

# THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR

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## George Zimmerman's Fox News interview: Risky step for Trayvon Martin's killer?

George Zimmerman, charged with killing Florida teen Trayvon Martin, agreed to an interview with Fox News this week. Legal experts say submitting to the media spotlight this way is a tricky step for criminal defendants and their attorneys. What's said can be used against them.

By Mark Guarino, Staff writer

“ [Zimmerman] wants to claim that, under the totality of the circumstances, homicide was justified and he had to do what he had to do. So he's walking that line carefully since the trial will be about justified homicide,” Mr. Pattis says. “That is exactly what I expected him to say and it's very, very shrewd.”



Fox News Channel host Sean Hannity, right, interviews George Zimmerman, left, and his attorney Mark O'Mara on Wednesday at an undisclosed Florida location.

Fox News Channel/AP

In his first media interview since his arrest for killing a Florida teenager, former community watch volunteer George Zimmerman apologized for the circumstances, but did not show remorse for his actions.

Zimmerman is free on a \$1 million bond following second degree murder charges involving the killing of Trayvon Martin on Feb. 26 during a confrontation in a gated community in Sanford, a city in central Florida. Zimmerman's trial is pending and he says he is not guilty. In an April court appearance, he expressed sympathy for Mr. Martin's parents, which he repeated Wednesday in a Fox News interview with host Sean Hannity.

“I would tell them again I'm sorry ... I'm sorry that they buried their child. I can't imagine how it must feel like. And I pray for them daily,” Zimmerman said. He added he was “certainly open” to a conversation with them in the future.

Some legal analysts say that while it is certainly risky to put a defendant in a high-profile case in the media spotlight, the televised interview's purpose was to present Mr.

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Zimmerman as a reasonable person and lawful gun owner who found himself trapped in an unpredictable situation, which justified the killing.

Despite the sympathy directed to the parents, Zimmerman appeared calm but resolute regarding his actions.

“It was all God’s plan, and for me to second guess it or judge it...,” he said, shaking his head. He later told Mr. Hannity he “would not have done anything differently” even though he wished “that there was something, anything I could have done that wouldn’t have put me in the position where I had to take [Martin’s] life.”

Zimmerman’s description of the events corresponds to Florida’s controversial “stand-your-ground” law at issue in this case. The law permits people to use lethal force when they fear great bodily injury or death.

Norm Pattis, a criminal defense attorney in New Haven, Conn., says that, while “it’s rarely a good idea” to expose defendants to the media because of the danger the prosecution can use their words against them in a trial, Zimmerman’s attorneys apparently used the Fox interview to successfully articulate his defense and to emphasize his credibility.

“[Zimmerman] wants to claim that, under the totality of the circumstances, homicide was justified and he had to do what he had to do. So he’s walking that line carefully since the trial will be about justified homicide,” Mr. Pattis says. “That is exactly what I expected him to say and it’s very, very shrewd.”

The interview is also expected to be effective in reaching potential jury

members, says Daniel Filler, a criminal law professor at Drexel University in Philadelphia and a former public defender in New York.

“It’s entirely possible that his lawyers will never put him on to testify so these public statements may be the only testimony jurors will ever hear from him,” Mr. Filler says.

The televised statements will only enter the court record through the prosecution, which will not likely happen since Zimmerman said little outside his defense strategy and there are not yet other media interviews to present the possibility of a conflicting account.

The interview, therefore, “is really about humanizing him and putting the story out there without exposing him to cross examination,” Filler says.

Of course, there are always risks to the strategy.

Early media interviews with former Penn State assistant football coach Jerry Sandusky backfired after he denied accusations that he had sexually molested young boys but appeared aloof to the traditional boundaries between adults and children – the likely reason his attorneys kept him from testifying at his trial.

Mr. Sandusky was convicted on 45 counts of child sex abuse involving 10 boys over 15 years.

Last month, criminal defense lawyer Pattis arranged and sat in on a televised interview between his client Anna Gristina and Matt Lauer of NBC’s Today Show. Ms. Gristina is the mother of four dubbed the “Soccer Mom Madam” for

promoting prostitution from her New York City apartment.

Pattis says “the general rule is you don’t give interviews because there’s no accounting what questions will be asked and what your client says may be admissible” in court. He says the opportunities only become advantages when the clients vigorously prepare beforehand.

It is uncertain if the Fox interview is Zimmerman’s last moment in the media spotlight before his trial. The New York Post reported Thursday that he arranged an interview with Barbara Walters of ABC News, but Ms. Walters canceled the appearance when Zimmerman asked the network to pay for a month-long stay at a hotel.

When to end interviews once the ball starts rolling?

“Pretty quickly,” says Filler.

“If you can get the story out once well ... that one public statement will be repeated on every other network, so you need not keep doing it again and again. The danger happens if [the accused] makes multiple statements and they become inconsistent,” he says. “Less is more.” ■