

Former Las Vegas Official Convicted in Journalist's Murder, *Isabelle Taft, (Aug. 28, 2024)*

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A former county official was found guilty on Wednesday of murdering a longtime Las Vegas reporter who wrote articles critical of him. The highly unusual case had raised fears about press freedom in the United States and in particular the risks facing local journalists.

The reporter, Jeff German, was stabbed to death outside his home in September 2022. Police investigators, and now a Clark County jury, concluded that his attacker was Robert Telles, who ran a county office that handles the estates of those who die without apparent heirs.

A few months before his death, Mr. German [wrote an article](#) for The Las Vegas Review-Journal describing employees' complaints that Mr. Telles had created a

toxic work environment, demonstrated favoritism and had an improper relationship with a staff member. Mr. Telles denied the allegations. He lost his re-election bid a month after the article came out, and Mr. German kept reporting.

Prosecutors suggested that was why, on a hot September day, he went to Mr. German's suburban home and hid in bushes at the side of the house, waited for Mr. German and then stabbed him to death.

Jurors were persuaded, convicting Mr. Telles of murder in the first degree. He was sentenced to life in prison with the possibility of parole after 20 years.

Pamela Weckerly, the Clark County chief deputy district attorney, said the back story to the case was less important than the crime itself.

"In the end, this case isn't about politics," Ms. Weckerly said during her opening statement. "It's not about alleged inappropriate relationships. It's not about who's a good boss or who's a good supervisor or favoritism at work. It's just about murder."

The prosecution said DNA found on Mr. German's hands matched that of Mr. Telles. The police recovered security footage of the assailant, who wore a wide-brimmed straw hat and sneakers and carried a gray bag, and found matching items at Mr. Telles's home, though the hat and sneakers had been chopped up. The assailant drove a car that looked like one owned by Mr. Telles; video footage showed the car traveling between Mr. German's home and Mr. Telles's neighborhood on the day of the murder.

Mr. Telles's defense lawyer, Robert Draskovich, said his client had sought to make reforms in the county office he led, angering an "old guard" that sought to push him out by giving information to Mr. German and by instigating a bribery investigation against Mr. Telles.

Mr. Draskovich argued that the police had failed to consider evidence that might have pointed to other suspects and said that Mr. German's blood had not been found inside Mr. Telles's vehicle or on the shoes recovered at his home. He suggested his client had been framed.

"There is no rational explanation as to why the hat and shoes were cut into pieces, except that they would be easier to conceal and plant," he said.

Mr. Draskovich described Mr. German as a good journalist, and said that Mr. Telles had responded appropriately to his reporting when he made jokes about it online.

“These articles were not a motive for a murder,” Mr. Draskovich said. “And we all know, killing a journalist does not kill a story.”

Mr. Telles, who was in the courtroom, nodded in response.

Mr. Telles took the stand in his own defense a week into the trial.

“This thing has been kind of a nightmare,” he said. “I want to say unequivocally: I’m innocent. I didn’t kill Mr. German. And I’ve got a lot to share with you all.”

Rather than respond to questions from his lawyer, he spoke for almost three hours. He claimed that he had been framed and that the killing had been committed by a professional hit man, as part of a tangled conspiracy involving corrupt local businesspeople who wanted to stop Mr. Telles from investigating them. He suggested that police officers, DNA analysts, the district attorney and others might also have been involved.

Since 1992, the Committee to Protect Journalists has identified 15 media workers killed in the United States in relation to their work, including five people killed by a gunman who blasted into their newsroom in Annapolis, Md., in 2018.

Katherine Jacobsen, the group’s program coordinator for the United States, Canada and the Caribbean, said local journalists face particular risks. They work in newsrooms with fewer resources and live among the people they cover, sometimes critically, at a political moment in which the news media is increasingly attacked as untrustworthy.

She noted that Mr. German was killed outside his own home.

“It’s chilling to think that there are no safe places for those local journalists to go,” she said.

Mr. German had moved to Las Vegas from his native Wisconsin because he wanted to cover organized crime, [friends and co-workers said](#) after his death. He scrutinized mobsters, elected officials and casino titans for more than four decades.

He stayed on the job, even as local newsrooms around the country laid off journalists with the experience and sourcing needed to turn out the kind of accountability reporting that Mr. German produced.

“The public would never know unless Jeff pointed it out,” Tom Pitaro, a criminal defense lawyer who met Mr. German shortly after he arrived in the city, said in an interview. “We’ve lost that.”

Glenn Cook, executive editor of The Las Vegas Review-Journal, said in a statement that the jury delivered “a measure of justice for Jeff German.”

“Jeff was killed for doing the kind of work in which he took great pride: His reporting held an elected official accountable for bad behavior and empowered voters to choose someone else for the job,” Mr. Cook said.

During testimony for the sentencing phase of the trial on Wednesday afternoon, Mr. German’s three siblings described their older brother as a devoted uncle who loved sports, family gatherings, and “Seinfeld.” Over the years, the siblings followed Mr. German to Las Vegas.

His youngest sister, Jill Zwerg, said she once asked him why he always turned down offers to leave the city for other opportunities.

She recalled him responding, “This is Las Vegas. This is Sin City. This is where I need to be.”

At 69, Mr. German had no plans to retire.

Before his death, Mr. German had also begun reporting about a Las Vegas lawyer accused of running a \$500 million Ponzi scheme that ensnared hundreds of investors. He left behind folders of court documents, and a Washington Post reporter picked up where he left off.