

The Real Reason Washington Ignored Kavanaugh's Would-Be Killer
Michael Schaffer (Opinion) - Politico

On June 8, at about 1:05 in the morning, a taxicab pulled up outside the Chevy Chase home of Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh. A young man dressed in black got out, carrying a backpack and a suitcase. According to an FBI affidavit, he eyed the Deputy U.S. Marshals standing guard outside the house, then turned and walked down the block.



Nathan Howard/Getty Images A Montgomery County Police officer stands guard as protesters march past Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh's home on June 8, 2022.

A few minutes later, the man called 911, allegedly saying he was having suicidal thoughts, had a firearm in his suitcase and had come from California to kill a Supreme Court Justice.

Local police were dispatched and arrived to take Nicholas John Roske into custody while he was still on the phone to emergency services. In his bags, they found an unloaded Glock 17 pistol with two magazines of ammunition as well as pepper spray, zip ties, a nail gun, a crowbar, duct tape, a knife and a tactical chest rig.

At a nearby police station, he agreed to speak with federal agents, allegedly telling them he was upset about the leaked Supreme Court decision undoing the right to abortion and worried that gun control would be further rolled back.

*He said he'd found Kavanaugh's address on the internet. In a second interview, he told the FBI that he had planned to kill himself after murdering the justice. He's now **facing federal charges**. He has pled not guilty.*

I know about Roske's case — as you probably do, too — thanks to coverage in [The Washington Post](#), [CNN](#), [POLITICO](#) and my [local TV news station](#), among others.

*But on the right, it's become an article of faith that the story is being ignored by biased media. A [Fox News report](#) totted up the small-ball treatment afforded in dead-tree newspapers (relegated to page 20 of *The New York Times*!), broadcast TV (unmentioned on any of the subsequent weekend's Sunday programs!) and cable yakkers (nada that evening on MSNBC's prime-time shows!).*

"[OUTRAGEOUS OMISSION](#)," Sean Hannity declared on Twitter a few days later, inviting viewers to watch Mike Huckabee and Kayleigh McEnany discuss it that night.

In fact, the incident was swiftly condemned by any public figure with a megaphone. In short order, legislators passed a bill to offer new protection to judges.

Notwithstanding Hannity's urge to portray a feckless liberal establishment countenancing mob rule, you won't likely find anyone in official Washington saying anything positive about the gunman.

Still, just because it was neither outrageous nor omitted doesn't mean Hannity's totally wrong.

Reported in detail, the arrest still didn't become a sort of news moment in Washington, the kind of thing that dominates both media assignment desks and back-fence conversations with neighbors, the kind of story that would turn Roske into a household name.

And that is, at least in part, a function of something that really doesn't get enough attention: Potential violence and intimidation in Washington's political world has stopped seeming quite so newsy.

Man-threatens-man has become the new dog-bites-man. Among the lesser effects of this cultural change is that, in newsrooms and greenrooms, the hurdle for attention has been raised.

Why didn't Washington get obsessed with the would-be Kavanaugh assassin? I'd bet the answer is more prosaic than the media-bias critics would believe.

For one thing, in a city that has long drawn disturbed people with crazy schemes, Roske's story was not especially hair-raising: His gun was unloaded, he called the cops on himself, he took a cab to the justice's house (had he not heard of Uber?). There's nothing less compelling to us media types, in all of our faux world-weariness than an insufficiently freaky freak of the week.

More importantly, the Roske story would have to elbow for space in our mental lists of near-misses. Shooters nearly killed Reps. Gabby Giffords and Steve Scalise. A couple of miles down Connecticut Avenue from Kavanaugh's place, a gunman motivated by an anti-Clinton conspiracy theory took a shot inside Comet Pizza.

Threats against federal judges were up 400 percent, [according to a report last year](#). Threats against members of Congress are up 107 percent, [according to Capitol Police](#).

Google for examples and you'll find a collection of news accounts that span the continent as well as the ideological spectrum, from [Andy Harris](#), the right-winger from Maryland's Eastern Shore, to [Norma Torres](#), a Southern California Democrat.

The Capitol Police are opening offices in California and Florida to monitor threats. There was also the small matter of an actual attack on the U.S. Capitol last year, one that led to seven fatalities and featured rioters chanting about hanging the sitting Vice President.

But even a tally of threats doesn't quite capture how a looming sense of potential menace has seeped into the Village's consciousness. Public officials fear doxing and the lunatics it might bring to their doors. The inboxes of reporters, particularly women and members of minority groups, fill with menacing messages. People no longer assume it's all online cosplay. Why should they?

A more sophisticated conservative critique of the Roske coverage holds that the story didn't resonate because a pro-choice Californian doesn't fit liberal Washington's image of what a crazed, Glock-toting madman is supposed to be — making it easier to ignore as a one-off. But even that bit of psychological evasion wouldn't be as possible if the environment weren't providing so many examples of what a "real" threat looks like.

On the right, the outrage over the supposedly ignored alleged assassination attempt has lately bled into agita about the recent spate of protests at the homes of justices, including Kavanaugh.

It's easy to wave off the complaints, and not just because some of them come from people who have pooh-poohed the insurrection: These justices took away a Constitutional right, and they have the nerve to complain about a few people banging pots and pans outside of their houses? It reeks of bad-faith efforts to change the subject.

Yet against the backdrop of 2022, if you're in your home while the protesters are outside, you're likely to feel intimidated. And a city full of anxious, intimidated people is likely to behave differently on all sorts of things.

It's also easy to miss how much of a change this represents. Until quite recently, the norm in Washington was that everybody got to be a civilian sometimes, going out to dinner or walking the dog in peace. This had its downsides (it surely abetted the bubble-thinking of the establishment) but it also meant that moments of intimidation or threat were truly shocking.

This change is dangerous, whether or not the Kavanaugh gunman was. "We talk a lot, especially on the left, about attacks on democracy, about worrisome real limits on voting rights and access to the ballot and gerrymandering, and all those things are important.

But there's no faster way to lose democracy than through violence," says Amanda Ripley, a longtime Washington journalist who spent much of the last few years

researching a book about intractable conflicts and how to move past them. “In my opinion we should be talking about that.”

Like discredited elections, violence — or even the prospect of violence — de-legitimizes institutions and social norms and the various guardrails of society.

“Threats on judges’ lives are a real thing, a part of the playbook all over the world” for chipping away at democracy, says Ripley, whose book takes lessons from acrimonious divorces, gang feuds and developing-world insurgencies to analyze the conflict-addled state of American government.

It’s not clear that there’s much Washington’s powerful can do about it. In the 19th century, when actual elected officials were fighting duels and clobbering each other to near-death with canes, elites might have had the ability to rein in the hooligans, who could presumably be coerced with committee assignments or patronage or dis-invitations from fancy dinner parties or whatever other tools can shape the behavior of insiders.

The sense of menace in contemporary politics comes largely from internet-fueled nobodies, acting in what they see as their side’s interest. How do you buy them off?

I was struck by one particular thing Ripley told me about research into de-escalation: Don’t trust your gut.

“In any high conflict like this, your intuition is going to make things worse.”

She was referring to, say, the urge to go protest at a judge’s house to show how righteously furious you are.

“That’s going to have an effect on other people and it might not help the cause.”

As a journalist, of course, my gut says to expose just who is responsible for this new climate of jeopardy, the asymmetric era of political wretchedness that has brought Washington to this point. ut in the spirit of peace, I’ll ignore that intuition.

Instead, I’ll stick with this: A troubled man with a gun came to town with thoughts about killing. It is a shocking thing to have happen. The fact that it seems to be happening so often shouldn’t make it any less shocking.