



Associated Press

McLennan County District Attorney Vic Fezell in front of courthouse at Waco

## Bible-quoting DA leads race despite bribery indictments

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WACO — District Attorney Vic Fezell may have been indicted for bribery but he's still a part-time Baptist preacher who quotes the Bible and has a picture of John Wayne on his office wall.

In many quarters of McLennan County in this very Baptist heart of Texas, he's a cause celebre who remains a tough man to beat in the Nov. 4 election.

His "Go get 'em Vic!" bumper stickers are going like hotcakes. They feature a pair of hands, thumbs up, breaking the chain on a set of handcuffs.

The bumper stickers are a reminder of Fezell's arrest Sept. 17 in which he was handcuffed in what he calls "a vulgar display of power."

Fezell gained prominence outside McLennan County through his investigation into a murder confession by Henry Lee Lucas in which a grand jury decided the confession was a lie. Fezell contends the federal charges are largely because of the embarrassment he caused law officers.

His arrest followed a federal indictment, charging him with 12 counts of accepting \$19,000 in bribes from defense attorneys to influence his handling of criminal cases. Some of those are believed to involve cases of driving while intoxicated.

Fezell denies any wrongdoing, saying he has never accepted influence money.

"Most of the folks around here know it's a put-up job," he says.

In an interview in the bland brick annex to the imposing, white turn-of-the-century marble and limestone county courthouse, Fezell likened himself to a biblical character.

"Daniel got thrown into the lion's den, but the lions didn't eat him," he said.

The 35-year-old district attorney and one-time police cadet also has compared himself to "Rocky Balboa," the movie character made famous by Sylvester Stallone.

In the case of Lucas and the slaying of a Waco woman, the grand jury concluded Lucas' confession was untrue. Lucas was at one time believed to be the nation's biggest mass murderer. But he recanted on all but one of his confessions, and evidence now calls many of his confessions into question.

"Everybody agrees I was right about that (Lucas case)," he said.

Fezell also boasts of the conviction rate since he took office. According to the Texas Judicial Council's annual report for fiscal 1985, there were convictions in 75 percent of the 498 felony cases disposed of in McLennan County. All but 27 of those cases were guilty pleas, said Sonja Flora, trial court specialist for the council in Austin.

County Republican Chairman Allan Horton predicts a close race between Fezell, a Democrat, and Republican opponent Paul Gartner, with the indictment just the edge Gartner needs to win.

Gartner, a Waco lawyer, was handily defeated by Fezell four years ago.

"On the other hand, Vic Fezell is a pretty good actor and is really good at playing on emotions of (his) being persecuted," Horton said. "The fact that this is a strong Baptist community and he's been a part-time Baptist preacher gets him a lot of sympathy."

At Fatz Brick Pit, a favorite downtown lunchspot, Michael Korpi, who teaches film at Baylor University, said he and many other citizens believe "a lot of unethical things" have oc-

curred in the district attorney's office.

Korpi said he doesn't plan to vote for Fezell but predicts he'll be re-elected to a second term anyway.

"He's a very smart politician. He plays to every major constituency in the county. He's done a real good job of pulling the evangelical community. They think he's just being picked on."

The Rev. R.L. Whitworth, pastor of the Calvary Assembly of God, said he believes 99 percent of his 1,000-member congregation is for Fezell.

"I don't think that man needs those kind of payoffs from some DWI drinker. I think (the charges) are nothing but political smears."

Fezell, who was a guest preacher at Whitworth's church, is capable of keeping a crowd spellbound, Whitworth said.

"I think he's a good man and I heard him preach," the minister said. "All of us go by feelings."

John Ben Sutter, Fezell's top aide who has worked for other politicians, argues that for Fezell to threaten his political future by accepting a mere \$19,000 in bribes would be "downright stupid."

The case continues to be perhaps the hottest topic of conversation this fall, along with the usual football fever over the Baylor Bears.

A restaurant owner, who asked not to be identified, said he's heard both sides of the argument on Fezell's guilt or innocence.

"It's damn near split 50-50," he said. "The lawyers and leading citizens, they think he's guilty. But to the average working guy on the street, he's the people's hero."

"My forecast is he's gonna win the election hands down."