

Outcome of Deeb trial sends shock

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Former, current DAs surprised; others not

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The acquittal of Muneer Mohammad Deeb Tuesday in the Lake Waco triple murder case sent mild shock waves through the lives of people touched by the case in the past decade.

No matter on which side of the case they previously had been, most admitted surprise at the verdict returned by the Tarrant County jury.

"All I can say is that my thoughts and prayers are certainly with the family members of Jill, Raylene and Kenneth," said former McLennan County District Attorney Vic Feazell. "That is about all I can say, except that I am perplexed and bewildered, as I'm sure a lot of people are."

■ Muneer Mohammad Deeb found not guilty/1A

"But in my mind, this doesn't change anything as far as Mr. Deeb's culpability goes, because I have been through one trial with him," Feazell continued. "I just hope they send him back to Jordan."

Deeb was found not guilty of masterminding what prosecutors have called a botched murder-for-hire scheme that led to the July 1982 deaths of Jill Montgomery, Raylene Rice and Kenneth Franks.

Feazell and assistant Ned Butler prosecuted Deeb and Deeb's co-defendant, David Wayne Spence, who is on death row.

Deeb, 33, was convicted in 1985 in Johnson County and was on death row until June 1991.

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1982-1993 CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS

■ July 1982 — The bodies of Jill Montgomery, Raylene Rice and Kenneth Franks found at Lake Waco.

■ September 1982 — Muneer Mohammad Deeb charged with capital murder in the teens' deaths, but released four days later after he passes a polygraph test.

■ November 1983 — Deeb, David Wayne Spence, Gilbert Melendez and Anthony Melendez indicted for capital murder in the lake deaths.

■ July 1984 — Spence sentenced to death in Waco in the death of Jill Montgomery. The Melendez brothers plead guilty and receive life prison terms.

■ March 1985 — Deeb sentenced to death in Cleburne in death of Jill Montgomery.

■ June 1991 — Court of Criminal Appeals reverses Deeb's conviction and awards him a new trial.

■ January 1993 — Deeb acquitted by Tarrant County jury. Freed from jail after almost a decade behind bars.

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ACQUITTAL

Deeb trial outcome reviewed

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County and was on death row until June 1991, when the Court of Criminal Appeals awarded him a new trial. The court ruled that testimony from a jail inmate should not have been allowed.

Darryl Beckham, who was in jail with Spence, testified that Spence told him about the conspiracy with Deeb to kill a Methodist Home resident for insurance money that would have gone to Deeb in the event of her death.

Feazell didn't see any of the trial in Fort Worth, but said he thinks there was plenty of other evidence to convict Deeb without Beckham's testimony.

"You can take out Beckham's testimony and, to me, it changes nothing. The evidence is there," Feazell said.

Waco attorney Dick McCall, Deeb's court-appointed attorney in his first trial, said he is glad for Deeb because he never thought he was guilty.

"I'm happy for him, and I regret that he spent all that time in jail," McCall said. "I thought it was a bunch of crap all along, but it doesn't make any difference what I think. He was ultimately proved innocent, and I am glad he is reunited with his family and wish him the best of luck."

McCall said Deeb steadfastly professed his innocence from the time he was first arrested in September 1982. "I think he is the only person in the United States suspected of a crime who has ever passed a polygraph test administered by a police agency," McCall said. "I think, to a large extent, that it was lying jailbird

testimony that got him convicted in the first place, and without that, they just didn't have that much of a case at all."

McLennan County District Attorney John Segrest disqualified his office from the Deeb retrial because he and McCall wrote Deeb's appeal brief before Segrest became district attorney.

Still, Segrest said, he was surprised at the verdict.

"I would not have laid money that he would have been acquitted," Segrest said.

Although Deeb was tried in the death of Jill Montgomery alone, Segrest said he thinks the state is precluded from trying Deeb again in one of the other teen's deaths because the jury has decided that there was insufficient evidence to prove the state's murder-for-hire theory.

"It's called collateral estoppel," Segrest said. "A fact essential to the state's proof has been decided and you can't redecide that. Once a fact has been determined by a jury, then that fact cannot be resubmitted to another jury."

Feazell disagrees, saying if he were still DA, he would take another shot at Deeb.

"I would, but it's not my call. I'm tenacious," Feazell said.

Former Waco police detective Ramon Salinas, who was lead investigator in the Lake Waco case for months after the killings, never thought Deeb was guilty. He said he thinks justice has been

served.

"In my opinion, I didn't feel that man had anything to do with it," said Salinas, who became a private investigator in 1989. "That is just opinion. Mine is one of many."

"I just knew that me working on the case closely, and some of the things that I had investigated did not point to this guy. But then again, I was not privy to some of the information that others had after the district attorney's office took over the case later."

Salinas said the case touched him personally because he had two daughters about the same ages as the victims at the time of the murders.

"I want to make it clear that I was very deeply hurt and concerned with the deaths of these kids, and especially concerned and had very strong feelings for the parents of these kids," he said. "They have gone through a hell of an ordeal that no one deserves to go through."