

New York Times
Editorials/Op-Ed

Judges' Duty, and Safety

Published: April 13, 2005

To the Editor:

"The Judges Made Them Do It" (editorial, April 6):

On behalf of 1,200 dedicated members of the American judiciary, I urge public vigilance to protect and defend the role of an independent judiciary in the wake of the tragic Terri Schiavo case and the horrific violence against judges in Chicago and Atlanta.

Our system of democracy depends on judges being supported in the exercise of their constitutional obligation to protect the basic rights of individuals and decide cases fairly. Those decisions must be made according to the law, without regard to public pressure and without fear of political reprisal.

We are especially concerned about the inflammatory post-Schiavo political rhetoric urging punishment of the judges who ruled in the case. In this overheated political environment, it is particularly irresponsible to urge retaliation against judges who, with near unanimity, made difficult decisions under the most stressful of circumstances.

As Justice Anthony M. Kennedy has said: "The law makes a promise - neutrality. If the promise gets broken, the law as we know it ceases to exist. All that's left is the dictate of a tyrant, or perhaps a mob."

Sandra Thompson

Torrance, Calif., April 6, 2005

The writer is president of the National Association of Women Judges.