

Customs and Border Protection Officer Convicted by Federal Jury of Receiving Bribes, Allowing Drug-Laden Vehicles to Enter the U.S.

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For Immediate Release

U.S. Attorney's Office, Southern District of California

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NEWS RELEASE SUMMARY – June 12, 2024

SAN DIEGO – Former U.S. Customs and Border Protection Officer Leonard Darnell George was convicted by a federal jury late Monday, June 10, of accepting bribes to allow vehicles containing methamphetamine and other illicit drugs to pass through the border into the U.S.

George was also convicted of allowing vehicles with unauthorized individuals to pass through his lane and into the U.S. while working for two separate criminal organizations.

During the trial, several witnesses testified that George agreed to allow drug-laden vehicles enter the U.S. through his lane in late 2021. George would notify members of the drug trafficking organization when he was at work, what lane he was on, and that they had one hour to reach his lane. However, in February 2022 after an alert placed by law enforcement agents on a suspected drug smuggling vehicle was flagged entering George's lane, George was forced to send the vehicle to secondary revealing approximately 222 pounds of methamphetamine. Undeterred, George allowed a second drug-laden vehicle affiliated with the drug trafficking organization and traveling directly behind the flagged vehicle enter the U.S. with over 200 pounds of drugs. Text messages sent by George the following day reveal he received approximately \$13,000 for the vehicle he allowed to enter the U.S. On the same day he received his bribe payment, George purchased a 2020 Cadillac CT5 for an associate of the drug trafficking organization as a gift. George delivered the Cadillac CT5 to the associate in Ensenada on Valentine's Day.

Over the course of six months, George continued to allow vehicles containing drugs and undocumented individuals to enter the U.S. through his lane. George repeatedly omitted passengers

and the true names of drivers coming through his lane, instead entering the names of others to conceal his criminal activities. Law enforcement agents and prosecutors identified approximately 19 crossings associated with the criminal organizations during the six-month time period. Text messages confirmed George agreed to allow vehicles through his lane for \$17,000 per vehicle, \$34,000 for two vehicles, \$51,000 for three vehicles, or \$65,000 for four vehicles. One text message confirmed that George received \$68,000 after he allowed four vehicles from one organization to enter his lane in June 2022.

Testimony from a witness confirmed that George purchased vehicles, motorcycles, and jewelry with the proceeds of his illicit activities. Additionally, on George's days off, he travelled to Tijuana to visit Hong Kong Gentlemen's Club where he spent approximately \$5,000 per trip. He would stand on the second level of the club and throw cash over the balcony to the dancers below, "showering" them with money. He would buy bottles of alcohol, and occasionally gifts, for dancers.

The extent of George's relationship with traffickers revealed itself when prosecutors admitted a photograph of one of George's trafficking associates taking a selfie in George's CBP uniform jacket.

"With this verdict, the jury sent a clear message to anyone considering trading in their badge for cash," said U.S. Attorney Tara K. McGrath. "Abandoning the integrity of the uniform for the conspiracy of drug trafficking is a path to a criminal conviction."

"As persons in positions of public trust, we are relied upon to serve and protect the American people," said FBI San Diego Special Agent in Charge, Stacey Moy. "We also rely on each other to uphold that sacred oath. Should that oath be violated, the FBI and its law enforcement partners remain steadfast in our pursuit of justice, even if it means holding ourselves accountable."

"CBP does not tolerate misconduct within its ranks," said Special Agent in Charge Elizabeth Cervantes of CBP's Office of Professional Responsibility, San Diego Field Office. "The Office of Professional Responsibility's efforts in this case and this latest court decision are a testament to CBP's commitment to preserving the honor of its overwhelmingly professional workforce, and to its core values of vigilance, integrity, and service to country."

"Today's conviction shows HSI's and our law enforcement partners dedication to dismantling criminal organizations and holding those criminals that enable their illicit activity accountable," said Chris Davis, Special Agent in Charge for Homeland Security Investigations in San Diego. "There is no place in law enforcement for those who dishonor their badge and oath to protect our communities and our country."

"The Department of Homeland Security Office of the Inspector General is grateful for the continued collaboration with our law enforcement partners as we fight corruption along our Southern Border," said Inspector General Joseph V. Cuffari. "This guilty verdict sends a clear message that federal employees who violate the law will be held accountable for their actions."

The case was tried and prosecuted by lead Assistant U.S. Attorney Bianca Calderon-Peñaloza and Assistant U.S. Attorney Brandon J. Kimura.

George's sentencing is scheduled for September 13, 2024, at 9 a.m. before U.S. District Judge Todd W. Robinson.

SUMMARY OF CHARGES

Case Number 23CR1291

Receiving Bribe by Public Official – Title 18, U.S.C., Section 201

Maximum penalty: Fifteen years in prison

Conspiracy to Import Controlled Substances – Title 21 U.S.C., Sections 952, 960, 963

Maximum penalty: Life in prison with a 10-year mandatory minimum

Bringing in Certain Aliens for Financial Gain – Title 18 U.S.C., Section 371, Title 8 U.S.C., Section 1324(a)(2)(B)(ii)

Maximum Penalty: Ten years in prison

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Maximum Penalty: Ten years in prison

INVESTIGATING AGENCIES

Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)

Department of Homeland Security – Office of Inspector General (DHS OIG)

Homeland Security Investigations (HSI)

Customs and Border Protection – Office of Professional Responsibility (CBP OPR)

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