D.A.

SACRAMENTO COUNTY DISTRICT ATTORNEY STEVE WHITE IS TACKLING BIG CITY CRIME IN HIS ONCE SLEEPY HOMETOWN—AND WINNING.

IT IS THE DAY after the June 5 primary election, and Sacramento County District Attorney Steve White has been home for more than a week. Not campaigning, not hitting the rubber-chicken political-dinner circuit, but home with his wife, Laurel, and their first child, Dylan White, born May 27. He stays in touch with the office by phone, and daily packages for review and signature are couriered by his longtime secretary, Terry Yoshikawa. ☆ While unchallenged and easily elected in the

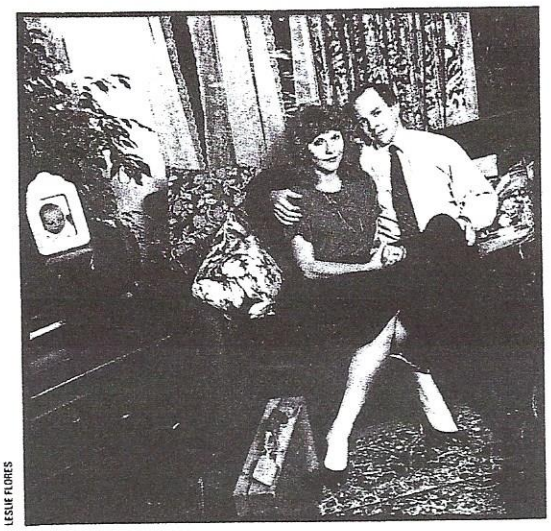
BY SIGRID BATHEN

LESLIE FLORES

primary, White says he would have stayed home in any case. Even when he returns to the office three weeks after Dylan's birth, as planned, he often goes home for lunch. Much of his life, both personal and professional, revolves these days around the concerns of women and children, as he aggressively prosecutes abusive spouses by day and spends time with his growing family at night.

"It's really not a conflict for me, given a couple of understandings," he says of job-fatherhood pressures. "First, life involves a number of balancing considerations. Second, my family is the most important part of my life, period. I know that I can successfully meet my responsibilities to my office and still meet my responsibilities to my family.

"If there were ever the need to compromise, I would simply leave public life."



LESLIE FLORES

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No traditional political wife, Laurel White is a former Kansas City television anchorwoman and documentary producer who has worked as a reporter for the Sacramento *Business Journal* while attending McGeorge School of Law. An assistant U.S. Attorney in Sacramento since April 1989, she plans to return to work in September.

"I haven't felt any conflicts at all," she adds. "I'm extremely supportive of his political efforts, and he is completely supportive of my career. Both of us believe family is the most important thing in our lives."

White's climb to the top prosecution job in Sacramento County—seat of the state Capitol and hence a politically significant post with responsibilities beyond "routine" criminal prosecution—has been steady, even meteoric. Known as a tough but fair prosecutor with a keen legal mind, White is widely regarded as a progressive law enforcement official with an eye to prevention as well as punishment, not averse to tackling difficult, complex cases which might be rejected as unwinnable by other prosecutors. Since becoming D.A. in April 1989, he has substantially increased the investigation and prosecution of domestic violence cases, begun efforts to more comprehensively track and target drug- and gang-related crimes, and vowed to improve prosecution of political corruption in the state capital.

Appointed to the post in March 1989 by the Sacramento County Board of Supervisors to fill the remaining term of John Dougherty, who abruptly resigned to enter private practice, Steve White survived a nasty, bruising appointment battle with former Chief Deputy D.A. Kathryn Canlis. Ironically, Canlis is now executive director of the California District Attorney's Association—a position held by White from 1979 to 1983, when he was named by Attorney General John Van de Kamp to head the attorney general's statewide criminal division.

Canlis, who reportedly remains embittered by the confrontation, was overwhelmingly endorsed for the post by an in-house association of deputy D.A.s from whom White received no votes (the final tally was 81 for Canlis, 20 for Sacramento attorney Hamilton Hintz Jr., one vote for attorney John Virga and none for White or attorney Lloyd Riley).

Despite such formidable internal opposition, White prevailed, waging a relentless campaign where it apparently counted—with supervisors and local media, ultimately garnering glowing endorsements from a wide range of local power brokers, including editorial support from *The Sacramento Bee.*

A former deputy D.A. himself, White was a Sacramento prosecutor from 1974 to 1979, supervising felony prosecutions and prosecuting major cases involving career criminals, organized crime and major narcotics. Today, he says, the initial acrimony about his appointment within the ranks of deputy D.A.s is past. "I would be glad to stand for reelection on the basis of votes in the office," he says.

As D.A., the 41-year-old White—one of the youngest D.A.s in the state—supervises a staff of 521, including 130 lawyers and 49 criminal investigators. As the area's population grows, office caseloads are mushrooming. In fiscal year 1989–90, the office filed 16,809 felony complaints (up from 11,206 in fiscal '88–'89), and 36,125 misdemeanor complaints (up from 32,927 in '88–'89).

Among those who have worked with him over the years, White has few detractors.

"He is incredibly smart," says Sacramento Municipal Court Judge Michael Ullman, former chief consultant to the Assembly Committee on Criminal Justice (now known as the Assembly Committee on Public Safety), who worked with White when the latter was handling legislation for the state D.A.'s association. "He was the most effective law enforcement lobbyist I had ever seen.

"He knew how to deal with people, how to muscle things through, when not to. He was always a person of his word. He was a master at compromising bills that he could compromise, and he was a master of not compromising what he didn't have to. He had the utmost credibility with everybody in the process—legislative staff, legislators, other lobbyists."

Sacramento Municipal Court Judge Barry Loncke, who worked closely with White on legislative issues and served on a blue-ribbon commission appointed by Van de Kamp

to review child abuse laws in California, described the new D.A. as "very reasonable, but very tough, an efficient prosecutor with the interest of the people in mind . . . he can look at both sides of an issue and come up with something both reasonable and fair.

"As a judge, I don't make [prosecution] decisions, but it is important that those decisions are in the hands of someone who is fair and unbiased," adds Loncke. "He understands the limits of the system and is willing to come up with the right answer rather than what is politically popular."

A native Sacramentan with a large local extended family, which includes his parents, a brother and two sisters and 11 nieces and nephews, White is a 1967 graduate of Mira Loma High School, where he was student body president. He earned a history degree with highest honors from California State University, Sacramento, in 1971, and a law degree from the University of California, Davis, in 1974.

He worked his way through undergraduate and law school in a variety of jobs—as a warehouseman at Mather Air Force Base, a firefighter with the California Division of Forestry in Mendocino, a file clerk and a tax representative for the state Employment Development Department, where his father, Harry E. White, was a tax administrator until his retirement five years ago.

White says he planned to go on to medical school after law school and "had no ambition to be a trial lawyer." But in his last year of law school, he worked in the D.A.'s office, "and I just loved it."

Former Sacramento County District Attorney John Price, who was D.A. from 1959 to 1979 and supported White for the post last year, recalls that White "did a good, workmanlike job" as a young prosecutor. "I thought he was very good." In 1977, White was asked by Price to help organize a state program for prosecution of so-called "career" criminals, and two years later he was tapped for the top legislative job in the D.A.'s association.

As a young prosecutor, White was known to be aggressive, if not overzealous. "Defense attorneys didn't like him," recalls one local jurist. "He was a hardnosed prosecutor."

During his years as a lobbyist and administrator for the D.A.'s association, Ullman said White "mellowed" in the legislative process. "He took a few months to learn it," says Ullman, "and he mastered it."

A Democrat with liberal views on social issues—unusual in a field dominated by conservative Republicans, although, like most prosecutors, he considers himself "conservative on law and order"—White earned a reputation with the D.A.'s association as a skilled, fair-minded legislative negotiator who built the organization into an influential, respected voice on issues affecting law enforcement.

"The organization grew from one that previously did not have a major presence in the legislature to a major voice in terms of law enforcement positions," recalls Richard Iglehart, a former CDAA executive director and longtime chief assistant D.A. in Alameda County, who succeeded White as the attorney general's criminal division chief. With the articulate, even telegenic White in the association's top slot, Iglehart said, "reporters started calling."

A major factor in White's appointment as D.A. was the legislative and media savvy that he developed in the CDAA job and which became even more apparent in the attorney general's office, when he was frequently interviewed by reporters on major cases and other statewide legal issues.

As D.A., he has continued that high-profile stance—granting frequent media interviews on cases handled by the office, including the macabre mass murder case

against F Street landlady Dorothea Montalvo Puente. As a regular of sorts on the evening news, White's media presence has fueled speculation that his political ambitions are not limited to the county prosecutor's office.

White nearly ran for a state Assembly seat in 1986, when he was strongly urged by state Democratic party leaders to run for the post currently held by Roseville Republican Tim Leslie. White declined the offer to run, because "I didn't think it would be as satisfying as the work I was doing at the time in the attorney general's office."

White was actively recruited by Van de Kamp to head the attorney general's criminal division when Van de Kamp was first elected attorney general in 1982, but White initially declined—choosing instead to complete the legislative agenda he had set as director of the D.A.'s association.

When Van de Kamp again offered him the job in 1983, White accepted, and for six years directed the work of some 275 lawyers, 100 investigators and special agents, and other staff in the statewide criminal division—which includes offices in five cities and a wide variety of criminal cases. The attorney general's office represents the state on all criminal appeals, including death penalty appeals, and prosecutes cases that local D.A.s are unable, or sometimes unwilling, to handle. The office also initiates investigations and prosecutions in certain specialized areas, such as Medi-Cal fraud and organized crime.

During his tenure, White helped create a separate unit to target major fraud and white-collar crime, and initiated investigations into nursing home and elderly abuse. One of four division heads in the attorney general's office, White was known as a visible, hands-on administrator, who instituted special training programs for lawyers, as well as numerous case-tracking and reporting methods to improve accountability.

White says he has no future political plans beyond running for reelection as D.A. in 1994—a race for which he is already raising money. "I very much enjoy the job I'm doing, and I don't have any ambition beyond this," he says carefully. "At the same time, I'm only 41 and I have a lot of working years in front of me."

White also plans to give higher priority than his predecessor to cases involving political corruption in the state Capitol. Although Dougherty hotly denied it, he was often criticized for failing to pursue such cases while he was D.A. White is careful not to criticize his predecessor, but says he is "targeting resources" for political corruption investigations.

"You deal with the crime that occurs in your area," he says simply. Limited re-

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sources to investigate political crimes can be extended, White says, through cooperative investigations involving other local D.A.s, the U.S. Attorney and state Attorney General—"first to see that the issue gets attended to, and secondly that it doesn't get duplicate attention."

Despite his apparent early unpopularity among deputies in the office, White has since earned their sometimes grudging admiration. A strong advocate of hands-on management, White meets regularly with supervisors and deputies and chose his chief deputy, longtime deputy D.A. Tim Frawley, from within the ranks (as his only appointment exempt from civil service, White could have chosen someone from outside the office).

"It would be wrong to say there wasn't any friction," says one deputy, who asked for anonymity and is active in the Deputy D.A.'s association, an issues-oriented political organization separate from the Sacramento County Attorneys Association, the labor union of deputy D.A.s and other county lawyers. "There was certainly some friction and some concern. At the same time, Steve appointed from within the ranks for his chief deputy, and that went a long way toward bridging any gaps in the office.

"It's also the case that for most people in the day-to-day operation of the office, it doesn't make much difference who the district attorney is."

Deputy D.A. Rick Lewkowitz, however, sees a world of difference. Supervisor of the domestic violence prosecution unit in the D.A.'s office, Lewkowitz credits White's "leadership and motivation" for a substantial increase in county prosecutions for spousal abuse and other forms of domestic violence.

"Basically, I was here by myself attempting to prosecute difficult cases from beginning to end," Lewkowitz recalls of the pre-White approach to domestic violence cases in Sacramento County. "Because of the vast number of cases, we were not really handling very many of them."

With White's support, the domestic violence unit has been increased substantially—to five prosecutors, an investigator, two social workers and student interns in social work and counseling. White believes the program is the only one of its kind in the state.

"The truly unique part is that he gave us authorization and encouragement and went to the board [of supervisors] and successfully got us two social workers full time to work with the victims and get them to court," says Lewkowitz. "It's really helped, because the victims are getting the kind of support they need."

Chronically low in self-esteem, often economically dependent on their abusers

and fearful of retaliation by violent spouses or companions, victims of domestic violence are among the most difficult to convince that prosecution is the best path. Or, they may initially agree to assist the prosecution and then back out. With the two social workers assigned full time to work with victims and assure them of support before and in court, Lewkowitz says cases are much more efficiently prosecuted.

"The volume," says Lewkowitz, "has increased dramatically." In the last six months of 1989, between 150 and 200 domestic violence cases were reviewed in the D.A.'s office each month. By contrast, from March through May 1990, that number had soared to 500 cases each month—largely as a result of White's edict that local law enforcement turn over all cases of domestic violence to the D.A. for review and possible prosecution.

"It's really phenomenal to see the changes that have occurred in this area," says Lewkowitz. "And it has a rippling effect, on police officers, members of the public, defense attorneys. Everyone is treating it more seriously."

Increasing domestic violence prosecutions was a key element of White's campaign for D.A., and he remains adamant on the subject—even criticizing his friend and political ally, Sheriff Glenn Craig, over what White perceived to be the sheriff's department's reluctance to turn all domestic violence cases over to the D.A.

While the Sacramento Police Department had agreed to such a policy early in White's administration, Craig cited the need for officer review of cases before they are routinely sent to the D.A. Some officers accused White of political grandstanding last January when, in the wake of the brutal murder of Sacramentan Kathy Thomas by her estranged husband Richard, who gunned her down at her office, White harshly and publicly criticized sheriff's department policies in domestic violence cases.

Although White says his discussions with Craig have been amicable and the two remain friends, White's position was given tragic support with the Thomas murder. Kathy Thomas had filed for divorce and obtained a restraining order against her husband, to no avail. She had, in fact, called the sheriff's department when her husband allegedly violated the order and tried to run her car off the road shortly before she was killed. Sheriff's spokesman Ed Close said the earlier report was under investigation at the time she was killed.

"What Steve wanted, we ended up sending him," Close said—which means the department now sends the D.A. "all domestic violence cases, a lot of which are not prosecutable." Close estimates that number at approximately 4,000 annually.

"The Thomas case is the best and the worst example of why we must expend every effort to improve domestic violence prosecutions," says White, whose office is prosecuting Richard Thomas for his wife's murder. White has little patience with the historic failure of the criminal justice system to protect women and children from violent spouses and fathers. "Domestic violence has historically been given short shrift by the criminal justice system, largely because of the misapprehension that it is not a serious problem," White says. "There is a sexist aspect to that, in that the overwhelming number of people affected are female. It also shows insufficient concern for the rights and needs of the children, who are often the unrepresented odd player out."

Citing "very substantial anecdotal and statistical data" indicating that once it begins domestic violence tends to worsen, White says prosecutors must "step in and consciously take hold of this area of crime and direct resources with creativity and intelligence to improving the situation, to fixing it, in an overloaded criminal justice system, which we will probably always have."

"Directing resources" means that White's office reviews all police and sheriff's reports of domestic violence, with a view to early intervention and prevention of more serious violence. "That's why we don't distinguish between misdemeanor and felony violence, because if we intervene at the misdemeanor level, we can prevent the felony cases," he says.

Noting that "victims are not strong advocates for themselves," White has made "an absolute policy" that cases will not be dismissed at the request of victims. With the support of social workers, he adds, more victims are willing to cooperate and testify.

The offender's immediate arrest, he adds, is critical: "You hear the offender saying they never really realized it was a crime."

White's aggressive approach to domestic violence cases is longstanding. In the attorney general's office, he helped prosecute a brutal, highly publicized Yuba County case—the 1982 beating death of 24-year-old Brenda Ferreira by her boyfriend, Joseph "Pete" Coleman, which the local D.A. had declined to prosecute because of allegedly insufficient evidence.

It is highly unusual for the state prosecutor to take over a local case in California, particularly in old, purportedly closed cases. With the graphic testimony of an outraged Chico neurosurgeon (the testomony was available to local prosecutors as well) who had cared for Ferreira as she died a long, agonizing death from the beating (she was beaten at a party on Dec. 5, 1981, and died April 24, 1982), White ordered the case reopened and assigned Deputy Attorney

General Ray Brosterhous to it full time. In 1988, six years after Ferreira's death, Coleman was convicted of second-degree murder—a conviction recently upheld on appeal.

In a January 1990 review ordered by White of all cases pending and filed in the D.A.'s office, alcohol and drugs were found to be involved in more than 65 percent of all felonies and 27 percent of misdemeanors. Drugs other than alcohol—primarily speed (methamphetamine), crack cocaine and heroin—were involved in nearly half of all felonies. If the internecine crimes between competing drug gangs were factored into that equation, he adds, the percentage of drug-related crimes would doubtless be even higher.

If he were making decisions on drug intervention at the national level, White says, "I would not be spending those tens of billions of dollars fighting the drug wars in Peru and Turkey, because as a matter of empirical fact, we can't succeed. There is no way by anybody's reckoning we could interdict, stop at its source or impede a sufficient number of drugs coming into this country to make a significant difference.

"We'd have to garrison the entire country to stop the drugs [from coming in]. It's an absolute waste of money, but worse than that, it keeps us from focusing on where the problem must be solved, and that is of course on the demand side. We could take half of the billions of dollars we're spending on foreign interdiction and fund more creative programs in the schools, to change the mindset of young people who *aren't* on drugs."

As Sacramento grows, so do its urban problems—pollution, congestion, traffic gridlock, drugs, gangs, crime. "There are very real concerns about growing gang problems in our community," says White. "The competition [for the drug trade] in Los Angeles has pushed a lot of that activity north to our county. I think law enforcement is doing extraordinarily well in keeping it from expanding. It's a serious problem, as these drive-by shootings are all too frequent testimony, and there is nothing we attend to with higher priority."

Noting that the Sacramento of his youth is "another country" compared to the urban sprawl of today, White urges prompt action by local government to plan for future growth. "We are on the cusp of becoming another Los Angeles or San Jose, but we're not there yet," says the third-generation Sacramentan. "We still have a sort of last chance to ensure that we are managing this community properly, to not let these centrifugal forces tear us apart." ■

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