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Alamo found not guilty

By Linda Seubold
of the SWTR

A jubilant Tony Alamo thanked God for giving him two good attorneys and called his acquittal Thursday on the charge of threatening to kidnap U.S. District Judge Morris Arnold "a very major victory."

A jury of five women and seven men deliberated three hours before returning at 5:20 p.m. to announce its verdict of not guilty.

But Alamo was unable to leave the federal courthouse a free man.

Federal marshals served him a few minutes later with a Labor Department bench warrant that says he must be jailed until he pays more than \$387,000 in separate cases stemming from charges that wages should have been paid to workers for the Tony and Susan Alamo Christian Foundation. Alamo maintains the workers are volunteers.

Alamo did not seem worried, however, as marshals led him from the courthouse wearing chains around his waist, wrists and ankles.

Alamo told reporters who yelled questions at him that he would be retaining legal eagles Jeffrey Dickstein and Edwin Vieira Jr., who successfully defended him in his trial that ended here today.

Dickstein opened his closing arguments to the jury with an almost-shouted Bible verse and proceeded to make his presentation with the fire of a tent revival preacher.

"This is a major victory for the people of the United States of America," the Tulsa attorney said after the verdict. "Every church in the United States was at issue in this case. If the government had won this one, no pastor could ever again bad-mouth the violation of religious and constitutional procedures by the government."

Prosecutor U.S. Attorney Mike Fitzhugh said he and assistant U.S. attorney Bill Cromwell were disappointed with the verdict.

"But we will accept the verdict of the jury," Fitzhugh said. "Our system is the greatest in the world."

Cromwell said Alamo won by presenting the matter as a First Amendment case, but declined to elaborate.

The charge against Alamo was filed after an article appeared in the Southwest Times Record on Feb. 22. The article was based on two telephone conversations Alamo had with SWTR editor Jack Moseley. Prosecutors alleged Alamo's statements quoted in the article included threats to kidnap Arnold.

The government based its charge against Alamo on Moseley's story, notes from the telephone conversations and Alamo's taped radio sermons.

After the verdict, U.S. District Judge Thomas Eisele of Little Rock, who presided over the trial where Arnold normally holds court, denied Dickstein an expedited hearing on the Labor Department warrant. Eisele also refused to let Alamo, if accompanied by two marshals, have dinner with his attorneys and supporters — another request by Dickstein.

Before the verdict was read, Eisele warned spectators — who included about 25 Alamo supporters — not to make an outburst. The supporters controlled their emotions but were obviously overjoyed.

Alamo made no sound, but an expression of joy and relief began to flood his face as the verdict sank in. He was sitting at the defense table, swiveled in his chair to face the jury with his left hand resting on a well-worn King James Version of the Bible.

Alamo turned immediately to his left and embraced and thanked Dickstein, then turned to his right and shook Vieira's hand.

"This is wonderful! I'm so happy I can hardly stand it," said Alamo's brother Dan Hoffman of Nashville.

Prosecutors claim Alamo threatened to kidnap Arnold in retaliation for his ruling ordering Alamo to pay \$1.4 million in damages to Miller, which reportedly cost Alamo about \$50 million worth of property in Arkansas and Tennessee, including a multi-million-dollar designer clothing business.



Tony Alamo leaves courthouse after being found not guilty of threatening to kidnap a federal judge.