public relations tack by the church, which is now saying whatever it might have done was simply for self-preservation.

"Our church members do not claim their total innocence of some of the charges to be leveled against them," Kenneth Whitman, a top Scientology official, said in a press release last week. "What they do contend is that they did so in defense against a government bureaucracy which has consistently acted against the civil and human rights of the church and its members."

Heldt and Snider spoke at length yesterday, unfolding the nature of their church's troubles, but they were interrupted by Hirschkop when asked any questions about specific allegations made by the government or carried in previous newspaper articles.

"They want to tell everything, they want to let it all hang out," Hirschkop said of his clients. "But I won't let them. I'd be crazy to let them [respond] when we're facing this crazy

indictment. After the trial we can get into it (the allegations)."

Hirschkop said he would not discuss details of talks he has had with U.S. Attorney Earl J. Silbert because that "would interfere with the process." He declined to say whether plea bargaining had been discussed. He said he had asked to meet with assistant U.S. Attorney General Phillip Heymann before any indictments are returned to try to prevent the government "from returning indictments against the church."

Those most opposed to Scientology, including a cadre of former church members, have said their worst fear is that church officials who are indicted will plead guilty, thereby avoiding the public "expose" of church activities these people say would come out at trial.

"I want a trial, I look forward to it," Snider said in response to a question. He and Heldt said that would allow them "to bring in the entirety" of the church's case, and put detractors under oath.

At the same time, Hirschkop said neither Heldt nor Snider will accept the government's invitation to appear before the ongoing grand jury investigation. He noted that attorneys cannot accompany those under investigation and termed the government's invitation "like handing you a rope and inviting you to the tree."

As part of his background explanation of the church's troubles with the government, Heldt said that Scientology was once banned in Australia, and the church, with enormous effort, got that ban lifted. Investigation by the church revealed that the ban was the result of false information about the church spread into Australia through "State Department lines. That got us into the [United States] Freedom of Information Act suits against U.S. government agencies, church officials said, and some of the agencies claimed they had no information on the church when in fact they did. The government has had "massive files with massive false reports on the church," Heldt said.

Scientology has filed a multimillion-dollar suit against the government, alleging a campaign of harassment that has spanned decades, and Hirschkop asserted yesterday that the government's intent in the indictments is to destroy the church's litigation against the government, "which would destroy the church."

Hirschkop and his two clients also rallied against the FBI search and seizure of church files last summer, claiming that agents "rummaged" through church mail and lists of contributors and that most of the documents seized were innocuous.

The tactics used by the FBI in the raids threaten the First and Fourth amendments to the Constitution, church officials said. Court decisions, so far have upheld the legality of the search.