

Chicago murders spotlight risks to judges - Was Lefkow's family targeted by white supremacists?

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The brutal murder of the husband and mother of a US District Judge here this week has, in addition to shocking the city and galvanizing law enforcement here, become a horrific reminder of the dangers that many in the legal community face simply by virtue of who they are.

The motive and perpetrators may be unknown, but Chicago police are exploring leads that relate to the legal record of the US District Judge, Joan Lefkow. Prominent among them: the case of a white supremacy organization whose leader was convicted last year for trying to solicit Judge Lefkow's murder.

This would be the first instance of an American federal judge's family members being killed as a result of rulings he or she made. But although assaults on prosecutors and members of the judiciary are rare, threats are increasingly common.

"There's a natural degree of risk that comes with any judicial decision," says Dave Turk, a historian with the United States Marshals Service, in charge of protecting 2,000 federal judges and magistrates. "Judges and prosecutors are your focal points."

Lefkow has confronted the risk before. She has been one of the few judges in recent years to warrant a 24-hour security detail for several weeks, in early 2003. In that case, Matthew Hale, leader of the neo-Nazi group formerly called the World Church of the Creator, was convicted of trying to arrange Lefkow's murder with a man who turned out to be an FBI informant. Mr. Hale had become angry with Lefkow because she presided over a 2000 trademark infringement case against his group. His sentencing is scheduled for next month.

When the bodies of Lefkow's husband, Michael, and her mother were discovered shot in her basement, suspicion immediately turned once again to members of Hale's group, although no concrete evidence has yet surfaced to indicate their guilt.

"What's clear is that the members of the World Church of the Creator have been involved in a huge amount of criminal violence over the years," says Mark Potok, director of the Southern Poverty Law Center's Intelligence Project, which tracks more than 700 hate groups around the nation.

"Its leader [Mr. Hale] is in prison for soliciting the murder of Judge Lefkow, whose home address was posted by a group member on the Internet," says Mr. Potok. "So it is not difficult to surmise that a member or sympathizer of this incredibly violent group might very well have been behind the murders."

Some members of the group have expressed glee over the murders in online posts.

But detectives are also looking at other possible connections for the murders. Nothing was taken from the house, and both victims were wearing jewelry, so a random robbery seems unlikely. Police are scouring the thousands of past cases, unrelated to Hale, that Lefkow and her husband, a lawyer, handled.

The fact that judges cross dangerous people is one reason the US Marshals Service was created in 1789; protecting federal judges, prosecutors, and trial witnesses is their oldest mission.

These days, about 700 threats or "inappropriate communications" are logged against judicial members every year. With each one, an assessment is made as to the level of danger and the actions required, says Dave Turk, a historian with the service. They also consider input from the judge affected, who may not want the inconvenience of a security team.

In 2003, the agency provided 20 protective details for judges and attorneys, 12 of which were round-the-clock. All federal courthouses now have metal detectors, and some in the judiciary keep panic buttons or escape hatches nearby.

But it's not always enough. In recent decades three federal judges have been killed:

* In 1979, US District Judge John Wood was murdered by a hired killer allegedly connected to a Colombian drug-smuggling case the judge was trying.

* In 1988, US District Judge Richard Daronco was shot in his backyard by the father of a plaintiff in a dismissed sexual-discrimination case.

* And in 1989 Federal Appeals Court Judge Robert Vance was killed by a mail bomb. In that case, a civil rights attorney was also killed, and the whole circuit was put under protection, says Turk.

Judges around the country were shaken by the Lefkow killings. The risks of their job are "something you have to be constantly aware of," says North Carolina State Court of Appeals Judge Sanford Steelman. "You do have to take certain steps to protect your family and yourself. At the same time ... federal courts have a lot more security for their judges than do state courts."

When Judge Steelman was a Superior Court Judge in Davidson County, N.C., a defendant once threw a chair at him after the judge revoked his probation. In another instance, an inmate was raving in a jail cell, threatening the lives of the judge and district attorney.

"If there's any possibility of violence, you implement necessary measures to make sure security is there," says Steelman.

In addition to highlighting the judiciary's security risks, the Lefkow case is bringing renewed attention to white-supremacy groups. The crime comes at a potentially dangerous time for hate groups, says criminologist Brian Levin, executive director of the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism at California State University, San Bernardino

"Most of the old guard that helped found the neo-Nazi movement in the United States are either dead or incapacitated," says Mr. Levin. This includes Richard Butler of the Aryan Nations and William Pierce of the National Alliance. Others, such as Ku Klux Klansman Lewis Beam and Tom Metzger of the White Aryan Resistance have seen their influence wane, in many cases because victims have filed successful lawsuits.

At the same time, notes Levin, there is a core of true believers inspired by calls for a violent "leadership resistance." So while the movement may have contracted with the removal of its traditional leaders (as well as with internal squabbling over who would succeed them), it was also those leaders who often acted as a check on violent behavior. "What we have now is a core of people who are unrestrained," says Levin.

Other experts agree.

"The ideology of hardcore white supremacists today is a desperate, defensive ideology, one dominated by the Fourteen Words slogan: 'We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children,' " says Mark Pitcavage, a researcher with the Anti-Defamation League, via e-mail. "They have convinced themselves that now ... the white race is threatened."

According to the Anti-Defamation League, the World Church of the Creator (now called the Creativity Movement) considers itself a religion based on the belief that the white race is "nature's highest creation."

Hate sympathizers claim in hate literature and on websites that Judge Lefkowitz is Jewish. She is not, and her husband was active in the Episcopal Church.

For now, until it can be determined how or if the killings relate to her job as a judge, Lefkowitz and her family are once again under 24-hour protection.

* Patrik Jonsson contributed to this report from Raleigh, N.C.

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