

Political killings carry a threat for all society

Chicago Tribune (IL) - March 2, 2005

Author: Eric Zorn.

Of all the forms of murder that rip the fabric of society, an organized assassination is by far the worst.

Obviously, this thought is prompted by Monday's slaying of U.S. District Judge Joan H. Lefkow's husband and mother in her family's North Side Chicago home. Yet just as obviously it's important to add that police haven't linked those slayings to followers of imprisoned white supremacist leader Matthew Hale, who was convicted last year of soliciting the judge's murder.

We don't yet know why attorney Michael F. Lefkow, 64, and Donna Grace Humphrey, 89, were shot in the family's basement. Among other possibilities, they may have been victims of a wandering sociopath, a startled or murderous home invader, or a killer with a grudge against the family unrelated to the judge's position.

What we do know is that the ability of judges and other public officials to make decisions without fearing for their lives or, worse, the lives of their loved ones is key to our way of life.

We know that fear is corrupting, corrosive, malignant, metastatic. It's toxic to freedom, the enemy of justice.

We see more than our share of mayhem in this country--random, predatory; purposeful, senseless. But what we don't see, or haven't seen in a long time, are orchestrated hits on key government, law enforcement and business officials of the sort we associate with third-world thugocracies and nations nearly paralyzed by terrorism.

American assassins and would-be assassins of the last several decades have tended to be lone nuts--your loopy John Hinckleys, pathetic Mark David Chapmans and deluded Squeaky Frommes--and not particularly threatening to others.

The few and isolated exceptions prove the rule: The November, 1973, assassination of Oakland's public schools superintendent Marcus Foster by the radical Symbionese Liberation Army and the June 1984 planned slaying of liberal talk-show host Alan Berg by three members of a white supremacist group are two that come to mind.

Even in a highly security-conscious age when gangs rule neighborhoods, graft greases the system and many people fear going out alone, we have lived under the fundamental presumption that our lawmakers, our police, our prosecutors and our judges are free from the threat of retaliatory murder.

This presumption is so strong that many of us have laughed at the inflated self-importance of mid-level politicians who travel with teams of bodyguards: Get over yourself, ya pompous bureaucrat. You're not that important, and we don't live in that kind of country.

In the United States, with very few exceptions, the mighty, the wealthy and the influential live in neighborhoods, walk down streets, dine in restaurants and shop in stores right alongside everybody else.

Even though our lives have felt constricted by metal detectors, gated communities, surveillance cameras and other forms of security, we still live in a remarkably open society.

Why here? It's just not how we've done things. I'll leave further explanations and analysis to the political scientists, sociologists and psychologists.

But the status quo is fragile. Here's why news of this crime feels so sickeningly ominous: Any organized, politically motivated attack on a judge or a judge's family is an attack on a core presumption that shapes our daily lives--that major decision-makers operate free from the fear of organized intimidation, extortion and bloody revenge.

If that precious presumption shatters, we risk turning into one of those nations where the powerful and famous live in cocoons protected by thick walls, deadbolts, bulletproof glass and armed guards. They scurry from place to place, an eye always out for killers and kidnappers.

Political courage is backed by blood and underwritten by terrible risk. Moral bravery is about more than words.

It's too early to conclude that the presumption suffered a serious crack Monday in Judge Joan Lefkow 's home.

But it's not too early to hope that it didn't.

Edition: Chicago Final

Section: Metro

Page: 1

Index Terms: FEDERAL ; COURT ; MURDER ; SAFETY ; ETHICS

Record Number: CTR0503020092

Copyright (c) 2005, Chicago Tribune Company. All rights reserved.