

Hale held in plot to kill judge - Professed racist grabbed by FBI before hearing

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Author: Matt O'Connor, Tribune staff reporter.

In a dramatic scene Wednesday in Chicago's federal courthouse, a phalanx of federal agents arrested white supremacist Matthew Hale on charges he solicited the murder of a federal judge.

Hale, head of the World Church of the Creator, had been ordered by the judge, Joan Humphrey Lefkow, to appear Wednesday for a contempt hearing on a civil lawsuit, but he was arrested in the Dirksen Federal Building in the Loop before he reached the courtroom.

The two-count indictment charged Hale, 31, of Downstate East Peoria, with soliciting an individual to forcibly assault and murder Lefkow and with obstructing justice by trying to influence the judge in a legal fight over the church's name.

Hale allegedly was targeting the judge even though a year ago she had ruled in his favor, dismissing a trademark infringement suit filed by a church with a similar name.

At a hearing in federal court on the criminal charge, Hale was greeted by several supporters who stood and raised a hand in a Nazi-style salute. A court-appointed lawyer entered a not-guilty plea for Hale, who will be held at least until a detention hearing Monday.

U.S. Atty. Patrick Fitzgerald said prosecutors would seek to hold Hale until his trial as a danger to the community.

"In a free society, we cannot let people behave in a way that encourages violence," Fitzgerald told reporters.

The charges provided no detail about the alleged murder solicitation other than that it was to have occurred between Nov. 29 and Dec. 17.

Hale, who calls himself Pontifex Maximus--"highest priest"--holds his church out as a religious organization dedicated "to the survival, expansion and advancement of the white race."

Hale graduated from Southern Illinois University School of Law in 1998, but he was denied a law license by the state because of his racist views. Hale has unsuccessfully sought to challenge the denial as a violation of his First Amendment rights.

Over the 4th of July weekend in 1999 in Illinois and Indiana, former church member Benjamin Smith went on a shooting spree directed at blacks, Jews and Asians, killing two people, including former Northwestern basketball coach Ricky Byrdson and wounding nine before killing himself.

The FBI investigated Hale to determine if he played a role in Smith's rampage, but he was never charged.

On Lefkow's orders, Hale had gone to the courthouse Wednesday for a hearing on why he shouldn't be held in contempt for not changing the church's name as ordered.

Terrorist task force

Instead, numerous agents from the FBI's Joint Terrorist Task Force, including federal marshals and Chicago police officers, arrested Hale after he passed through security in the lobby and approached an elevator bank.

He had been indicted on the murder solicitation charges Monday, but the charges had been sealed until after his arrest, authorities said.

The contempt hearing was canceled after Hale's arrest.

Lefkow was presiding over a trademark infringement suit filed by the Church of the Creator, headquartered in Oregon, against World Church of the Creator. The Oregon church, operated by TE-TA-MA Truth Foundation, said the similar names and trademarks left the mistaken impression that it endorses Hale's racist messages.

Last January, Lefkow ruled in Hale's favor, dismissing the Oregon church's lawsuit, but in July a federal appeals court in Chicago ruled that Hale's group had violated the trademark.

Lefkow was enforcing the appeals court's directive when on Nov. 19--10 days before the alleged murder solicitation commenced--she ordered the World Church of the Creator to stop using that name and trademark and remove both from printed materials and Internet sites.

On Dec. 13 Lefkow granted TE-TA-MA's motion for Hale's church to show why it shouldn't be held in contempt for defying the order and ordered Hale to appear in court Wednesday.

Hale went on the offensive, issuing press releases accusing Lefkow of ordering that church bibles be burned--an accusation denied Wednesday by a lawyer for TE-TA-MA.

According to another Church of the World Creator press release, Hale sued Lefkow in federal court in Peoria Dec. 24 in an effort to have her Nov. 19 order declared unconstitutional.

"I further do not understand the persecution of our church by this court," Hale wrote in a filing last month in the trademark case before Lefkow.

In a press release issued Friday, Hale said he expected to be jailed by Lefkow at the contempt hearing, citing his lawsuit against her and what he said was "pressure from the Jews, [Lefkow's] marriage to a Jew, the fact that she is a proud `grandmother' of three half-bred negroes."

"I say too then that there is only so much we as a church can endure before a minister can no longer look the people in the eye with a straight face preaching legality when individuals like Judge Lefkow indulge in unbridled terrorism against people who simply want to practice their religion," Hale was quoted as saying in the press release.

Fitzgerald said Hale wasn't prosecuted for "rhetorical flourishes," as one reporter put it.

Quoting from the statute, Fitzgerald said prosecutors would have to prove that Hale solicited someone to kill the judge "under circumstances strongly corroborative of intent."

The murder solicitation "has to be under circumstances that strongly corroborate that you meant to do it," Fitzgerald said.

"We fully appreciate that everyone has a right to express their views, everyone has a right to hold views that we may not all share," Fitzgerald said. But "the First Amendment does not protect anyone for seeking to have someone else carry out a murder."

Hale faces up to 30 years in prison if he is convicted of the murder solicitation charge.

Lefkow was named to the federal bench in 2000 after serving as a bankruptcy judge for three years and a federal magistrate for 15 years.

Richard S. Hirschhaut, regional director of the Anti-Defamation League in Chicago, said he wasn't surprised by Hale's arrest for murder solicitation.

"We have long known his propensity for violence," Hirschhaut said.

Hirschhaut and Brian Levin, a professor at California State University in San Bernardino who directs the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism, both estimated the Church of the World Creator has members "in the low hundreds."

Attempted alliances

Hale's group has tried to form alliances with other hate groups, Hirschhaut said.

Last month, Hale announced online that the church had moved its headquarters to a Wyoming city on an American Indian reservation. Hale said he was staying in East Peoria, where the church had been based.

Violence against judges in Chicago and around the country isn't uncommon.

On Tuesday, a man was indicted in Texas on charges of hatching a plot to kill the federal judge who presided over the Oklahoma City bombing trials

In Chicago, a convicted murderer was found guilty in 1997 of mailing a destructive device to U.S. District Judge Blanche Manning a few weeks after she had dismissed his civil lawsuit. A security guard discovered the crude bomb before it reached Manning's chambers.

In 1994, a man also upset over a civil suit being thrown out of court walked into the chambers of a federal judge in Chicago with a kitchen knife tucked in his waistband, but marshals were alerted and arrested him.

Caption: PHOTOS 3

PHOTO (color): (Joan Humphrey) Lefkow. PHOTO (color): (Matthew) Hale .

PHOTO (color): U.S. Atty. Patrick Fitzgerald (from left), Chicago Police Supt. Terry Hillard and Thomas Kneir of the FBI's Chicago office meet with reporters Wednesday to discuss the arrest of Matthew Hale . Tribune photo by Candice C. Cusic.

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