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Dakota County courtroom threat, unlike others, was foiled

Dakota County District Judge Rex Stacey has a message for John Stephen Woodward, the man who allegedly plotted to have him assassinated next year during Stacey's annual pilgrimage to the world-famous Sturgis motorcycle rally in South Dakota.

"I ... would like him and others like him to know that I'm not the least bit intimidated and will continue to do my job as fairly and thoughtfully as I can," Stacey said Friday in an e-mail to a reporter. "And I no longer go to Sturgis during bike week. It's too crowded. I now go two or three weeks prior to the rally so I can enjoy the Black Hills!"

If the judge's tone sounds defiant, it comes at a time when judges, court employees and public servants around the country are feeling antsy about anti-government rhetoric that, with worrisome frequency, has erupted into violence.

Pundits have tried to link such acts to the recession, the Internet or an uptick in the federal prosecution of gang members. In some cases, members of extremist groups have cited ideological reasons for attempting to make life difficult for judges and court personnel. At other times, the perpetrators have acted entirely alone, deep in their delusions of having been personally betrayed by government employees with a vendetta against them.

Still other acts against judicial workers appear to be more of a general lashing out against authority or a gunman attempting suicide by drawing return fire from courthouse security.

Whatever his motivation,

Woodward won't be joining the ranks of Leslie Stanley Fredrickson, Loren Francis Bellrichard, Walter Leroy Moody, John Patrick Murphy or Daniel Petersen. All of them waded through the justice system in Minnesota, and all of them, to varying degrees, carried out vengeful acts against judges and judicial personnel they felt had wronged them.

Not Woodward.

On Wednesday, the Rice County attorney's office charged Woodward, 47, of Inver Grove Heights with conspiring to murder his next-door neighbor, Dakota County Attorney James Backstrom, and Stacey, who sentenced him to prison for selling methamphetamine.

Woodward also was charged with conspiring to have a woman who testified against him severely beaten and left in the woods with arms broken.

The plan fell apart, according to charges, when Woodward's prison friend approached authorities and agreed to wear a recording device as the two plotted the assassinations together. A reporter's attempts to interview Woodward were unsuccessful.

COURTROOM ATTACKS ON RISE

When Steve Swensen learned about the foiled murder-for-hire plot, he had to breathe a sigh of relief.

Swensen, a former U.S. marshal who retired last year after policing the federal courts in Minnesota for 24 years, has investigated more than his share of threats against judicial employees. He also has studied dozens of courthouse shootings and bombing and arson cases nationwide, dating to the 1970s -- more than 185 of them, all with endings much worse than Woodward's failed plot.

"In this case, we're fortunate that the other inmate made the right decision and came forward," he said. "It could have been a bad situation."

Swensen this summer released his 74-page study, "Court-Targeted Acts of Violence, 1970-2009," and in it he documents what he believes to be sizable increases in actual attacks on the people and facilities that make up America's judicial system. Some of the data from the 1970s and 1980s are incomplete, but such incidents appear to be on the rise.

In fact, the U.S. Marshals Service indicates that threats against federal court personnel have more than doubled in the past seven years. Some have escalated far beyond threats.

In January, a 66-year-old gunman unhappy about his Social Security benefits opened fire in a federal courthouse in Las Vegas, killing two. In March, a man with a history of mental illness wounded two officers at the entrance to the Pentagon. A year earlier, two police chiefs, a county deputy and a paramedic were wounded after a gunman, apparently suicidal after an argument with his family, took hostages and traded fire with authorities in a courthouse square in rural Georgia.

In each incident, the gunman was killed in the ensuing police response.

MURPHY CASE

The case studies in Swensen's report are equally hair-raising. Among the names longstanding Minnesota judges and attorneys might recognize is John Patrick Murphy, who terrorized metro-area judicial officials from 1978 to 1993. Most of Murphy's victims were women.

Murphy smeared blood on their houses and cars, slashed telephone lines and car tires and left behind mutilated animal carcasses as a calling card. A federal probation officer's home was vandalized more than 30 times.

He pleaded guilty in 1994 to terrorizing court officials and threatening the life of a Ramsey County sheriff's deputy, and then spent the next 10 years in and out of prison for probation violations. He was mistakenly released from custody in January 2006, inciting a monthlong manhunt across Minnesota and North Dakota. His victims were placed on alert.

Murphy turned himself in to authorities on Feb. 14, 2006 and is serving a 27-year prison sentence in Minnesota for violating probation, with an eligible release date in 2024.

SHARED TRAITS

Swensen, of Woodbury, last year founded the Center for Judicial and Executive Security, which does security consulting for the U.S. marshals, county governments and other public bodies. He believes

many suspects who lash out with violence at the justice system share certain traits.

One is the loss of what Swensen calls personal and professional "inhibitors." A man who has lost his job, home and family to financial ruin and divorce might feel less inhibited to commit courthouse violence than someone invested in a career and loved ones. Likewise, people involved in civic groups have social outlets to help them defuse, fulfilling activities to occupy their mind, reputations to maintain and friends to offer them perspective.

"Some people develop that mind-set that they can't (fall) any further," he said. "They can't accept the idea that the problem is their own. They lash out at someone else they perceive as causing their problems. It could be a spouse in a divorce case, a judge who has made a ruling against them in a court case, an attorney who is prosecuting them."

TECHNOLOGY FUELS EXTREMISM

Another concern for Swensen is what some have deemed the "American Patriot Movement," an umbrella term for anti-government extremists such as the Montana Freeman, Neo-Nazis and the Ku Klux Klan. He includes in this category tax protesters, common law court activists, constitutionalists and others who selectively interpret the U.S. Constitution to favor their own ideology.

In April, a federal judge in St. Paul sentenced 67-year-old Daniel Petersen -- a founding member of the Montana Freeman -- to more than seven years in prison for filing false liens against three federal judges. Petersen, who represented himself in court during a three-day jury trial last October, had declared the Freeman's Montana ranch a sovereign government and demanded \$100 trillion from the U.S. for unlawfully confining him.

Swensen believes technology has allowed members of such groups to seek each other out and egg each other on.

"There's no question that the Internet has let this type of misinformation become widespread," Swensen said. "You get someone who is disgruntled with the county courts or the federal courts, and they go on the Internet, and they broadcast that, and someone else feels like they've been in a similar situation. That can cause problems."

Woodward, according to charges, allegedly told his prison friend he felt Backstrom, the Dakota County attorney, was once his best friend. He said Backstrom had set him up for his drug conviction, betraying him. Backstrom had limited comment on the case Friday.

"Court security is an extremely important concern for everyone working in the courthouse," he said, in a statement forwarded by his spokeswoman. "Threats against judges and other public officials are taken very seriously, as they should be."
