

Free Speech That Threatens My Life

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The news of James Kopp's arrest in France for the 1998 murder of Dr. Barnett Slepian reached me just as I finished performing an abortion for the last patient of the morning. My relief was tempered by the news of the previous day: A judgment against anti-abortion fanatics who want me and other doctors killed had been overturned by the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit, in California.

The previous afternoon, as I sat by a window in my office talking with a reporter about the appellate court decision, I noticed that the Venetian blinds were slightly open. Without interrupting the conversation or thinking about it, I reached over to close the blinds. That has become my response when I find myself by an open window. I move away, draw the curtains or close the blinds.

It's too dangerous for me to be in front of a window. Five shots were fired through the waiting room windows of my office in 1988. But I learned the need to be cautious most intensely in October 1998 as I watched in horror the reports of Dr. Slepian's assassination in the kitchen of his home in western New York.

Whoever shot Dr. Slepian accomplished his purpose – to strike terror into my heart. It was an act of political terrorism, as have been the assassinations and attempted assassinations of 10 other abortion doctors and several similar attacks, also sometimes fatal, on others who helped abortion doctors or were with them.

It is unusual now for me to lift the coverings of windows in my home so I can see out. I have a nice view from my home of the famous Flatirons mountains that rise above Boulder, but it is a luxury now to enjoy that view.

As my life is now, the windows cannot be uncovered at night. Sometimes I look into the homes of my neighbors and see them moving about and relaxing with their families. My office is a fortress of steel fences and bulletproof windows, and my home has become a hiding place from which I emerge and hope that I will not be the next assassin's target.

A court ruling belittles a danger faced by abortion doctors.

James Kopp, a suspect in Dr. Slepian's assassination, has been arrested, but where is the next one like him? Who are all the people who helped him escape and hide? When and where will the next assassin strike? Will I get to live out my life?

This week's decision by the Court of Appeals was crushing. I am one of the four physicians who are plaintiffs in this lawsuit against anti-abortion activists who have targeted us. We sued them under federal racketeering law and another law against inciting violence against doctors who perform abortions. We sat in that courtroom in Portland in 1999 for one month next to the people who wanted us dead. We listened to our lawyers present fact after fact to the jury, showing the terror that had been inflicted

on our lives. We listened to the self-righteous anti-abortion fanatics justify their use of speech in posters and on the internet to terrify abortion doctors. My medical colleagues and I went into medicine to help people, and we do. But we became the targets of these despicable and dangerous people.

Each of us doctors described to the jury how we had been stalked and portrayed as criminals by the defendants' "wanted poster" hit lists, which were distributed as fliers and displayed in a 1995 news conference in Virginia. Later, this list was posted on the Internet.

We described how our lives had been permanently warped – in some ways ruined – by this harassment. Maria Vullo, our attorney, eloquently showed the pattern to the jury: poster, murder; poster, murder: poster, murder – all since 1993. Her colleagues pounded home the inescapable conclusion that the defendants purposely created a climate that said to fanatics, "Kill these doctors. Here's your list."

The federal jury of Portland citizens agreed with us that the anti-abortion posters and rhetoric were dangerous to us. Their verdict against the defendants was an important signal that our adversaries may not exploit our democracy's sacred freedom of speech in order to endanger others.

My name, along with those of other doctors, is on an Internet abortion hate list – called the "Nuremberg Files" - now found to be acceptable free speech by the appellate court's decision. Dr. Slepian's name has had a line drawn through it. Who's next? □

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