

Strand of Evidence

FBI Crime-Lab Work Emerges as New Issue In Famed Murder Case

Jeffrey MacDonald's Lawyer Alleges Fraud by Agent With History of Problems

Mystery of Blond Fibers

By Laurie P. Cohen, Staff Reporter of The Wall Street Journal

It has been nearly two decades since former Army surgeon Jeffrey MacDonald was convicted of murdering his wife and two daughters in their Fort Bragg, N.C., home. This is the story that was told in Joe McGinniss's best-seller "Fatal Vision," dramatized on television, chronicled in hundreds of newspaper articles and examined in a dozen judicial opinions.

Why it warrants attention again is quite a different story: one that involves a longtime star of the once-fabled FBI Laboratory and a Boston criminal-defense lawyer who is still seeking to overturn Dr. MacDonald's conviction.

Federal Bureau of Investigation scientists gave distorted testimony to meet prosecutors' needs and did sloppy analytical work in some cases, according to a stinging 500-page Justice Department report.

Whatever the truth about Dr. MacDonald's guilt or innocence, a close examination of his long-moribund case raises serious concerns about the FBI crime lab, which is already under scrutiny for allegedly biasing its findings to favor prosecutors over criminal defendants.

Tuesday, the Justice Department inspector general issued a long-awaited report on the Washington-based lab; while very critical of the accuracy of some of its work, the inspector general said he could find no instances of perjury or fabricated evidence. The report made no mention of FBI Special Agent Michael P. Malone's pivotal role in keeping Jeffrey MacDonald behind bars, but it rebuked him sharply in an unrelated matter.