

Clearwater Sun

Feds eye alleged sect plot to corrupt U.S. judge

by George Wayne Shelor

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From [Lermanet](#)

[NOTE: January 22, 1984 was a notable date in Tampa Bay because Tampa Stadium was hosting the Super Bowl. Journalists from all around the country were in the area when this article was the front-page lead story. The cult PR agents could not have been pleased.]

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The U.S. Attorney's Office in Tampa is investigating a suspected 1982 extortion plot by the Church of Scientology to entrap and compromise a Tampa federal judge who presided over a suit against the Clearwater-based sect, a Clearwater Sun investigation has revealed.

The purported plot, which involved an attempt to lure U.S. District Judge Ben Krentzman aboard a boat off the Pinellas Suncoast where prostitutes and drugs were to be used to put the judge in a compromising position, was authorized personally by reclusive Scientology founder L. Ron Hubbard, confidential sources have told the Sun.

Although U.S. Attorney Robert Merkle would neither confirm nor deny his office is involved in the investigation, Clearwater Police Chief Sid Klein acknowledged Saturday his department has been investigating the activities of the controversial sect.

"The Clearwater Police Department has been conducting an ongoing criminal investigation involving the Church of Scientology," Klein said. "Pertinent information related to this case has been turned over to a federal agency." Klein would not, however, discuss the specific nature of his department's investigation.

Pinellas County Sheriff Gerald Coleman said his department, too, is involved in a criminal investigation of the sect's activities, "(but) I'm not at liberty to discuss any of the details," he said.

John G. Peterson, a Beverly Hills, Calif., attorney for the Church of Scientology, dismissed the substance of the story when reached late Saturday.

"Ben Krentzman is a respected judge," Peterson said. "There is no way we would ever in our wildest imagination dream that Ben Krentzman would get on a boat with drugs and prostitutes."

And although no law enforcement agencies contacted within the past three weeks would confirm a federal investigation, confidential sources have told the Sun that federal investigators have been in contact in recent weeks with a former high-ranking Scientologist, a witness whose identity is a tightly guarded secret.

The witness, a former officer in Scientology's "Guardian Office/Watchdog Committee," became "disenchanted" with the church in recent months and is believed to have details of the plot to entrap Krentzman, according to sources.

The witness reportedly was ordered by Hubbard - through another sect official - to use \$250,000 to execute the plan to compromise Krentzman because Scientology officials anticipated an unfavorable ruling in the trial, according to sources.

Prosecutors have reportedly guaranteed the witness protection and immunity from prosecution in exchange for testimony which may implicate a number of Church of Scientology officials and others in the reported plot, the Sun has learned.

Although specifics of the plot have not been disclosed, the Sun has confirmed through several sources that it involved the attempt to lure the judge aboard a large boat equipped with drugs, prostitutes and hidden cameras and microphones.

Although the alleged operation was reportedly implemented to a degree, the conspirators were unsuccessful in getting Krentzman aboard the boat, sources said. Krentzman, however, was unaware of the 1982 plot until recently.

Curiously, such a plot was referred to in an edition of a weekly newsletter which circulated publicly in Southern California in December. The newsletter, a copy of which the Sun has obtained, carries no disclaimer as to whom or what organization is responsible for its publication. But the contents of it are decidedly anti-Scientology, revealing many facets of the sect's operation which, if factual, appear to come from former church insiders.

Contacted at his Clearwater homes Saturday, Judge Krentzman said federal authorities have recently briefed him of impending newspaper stories about "some wild story," but he declined to elaborate further.

"I was given notice two or three days ago that something may be in the newspapers," about the alleged plot, Krentzman said. "I never heard anything about it until just recently."

Krentzman said he had no "feelings at all" about the developing investigation, and he was reluctant to comment further on a matter on which he is not fully versed.

Although Merkle and other law enforcement officials refused to confirm details of the case, the Sun has learned and confidential sources have confirmed:

Krentzman was the chief judge of Florida's 32-county Middle District, at the time of his semi-retirement in late 1982. (Federal judges are appointed for life and never actually retire. Upon stepping down, they still draw full salary and may preside over some cases.)

One of Krentzman's more controversial cases was *Tonja C. Burden vs. the Church of Scientology*, a long and complicated trial which began in July 1980.

Miss Burden, then 20, filed a \$ million suit against the sect to compensate her for alleged mental abuse, brainwashing, imprisonment and fraud, according to public records. Miss Burden said she entered the Church of Scientology with her parents at age 13 and was for a time a "personal slave" to former pulp science fiction writer and Scientology founder L. Ron Hubbard.

Miss Burden's seven years in the sect ended when she fled from the garage of the former Fort Harrison Hotel in Clearwater, the church's international headquarters.

The church, which has affiliated outlets throughout the world, has headquarters in Clearwater, Los Angeles and Suffolk, England. It claims a worldwide membership of 6 million. A former church official recently estimated the church's assets at \$300 million, a figure investigators have labeled "conservative."

During the trial, Krentzman ordered the sect to reveal the whereabouts of the reclusive Hubbard, who had not been seen in a number of years. Church officials told Krentzman that Hubbard, who founded the sect in 1954, retired from the organization in 1966 and had no hand in its everyday affairs. They said they did not know where he lived and thereby could not reveal information they did not have.

The Scientologists' attorneys countered Krentzman's order by demanding that Krentzman remove himself from the case because the judge's son, John, had at one time worked for the Pinellas-Pasco State Attorney's Office on a Scientology investigation, and Krentzman was thereby prejudiced.

However, sect attorney Peterson said Saturday the church never once sought to have Krentzman removed from the case. "I think somebody is using your paper to get a story going," he said.

Krentzman refused to step down from the case. And although he went into semi-retirement in November 1982, Krentzman retained jurisdiction over the Burden trial until November 1983. At that time, U.S. District Judge Elizabeth Kovachevich assumed jurisdiction, according to Tony Cunningham, a Pinellas County attorney representing Miss Burden. The case is unresolved but "is at issue and ready for trial," Cunningham said.

Also during early 1982, the Clearwater City Commission held a series of public hearings, producing witnesses attesting to the sect's purported criminal activities not only in Clearwater but in other areas of the United States.

A number of ex-Scientists called the church's Fort Harrison headquarters in downtown Clearwater "a horror" and told of the sect's "Fair-Game Doctrine" which states that an enemy "may be tricked, sued, lied to or destroyed."

Also, since 1975, when the Scientists made Clearwater their international headquarters, dozens of lawsuits have been filed against the sect. Allegations of the sect's involvement in fraud, enslavement, entrapment, theft and harassment have filled the court system.

Eleven church leaders, including Hubbard's wife, Mary Sue, were found guilty four years ago of a massive criminal conspiracy to steal thousands of government files and to conduct burglaries, wiretapping and spying on more than 120 public agencies, including the FBI, the Internal Revenue Service and the CIA.

The sect, claimed the Justice Department, was "involved in a widespread conspiracy to subvert not only the government but the judiciary as well."

While the city of Clearwater was holding the hearings, Scientology officials were issuing press releases saying that any transgressions were in the past, and the sect was no longer, if ever, involved in any subversive activities.

But it was at this time, from February to May 1982, that the alleged plot was being constructed, according to informed and reliable sources and the California newsletter.