

**THE BEST (AND WORST)
OF 1989**

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Target: Noriega

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The work 'of demented, criminally stupid minds': Experts remove a package from Atlanta courthouse, Robinson (top) and Vance

Terror in the South

Deadly mail bombs claim two prominent victims and spur a massive hunt

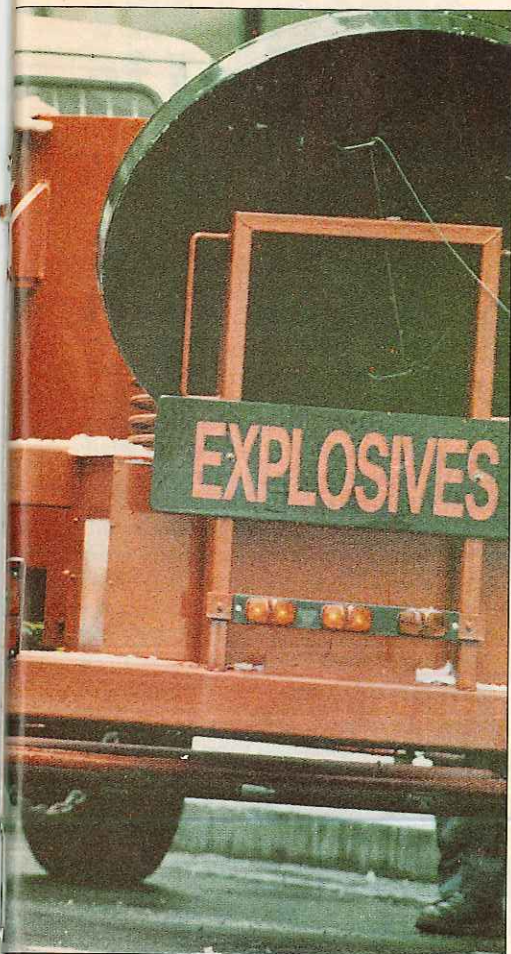
The call came in at 2:51 p.m. A woman calmly told the police operator that her neighbor had called about an explosion and that her husband was "bloody and hurt very bad." Six minutes later the first squad car sped up the winding driveway of federal Judge Robert Vance's brick Colonial house in the affluent Birmingham, Ala., suburb of Mountain Brook. The police found Vance's wife, Helen, seated in the driver's side of the couple's van, bleeding and dazed. The police followed her bloody footprints into the kitchen. There they found Judge Vance on the floor, part of his torso torn by the blast from a powerful pipe bomb.

At first investigators thought drug traffickers were responsible for the brutal

Christmastime murder. Vance, 58, sat on the United States Court of Appeals for the 11th Circuit, which rules on federal cases from Florida—a major importation point for Colombian cocaine—as well as from Alabama and Georgia. But two days later a second package bomb was discovered at an Atlanta courthouse. It was removed safely. Then more tragic news: Robert Robinson, a black alderman and a lawyer in Savannah, was killed after a package he opened blew up in his face. When a fourth bomb was found in the Jacksonville, Fla., headquarters of the NAACP, there seemed little doubt the attacks were racially motivated. "I think it's the work of white supremacists, without any question," said the NAACP's executive director, Benjamin

Hooks. "[The work] of demented, criminally stupid minds." On Friday, a Maryland state circuit court judge was wounded by a package bomb delivered to his home. But preliminary reports suggested this fifth incident was unrelated to the others.

The FBI quickly made solving the string of bombings its top priority. While bureau Director William Sessions warned anyone involved in civil-rights cases not to open any suspicious packages, agents looked for connections between the four incidents. They found plenty. Both the packaging of the bombs and their construction were similar. All were slightly larger than a shoe box, wrapped with brown paper and had red and white mailing stickers. All four were mailed from Georgia. Like most letter



DAVID TULIS—UPI

bombs, they had excess postage stamps (no bomber wants to risk contact with a post-office clerk just to get the exact weight). Experts said the explosives were relatively sophisticated but built from easily obtained materials.

Whoever sent the bombs, investigators say, was eerily familiar with the habits of the targets. The packages sent to Vance and Robinson each showed the return address of a person known to the victim. Mrs. Vance, who suffered from severe injuries, told police that her husband believed he was opening a package of horse-breeding magazines from a colleague who had sent a similar parcel the year before. Fate also played a part. NAACP chapter president Willye Dennis was in such a hurry to get to a news conference that she left the bomb that arrived at her Jacksonville office unopened. When she returned the next day, word of the other bombings was out and she called the sheriff. In Savannah, Robinson's secretary was out that day. Her replacement was uncomfortable opening the boss's mail, so Robinson sat down at his desk and opened the package that killed him.

Links between the targets suggested that the attacks might have been sparked by anger at advances by blacks at the cost of

perceived setbacks to whites. In the past six years, Judge Vance participated in several rulings that damaged the Ku Klux Klan—including one that helped send seven members to jail and led to the awarding of money to civil-rights marchers. Last September Vance wrote a blistering reversal of a Florida segregation ruling that could have signaled an end to mandatory busing for hundreds of schools throughout the South. The winning appeal to the Duval County case was filed by the Jacksonville NAACP, where a bomb was discovered Tuesday. The 11th Circuit Court of Appeals also ruled on a desegregation plan in Savannah, where Robinson served as one of the NAACP's local counsels. (Vance, however, did not take part in the Savannah ruling, which went against the NAACP's position.) And the FBI revealed that in August, letters were sent to news agencies threatening nerve-gas attacks on unspecified targets and criticizing the 11th Circuit for its "bias" and failure to "protect the innocent." The anonymous letters were followed days later by a tear-gas attack on the NAACP regional offices in Atlanta. Investigators now say the gas bomb was similar in construction to the pipe bombs recovered last week.

Leading suspects: If anger at desegregation proves to be the motive, the FBI has plenty of possible suspects. Though bombing has not been the signature tactic of the KKK, some former Klan members say the group has recently splintered into more extremist factions. "They may be smaller in numbers, but they are much more dangerous now," says Tom Martinez, who left the white-supremacist movement in 1986. "It doesn't take a thousand terrorists to plant a bomb, just a handful." FBI sources say the agency is also looking into the possibility that a number of white-supremacist groups subdued by aggressive Justice Department campaigns several years ago have made a comeback. White supremacists are suspected of sending a pipe bomb to U.S. District Judge Paul Benson in Fargo, N.D., in 1986. Around the same time, people with ties to the Aryan Nations bombed the home of the Rev. Bill Wassmuth, a civil-rights leader and Roman Catholic priest, in Idaho. "We had a good hit against the Aryan Nations, Posse Comitatus, and the Covenant, the Sword and the Arm of the Lord—all those groups," says William Baker,

head of the FBI's criminal section. "We locked up a lot of them, but obviously now we'll have to pay attention to this type of individual again."

Sources close to the investigation say the FBI is also looking into the possible involvement of old-time segregationists who have been stirring up violence since the early years of the civil-rights movement in the South. Parts of Georgia have long been a haven for racist agitators. And as the Maryland bombing made only too clear, the possibility loomed that a wave of copycat acts of terrorism might follow the Southern bombings. The police described Judge John Corderman, 47, as a gun-control advocate who presided over many drug cases.

At the weekend the FBI was hinting it suspected a single individual was behind the mail-bomb attacks in the Deep South. Investigators also announced they had received letters threatening "more mailings." The FBI is taking the new letters seriously. In any case, few people with strong civil-rights records are likely to rest easy this Christmas season until the bomber—or bombers—are found.

GEORGE HACKETT with FRANK WASHINGTON in Atlanta, HOWARD MANLY in Birmingham, CLARA BINGHAM in Savannah and MARK MILLER in Washington



PETER BLAKELY—PICTURE GROUP

Violent climate: KKK cross-burning in 1987

Advocates of Hate

The bombings may have been the work of one individual. But members of white-supremacist groups have been linked to earlier hate crimes.

Ku Klux Klan: For more than a century, the hooded orders have terrorized blacks, Jews and other minorities. But in recent years, the KKK has suffered setbacks in court.

Skinheads: Across the country, some 3,000 shaven-headed teens advocating violence have emerged as white supremacists' youth corps.

The 'Identity' Movement: Followers from Florida to Washington state view blacks as "mud people" and Jews as the Devil's children.