

All those fights, that pride, downed Duffy | Deputy says, `He did it to himself'

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After 20 years of confrontation and controversy, it was too many simultaneous battles on too many fronts that finally toppled Sheriff John Duffy -- not fear for the safety of his family.

"He did it to himself," said one deputy, hours after Duffy announced that he would not run for a sixth term. "He's blaming it on the media -- but how did the media get all that information? They got it from within the department -- from deputies who broke the code of silence."

Like so many other of Duffy's critics, attorney Tom Adler does not believe the sheriff is bowing out because of fears that recent media inquiry about a security "bunker" in Duffy's Scripps Ranch home would compromise the safety of his family.

"That would be the logical thing for him to say at this point," said Adler, spokesman for California Attorneys for Criminal Justice. "Of course, it's probably true that he does not want his personal life scrutinized."

"I also think he sees that there's a substantial likelihood he would not be re-elected and his ego structure could not stand the prospect."

Duffy, 59, simply has locked horns too often, with too many people.

In past three years, he has been accused of bad management by the Board of Supervisors, the county grand jury and some of his own deputies.

Two grand jury reports coming just weeks apart earlier this year took their toll. Detailing abuses in the jails, the reports confirmed how some inmates were systematically mistreated by deputies while others were allowed to suffer or die through lack of routine medical care.

Since his last re-election, Duffy has been investigated by the FBI and sued by the American Civil Liberties Union, and he continues to field allegations that he has not properly reported loans and outside income.

In the face of mounting problems and diminishing public support earlier this year, he publicly snubbed the county's five supervisors by ignoring their invitation to the opening of the new Vista jail.

He heaped verbal abuse on the press, supervisors, defense attorneys, jail inmates, his own deputies and anyone else who pointed to deficiencies in his department. He turned allies into enemies in nearly every segment of the community.

"He's vicious. That man is vicious and vindictive," said another deputy yesterday. "I think the consensus among deputies is that Duffy has not done well the last few years and that his demise came from within the department when deputies began breaking the code of silence by going to the media."

Central to this consensus were the problems in the jails coupled with an arrogant, uncompromising attitude that directly dragged the sheriff down.

"It definitely all came from the jails," the same deputy said. "A long time ago, he could have headed all of this off by making changes on his own. But he was Duffy. He thought he didn't have to."

The first allegation of mistreatment of inmates came five years ago, when Jim Butler, a Vista builder, alleged he had been beaten and denied heart-disease medication at the Vista jail. Three years later, in spring 1988, complaints from another inmate set off a series of investigations that reached all the way to the grand jury and the FBI.

Orned "Chicken" Gabriel, an inmate at the El Cajon jail, alleged he was beaten by a gang of deputies that was later dubbed the "Rambo Squad." Within six months, more than 100 men and women had called The San Diego Union to allege they were mistreated or denied medical care in the jails.

At first Duffy denied the allegations. Later he called a press conference where he attacked the people who made the allegations. Still later, the sheriff began attacking the reporters who wrote the stories.

Through it all, critics contended that had the sheriff simply acknowledged the problems and made changes, the public would have been satisfied. But Duffy continued on the attack, even after two grand jury reports confirmed most of the abuses reported to the media -- including the existence of the Rambo Squad -- and said medical care in the jails was primitive.

In two separate reports, grand jury members said problems in the jails were not directly attributable to overcrowding or underfunding. The major cause of the problems, according to both reports, was bad management.

Deputies began talking about how they also were victims of what they said was Duffy's vindictive nature. A number of them told The Union that Duffy harbored vendettas against deputies who had tried to document abuses in the jails.

It was learned that in recent years the sheriff spent more time out of town than any other elected official in the county.

Continued scrutiny by local newspapers showed that Duffy, who lost a lawsuit brought against him by the ACLU, never reported on his financial disclosure forms the \$33,000 in loans to repay court expenses. He said it was an oversight, which was soon corrected.

In January of this year, a number of the sheriff's top-ranking officials began to publicly complain that the sheriff, who was loathe to let even the most minute decision be made by underlings, was out of town so often that day-to-day operations sometimes ground to a halt while they waited for him to return.

The sheriff maintained that all of his out-of-town trips were designed to benefit the department. After further probing, he admitted last month that he has received \$13,092 since 1983 for consulting work.

Each time a new criticism was reported, Duffy attacked the media. Many of his critics contended that he was overreacting and hurting his chances for re-election.

In the most recent episode, Duffy berated Richard A. Serrano, a reporter for the Los Angeles Times, saying Serrano's inquiries into a "bunker" in the sheriff's house were jeopardizing the safety of Duffy's family.

True to form, after Duffy lost a fight in court to quash those inquiries, he unleashed his wrath on Judge Jeffrey T. Miller, calling him a coward.

"The best bit of public service he's given to the community was his announcement yesterday," said Michael Crowley, a

San Diego attorney associated with the ACLU. "The writing was on the wall. It's hard to be effective in a tough job when you don't have the support of the public or other politicians."

Credit: Staff Writer

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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