

ATF

News Release



Nashville Field Division

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For Immediate Release
Oct. 27, 2008

Two Men Charged in Federal Court for Violating Federal Firearms Laws and Making Threats Against a Presidential Candidate

JACKSON, Tenn. — Daniel Cowart, 20, of Bells, Tennessee and Paul Schlesselman, 18, of West Helena, Arkansas were charged in a federal complaint, Friday, Oct. 24, 2008, announced Lawrence J. Laurenzi, Acting U.S. Attorney for the Western District of Tennessee, James Cavanaugh, Special Agent in Charge of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives; Richard Harlow, Special Agent in Charge of the United States Secret Service, Memphis Field Office; and Troy Klyce, Sheriff of Crockett County. The Criminal Complaint charges Cowart and Schlesselman with the illegal possession of a sawed off shotgun, conspiracy to rob a federal firearms licensee, and making threats against a major candidate for the office of president.

“The allegations set forth in this criminal complaint are serious and will be treated as such,” said Lawrence J. Laurenzi, Acting U.S. Attorney for the Western District of Tennessee. “The public can rest assured that federal, state and local law enforcement are diligently working together to investigate and prosecute the alleged activity.”

According to the complaint, approximately one month ago, Cowart and Schlesselman met via the internet through a mutual friend and both claim to have very strong beliefs regarding “White Power” and “Skinhead” philosophy. Cowart and Schlesselman began discussing going on a “killing spree.” The complaint further alleges that Cowart and Schlesselman discussed robbing a gun shop (federal firearms licensee) in order to gather weapons and ammunition. The complaint notes the defendants were in possession of a sawed off shotgun.

On Oct. 20, 2008, Cowart allegedly traveled from Tennessee to Arkansas to pick up Schlesselman in order to carry out their plan. The complaint states that at this time, the defendants further discussed their killing spree to include targeting a predominately African American school and to continue their spree until their final act of violence, which would be to attempt to assassinate Presidential Candidate Barack Obama. “The U.S. Secret Service takes all threats against presidential candidates seriously and is actively investigating the allegations,” said Richard Harlow, Special Agent in Charge of the Secret Service-Memphis Field Office. “The Secret Service does not comment on this type of investigation.”

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The complaint further notes that the defendants stated that they would be willing to die during this attempt. According to the complaint, after soliciting a friend to drive their car between 11 p.m. on Oc. 21, 2008, and 2 a.m. on Oct. 22, 2008, the defendants made plans to rob a house, but were diverted when they arrived and observed a dog and two cars at the location. Cowart and Schlesselman then dropped Stafford back off at her residence and then went to a local retail store and allegedly purchased nylon rope and two ski masks.

“It is critical that the alleged plot was interrupted,” said James Cavanaugh, Special Agent in Charge of ATF. “We give credit to the deputies of Crockett and Haywood Counties. All forces of law enforcement have come together to stop this threat.”

The defendants were arrested on Oct. 22, 2008, by the Crockett County Sheriff’s Office. “Once we arrested the defendants and suspected they had violated federal law, we immediately contacted federal authorities,” said Sheriff Troy Klyce of Crockett County. “The Sheriff’s Department is committed to keeping Crockett County a safe place for all of our citizens.”

Cowart and Schlesselman had their initial appearances in federal court today and are scheduled to be back in court for a detention hearing on Oct. 30, 2008, in Memphis, Tenn.

This case is being investigated by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, Memphis Field Office; the U.S. Secret Service, Memphis Field Office with the assistance of the Crockett County Sheriff’s Office and the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

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