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Fezell acquitted this morning

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AUSTIN (AP) — A federal court jury today acquitted McLennan County District Attorney Vic Fezell of charges he accepted bribes in return for reducing or dismissing prosecution of criminal cases.

The decision came after about six hours of deliberations that began Friday.

Jurors returned verdicts of innocent on two counts of racketeering and bribery.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Jack Frels said in closing arguments Friday that the 36-year-old Waco prosecutor used his public office for his private gain.

Fezell has denied the charges, and his lawyer, Gary Richardson, told jurors, "I assure you that Vic is fighting for survival, but I also assure you he is telling the truth."

A total of 65 government witnesses and 19 defense witnesses, including Fezell, testified during the trial.

Fezell, district attorney in Waco since 1984, is accused of racketeering and conspiracy in 14 instances of accepting bribes from Waco attorneys to get misdemeanor driving while intoxicated and drug charges dismissed or reduced.

"Don't destroy the career of a young man who is willing to stand up to the big boys," Richardson said in his final argument to jurors.

But Frels said of Fezell, "He's mad about being in this courtroom. He's mad about being found out."

U.S. District Judge James Nowlin instructed the jury to find Fezell guilty or innocent of racketeering in the 14 cases of accepting bribes.

A second charge accuses Fezell of agreeing to accept one-third of the legal fees of several Waco attorneys in

return for reduced or dismissed prosecutions.

Eight charges of mail fraud were dismissed Thursday.

"I feel good. I'll save anything else I have to say until after the verdict," Fezell said after both sides rested Thursday.

He testified at the start of the trial in an unsuccessful motion for dismissal that the charges originated after he called a grand jury probe into the handling of cases involving Henry Lee Lucas, who claimed to have committed hundreds of murders.

Lucas later recanted his confessions, saying he was trying to embarrass law enforcement officials.

Much of the government's case was built around testimony of two Waco law partners, Don Hall and Dick Kettler, who said Fezell wanted one-third of the legal fees they received from cases that he dismissed or reduced.