AMERICAN CONSTITUTIONALISM

VOLUME II: RIGHTS AND LIBERTIES

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Supplementary Material

Chapter 11: The Contemporary Era – Democratic Rights/Free Speech

**Planned Parenthood of Columbia/Willamette, Inc. v. American Coalition of Life Activists, 290 F.3d 1058** (9th Cir. 2002)

*In 1994, Congress adopted the Freedom of Access to Clinic Entrances Act (FACE). Among its provisions was right of legal action to persons who have suffered a “threat of force . . . because that person is or has been . . . providing reproductive health services.” The statute responded to a growing number of acts of arson, bombings, assaults, and even murders against abortion providers. A set of physicians associated with Planned Parenthood in Oregon filed suit under the act in federal district court against the American Coalition of Life Activists (ACLA) and associated anti-abortion activists. The activists were accused of making a threat of force by distributing “Deadly Dozen” and “guilty” posters and publishing a website known as the “Nuremberg Files,” both of which contained the names and addresses of individual abortion providers. A jury found in favor of the doctors, leading to an injunction prohibiting future distribution of the posters and a monetary award of over a hundred million dollars. On appeal, a panel of the Ninth Circuit reversed, finding that the trial court had allowed the jury to use a legal standard of threat that was inconsistent with the First Amendment. The circuit court then heard the case en banc and in a divided vote reversed the ruling of its panel, finding that the context surrounding the posters transformed them from mere advocacy into true threats.*

JUDGE RYMER.

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On March 10, 1993, Michael Griffin shot and killed Dr. David Gunn as he entered an abortion clinic in Pensacola, Florida. Before this, a "WANTED" and an "unWANTED" poster with Gunn's name, photograph, address and other personal information were published. . . .

Many pro-life activists in Operation Rescue condemned these acts of violence. As a result, Advocates for Life Ministries (ALM), Bray, Burnett, Crane, Foreman, McMillan, Ramey and Stover, who espoused a "pro-force" point of view, split off to form ACLA. Burnett observed, "if someone was to condemn any violence against abortion, they probably wouldn't have felt comfortable working with us." Organizational meetings were held in the spring of 1994, and ACLA's first event was held in August 1994. ACLA is based in Portland, Oregon, as is ALM. ALM publishes *Life Advocate*, a magazine that is distributed nationally and advocates the use of force to oppose the delivery of abortion services. Except for Bray, who authored A *Time to Kill* and served time in federal prison for conspiring to bomb ten clinics, the individual defendants were directors of ACLA and actively involved in its affairs. ALM commissioned and published Bray's book, noting that it "shows the connection between the [justifiable homicide] position and clinic destruction and the shootings of abortionists." Wysong and ACLA also drafted and circulated a "Contract on the Abortion Industry," having deliberately chosen that language to allude to mafia hit contracts.

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By January 1995 ACLA knew the effect that "WANTED," "unWANTED," or "GUILTY" posters had on doctors named in them. For example, in a September 1993 issue of *Life Advocate* which reported that an "unwanted" poster was being prepared for Britton, ALM remarked of the Gunn murder that it "sent shock waves of fear through the ranks of abortion providers across the country. As a result, many more doctors quit out of fear for their lives, and the ones who are left are scared stiff." Of another doctor who decided to quit performing abortions after circulation of a "Not Wanted" poster, Bray wrote that "it is clear to all who possess faculties capable of inductive analysis: he was bothered and afraid." Wysong also stated: "Listening to what abortionists said, abortionists who have quit the practice who are no longer killing babies but are now prolife. They said the two things they feared the most were being sued for malpractice and having their picture put on a poster." And Burnett testified with respect to the danger that "wanted" or "guilty" posters pose to the lives of those who provide abortions: "I mean, if I was an abortionist, I would be afraid."

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*Brandenburg v. Ohio* (1969), makes it clear that the First Amendment protects speech that advocates violence, so long as the speech is not directed to inciting or producing imminent lawless action and is not likely to incite or produce such action. . . . If ACLA had merely endorsed or encouraged the violent actions of others, its speech would be protected.

However, while advocating violence is protected, threatening a person with violence is not. In *Watts v. United States* (1969), the Court explicitly distinguished between political hyperbole, which is protected, and true threats, which are not. . . .

ACLA's position is that the posters, including the Nuremberg Files, are protected political speech under *Watts*, and cannot lose this character by context. But this is not correct. The Court itself considered context and determined that Watts's statement was political hyperbole instead of a true threat because of context. Beyond this, ACLA points out that the posters contain no language that is a threat. We agree that this is literally true. Therefore, ACLA submits, this case is really an incitement case in disguise. So viewed, the posters are protected speech under *Brandenburg* and *NAACP v. Claiborne* (1982), which ACLA suggests is the closest analogue. We disagree that *Claiborne* is closely analogous.

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The Court held that there could be no recovery based on intimidation by threats of social ostracism, because offensive and coercive speech is protected by the First Amendment. "The use of speeches, marches, and threats of social ostracism cannot provide the basis for a damages award. . . .

. . . . [NAACP’s Charles] Evers gave . . . speech to several hundred people calling for a total boycott of white-owned businesses and saying: "If we catch any of you going in any of them racist stores, we're gonna break your damn neck." The Court concluded that the "emotionally charged rhetoric" of Evers's speeches was within the bounds of *Brandenburg.* It was not followed by violence, and there was no evidence — apart from the speeches themselves — that Evers authorized, ratified, or directly threatened violence. . . .

. . . . To the extent there was any intimidating overtone, Evers's rhetoric was extemporaneous, surrounded by statements supporting non-violent action, and primarily of the social ostracism sort. No specific individuals were targeted. For all that appears, "the break your neck" comments were hyperbolic vernacular. Certainly there was no history that Evers or anyone else associated with the NAACP had broken anyone's neck who did not participate in, or opposed, this boycott or any others. Nor is there any indication that Evers's listeners took his statement that boycott breakers' "necks would be broken" as a serious threat that *their* necks would be broken; they kept on shopping at boycotted stores.

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Whether a particular statement may properly be considered to be a threat is governed by an objective standard — whether a reasonable person would foresee that the statement would be interpreted by those to whom the maker communicates the statement as a serious expression of intent to harm or assault. . . .

Under our cases, a threat is "an expression of an intention to inflict evil, injury, or damage on another." . . . A true threat, that is one "where a reasonable person would foresee that the listener will believe he will be subjected to physical violence upon his person, is unprotected by the first amendment."

It is not necessary that the defendant intend to, or be able to carry out his threat; the only intent requirement for a true threat is that the defendant intentionally or knowingly communicate the threat. . . .

The dissents would change the test, either to require that the speaker actually intend to carry out the threat or be in control of those who will, or to make it inapplicable when the speech is public rather than private. However, for years our test has focused on what *a reasonable speaker* would foresee the *listener's* reaction to be under the circumstances, and that is where we believe it should remain. Threats are outside the First Amendment to "protect [] individuals from the fear of violence, from the disruption that fear engenders, and from the possibility that the threatened violence will occur." *R.A.V. v. City of St. Paul, Minn*. (1992). This purpose is not served by hinging constitutionality on the speaker's subjective intent or capacity to do (or not to do) harm. Rather, these factors go to how reasonably foreseeable it is to a speaker that the listener will seriously take his communication as an intent to inflict bodily harm. This suffices to distinguish a "true threat" from speech that is merely frightening. Thus, no reasonable speaker would foresee that a patient would take the statement "You have cancer and will die within six months," or that a pedestrian would take a warning "Get out of the way of that bus," as a serious expression of intent to *inflict* bodily harm; the harm is going to happen anyway.

Neither do we agree that threatening speech made in public is entitled to heightened constitutional protection just because it is communicated publicly rather than privately. As *Madsen v. Women’s Health Center, Inc.* (1994) indicates, threats are unprotected by the First Amendment "however communicated."

Therefore, we hold that "threat of force" in FACE means what our settled threats law says a true threat is: a statement which, in the entire context and under all the circumstances, a reasonable person would foresee would be interpreted by those to whom the statement is communicated as a serious expression of intent to inflict bodily harm upon that person. So defined, a threatening statement that violates FACE is unprotected under the First Amendment.

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Because of context, we conclude that the Crist and Deadly Dozen posters are not just a political statement. Even if the Gunn poster, which was the first "WANTED" poster, was a purely political message when originally issued, and even if the Britton poster were too, by the time of the Crist poster, the poster format itself had acquired currency as a death threat for abortion providers. Gunn was killed after his poster was released; Britton was killed after his poster was released; and Patterson was killed after his poster was released. Knowing this, and knowing the fear generated among those in the reproductive health services community who were singled out for identification on a "wanted"—type poster, ACLA deliberately identified Crist on a "GUILTY" poster and intentionally put the names of Hern and the Newhalls on the Deadly Dozen "GUILTY" poster to intimidate them. This goes well beyond the political message (regardless of what one thinks of it) that abortionists are killers who deserve death too.

The Nuremberg Files are somewhat different. Although they name individuals, they name hundreds of them. The avowed intent is "collecting dossiers on abortionists in anticipation that one day we may be able to hold them on trial for crimes against humanity." . . . However offensive or disturbing this might be to those listed in the Files, being offensive and provocative is protected under the First Amendment. But, in two critical respects, the Files go further. In addition to listing judges, politicians and law enforcement personnel, the Files separately categorize "Abortionists" and list the names of individuals who provide abortion services, including, specifically, Crist, Hern, and both Newhalls. Also, names of abortion providers who have been murdered because of their activities are lined through in black, while names of those who have been wounded are highlighted in grey. As a result, we cannot say that it is clear as a matter of law that listing Crist, Hern, and the Newhalls on *both* the Nuremberg Files *and* the GUILTY posters is purely protected, political expression.

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As a direct result of having a "GUILTY" poster out on them, physicians wore bullet-proof vests and took other extraordinary security measures to protect themselves and their families. ACLA had every reason to foresee that its expression of intent to harm (the "GUILTY" poster identifying Crist, Hern, Elizabeth Newhall and James Newhall by name and putting them in the File that tracks hits and misses) would elicit this reaction. Physicians' fear did not simply happen; ACLA intended to intimidate them from doing what they do.

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Like "fighting words," true threats are proscribable. We therefore conclude that the judgment of liability in physicians' favor is constitutionally permissible.

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*Affirmed*.

JUDGE REINHARDT, with whom JUDGE KOZINSKI, JUDGE KLEINFELD and JUDGE BERZON join, dissenting.

. . . . I write separately to emphasize one point: the majority rejects the concept that speech made in a political forum on issues of public concern warrants heightened scrutiny. This rejection, if allowed to stand, would significantly weaken the First Amendment protections we now enjoy. It is a fundamental tenet of First Amendment jurisprudence that political speech in a public arena is different from purely private speech directed at an individual. . . . Political speech, ugly or frightening as it may sometimes be, lies at the heart of our democratic process. Private threats delivered one-on-one do not. The majority's unwillingness to recognize the difference is extremely troublesome. For this reason alone, I would be compelled to dissent.

JUDGE KOZINSKI, with whom JUDGE REINHARDT, JUDGE O’SCANNLAIN, JUDGE KLEINFELD, and JUDGE BERZON join, dissenting.

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The difference between a true threat and protected expression is this: A true threat warns of violence or other harm that the speaker controls. Thus, when a doctor tells a patient, "Stop smoking or you'll die of lung cancer," that is not a threat because the doctor obviously can't cause the harm to come about. Similarly, "If you walk in that neighborhood late at night, you're going to get mugged" is not a threat, unless it is clear that the speaker himself (or one of his associates) will be doing the mugging.

In this case, none of the statements on which liability was premised were overtly threatening. On the contrary, the two posters and the web page, by their explicit terms, foreswore the use of violence and advocated lawful means of persuading plaintiffs to stop performing abortions or punishing them for continuing to do so. Nevertheless, because context matters, the statements could reasonably be interpreted as an effort to intimidate plaintiffs into ceasing their abortion-related activities. If that were enough to strip the speech of First Amendment protection, there would be nothing left to decide. But the Supreme Court has told us that "[s]peech does not lose its protected character ... simply because it may embarrass others *or coerce them into action." NAACP v. Claiborne Hardware Co.* (1982) (emphasis added). In other words, some forms of intimidation enjoy constitutional protection.

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The majority recognizes that this is the standard it must apply, yet when it undertakes the critical task of canvassing the record for evidence that defendants made a true threat . . . its opinion fails to come up with any proof that defendants communicated an intent to inflict bodily harm upon plaintiffs.

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. . . . In order for the statement to be a threat, it must send the message that the speakers themselves — or individuals acting in concert with them — will engage in physical violence. The majority's own definition of true threat makes this clear. Yet the opinion points to no evidence that defendants who prepared the posters would have been understood by a reasonable listener as saying that *they* will cause the harm.

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From the point of view of the victims, it makes little difference whether the violence against them will come from the makers of the posters or from unrelated third parties; bullets kill their victims regardless of who pulls the trigger. But it makes a difference for the purpose of the First Amendment. Speech — especially political speech, as this clearly was — may not be punished or enjoined unless it falls into one of the narrow categories of unprotected speech recognized by the Supreme Court: true threat, incitement, conspiracy to commit criminal acts, fighting words, etc.

Even assuming that one could somehow distill a true threat from the posters themselves, the majority opinion is still fatally defective because it contradicts the central holding of *Claiborne Hardware:* Where the speaker is engaged in public political speech, the public statements themselves cannot be the sole proof that they were true threats, unless the speech directly threatens actual injury to identifiable individuals. Absent such an unmistakable, specific threat, there must be evidence *aside from the political statements themselves* showing that the public speaker would himself or in conspiracy with others inflict unlawful harm. The majority cites not a scintilla of evidence — other than the posters themselves — that plaintiffs or someone associated with them would carry out the threatened harm.

Given this lack of evidence, the posters can be viewed, at most, as a call to arms for *other* abortion protesters to harm plaintiffs. However, the Supreme Court made it clear that under *Brandenburg v. Ohio* (1969), encouragement or even advocacy of violence is protected by the First Amendment. . . .

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We have recognized that statements communicated directly to the target are much more likely to be true threats than those, as here, communicated as part of a public protest. Our caselaw also instructs that, in deciding whether the coercive speech is protected, it makes a big difference whether it is contained in a private communication-a face-to-face confrontation, a telephone call, a dead fish wrapped in newspaper  — or is made during the course of public discourse. The reason for this distinction is obvious: Private speech is aimed only at its target. Public speech, by contrast, seeks to move public opinion and to encourage those of like mind. Coercive speech that is part of public discourse enjoys far greater protection than identical speech made in a purely private context. . . .

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While today it is abortion protesters who are singled out for punitive treatment, the precedent set by this court — the broad and uncritical deference to the judgment of a jury — will haunt dissidents of all political stripes for many years to come. Because this is contrary to the principles of the First Amendment as explicated by the Supreme Court in *Claiborne Hardware* and its long-standing jurisprudence stemming from *Brandenburg v. Ohio*, I respectfully dissent.

JUDGE BERZON, with whom JUDGE REINHARDT, JUDGE KOZINSKI, JUDGE KLEINFELD, and JUDGE O’SCANNLAIN join, dissenting.

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. . . . The essential problem — one that, as far as I am aware, is unique in the plethora of "threat" cases and perhaps more generally in First Amendment jurisprudence — is that the speech for which the defendants are being held liable in damages and are enjoined from reiterating in the future is, on its face, clearly, indubitably, and quintessentially the kind of communication that is fully protected by the First Amendment.

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. . . . The precise question before us is therefore whether that context [of other speech arguing that violence against abortion providers can be morally justified] is sufficient to turn a set of communications that contain speech at the core of the First Amendment's protections into speech that can be proscribed pursuant to an injunction and compensated for through damages.

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. . . . There is a difference for speech-protective purposes between a statement that one oneself intends to do something and a statement encouraging or advocating that someone else do it. The latter will result in harmful action only if someone else is persuaded by the advocacy. If there is adequate time for that person to reflect, any harm will be due to another's considered act. The speech itself, in that circumstance, does not create the injury, although it may make it more likely. The Supreme Court has essentially decided that free expression would be too greatly burdened by anticipatory squelching of advocacy which can work harm only indirectly if at all. . . .

A true threat, in contrast, implies a firmness of purpose by the person speaking, not mediated through anyone else's rational or emotional reaction to the speech. Threatening speech thereby works directly the harms of apprehension and disruption, whether the apparent resolve proves bluster or not and whether the injury is threatened to be immediate or delayed. Further, the social costs of a threat can be heightened rather than dissipated if the threatened injury is promised for some fairly ascertainable time in the future — the "specific" prong — for then the apprehension and disruption directly caused by the threat will continue for a longer rather than a shorter period. . . .

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The subjective intent requirement for alleged threats delivered in the course of public protest comports with Supreme Court precedent, both directly and by analogy. Although the Supreme Court has yet to outline fully the constitutional limitations applicable to proscription of threats, in its most direct look at the subject the Court expressed "grave doubts" that a person could be liable for threatening expression solely on the basis of an objective standard. *Watts v. United States* (1969). . . .

With regard to this subjective intent requirement, there is no meaningful distinction between incitement cases and threat cases such as this one — that is, cases involving public protest speech, especially where the alleged threat, on its face, consisted entirely of advocacy. The First Amendment protects advocacy statements that are likely to produce imminent violent action, so long as the statements are not directed at producing such action. To do otherwise would be to endanger the First Amendment protection accorded advocacy of political change by holding speakers responsible for an impact they did not intend.

Similarly, a purely objective standard for judging the protection accorded such speech would chill speakers from engaging in facially protected public protest speech that some might think, in context, will be understood as a true threat although not intended as such. Unsure of whether their rough and tumble protected speech would be interpreted by a reasonable person as a threat, speakers will silence themselves rather than risk liability. . . .

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One cannot read plaintiffs' closing argument in this case without fearing that the jury was being encouraged to hold the defendants liable for their abstract advocacy of violence rather than for the alleged coded threats in the posters and website, the instructions to the jury to the contrary notwithstanding. And while advocacy evidence may make both an intent to threaten and a perception that there was a threat more likely, that is not unequivocally so. People do not always practice what they preach, as the stringent incitement standard recognizes. If we are serious about protecting advocacy of positions such as defendants' sanctioning of violence, as we are constrained to be, then permitting that protected speech to be the determinative "context" for holding other facially protected, public protest speech — the posters and website in this case — to be a "true threat" seems to me simply unacceptable under the First Amendment. . . .

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Admitting testimony by law enforcement officers as to whether certain speech has the primary characteristic of an unprotected category (for instance, is a serious threat, or is obscene, or is false) allows the government not only to prohibit or burden that category of speech (true threats, obscenity, defamation), but also persuasively to shape the jury's determination of what speech falls into the unprotected category. The obvious risk is that the government will use its "aura of special reliability and trustworthiness," to describe as undeserving of constitutional protection speech that in fact is only unpopular with the government. In *Watts v. United States* (1969), the Court looked to the reaction of those to whom the speech was directed to determine how the speech should be taken. Had the Secret Service run to the President to inform him of Watts' speech and warn him of the "threat," the Secret Service's reaction, and the President's resulting fear, presumably would not have been allowed to override the reaction of the actual audience to the speech.

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