

THE FRAMING OF A COP

How clever Dominican drug cartel manipulated New York politicians to bust a federal agent

This is the first of three columns.

THERE was no blood in the prosecutor's face. He was cold law on a fleshy page. David Lawrence had spent his career offering the same look to drug dealers and murderers. And now the federal prosecutor was standing outside his office looking at a federal agent.

A decorated immigration officer, Joseph Occhipinti, had been trying to persuade Lawrence into making a case against a Dominican organized crime figure. The men had worked on similar cases.

"Forget about that case," said Lawrence, an assistant U.S. attorney in the Southern District. And then he gave Occhipinti what is sometimes called "The Indictment Look."

"I'm hearing some things," Lawrence continued.

"What kinds of things?"

"I'm hearing you're some kind of rogue agent. I'm hearing you're out there going a lot of crazy things."

Lawrence turned on a fine leather heel and walked off. Occhipinti lingered, his breath gone. In one instant he had switched from the hunter to the hunted.

"Jesus," Joseph Occhipinti thought. "They're actually going to try and put me in jail."

What follows here is the story of social evil, a story of how a skillful Dominican drug cartel was able to manipulate government officials into prosecuting a federal agent who was trying to snuff it down.

Convicted during a June trial of civil-rights violations, Joseph Occhipinti is expected to receive a three-year federal prison sentence next week.

A Post examination of the case has determined:

■ That a violent gang of Dominicans with a base in San Francisco de Macoris now runs most of the cocaine business in upper Manhattan.

■ That an organization of Dominican merchants — The Federation of Dominican Businessmen and Industrialists — is rife with organized crime figures, doubling as legitimate businessmen.

■ That Mayor Dinkins and his aides were duped by Dominican organized crime figures into helping stop a federal investigation that might have exposed the organization.

■ That a state senator, Franz Leichter, in the role of a private lawyer, brokered a deal between a Dominican loan shark he knew to be under investigation and a corrupt bank official who was indicted on fraud charges last week.



MIKE McALARY

Dominican community — code named Project Bodega — the FBI had information Dominican gangsters were trying to kill or frame Occhipinti.

Many leads in The Post's examination trail back to the Federation, a now mostly defunct group of 500 Dominican business owners formed in 1987 to advance the candidacy of the Dominican president, Salvador Jorje Blanco.

The group's constitution was strictly quid pro quo. In exchange for campaign contributions to Blanco, former Federation executives admit, members were given Dominican government positions and fantastic tax breaks on imports. President Blanco was convicted and jailed in 1989 on charges he overcharged his own army \$3 million in a weapons deal.

"The case against the president was political," said former Federation president Erasmo Taveras, who was allowed to plead out felony charges of illegal money wiring and loan sharking after agreeing to cooperate with federal prosecutors in a fraud case involving executives of the failed Capitol National Bank.

Most Federation members are legitimate businessmen. But membership also includes a malignant lot of loan sharks, drug dealers, counterfeiters and body smugglers masquerading as legitimate busi-



DISGRACED HERO: Immigration Officer Joseph Occhipinti has gone from investigating Dominican organized crime to being investigated himself. Convicted in June of civil rights violations, he is now facing a federal prison sentence.

A tireless investigator, Occhipinti brought the historical determination of Eliot Ness to the job ...

nessmen. Some used tourist agencies as a front for selling fraudulent documents. Others ran illegal money wiring services, and either wittingly or unwittingly laundered millions of dollars in drug money. And when they were caught, they pleaded ignorance of American law.

As heroes go, Joseph Occhipinti arrives in this drama as a flawed protagonist. All of his ambition is seeded in an inability to sprout beyond 5-foot-7 — the NYPD's old height requirement. As a young

man growing up in Sheephead Bay, Occhipinti embarked on the only police career path open to him. He earned a U.S. Customs officer tin and then an INS agent badge.

True, Occhipinti carried a real badge and gun. And he got enough medals to sink a body twice his size in the East River. But still, he always felt professionally inadequate.

But then, in October 1988, after one of the longest nights in the history of the NYPD — a 55-minute period during which two cops were gunned down in separate incidents in upper Manhattan — a set of homicide detectives enlisted Joe Occhipinti's help in solving the murder of Police Officer Michael Buczek.

Occhipinti is generally credited with identifying Buczek's killer as a politically connected Dominican drug dealer. The suspected triggerman, a known terrorist, was subsequently arrested in the Dominican Republic. He died mysteriously on

his way down a set of stairs to meet New York City detectives. He went down the stairs, it is said, with the hand of Santo Domingo on his back.

Armed with soft information on an equally vague Dominican drug cartel, Occhipinti hit Dominican businesses with rare vengeance. A tireless investigator, Occhipinti brought the historical determination of Eliot Ness to the job of identifying our next Capone generation. He busted drug dealers and splintered gambling operations. He identified suspected money launderers, and captured smugglers. In short, he scared people.

And then, suddenly, during the first week of April 1990, a great shriek emanated from Washington Heights. Civil libertarians appeared to denounce the raids as illegal. Local politicians talked of a federal conspiracy to produce an undercount in the city census. Five bodega owners, all of them with ties to the Federation, said Occhipinti was the one who

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NEW YORK POST

RAMING UP A GUP: ARTEL TRICKED POLS

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robbed them. Dishonest members of the nation are sophisticated. Many gained their criminal expertise in the give-and-get Dominican government of Gen. Jorge Blanco. Some returned for the same reason on incentives in American politics.

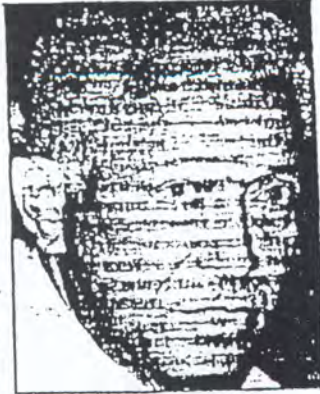
They have worked in City Hall campaigns of Stanley Michels and Adriano Espaillat. Michels and Espaillat were the first to denounce the raids. They thought this was a census taker. Stanley Michels said, "I never knew, until now, of criminal activity."

Sen. Franz Leichter took money and even lawyered 89 deals between two corrupt individuals — Taveras and Cordova, the soon-to-be indicted founder of the failed Capital Bank.

Leichter's client in the deal, the an-born Cordova, is accused of stealing millions from Dominican investors. During the process of making the deal, a lawyer with Leichter's firm even wrote a letter to Attorney Gen. Robert Abrams requesting release of seized business documents. Cordova was termed "a valuable businessperson" in the 10-delivered letter.

"I don't see anything wrong with that," Sen. Leichter said of Leichter's work.

While a set of legitimate members, including the organization's standing president, Max Arias, were content to go to the newspaper El Diario with their complaints about Project Bodega, others made telephone calls. Zenida Mendez, a mavoral with strong ties to the Dominican community, said she took several calls from Taveras. She was under indictment at the time. Taveras denies making the calls and suggests someone used her name. He admits, however, giving no less than 500 loans out to Dominican bodega owners at the time of Project Bodega. He estimates his losses at \$1 million. An article identifying Taveras as a suspected loan shark first appeared in The New York Times the week David Dinkins was elected mayor. At the urging of Federation members, Mendez helped set up a press conference in City Hall condemning Project Bodega. The Federation issued a press re-



MAYOR DINKINS

Was he a pawn used by Dominican crime kingpins?



FRANZ LEICHTER

Allegedly brokered deal for a loan shark.

lease condemning the raids as unconstitutional on April 3, 1990. Taveras was listed on Federation letterhead as executive vice president.

Ultimately, Mendez said she helped brief Mayor Dinkins on the crisis. After the New York Times weighed in on the subject of the raids with a April 10, 1990, feature on tormented bodega owners, Dinkins stepped forward to denounce the raids and demand an investigation. Occhipinti was ordered by his superiors in Washington D.C. to shut down Project Bodega the next day.

Last week, the founder of the Federation, Simon Diaz, professed no knowledge of Taveras' role in getting the mayor to denounce Project Bodega. Confronted with the criminal records of several Federation members, including the confession of a former co-worker who had implicated him in visa fraud, Diaz finally admitted the Federation was contaminated.

"I want to say everybody in the Federation was legitimate," Diaz said. "But I don't know if my own brother is legitimate. You never know. It is like with Mr. Noriega. Too many people, you do not know what they are doing. The good and the bad get mixed up."

Ultimately, in accordance with the mayor's demand, a federal case was brought against Joseph Occhipinti in the Southern District. He was indicted in March 1991 on 25 counts of conspiracy, civil rights violations and embezzlement. The theft charges weren't ever viewed as anything more than window-dressing.

All of the complainants from Project Bodega who testified against Occhipinti have ties to the Federation. Several committed perjury in the grand jury room. Others perjured themselves at trial, lying about their command of the English language and their arrest records. Two witnesses recanted on tales of being robbed by Occhipinti.

Incredibly, the prosecution made the witnesses out to be law-abiding. The government believed the witnesses if only because there were so many of them. They chose to disbelieve information, including secretly

recorded statements made by the defense, that there was a conspiracy to frame Occhipinti. No investigation of the Federation by federal prosecutors was ever conducted.

Constance Baker Motley heard the case. A graduate of the same political clubhouse that produced David Dinkins, Motley is the most overturned judge sitting on the federal bench in the Southern District. She refused to release Occhipinti's lawyer from the case even after the lawyer threatened to commit suicide.

The federal prosecutor was Jeh Johnson, Motley's former law clerk. He had worked with Occhipinti on prior cases. The two argued over prosecuting one case in which a paralegal insisted a former assistant prosecutor in Johnson's office, now representing Dominican drug dealers, had thrown sex and drug parties for current employees of the Southern District. Occhipinti argued Johnson was afraid of embarrassing his office. Despite this glaring conflict, Motley allowed Johnson to prosecute Occhipinti.

A series of 50 secretly recorded and incriminating conversations made by the defense team with complainants and other witnesses to Project Bodega was turned over to the prosecution at trial and held for 10 days. Unable to produce transcripts of the conversations, which were still being held by the government, Occhipinti's lawyer was precluded by Motley from questioning witnesses about admissions of criminal behavior. When the lawyer pressed the issue, Motley held him in contempt.

The jury cleared Occhipinti of stealing money and basically found him guilty only of conducting illegal searches.

But prosecutors insist he's guilty as charged. They apparently find it incredible that — in the age of the BCCI scandal — there could exist a conspiracy in a community where three of the biggest sources of income are drugs, loan sharking and money laundering.

TOMORROW: The trail of murder and violence.

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WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 9, 1991 / Monthly news, 70 today, 10¢, and 50¢ tonight / Details, Page 2

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THURSDAY, OCTOBER 10, 1991 / Cloudy, upper 60s today; cloudy, chance of rain, upper 50s tonight / Details, Page 2

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DOMINICAN CARTEL'S CALLING CARD: 2 BODIES IN THE GRASS

This is the second of three columns.

THE swollen corpses were discovered in the marsh grass on the edge of Jamaica Bay. The message was as clear as the winter sky. You had two informants face down in a wildlife refuge. There is no safe haven for the mob canary, not even in a bird sanctuary.

One of the Dominicans found handcuffed, blindfolded with duct tape and shot in the head was Rogelio Lopez Doran, 42. He is a former mayor of San Francisco de Macoris. His family had advised cops of his disappearance in early January. The politician was already two weeks missing by then.

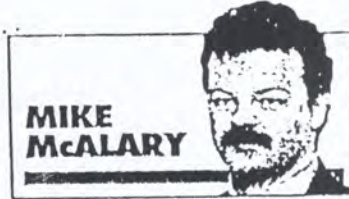
The kidnapers made one telephone call demanding a ransom payment of cocaine and money. They never called again. And then, on Feb. 5, 1991, a Queens fisherman searching for worms made the gruesome discovery. FBI agents found the case fascinating, if only because it's not every day that you find a former mayor of a big foreign city murdered in Queens. Agents further

identified Doran as a close friend of two Dominican Republic presidents. He had headed President Joaquin Balaguer's election committee and served as former President Salvador Jorge Blanco's envoy to Colombia.

The second murder victim was Angel Morantin, 42. A Washington Heights drug dealer, Morantin had posed as a travel agent. So there were drugs and politics all over the case. There wasn't much of a mystery over the killer's pedigree. A note written on a piece of cardboard wedged between the bodies read: "From the San Francisco de Macoris drug cartel."

A politician with ties to Colombia. A Dominican drug cartel. Execution murder. As crime trifectas come. The Case of The Dead Canaries had it all.

Joseph Occhipinti, the head of the INS smuggling unit in New York, had been trying to prove the existence of the San Francisco de Macoris cartel for years. He targeted the operation in a series of controversial 1989 raids, code-named Project Bodega. The agent's motives were good but his arrest tactics sloppy. He pushed the cartel, and they pushed back.



MIKE McALARY

Occhipinti was accused by members of a corrupt business organization — The Federation of Dominican Businessmen and Industrialists — of being a rogue agent. A Post probe has found the federation to be rife with organized-crime figures. At the federation's urging, Mayor Dinkins denounced the raids and demanded an investigation. The mayor never recognized the hand of the cartel on his back.

Occhipinti was arrested a month after the bodies were found in the high grass. In June, after a wildly controversial trial in Manhattan federal court, he was convicted of civil-rights violations. Next week, Occhipinti faces sentencing.

And somewhere in the Dominican Republic, most probably in San Francisco de Macoris, a drug lord is laughing.

In the beginning, only Occhipinti and Manhattan detectives assigned to the 1988 murder of Police Officer Michael Buczek believed that a single Dominican drug cartel controlled Little Santo Domingo. As early as 1988, Occhipinti had identified the syndicate as "The San Francisco de Macoris Drug Cartel" in his investigative reports.

Informants located by The Post who are now cooperating in a state investigation of Dominican money laundering and loan sharking say the syndicate was actively smuggling aliens into the country and then employing them in small bodegas, travel agencies and money-wiring businesses. The informants have linked several federation businesses to the cartel.

American money is now said to be the first source of income in the Dominican Republic — one of the poorest countries in the hemisphere. There is not a family there that doesn't have



ROGELIO DORAN
Slain informant.

Cartel's calling card: 2 corpses

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family in the United States. Indeed, with an estimated population of 800,000 Dominicans, New York City is the second largest Dominican city after Santo Domingo.

Money is now a cottage industry in Washington Heights. Most money is sent back to the Dominican Republic by legal and illegal wiring-exchange houses. As of April 1, there were only about 30 licensed money transmitters in New York state. But there are hundreds of illegal wiring stores scattered throughout the city. Investigators believe there are at least 50 people operating wire transmitters out of their homes. Ordinary people can wire as little as \$10 home. Drug dealers wash millions through the exchanges every year.

"You never really know who you are dealing with," said Erasmo Taveras, a money exchanger who has admitted wiring \$70 million back to the Dominican Republic in 500,000 illegal transactions. "If a guy comes in with a bag of money and you ask him for identification, he'll usually leave. If he leaves, you know. But a lot of the people have fraudulent documents. There is cheating all over."

Many of the money exchangers double as neighborhood loan sharks. The money given to them is lent out to bodega owners at usurious interest rates ranging between 30 and 50 percent. Others involved in the criminal enterprise pose as

Money is now a cottage industry in Washington Heights. Most money is sent back to the Dominican Republic by legal and illegal wiring exchange houses.



MIKE McALARY

neighborhood travel agents. Fraudulent immigration papers are sold at the agencies, and smugglers use them to sneak illegal aliens through customs. Blank Puerto Rican birth certificates, fake Dominican drivers' licenses and phony letters of bank credit — all documents used to establish legal residence — are now as easy to obtain as cocaine in Washington Heights.

Once in place, the illegals — nicknamed "Dominican-Yorks" — are able to facilitate cartel drug-making businesses and money-laundering procedures. The informants say the Dominican-Yorks are trained at a drug-dealing boot camp in San Francisco de Macoris, a city of about 300,000 located two hours north of Santo Domingo.

In July police seized a shipment of about 700 pounds of cocaine on the city's outskirts. The Dominican-Yorks come here to work for their sponsors, living secret lives in tiny Washington Heights apartments like the one Dominican President Joaquin Balaguer lived in as a political exile in the mid-'60s. The blind politician is said to be deaf on the subject of breaking up the cocaine cartels.

The accepted adage is that Colombians sell cocaine wholesale, Dominicans sell it retail. The drug soldiers complete their bloody tours in Washington Heights and then retire after three or four years to a life of luxury. In a country where average earnings are but \$900 a year, New York Times reporter Howard French found a kind of cocaine boom town in San Francisco de Macoris last August. Reporting in an article headlined, "Filthy Rich With A New York Cocaine Connection," French told of Dominican-Yorks returning home to purchase \$250,000 townhouses. The city was remarkably free of violence: No one could remember its last

murder. Dominican-York funerals, however, are a weekly occurrence.

"The unwritten code says that the things they go do in New York — violence and drugs — are OK over there, but not permitted at home," said Willfred Lozano, a Dominican sociologist.

Ochipinti identified one cartel boss as Freddy Antonio Then. Police believe he was the original target of the assassins who Buczek stumbled upon. Then was subsequently arrested and indicted on charges of conspiring to sell two kilos of cocaine to a DEA undercover agent. Then's relatives are still quite active. During a Project Bodega raid on the Then brothers' grocery, agents found \$135,000. On the

The accepted adage is that Colombians sell cocaine wholesale, Dominicans sell it retail.

other side of the Dominican-New York pipeline, another Then relative, Amado Then, is selling homes to Dominican-Yorks.

The operation against Freddy Then was set up by Ochipinti and sanctioned by the DEA. Freddy Then fled the U.S. a day before a federal jury handed up his conviction, and he remains a fugitive in the employ of the San Francisco de Macoris drug cartel.

Last week, more than two years after Ochipinti began to suspect the existence of the San Francisco de Macoris drug cartel, the DEA confirmed its existence. The DEA has linked a dozen execution-style killings, including the Dead Canary murders, to the cartel.

TOMORROW: Smugglers, garbage and crooked politics.



NEW YORK POST

METRO EDITION

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 11, 1991 / Cloudy, chance of rain, 60s today, partly cloudy, low 50s tonight / Details, Page 2

40¢ in New York City 50¢ elsewhere

Cartel used system to bring down innocent agent

Last of a series

THE fake passport stamps were found in an overturned desk in the Dominican Airlines office. By the time they were discovered, the president's plane was empty.

Dominican President Salvador Jorge Blanco had arrived with an entourage of 150 people. All of them had passed through customs. No one gave their passport stamps anything more than a cursory look.

And then the stamps were found. They were free passes to freedom. One alert airline official, Angel Nunez, believed the Dominican president had been used to help smuggle illegal aliens into the country.

Nunez got scared.

"If we're implicated in this," Nunez told immigration officials investigating the fraud, "the airline will suffer."

The investigation was brief, the deceit cheap and obvious. Some members of the presidential party had been given bogus green cards. They disappeared with them into New York's streets.

Nunez took the information to the airline president, Hugo Bueno, and laid the charges flat out. Either the president is a smuggler, or smugglers are using his plane.

"I am now working for the president," Hugo Bueno replied. "I cannot give you a comment."

And that's where the investigation ended. Bueno, a party loyalist, later wound up in a Dominican prison on corruption charges. So did his president, Blanco, who finished a four-year term of office in 1988, was convicted in absentia of corruption after leaving office. Suspected of forcing his own army to buy jeeps, weapons, food and clothes from his business friends, Blanco has since returned home. He is still fighting his conviction.

When Blanco was still president, he worked closely with an organization of Dominican businessmen in Washington Heights, the Federation of Dominican Businessmen and Industrialists. An examination of the federation by The Post uncovered widespread evidence of corruption. It was at the behest of federation members, many of them with criminal records, that prosecutors convicted federal immigration officer Joseph Occhipinti of civil-rights violations.



Occhipinti will be sentenced in the case next week. There is an alarming amount of evidence — none of it heard by Occhipinti's jury — which validates a claim that he was set up by federation members trying to protect a drug cartel.

Dominican prosecutors have charged that Blanco, as president, opened a dozen airstrips in his country for drug traffickers who use the Dominican Republic as a way station between Colombia and the United States.

"The federation was born with the Blanco presidency," said Erasmo Taveras, the group's past president, who was indicted in 1989 for loansharking. "We worked for him and he worked for us."

According to Taveras, one president of the federation was named to the Dominican consulate. Another was given a job with the export board. And healthy tax breaks were sold "wholesale."

"Everyone made money during those years," he said simply.

Corruption among Dominican government officials is legendary. Jacoba Majluta, a member

"Everyone made money during those years."

ERASMO TAVERAS

of Blanco's Dominican Revolutionary Party, lost a close election for president in 1986 to the incumbent, Joaquin Balaguer. During a visit to New York in 1986, Majluta held a series of meetings with federation members during which he made it clear that he was for sale. Sources who attended the meetings said Majluta was willing to lift import taxes.

"Whatever you give to me," Majluta was heard to say, "I will give you back three-fold."

Sources in New York's Dominican community said that Majluta also conducted a series of meetings with a carting firm with ties to organized crime. For a fee, Majluta was going to allow New York garbage to be deposited in the Dominican Republic. When Majluta lost the election, the idea was trashed.

One of those involved in the scheme was Pedro Alegria, a dear friend of Dominican politicians with the dashing good looks of a Spanish TV soap star. At the time of the meetings, Alegria was the head of Dominican tourism in New York. He had been given the job by Blanco.

Alegria has a fascinating criminal resume. For starters, he was suspected of having a hand in a plan to smuggle aliens into the United States on President Blanco's plane.

Convicted of a similar scheme 10 years ago, Alegria was banned from entering the country for three years. He parlayed his success as a smuggler into the job as head of tourism.

Along with Erasmo Taveras, the immediate past president of the federation, Alegria was under indictment for illegally wiring \$70

"Whatever you give to me, I will give you back three-fold."

JACOBA MAJLUTA

million to the Dominican Republic for a company called Dominican Express. The company, which was once owned by Alegria, was later sold to Carlos Cordova, founder of Capitol National Bank. Last week, Cordova and two other bank officials were named in a federal indictment charging them with stealing \$35 million from Capitol National.

Another Dominican organized-crime figure with strong ties to the federation is Pedro Castillo Reyes. Reyes was first arrested, along with Alegria, smuggling illegal aliens into the country. The men, operating out of a Washington Heights travel agency, charged aliens \$3,000 each.

In 1980, Reyes tried to bribe Joseph Occhipinti to help him in the smuggling scheme. The illegals were being put to work in Texas and New York as prostitutes and drug couriers. Reyes fled the country after his arrest. He remained a fugitive for seven years.

Eventually caught and convicted, Reyes later emerged as a big man for Capitol National Bank. Prosecutors have identified the bank as a favored laundromat of cash-carrying Dominican and Columbian drug dealers.

On the day before Project Bodega was denounced by federation members at a City Hall press conference, Occhipinti raided a Queens travel agency where Reyes worked. The convict's parole officer moved to find Reyes in violation after uncovering evidence of visa fraud and drug trafficking. Informants report that Reyes complained about Occhipinti's actions to federation members.

And Occhipinti ended up in a federal court dock.

Today, an innocent man sits at home alone. Joseph Occhipinti began his work 23 years ago with

Either the president was a smuggler or smugglers were using his plane.

an idea about justice. He believed a guy from Brooklyn could make a badge amount to something in this town. He made hundreds of arrests and became someone the lawless feared.

Next week, Occhipinti will face a prison term as a result of a collision between an innocent federal agent and the ignorant federal justice system. The drug dealers he identified and arrested used that system to bring him down.

There will be an appeal, of course, and a new light will reveal the true victim. It is not a new story. Only an American one.

Occhipinti injustice

rages on

**MIKE
McALARY**



ONE year ago I began an investigation into the case of Joseph Occhipinti, a federal immigration agent convicted of civil-rights abuses. At the time, Occhipinti was awaiting sentencing in the courtroom of federal Judge Constance Motley.

An exhaustive investigation into Occhipinti's case exposed clear and convincing evidence that members of a Dominican business federation in Washington Heights had conspired to fabricate evidence of civil-rights abuses against an aggressive federal agent seeking to make a case against the San Francisco de Macoris drug cartel. Many of the witnesses who testified against Occhipinti had criminal records — histories that were never known to the jury that convicted him.

A three-part series detailing the Occhipinti frame-up and the ability of corrupt federation members to coax local politicians into demanding a federal inquiry of the bogus charges against him first appeared in The Post 10 months ago.

In due course, the Occhipinti name became a rally-



JOE OCCHIPINTI
Writes to Mike.

ing cry for law-enforcement officials from coast to coast. Joe Occhipinti never uttered an ethnic slur. He never swung a nightstick at a prisoner's head. He is not one of those cops from the Rodney King videotape. He is not rogue cop Michael Dowd. Allegations that Occhipinti stole money from Washington Heights bodega owners were rejected out of hand by the jury hearing his case.

Ultimately, on the basis of what The Post determined to be clearly perjurious testimony, Occhipinti was found guilty of forcing illegal

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aliens to sign consent-to-search forms. He was ordered to serve 30 months in a federal prison.

In yesterday's editions of The New York Times, it was reported the United States Justice Department had ordered the FBI to take a new look at evidence used to convict Occhipinti. The remarkable turn of events — no one can remember a similar case where

interview witnesses in a case where a jury decision was upheld on appeal — is bound to be controversial. But no federal agent or local cop can be expected to perform his duties knowing that he can be framed by drug dealers in the 1990s as easily as corrupt cops framed innocent people in the '50s and '60s.

Occhipinti has at least one small victory today. And it's against this hopeful backdrop that I share with his supporters a portion of his

most recent letter from a federal prison hospital.

Dear Mike McAlary,

I would like to preface this letter by thanking you for conducting a highly professional and comprehensive investigation into my case. Unfortunately, the authorities intentionally ignored your findings in hopes of avoiding a public scandal during an upcoming election year. However, it was your series of articles that generated for me the unprecedented support of literally thousands of chiefs of police, police organizations, elected officials, community leaders and civil-rights activists. More importantly, everyday New Yorkers are tired of the daily crime and corruption.

It was your series of articles that caught the attention of Staten Island Borough President Guy Molinari, who predicated an in-depth investigation into the drug-cartel conspiracy, Dominican organized-crime operations in New York City and alleged prosecutorial misconduct. Thus far, an undercover inves-

tigation by his staff utilizing confidential informants was credited for uncovering the following:

(A.) Documentary evidence and more than a dozen witnesses confirming your preliminary findings of the drug-cartel conspiracy. More than 75 consensually-monitored taped conversations and executed witness affidavits support your findings.

(B.) Controlled buys of every type of contraband, including drugs, were made from some of the very same witnesses who had me convicted and who were portrayed as "law abiding" citizens by the prosecution.

(C.) More than 75 witnesses were located who confirm the basis for the allegations of prosecutorial misconduct and alleged corruption by prosecutors. Mr. Molinari succeeded in getting the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Professional Responsibility (Internal Affairs) to initiate an investigation, which is still pending.

(D.) Mr. Molinari was successful

in getting key members of House and Senate judiciary committees to agree to an investigation.

Unfortunately, on June 12, 199 the darkest day in my entire life, was shackled like an animal, in irons and all, body chains on me and handcuffed for 10 hours while being transported to the federal prison at El Reno, Okla. I was the placed in general population cage with hundreds of Dominicans, Cuban, Jamaican and Colombian drug dealers. In fact, a couple of Dominican drug dealers approached me and told me that they had recognized me. I felt very exposed, felt like my friend Manuel de Dios [the murdered drug-crusading journalist]. I realized this was no "bureaucratic screw-up" but had been intentional in order to silence me. I immediately identified myself.

The corrections officials were outraged that they had received no official notification of my prior law-enforcement background. So, for 1 days, 24 hours a day, I was placed in the "Hole" (solitary confinement) where I was incommunicado. It was during that time that I re-evaluated my life and realized the only crime was the naive belief that this country wanted to win the war on drugs. My dedication to duty brought pain and suffering to my loved ones — who are now the real victims in the drug war.

I remember reading one of your articles on the corrupt cop Dowd where you wrote that the family suffers for his mistakes. You were correct. But even cops who believe in the system — and are betrayed by the system — their families suffer. My crime was not being perceptive enough to see through the lie and the bureaucracy. I should have spent more time with my loved ones.

I am presently being hospitalized at the Medical Prison Hospital at Rochester, Minn., for the trauma I have suffered. Thus far, one month has passed. Hopefully, I'll only have to serve another 30 before getting early release. But because of my belief in my innocence, I have not lost my self-esteem or integrity. Thank you for helping me to get through this tragedy with some sort of dignity. I will continue to fight this injustice. Hopefully, the truth will eventually be acknowledged publicly by the Justice Department.

Thank You!

— Joe Occhipinti