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Jurors begin deliberations in Connolly's murder trial



Manuel L. Casabielle's closing statement in the murder trial of former FBI agent John J. Connolly Jr. (above) lasted four hours over two days. "What Mr. Connolly was doing was the FBI's work," the defense lawyer said.

By Shelley Murphy
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MIAMI - Retired FBI agent John J. Connolly Jr. was portrayed by his lawyer yesterday as an honorable man who did his job and never plotted with longtime informants James "Whitey" Bulger and Stephen "The Rifleman" Flemmi to kill anyone.

But, prosecutors argued that Connolly, 68, who retired from the FBI in 1990, was a corrupt agent who crossed the line decades ago to become a gangster.

Yesterday afternoon, a Florida jury of six men and six women started considering Connolly's fate after seven weeks of testimony in the state murder trial that gave them a chilling glimpse into Boston's underworld.

After getting the case for an hour yesterday, jurors quit for the day and are expected to resume deliberations today over whether Connolly is guilty of murder and conspiracy to commit murder for the 1982 killing in South Florida of Boston business consultant John B. Callahan.

Flemmi, who is serving a life sentence for 10 murders, testified he and Bulger enlisted a hitman to kill Callahan after Connolly warned them that the businessman was about to be questioned by the FBI. According to Flemmi, Connolly told them Callahan would probably implicate the gangsters in the 1981 killing of Roger Wheeler, a businessman who owned World Jai Alai. The hitman, John Martorano, testified that he lured his friend, Callahan, to Florida and shot him in the back of the head after being told of Connolly's tip. Callahan's body was found in the trunk of his Cadillac.

Though Connolly is charged only with Callahan's slaying, the prosecution was allowed to present evidence of alleged corruption and wrongdoing by the former agent dating to the 1970s.

In his final pitch, Connolly's lawyer told jurors that it is a simple case if they focus only on the murder charges.

"In reality, what Mr. Connolly was doing was the FBI's work," defense lawyer Manuel L. Casabielle told jurors during a closing statement that lasted four hours over two days. He contended that the FBI used Bulger and Flemmi as informants while knowing they were killers, and then left Connolly to take the fall after the pair were indicted on racketeering charges in Boston in 1995.

"When it was good, it was good for everybody," said Casabielle, telling jurors that Connolly was credited with developing FBI sources that helped decimate the New England Mafia during the 1980s. "When it was bad, it was only bad for John Connolly."

During a one-hour rebuttal yesterday, a prosecutor told jurors the case is not about the FBI failings, but instead about a murder conspiracy involving Connolly, who he said was corrupted by Bulger and Flemmi.

"Once he got in bed with them, once he became their friend, once he started taking money and gifts, John Connolly was their partner," said Miami-Dade assistant state attorney Michael Von Zamft. "He was no longer an FBI agent. The only thing he used his FBI badge for was to participate in crime."

The prosecutor asserted that Connolly "gave up the public trust because he decided that he would rather be a gangster than an FBI agent." Connolly sat between his lawyers, scowling as he listened to the prosecutor.

Casabielle urged the jury not to believe the state's star witnesses: Flemmi; Martorano, who served 12 years for killing 20 people; Kevin Weeks, who served five years for participating in five murders; and former FBI supervisor John Morris, who admitted taking bribes from Bulger and Flemmi.

Pointing at an empty chair he placed before the jury, Casabielle said it represented Bulger, 79, who allegedly made incriminating statements to Martorano and Weeks implicating Connolly in Callahan's slaying.

Von Zamft countered that Bulger is not available because Connolly warned him to flee.

Connolly, serving a 10-year prison term for a racketeering conviction, faces life in prison if convicted in Callahan's killing. ■

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