

It's time to bring down the hammer on death threats

Phil Egan & Barb Swanson - February 2024

Many of us who grew up alongside the blue waters of the St. Clair River developed an absorbing interest in the history and politics of the United States. For our brother Paul, the Lansing bureau chief for The Detroit Free Press, following the turbulent tides of Michigan state and American national government became a career choice. However, many in our family share a fascination with the subject.

Consequently, it was not a surprise to learn that our brother Larry had just started reading a book that one of us had just finished. Written by McKay Coppins, a writer for Atlantic magazine, entitled "Romney: A Reckoning", the book is an acclaimed biography of the ill-fated 2012 Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney.

The trials of Donald Trump in the United States Senate that followed his 2019 and 2021 impeachments were depressing for Canadians to watch. The cravenness of the Republican senators in acquitting Trump, faced with the overwhelming evidence of his wrongdoing, was bewildering. But one revelation in Coppins's book may help to enlighten those of us who found their decision indefensible. Coppins quotes Romney as stating that numerous Republican senators privately acknowledged that their vote would have been different, but for their fear of Trump's MAGA mob. Hilary Clinton once famously referred to Trump's rabid followers as The Deplorables – but they are worse than that. In one of the most sickening developments we have ever seen in American politics, every criticism, editorial, speech, book or article targeting Trump has been followed by voluminous, vicious and increasingly vile death threats.

A wave of institutional bomb threats, individual death threats and swatting – phony 911 calls designed to draw massive police response to the target's home or business -- have inundated prosecutors, government officials, judges, election workers and others. As Coppins revealed in his new book, many aspects of normal life in America are now being paralyzed by threats of violence.

Many have watched with increasing alarm as this growing violent American contagion has now begun to take root here in Canada. Global News recently secured an internal document prepared by the Integrated Terrorism Assessment Centre (ITAC), a division of the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS). It reveals a shocking surge in both online and verbal death threats directed at senior cabinet ministers and government officials. These, most recently, have emanated from discussions directed at gun reforms, the recent Convoy Protests in Ottawa, and Palestinian protests in major cities across the country.

Former Crown Attorney Randy Evans, now retired and living in Sarnia, spent most of his career in the GTA. Over a 37-year career, he cannot recall a single incident in which a credible death threat received a significant prison sentence unless it was connected with an additional crime. Sarnia Deputy Police Chief, Julie Craddock, agrees. In her experience, these death threats were also attached to other serious charges – often crimes associated with intimate partner violence. It's time things changed. We believe that any credible death threat directed at a public official should receive a mandatory four year prison sentence. In our view, there are few things as manifestly cowardly as threatening violence designed to make someone fear going about their daily business. We have seen the dreadful effects of this increased violence in America and we have no desire to see it spread north.

Sarnia Mayor Mike Bradley is one observer who sees this growing wave of threats in our society with a deep sense of foreboding. "It's getting worse," Bradley says, "and someone is going to get hurt."

Advances in both telephone and Internet criminal detection will increasingly make it possible to identify those responsible for such vile threats. Arming the courts with a mandatory four year prison term, should help to ensure that Mayor Bradley's fears for what might otherwise lie ahead, do not become a reality.