

SUPREMACIST CASE GOES TO JURY

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Author: Eric Ferkenhoff, Globe Correspondent

CHICAGO A white supremacist whose fiery rhetoric was blamed for a 1999 Midwest killing spree was a violent man so bent on revenge after being forced to change the name of his white-power church that he ordered the murder of a federal judge, prosecutors said yesterday in closing arguments.

Defendant Matthew Hale, dressed in an orange jail jumpsuit, sat expressionless as Assistant US Attorney Victoria Peters told jurors he was a "zealot for hate."

Lead defense attorney Thomas Anthony Durkin, who didn't call a single witness in the seven-day trial, acknowledged that "the venom he spews" and Hale's "lack of moral basis" may repulse the jurors. But he argued that the prosecution fell far short of proving its case that Hale, 32, from East Peoria, Ill., solicited the murder of US District Judge Joan Lefkow and obstructed justice. Particularly troubling, he argued, was the government's reliance on two former members of Hale's church who contended that Hale directed them, on separate occasions in late 2002, to murder Lefkow.

One of them, Jon Fox, had ambitions to replace Hale as the church's leader and didn't tell authorities about the alleged plot until 10 months after Hale suggested it, Durkin said. The other, Anthony Evola, who secretly recorded hundreds of conversations with Hale for the government, actually approached Hale about killing the judge not, Durkin said, the other way around.

While Evola and Hale are heard talking about "exterminating the rat" on the tapes, at no point does Hale explicitly order Lefkow's murder. The alleged plot was never carried out, and Lefkow was never injured.

Hale, the "Pontifex Maximus" of the former World Church of the Creator, gained national attention by leading white-power demonstrations in various parts of the country, including one in Wakefield in fall 2002, and another in Lewiston, Maine, in winter 2003.

But he is perhaps best known as the white supremacist whose failure to get a law license in Illinois in 1999 is believed to have touched off a two-state shooting spree by follower Benjamin Smith. Two people, including the former basketball coach at Northwestern University, were killed over the July 4 holiday, and nine others were injured before Smith took his own life on a southern Illinois highway.

It was in the days before the Lewiston rally against Somali refugees where some 4,500 people shouted down the 45 or so supremacists who showed up that Hale was arrested in the alleged murder plot.

Lefkow had presided over a federal trademark infringement case in which an unrelated Oregon group with a similar name filed suit to get Hale to change his group's name. Lefkow initially ruled in Hale's favor, but an appeals court overturned her. She ordered Hale and his group to change the name and remove it from any literature, including the White Man's Bible, put out by the church.

Hale immediately began plotting the murder of Lefkow, Peters said. "He viewed [the ruling] as an attack on his struggle to rid this country of minorities, an attack on his efforts to establish an all-white, non-Jewish country."

The government said Hale turned to Fox to kill Lefkow and lawyers for the Oregon group and asked that Fox burn down the Oregon church with its pastor inside.

When Fox refused, Hale enlisted Evola, the head of Hale's security detail, the White Berets. By then Evola had been cooperating with the FBI for more than three years. He testified earlier in the trial that he approached the FBI because he was perturbed that a member of Hale's church asked him to pass out racist literature in summer 1999 at a school where he worked.

The jury is scheduled to receive instructions this morning and then begin deliberations.

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