

(6)

ATTACKING CORRUPTION IN DUVAL COUNTY

When I raised organized crime as an issue in my campaign for attorney general, I envisioned creating a task force to coordinate with state and local law enforcement agencies to investigate and prosecute sophisticated crime syndicates like the Mafia. To my surprise, the largest nexus of organized criminal activity to demand my office's resources was operated by small-town local government officials, not professional gangsters.

These crooks were not a handful of sinister underworld villains operating tightly disciplined gambling, prostitution, or drug operations. They were a loose confederation of elected or appointed public servants who had made a cottage industry of stealing from the public till. Their ill-gotten gains generally were readily evident in public documents and were common public knowledge.

Those conditions should have simplified our prosecution of their crimes. But that overly simple view addressed neither the convoluted paths these officials used to transfer money and thus cover their tracks nor the iron grip these outlaws held on local law enforcement and judicial systems. Bringing them to justice gave us every bit as much of a challenge as dislodging an entrenched Mafia operation.

The location of this enterprise was Duval County, situated halfway between Corpus Christi and Laredo. It was home to 12,700 residents, mostly gathered in three towns, and 74,000 head of cattle roaming mesquite-choked pastureland that overlay significant oil and gas deposits. It is situated in what was called the "Nueces Strip" in Texas' early days, a desolate and lawless no-man's-land between the Rio Grande and Nueces River.¹ The mouths of the two rivers are about 140 miles apart, and the Nueces Strip extends upriver on the Rio Grande about 300 miles, narrowing at some points to about 50 miles. It was a flat, forbidding scrub