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A Research Review of Public Figure Threats, Approaches, Attacks, and Assassinations in the United States*

ABSTRACT: The authors review extant research on threats, approaches, attacks, and assassinations of public figures in the United States. Despite the limited number of studies, data exist concerning: 1) threatening letters and approaches to celebrities; 2) attacks and assassinations of public figures, usually the President of the United States; 3) threats and approaches to legislative members of state and federal governments; and 4) threats, approaches, and attacks against federal judicial officials. Similarities and differences across the various studies are discussed. Consistent findings across the studies indicate that direct threats toward the target are unusual and are often correlated negatively with an approach or attack; a significant proportion of subjects are mentally ill and have criminal histories; many subjects evidenced a downward spiral in their lives in the months or year before their approach or attack; and if an attack occurred, it was predatory (instrumental, premeditated) rather than affective (emotional, reactive), and the weapon of choice was a firearm, usually a handgun. Operational guidance and further research recommendations are made.

KEYWORDS: forensic science, stalking, assassination, violence, public figures

Threats, approaches, and attacks toward public figures in the United States received scant scientific attention until the systematic work of Dietz et al. in 1991 (1,2) began to unravel the relationship between threatening and inappropriate letters and approach behavior toward public figures. These studies were originally funded by a grant from the National Institute of Justice to the University of Virginia and appeared at the same time that “stalking,” an unwanted pursuit that was deemed threatening by the victim, became criminalized in California. The crime of stalking, although mostly occurring among prior sexual intimates within the private domain of a disrupted relationship, was publicly noticed following the killing of Rebecca Schaeffer, a young television actress, and the attempted killing of Theresa Saldana, a film actress, by two paranoid schizophrenic “fans” during the previous decade in Los Angeles. In subsequent years stalking would become a crime in all 50 states in the United States and in Canada, Britain, Australia, and New Zealand (3,4).

Although the publication of stalking research in general has been both frequent and productive—Spitzberg (5) recently published a meta-analysis of 108 samples of stalkers and victims across 103 studies, representing more than 70,000 participants—research

concerning threats, approaches, and attacks toward public figures has remained sparse but quite significant. It can be divided into five categories, defined most easily by the target of the approach: 1) threatening letters and approaches to celebrities; 2) attacks and assassinations of public figures, usually the President of the United States; 3) threats and approaches to legislative members of state and federal governments; 4) threats, approaches, and attacks against federal judicial officials; and 5) discoveries concerning threats, approaches, and attacks that generalize to all studied targets.

Threatening Letters and Approaches to Celebrities

There has been only one published study of threats and approaches to celebrities. Dietz et al. (1) examined the characteristics of 1800 threatening and otherwise inappropriate (sinister, bizarre, unreasonable, or disjointed) letters sent by 214 subjects to 22 Hollywood celebrities. These letters were drawn from the archives of Gavin de Becker, Inc., a Los Angeles-based private security firm. A random draw of 107 subjects who had been on file for at least six months and who had approached the celebrity was compared to 107 subjects who had not approached the celebrity of interest. At the time of this study (January 1985), there were 1559 subjects on file, of whom 270 (17.3%) had approached the celebrity. An “approach” was defined as a visit to the home of the celebrity; visit to the agency that represented the celebrity; visit to a home or business of a friend, relative, or intimate of the celebrity; an approach within five miles of any of the above locations with the intent to see, visit, or confront the above parties; travel more than 300 miles to see the celebrity or the above parties; or behaving in any manner out of the ordinary at a public appearance of the celebrity.

The letters were scored by coders for 904 variables. Level of agreement was 80–100% for most of the variables, although no

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interrater coefficients of agreement (kappa, ICC) were determined. Letter variables which discriminated between approach and non-approach were determined through the use of chi-square and t-tests. Significance was set at $p \leq 0.05$. There was no attempt in this study to use any predictive models.

Sixteen variables discriminated the two groups. The approachers were more likely to send 10–14 letters (12.2% base rate for approach); correspond for longer than one year; desire face to face contact with the celebrity; announce a specific time when something would happen; announce a specific location where something would happen; both write letters and telephone; repeatedly mention the celebrity's entertainment products; and write from two or more geographically different locations.

The non-approachers were more likely to use tablet writing paper; provide an address; desire to marry or have children with the celebrity; enclose commercial photos of the celebrity; attempt to instill shame in the celebrity; indicate a sexual interest in the celebrity; repeatedly mention other public figures; and mention any sexual activity.

There were a number of variables which counterintuitively did not discriminate between the two groups. These included the anonymity or lack of anonymity of the writer; the number of words or pages in each communication; changes of the handwriting within each letter; propriety of greeting or politeness in the letter; idiosyncratic writing or disorganization with the letter; enclosures within the letter (except for commercial photos noted above, the most likely enclosures, in descending order of frequency, were the subject's creative efforts, a photograph of the subject, other homemade photos, and bizarre materials such as biological specimens, drugs, dirt, or seeds); the role which the subject cast himself in, or whether it changed; idolizing the celebrity; preoccupation, overvaluation, or obsession with the celebrity; degree of insistence; emotional provocation (other than shame noted above); or presence or absence of any threat.

The lack of any relationship between threats and approach behavior in the Dietz et al. (1) study challenged long held prior assumptions that threats increased risk of an approach behavior, and therefore potential violence. They defined a threat as "any offer to do harm, however implausible" (p. 203), and found that 23% of the subjects were threatened, usually more than once. They further categorized threats as "direct," "veiled," or "conditional." Most of the threats were conditional, usually a demand for personal attention. Threats were also analyzed for presence of a plan, means, and opportunity. Four percent of the subjects threatened to kill the celebrity. Among the characteristics of threats that were examined for discriminatory power between approachers and non-approachers were the means by which the threat was conveyed; whether it was anonymous; whether it was toward person or property; the nature of the threatened harm; whether the threat was direct, veiled, or conditional; the logic of the threat; the nature of the demands in a conditional threat; the person or force that was to carry out the threat; whether the locus of control was internal or external; evidence of a plan, means, or opportunity; and scores on a "threat credibility" scale. *None of these variables* had any significant association with making or not making an approach to the celebrity.

Other notable findings in this study included the high percentage of subjects who also wrote to other celebrities (36%), the degree to which most subjects cast themselves in the role of a benevolent figure toward the celebrity (friend, spouse, or lover), the degree to which a majority of subjects were obsessed or preoccupied with the celebrity, and the inference that many of the subjects were mentally disordered by the authors. This latter inference has emerged as one

of the most consistent findings among researchers who study those who threaten, approach, and attack public figures.

Although the Dietz et al. (1) study of celebrity approaches regrettably continues to stand alone as the only study of its kind, it established an important precedent for the systematic study of threatening or otherwise inappropriate communications toward public figures. Most importantly, it advanced the term "approach" as an important threshold for assessing risk, given the fact that actual violence toward celebrities is a very low base rate phenomenon, and physical approach is a necessary precondition for most violence. Ironically, the study found that most approaches toward celebrities are not motivated by violence, but instead, by a desire for face-to-face contact. The study was limited by the small and nonrandom sample of targeted individuals, the absence of any demographic or clinical data on the subjects, the absence of any predictive statistics, and the focus upon letters as a pre-approach behavior, therefore excluding all subjects who would approach a celebrity without any previous communication and could pose a substantial threat by virtue of their absence of communication.

Attacks and Assassinations of Public Figures

Early research on attacks and assassinations of public figures in the United States focused on the small number of assassins of the President (6,7), subjects who had only threatened the President (8,9), or subjects who had visited the White House, behaved peculiarly, and insisted on seeing the President (10–12). The latter two groups resembled each other in many ways. They were predominantly unmarried, unemployed Caucasian males in their mid-30s with a common diagnosis of schizophrenia, histories of suicidal behavior, and previous hospitalizations. Rothstein (8,13,14) hypothesized a "presidential assassination syndrome" based upon such studies, but Megargee (9) demonstrated in an MMPI study of 45 presidential threateners and 45 nonthreateners evaluated at a federal mental health facility that there did not appear to be such a unitary syndrome. Although he found the threateners highly psychopathological (mean T scores exceeded 70 on scales 2, 4, 6, and 7, and exceeded 80 on scale 8. Two thirds of the threateners were the Foxtrot, Charlie, How, and Uncle subtypes), they were classified across 90% of his eleven MMPI types. The only characteristic that they appeared to share was a fixation on the Presidency.

The most cogent criticism of such "threatener" studies, however, is the fact that none of these individuals ever attempted to attack the President. Freedman (15) captured this point when he wrote, "No 'syndrome' of potential presidential assassins can be based on writers of threatening letters. . . . Indeed, as far as we know, the threat may be inversely rather than directly related to the act (p. 150)." Subsequent research would prove him correct.

Archival studies of Presidential assassins have fared somewhat better, the most notable being the work of James Clarke (6,7), a professor of political science at the University of Arizona, who researched the 17 individuals who carried out 16 actual assassination attempts against a prominent political figure in the U.S. Seven of the victims died of their wounds, for a 44% mortality rate. Clarke (6) identified four types: Type I assassins view their acts as a "sacrifice of self for a political ideal (p. 14)," and personal interest or evident psychopathology is secondary to a primary political motivation. John Wilkes Booth, the assassin of Abraham Lincoln in 1865 is a clear example of this type. Type II assassins are persons with "overwhelming and aggressive egocentric needs for acceptance, recognition, and status (p. 14)." They are highly anxious and dysphoric individuals who have experienced much affectional deprivation in their personal lives. The assassination is a rageful

seeking of attention that is politically rationalized. Lee Harvey Oswald, the assassin of John F. Kennedy in 1963, is a clear example of this type. Type III assassins are psychopathic individuals who experience life as meaningless, and the motivation is an emotionless display of contempt toward a society from which they feel completely alienated. John Hinckley, Jr., the man who attempted to assassinate President Ronald Reagan in 1981, is an example of this type. Type IV assassins are those with a diagnosable major mental disorder and evidence both persecutory and grandiose delusions. Charles Guiteau, the assassin of President James Garfield in 1881, is a clear example of this type. Clarke's work is highly informative, but it suffers from a necessarily small sample size and the absence of any direct investigative or interview data on the subjects.

The study of the assassination of public figures was advanced considerably by the work of Robert Fein and Bryan Vossekuil of the U.S. Secret Service. Fein, Vossekuil, and Holden (16) recognized the shortcomings of previous studies that only focused upon threateners and approachers and redefined the task as "threat assessment of targeted violence." Their methodology eschewed the traditional violence risk approach which emphasized more static factors, such as demographics or clinical status; and instead, they took a more functional-behavioral approach which emphasized the identification of a pathway toward violence that a certain high risk individual could take and ways in which law enforcement intervention could successfully interdict such movement toward assassination. Their research approach was designed primarily to aid law enforcement, and their subjects of interest were "individuals who had acted in lethal or near-lethal ways toward a prominent person of public status." The time frame selected was 1949–1996, and their Exceptional Case Study Project captured the universe of individuals who had assassinated, attacked, or near-lethally approached a protectee of the Secret Service (President, Vice-President, their families, former Presidents, candidates for President, and visiting heads of state); other major federal officials and office holders; governors and large city mayors; celebrities; and chief executives of major corporations. They identified 83 subjects involved in 74 incidents. Forty-six percent were attacks or assassinations, and 54% were near-lethal approaches. The primary target was the President of the U.S. (34%) and other Secret Service protectees (19%). Another third, however, were other national figures; business executives; and movie, sports, or media celebrities. Twenty of the subjects were clinically interviewed by the principal investigators, a forensic psychologist and a senior agent.

Fein and Vossekuil published their findings in a paper and a book chapter (17,18), and their work has substantially influenced the protective intelligence branch of the U.S.S.S. through their ongoing teaching and consultations. Their work confirmed some conventional beliefs concerning assassination and dismantled other beliefs that were, in retrospect, completely wrongheaded and misguided.

Most attacks, assassinations, or near-lethal approaches occurred in the target's home, office, hotel, campaign rally, or temporary worksite. The most common weapon was a handgun (51%) or a rifle/shotgun (30%). Knives were used in 15% of the cases. The primary goal in most of the incidents was to harm the target (68%). Motives for the attacks included:

- to achieve notoriety and fame
- to avenge a perceived wrong
- to end personal pain; to be killed by law enforcement
- to bring national attention to a perceived problem
- to save the country or the world
- to achieve a special relationship with the target

- to make money
- to bring about political change

Subjects who targeted celebrities or other figures not protected by the Secret Service were more likely to be motivated by a wish to save the world, to bring attention to a perceived problem, or to achieve a special relationship with the target. Presidential targeting was most often motivated by a desire to achieve notoriety or to be killed by law enforcement. Although many subjects considered more than one target to attack, only one person whose primary target was a public official considered attacking a celebrity. And only one person whose primary target was a celebrity considered attacking a public official. Subjects who targeted celebrities were more likely to have a delusion involving a relationship with the target (e.g., erotomania) than those who attacked public officials. Target dispersion may be confined to either celebrity figures or public officials, with little overlap.

The pathway to attack or assassination was marked by two important findings: first, in virtually all cases the attacks were planned over the course of weeks, months, or years (the most careful planners were those motivated by money). As Fein and Vossekuil wrote, "in every case, assassination was the end result of an understandable process, involving the attacker's pattern of thoughts, decisions, behaviors, and actions that preceded the attack (17, p. 185)." Subjects ruminate about assassination, they read about it, they sometimes keep journals and talk to others, they choose a target, they carefully plan, they engage in approach behavior and surveillance, they consider whether to escape, and they choose the moment and the weapon for the attack. They are also clearly capable of postponing an attack if plans do not unfold as anticipated. For example, Sirhan Sirhan appears to have approached Robert Kennedy on four different occasions with the intent and means to kill him before his completed assassination at the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles in June 1968 (19). Attacks and assassinations of public figures are not impulsive, emotionally-laden, sudden, or spontaneous acts, as the public often believes. They are acts of predatory violence: planned, purposeful, and emotionless (20).

Second, the pathway to attack or assassination was marked by the absence of any directly communicated threat to the target or law enforcement beforehand. In fact, none of the 43 assassins or attackers communicated a direct threat to the target before their attack, and less than 10% of the entire sample of assassins, attackers, and near-lethal approachers communicated a direct threat. On the other hand, two thirds of the subjects did communicate their intent to mount an attack to a third party or in a written diary or journal before the incident. They would tell family members, friends, workers, colleagues, and associates about their thoughts and plans.

This threat finding is critical to understanding the mode of violence of attackers and assassins of public figures (predatory) and the tactical advantage if one does not communicate directly with the target beforehand. It is also consistent with the absence of directly communicated threats in other targeted violence incidents, such as adult and adolescent mass murder (21,22). It is in stark contrast to the usual finding that individuals who stalk and attack private individuals, usually a prior sexual intimate, usually do threaten verbally beforehand (20). Most germane to threat assessment involving public figures, the absence of a directly communicated threat, means that law enforcement intelligence and interdiction should focus on those individuals who are preparing an attack, not just on those individuals who directly communicate a threat to attack.

Who are the assassins, attackers, and near lethal approachers of public figures? Fein and Vossekuil (17) emphasized that there is no profile of an American assassin. Historical and personal

characteristics indicated that the age range was 16 to 73; almost half had attended some college or graduate school; they often had histories of mobility and transience; they were often social isolates; few had histories or arrests for violent crimes; few had ever been incarcerated in state or federal prison; most had a history of weapons interest and use, but few had formal weapons training; many had histories of harassing other persons; most had histories of explosive and angry behavior, but only half had known histories of violent behavior; many often had histories of interest in militant or radical ideas and groups but were not members of such groups; many had histories of serious depression or despair; many had histories of attempted suicide; and almost all had histories of grievances and resentments, usually against a public official or public figure.

In the year prior to the incident almost half of the subjects experienced a major loss or life change, including marital problems and breakups, personal illness, death of a family member, failure at school or work, and personal setbacks that stimulated feelings of despair or depression. Likewise, even though two thirds of the subjects had been evaluated or treated by a mental health professional, only 23% had been evaluated or treated in the year before the attack. Almost all incidents occurred during a period of social and emotional decline in the lives of the subjects. Forty-three percent of the subjects were delusional at the time of their attacks, a finding which was significantly higher if the subject was a near-lethal approacher rather than an attacker: delusion may have impeded success, but in either case, both attackers and near lethal approachers were organized sufficiently, despite their psychosis, to mount an attack. Alcohol or substance abuse did not play a major role in the lives of the subjects or in their attacks, a finding which is in stark contrast to most studies of violence, mental disorder, and drug or alcohol abuse (23).

Fein and Vossekuil (17) concluded their study with a cautionary note: few assassins and attackers have had the cunning and bravado portrayed in novels or films, such as "In the Line of Fire" or "Day of the Jackal." Despite the planning and preparation that are exercised by virtually all attackers, many of them were found to have mixed emotions about actually attacking. Nevertheless, when an attack is implemented, it is the result of a process of thinking and behavior wherein the target has been selected on the basis of the subject's motives and as a means to an end.

Threats and Approaches to Legislators

Dietz et al. (2) conducted the first systematic study of threatening and otherwise inappropriate letters to members of the U.S. Congress. Appearing several months after their celebrity study (1), the researchers studied letters sent by 86 subjects, 20 of whom threatened assassination, to various legislators. In the U.S. Congress there are 100 senators and 435 representatives in the two houses. Using a random stratified sampling method, they compared the letters of 43 subjects who made an approach to 43 subjects who did not make an approach. A subject "approached" when he or she visited the home of the member; visited the agency or office of the member; visited the home of an acquaintance, friend, or intimate of the member; approached within five miles of the above locations with the intent to see the member; traveled more than 300 miles to see the member at any appearance; or behaved out of the ordinary at a public appearance. Although case selection was streamlined, the same statistical methods and significance level (0.05) were retained from the celebrity study.

Subjects who approached were significantly more likely to write repeatedly; provide identifying information; telephone and write; close letters appropriately; show politeness in their letters; assume

the role of a special constituent; cast the member in the role of a benefactor; repeatedly mention love, romance, or marriage; express a desire for face to face contact; or express a desire for rescue, assistance, valuables, or recognition.

Subjects who did not approach were more likely to use cursive writing; take an enemy role; cast the member in an enemy role; attempt to instill fear, upset, or worry in the member; or make any threat.

In this study, unlike the celebrity study in which there was no relationship between threats and approach, the presence of any threat in a letter was associated with a lower risk of approach. When the threats were further analyzed, virtually all the features of a threat were associated with reduced frequency of approach: threatening any kind of harm, threatening to kill, indicating that the threat would be carried out, direct threatening, veiled threatening, conditional threatening, and implausible threatening. Fifty-eight percent of the subjects threatened, and they did so an average of 3.7 times. Eighty-four percent of the non-approach cases made a threat, while only 33% of the approach cases made a threat. Although the difference was statistically significant, one out of three subjects who threatened did make an approach. Although threateners did approach, the writing of a threat was associated with a reduced risk of approach.

The Dietz et al. (2) letter study of legislative threats and approaches was subsumed by larger and more comprehensive studies conducted over the next decade by Mario Scalora, a forensic psychologist and professor at the University of Nebraska, and his fellows and students. One study focused upon contact behavior toward state government and officials and the mentally ill (24); other studies focused upon problematic contacts with members of the U.S. Congress (25) and risk factors for approaches to members of the U.S. Congress (26).

Scalora et al. (24) studied 127 cases investigated between 1987–2000 by the Nebraska State Patrol for threatening behavior toward state public officials or state agency employees. They drew from the findings of previous research concerning the prominence of mental disorder and previous mental health care among those who engage in threats and approach behavior toward targeted individuals. For example, Coggins et al. (27) noted that 50% of all subjects who threatened the President had received mental health care, and 90% of those determined to pose a risk to protectees had a history of mental health treatment. Scalora et al. (24) directly compared the contact behavior of those with and without mental illness. The presence of mental illness was based upon self-report of psychotic symptoms or corroborating data that the person had suffered from a mental illness. Coding of contact behavior and letter content included target dispersion (number of different targets contacted), approach behavior (any physical approach involving an articulated threat, threatening gesture, or attempt to unlawfully disrupt a government function), threatening language, demand language, and nine categories of letter content: policy-related, help seeking, insulting/degrading, threat dominant, anti-government, racial, sexual, religious, and obscene. There were 56 MI cases and 71 NMI cases.

A discriminant function analysis found that five variables correctly classified 71.4% of the subjects as mentally ill: 1) a greater number of reported contacts; 2) more frequent demands; 3) more frequent help seeking; 4) more frequent religious content; and 5) less likely to have insulting/degrading content. The articulation of a threat did not discriminate between the groups. The mentally ill tended to focus upon more specific personal concerns, and more intensely so, than the non-mentally ill subjects.

In another study, Scalora et al. (25) worked with the U.S. Capitol Police responsible for the security of the U.S. Congress and studied

4387 reported cases held in an electronic database between 1993–1999 which involved threats and other problematic contact. Approach behavior was defined in exactly the same way as the state study: such approaches included an attempted or actual face-to-face contact with or without a weapon toward a member of the congressional community (member, staff, police, or visitor). The thematic content in letters was abbreviated to six categories: domestic policy related, foreign policy related, help seeking, government entitlement, racial, and obscene/sexual. Interrater reliabilities for coding ranged from 0.86–0.95.

Results indicated that the vast majority of the subjects were Caucasian males, ranging in age from 11–87 years (mean = 44, SD = 12). Nearly one fourth of the subjects had a prior arrest record and one third displayed behavior suggestive of major mental disorder. Only one fifth (22.5%) of the subjects engaged in a physical approach, and it was a single contact. Only 6.9% of the cases engaged in a second problematic contact following a police interview or mental health intervention. Attempted or actual violent approaches occurred in 2.2% of cases.

The most prevalent threatening contact was done via letters or faxes (39.4%). Telephone harassment and threats were also common (27.1%). One third made a direct or veiled threat, although this was less likely if there was an approach ($p < 0.0001$). Although this finding is consistent with the other reviewed studies, the researchers carefully noted:

Threats cannot be ignored, as 21% of the approaches were preceded by threatening statements and 42% of the violent approaches involved prior threatening statements (p. 3).

One third of the subjects contacted multiple targets. A logistic regression analysis found that the following variables correctly classified the subjects as either approachers or non-approachers 76.4% of the time. Approachers were correctly classified 46.9% (53% false positive rate), and non-approachers were correctly classified 80.5% (19.5% false negative rate). These variables accounted for 30% of the variance. The approachers were classified by:

- younger age
- prior arrest record
- major mental illness
- less likely to use an alias
- less likely to have made a direct or veiled threat
- more likely to not be a direct constituent
- more likely to contact multiple targets
- use less threatening language (content)
- seek more help (content)
- less foreign and domestic policy (content)
- less obscene/sexual (content)
- less racial (content)

The authors stressed the findings that a prior criminal record and significant mental illness had important implications for the sharing of law enforcement data across jurisdictions and the active involvement of mental health professionals in any threat management endeavor. Help seeking in these subjects involved personal issues, rather than ideological ones, and the subjects were much more intently focused on their problems than the more grandiose motivations of the attackers and assassins outside the legislative branch of government (18). The number of subject contacts also posed formidable challenges, especially with the desire of the legislator to appeal to the needs of his or her constituents at both a national and local level.

The third study by Scalora et al. (26) attempted to discern more clearly the risk factors involved in both pre-approach and approach behavior toward members of the U.S. Congress. They randomly drew 316 cases from the U.S. Capitol Police database between October 1998 and July 1999 ($N = 1500$) and identified 104 approach cases and 212 non-approach cases as defined in their previous studies. A variety of subject and contact variables were coded, including the presence of demand language, coherence of verbal or written statements, policy-oriented statements, target oriented statements, and personal-oriented statements. Interrater reliabilities were 0.86–0.92.

A univariate analysis indicated that the approachers were significantly more likely to be males, have identified themselves prior to contact, have displayed symptoms of mental illness, have significantly more criminal offenses (except for threat/harassment charges), have had prior contacts with other federal law enforcement agencies, have made prior contacts with the target before approaching, have evidenced target dispersion, be incoherent and disorganized, have displayed themes of a personal nature, have utilized multiple methods of contact, and be less likely to articulate a threat. The mentally ill approachers were more likely to make specific demands, be incoherent and disorganized, engage in prior contacts before the approach, and mention personal issues.

A logistic regression analysis was then done utilizing all the univariate findings, and four variables emerged which correctly classified 82.5% of the overall sample (71.2% of the approachers and 88.1% of the non-approachers). Four variables were significant: approachers were more likely to have had prior contact with other federal agencies, identified themselves during the contact, engaged in multiple methods of contact, and expressed less threatening language during their contacts.

Among the approachers, 44% engaged in contact behavior before their approach; and within this “approach with prior contact” group, the majority were mentally ill, contacted other targets, used threatening, demanding, and incoherent language, and had both target and personal content in their communications.

Scalora et al. (26) concluded by emphasizing the importance of intensity of interest, extent of contact activity with the target, interest in other targets, personal help seeking, the presence of mental illness, and a history of criminal behavior in predicting approach behavior to the federal legislators. They write, “the role of mental illness may not only be related to cognitive distortions and emotional instability, but also to behavioral impulsivity that leads individuals to contact targets more intensely, thereby bringing these individuals more frequently to the attention of threat assessment professionals (p. 53).”

Threats, Approaches, and Attacks Against Federal Judicial Officials

One federal judge was killed in the United States in the two centuries between 1789 and 1979. Three were killed in the decade between 1979 and 1989. Fred Calhoun, a historian and researcher for the U.S. Marshals Service, the agency responsible for the security of the federal judiciary, conducted a detailed analysis of threats and violence toward federal officials, prompted by this sobering escalation in violence.

Calhoun (28) studied 3096 inappropriate communications toward federal officials during the years 1980–1993 and documented by the Analytical Support Unit of the U.S. Marshals Office. An “inappropriate communication” was defined as “any contact or approach to a federal judicial official—written, telephonic, verbal, through an informant, or by some activity—that is unwarranted, ominous,

threatening, weird, bizarre, or untoward (p. xix).” Although this study was not limited to letter analysis as were the Dietz studies (1,2), the bulk of the inappropriate and threatening communications was done through writing (43.8%) and telephoning (22.3%).

Inappropriate communications, 2996, contained enough information to determine an outcome. In 91.9% of the cases, there was no evidence that any attempt was made to implement the promised harm, and the threatener was never heard from again (“specious threat”). In 118 cases (3.9%), court officials were assaulted, and two federal judges were assassinated (“violent threat”). The remaining cases (4.1%) involved a risk of injury as the assailant unsuccessfully tried to carry out his threat (“enhanced threat”).

Threats were also classified as: 1) potent or impotent, whether or not the person had the ability to carry out the threat; 2) physical or intangible, whether or not there was explicit intent to cause physical harm; 3) direct or veiled, whether or not both the victim and the suspect were reasonably identified; and 4) immediate or deferred, whether or not the harm would come in a reasonably immediate period of time. None of these categorizations predicted a violent or enhanced outcome, and they turned out to be purely descriptive.

The methods for delivering a threatening or inappropriate communication did yield important results. Although most threats were communicated by telephone or writing, only 1% of these had a violent outcome. This increased slightly to 2.9% when the threat was delivered verbally, but the method of delivery that was most predictive of violence was suspicious activity, wherein 40.5% had a violent outcome and 17.6% had an enhanced outcome. Method of delivery was the most important predictive variable of the entire study.

Suspicious activity was deeds and gestures deemed threatening. In one case a stethoscope was found lying in a prosecutor’s driveway during a case he was prosecuting in which a doctor was the defendant. In another case a bullet was found on a prosecutor’s pillow at home. In other cases a tire on a car was flattened, or victims were followed, filmed, or surveilled. Suspicious activity always aroused the concern of the victim that the unknown perpetrator was closing in on the hunt and was poised to strike. Suspicious activities that turned out to be specious were often directed against multiple court victims or ideological threats unrelated to a specific case.

Calhoun (28) found that his subjects could be divided into “hunters” and “howlers.” Typically howlers kept their distance from the target and were content to rant and rave (verbally or in writing) against the personal injustice that they had suffered. If they threatened, it was almost always specious (96%). The hunters, however, did not explicitly threaten with words but instead engaged in approach behavior (“suspicious activity”) that in the majority of cases resulted in an enhanced or violent outcome. Often the suspicious activity was a symbolic demonstration to the victim of the danger he or she was in and the ease with which the hunter could violate the safe boundaries of the victim. From a psychological perspective, hunters approach and probe to enhance their feeling of omnipotent control over their victim. If such probing is known to the victim, it will often frighten and intimidate. From a tactical perspective, such approaching and probing provides useful information to plan the eventual attack. As Calhoun wrote, (28, p. 66), “The method of delivery was, in effect, the threatener’s signature . . . the howlers rarely hunted; the hunters rarely howled.”

What motivated a subject to become violent? The majority of those who attacked did it for personal, selfish reasons arising out of a specific court case. Of the four federal judges killed in the past 200 years, all were killed because they were judges, and three were killed due to their involvement in a specific court case.

Threats and targeted violence toward the federal judiciary are distinguished from other groups (celebrities, legislators, Presidents, etc.) by three characteristics: first, they were threats and attacks toward the *system of justice* as much as they were directed toward an individual. Second, they were motivated by insult, revenge, anger or fear for a specific litigious or case-related reason, and only one out of five appeared to be motivated by an irrational impulse or fixation, unlike the predominantly mentally ill in the other studies. And third, the threats were interpersonal, both the victim and the perpetrator knowing each other from their litigious encounter. This is strikingly different from the absence of personal knowledge of the attacker, assassin, or threatener by the victims in the studies of Dietz et al. (1,2), Scalora et al. (24–26), and Fein and Vossekuil (17,18). Although a quarter of the judicial threateners acted anonymously, it is likely they did so to hide their obvious identity from the victim. Threats and violence toward the judiciary is not done by deluded strangers; it is done by angry subjects personally known to the victim(s) through their professional encounters in the federal court system.

General Findings Across the Public Figure Studies

A review of threats, approaches, and attacks on public figures in the United States yields a number of consistent findings for other related research endeavors. These findings can be utilized to shape the design of other studies and to increase the cost efficiency of such studies by avoiding areas of research that have not been fruitful. Such guided research will substantially enhance both the intelligence gathering and protective duties of law enforcement in relation to the safety and security of public figures.

- The motivations and goals of subjects who contact, approach, and in a few cases attack public figures vary considerably and determine the selection of the target. A target may be a specific individual or a member of an identified group (legislator, judicial officer, celebrity, executive), but in most cases is a means to an end that has a strong personal and emotional value for the subject.
- Even if the subject is delusional (thinking that is based upon a fixed and false belief), the concern is likely to be very personal and emotional.
- The intensity of pre-approach behavior (contact behavior not involving a physical approach) may signal the presence of mental illness in the subject.
- Subjects will often contact and approach multiple targets within their domain of interest (legislators, celebrities, judicial figures, etc.) but may not cross over domains. This behavioral pattern necessitates strong linkages among jurisdictions to see if subjects have approached other targets.
- Many subjects who approach are not initially motivated by aggression, but instead are seeking help, beneficence, or a personal meeting. The inherent risk with such a motivation, however, is perceived rejection by the public figure, which is likely to occur, and the consequent stimulation of angry and aggressive feelings. For example, both Mark David Chapman, the assassin of John Lennon, and Robert Bardo, the assassin of Rebecca Schaeffer, had a nonviolent, face-to-face, and amicable encounter with their victims in the minutes or hours before their attacks, which were both carried out with a concealed handgun.
- Directly communicated threats either significantly decrease the risk of an approach to the public figure or have no

relationship to an approach. Direct threats, however, should never be ignored since a proportion of subjects who threaten do approach but in most cases do not carry out an attack.

- Analyses of various detailed aspects (form and content) of threatening communications, primarily in letters, have not yielded any useful predictive data and should not be pursued for predictive purposes. Researchers often gravitate to such databases, however, because they are the most easily accessed.
- The central question concerning threat assessment and threat management is whether or not the subject poses a threat toward the public figure(s), and the direction and speed with which he is moving. Posing a threat means that the individual is engaging in behavior to plan, prepare and implement an attack; such behavior is often viewed as suspicious by threat assessment professionals. Typically those who pose a threat do not make a direct threat for tactical reasons.
- A significant proportion of subjects who threaten, approach, or attack public figures are mentally ill, necessitating an ongoing relationship between law enforcement and mental health resources for both effective intelligence and diversion/treatment. Mental illness, however, should not be assumed to be present in all threat assessment cases.
- A significant proportion of subjects who threaten, approach, or attack public figures also have criminal histories, necessitating the importance of criminal background checks of subjects of concern and cross-jurisdictional cooperation among various law enforcement agencies when there is no unified national system of criminal history data collection.
- In many subjects with mental illness, there has been a lapse of recent mental health care, a likely result of noncompliance by the subject, inadequate community resources, or a combination of both.
- Many subjects evidenced a downward spiral in their lives in the months or year before their approach or attack, usually a combination of social failure and personal vulnerability to chronic anger, depression, or psychosis. These failures and the subject's poor adaptation to them often marked a decision point wherein the public figure(s) was identified as an object of salvation or persecution, and a plan was born to contact, approach, or attack the public figure.
- If an attack occurred, it was a predatory (instrumental, premeditated) mode of violence, rather than an affective (emotional, reactive) mode of violence. Such violence was planned over the course of weeks or months and involved careful preparation and implementation. Approachers and attackers of public figures do not "snap" and are not engaging in spur of the moment, impulsive behaviors. Even if the approacher or attacker is psychotic and severely mentally ill, he demonstrates a capacity and ability to organize his behavior to accomplish his goal.
- If a public figure is attacked, the weapon of choice in a majority of the cases is a firearm, usually a handgun.
- Those who attack may be intent on not only killing the target but also committing suicide at the hands of law enforcement.
- Threats are much more common than approaches, and approaches are much more common than attacks. Most predictions of escalation from threat to approach to attack will therefore be false positives.
- Preventive efforts should focus on false negatives: subjects who do not directly threaten but instead are planning and preparing to attack, evident in their suspicious approach behavior toward the target or targets of interest.

Methodological Limitations

The recommendations and findings of this review are limited by the very few studies that have focused upon threats, approaches, attacks, and assassinations of public figures. No formal meta-analysis of research findings is possible with such a small number of studies; and therefore our conclusions are based upon a careful reading of the studies, but they are subject to our own conscious and unconscious biases. Readers may find other conclusions that we have missed or determine that our emphasis on certain conclusions is unwarranted.

Nevertheless, the studies included in this review have remarkably advanced this specialty area of risk assessment and risk management in little more than a decade. Future research will need to focus on the refinement of predictive models, the interviewing and assessment of subjects of interest using standardized interviews and psychological testing, the grossly neglected area of threats and approaches toward celebrity victims, the life course of such perpetrators, and the often individualized pathway to violence (29) of those who threaten and attack public figures both in the United States and countries abroad.

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