

Anti-abortion zealots target Sotomayor aide as source of leak: Their threats are no joke

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US Supreme Court Associate Justice Sonia Sotomayor Justin Sullivan/Getty Images
Almost as soon as Politico published its *explosive story* on Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito's leaked draft opinion, which strongly suggests the court is about to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, conservatives responded by focusing not on the content of the news, but how it was obtained.

Online Monday night, there were nearly immediate calls to find and punish the leaker. In a press conference Tuesday afternoon, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell insistently told reporters that the prospect of re-criminalizing abortion was "not the story for today," but rather the supposedly dangerous precedent of the leak.

Also on Tuesday afternoon, Operation Rescue, the notorious anti-abortion activist group responsible for some of the movement's most outrageous tactics, joined the fray, issuing a press release declaring that the leak had most likely come from the office of Justice Sonia Sotomayor.

That claim traced back to pretty thin sourcing: a Twitter thread posted by a Republican political strategist who, about an hour after Politico published its story Monday night, suggested he'd solved the mystery: One of Sotomayor's staffers had joined hundreds of classmates in opposing the confirmation of Brett Kavanaugh and, at an earlier point, had been quoted in Politico regarding a case on which he'd assisted.

Within hours, the staffer's name had become a hashtag and his picture was plastered across Twitter, along with abundant calls for the individual's disbarment, incarceration for life or prosecution for treason.

On Tuesday, Operation Rescue took it a step further, repeating the unfounded allegations in a press release along with the claim that the leak had been designed to "foment social unrest that would apply pressure and intimidate the conservative justices to the point of changing their support for overturning Roe and Casey."

The group's president, Troy Newman, went on to charge that if the claims proved true — which is [quite an "if"](#) — Sotomayor should be impeached or forced to resign; anyone else involved, he continued, should be "arrested immediately for sedition and fomenting an insurrection against the Judicial Branch."

There's abundant irony here — now the right cares about "insurrection"? — as well as, apparently, some basic confusion about how journalism works. But there's also the more troubling prospect that Operation Rescue, which has long [treaded a fine line](#) between vitriolic advocacy and anti-abortion terrorism, and was [deeply implicated](#) in the 2009 murder of Dr. George Tiller, an abortion provider in Kansas, could again be stoking vigilante violence against its political enemies.

Cheryl Sullenger, the author of Tuesday's Operation Rescue press release, served two years in prison for conspiring to blow up an abortion clinic in California in 1988. In its campaigns against various abortion providers, the group has blockaded clinics; commissioned raucous and graphic "Truth Trucks" to drive through neighborhoods where abortion-clinic staffers live; threatened clinic employees that unless they quit they will be subjected to "campaigns of exposure," including vigils outside their homes; and posted "WANTED" posters with abortion providers' photos — a tactic that, in Florida, preceded the murder of two other abortion providers and a clinic volunteer, and has since been ruled in court to be tantamount to a [death threat](#). Operation Rescue was implicated in the 2009 murder of Dr. George Tiller — and could again be stoking vigilante violence against its political enemies.

For seven years before Tiller was murdered in his church, the group conducted a wide-ranging campaign against him, including mobilizing state legislators to try to bring bogus criminal charges against him and round-the-clock harassment.

After Scott Roeder — who donated to and organized alongside Operation Rescue, and [claims](#) he discussed "justifiable homicide" over lunch with Troy Newman — killed Tiller, Sullenger's phone number was found on his car dashboard. It would later emerge that Sullenger had supplied Roeder with information about Tiller's whereabouts and schedule.

In many ways, Operation Rescue's campaign against Tiller lines up with a phrase that became popularized during the Trump era: "stochastic terrorism," meaning the public demonization of a person or group that leads, almost inevitably, to violence.

In 2009, that pattern was still rare enough to be notable; today, it's the air we all breathe.

"The vilification of abortion rights supporters generally and even the Supreme Court has contributed to a one-way history of harassment, violence and threats of violence over time," said Frederick Clarkson, a senior research analyst at Political Research Associates as well as author of ["Eternal Hostility: The Struggle Between Theocracy and Democracy,"](#) which focuses extensively on anti-abortion violence.

*In 1985, Clarkson pointed out, someone **shot out a window** in the home of Justice Harry Blackmun, author of the 1973 majority opinion in Roe v. Wade. Before the attack, Blackmun had received numerous violent and graphic threats from anti-abortion activists, and over the previous year, seven abortion clinics and related facilities in and around Washington, D.C., had been bombed.*

"Beyond this, the history of bombings, arsons, assassinations and more always lurk in the background of the politics of abortion," continued Clarkson.

"In today's environment, when violent mobs storm the Capitol and other governmental institutions across the country, unproven claims like this add volatility. Cheryl Sullenger served prison time for her involvement in an attempted clinic arson. So she is certainly familiar with what it means to add fuel to the fire."