

Dan Rather Reports

Episode Number: 637

Episode Title: An American Nightmare

Description: Hundreds of foreign workers claim an American company lured them here with promises of good jobs and even U.S. citizenship. It's now become one of the largest human trafficking cases in modern U.S. History. Also, a Castle Doctrine update.

TEASE:

DAN RATHER (VOICE OVER)

TONIGHT...AN AMERICAN NIGHTMARE.

ALAN HOWARD, ATTORNEY

Hundreds of lives were effectively ruined here in the interest of profits.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

FOREIGN WORKERS BROUGHT TO THIS COUNTRY WITH BIG PROMISES BY A COMPANY THAT IS NOW ACCUSED OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING.

SCHNOOR DEPOSITION TAPE

Q. Now you understood that they would be living up to 24 people per trailer?

A. Initially, yes.

Q. And yet your view was this would be an improvement over their current living conditions in India; is that true?

A. Yes. Uh-huh.

Q. And how did you know that?

A. I don't have firsthand knowledge.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

ALSO... THE CASTLE DOCTRINE. CONTROVERSIAL LAWS ARE PASSING IN MORE

AND MORE STATES THAT ALLOW FOR THE USE OF DEADLY FORCE TO PROTECT PROPERTY....

MALCOLM MCMILLIN, JACKSON POLICE CHIEF AND HINDS COUNTY SHERIFF

I mean are we gonna shoot people for soapin' windows and rollin' your trees with toilet paper? That's the point I'm getting at, you know, where will it end?

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

WE'LL BRING YOU THE NEWS, TONIGHT ON DAN RATHER REPORTS.

ACT 1: HUMAN TRAFFICKING

DAN RATHER (ON CAMERA)

GOOD EVENING. WE BEGIN THE PROGRAM WITH A MILESTONE. THIS PROGRAM MARKS OUR FIFTH ANNIVERSARY ON HDNET. WE HAVE PRODUCED MORE THAN TWO HUNDRED EPISODES. EVERY WEEK WE STRIVE TO BRING YOU THE BEST IN INVESTIGATIVE REPORTING... LIKE OUR FIRST STORY TONIGHT. IT COMES FROM THE DEEP SOUTH. OVER THE LAST SEVERAL MONTHS, WE'VE BEEN INVESTIGATING WHAT COULD BE ONE OF THE LARGEST CASES OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN MODERN U.S. HISTORY. HUNDREDS OF FOREIGN WORKERS CLAIM AN AMERICAN COMPANY LURED THEM HERE WITH PROMISES OF GOOD JOBS, BETTER LIVES AND EVEN U.S. CITIZENSHIP. INSTEAD, THE WORKERS FOUND THEMSELVES CAPTIVE IN AN AMERICAN NIGHTMARE.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

PASCAGOULA, MISSISSIPPI IS A QUIET SOUTHERN CITY THAT BEATS WITH AN INDUSTRIAL HEART. A FEW MILES FROM ITS SLEEPY MAIN STREET, THIS PORT ON THE GULF OF MEXICO IS AN ECONOMIC ENGINE FOR THE REGION. THIS IS A PLACE WHERE THEY STILL BUILD THINGS... BIG THINGS...SHIPS MOSTLY... AND THOSE GIANT OFF-SHORE OIL PLATFORMS.

WE CAME TO PASCAGOULA TO INVESTIGATE SERIOUS ALLEGATIONS AGAINST ONE OF THE SHIPBUILDERS HERE. THE COMPANY IS CALLED SIGNAL INTERNATIONAL. ON THE SURFACE, THERE IS LITTLE TO DISTINGUISH IT FROM DOZENS OF OTHER INDUSTRIAL BUSINESSES ALONG THE PORT...AMONG LOCALS, SIGNAL IS KNOWN SIMPLY AS AN IMPORTANT EMPLOYER IN THE COMMUNITY... BEYOND THAT, THEY DON'T SEEM TO PAY IT MUCH ATTENTION.

PAUL, LOCAL RESIDENT

I've never really heard any bad comments. Not really. People don't really mention them too much around here unless they're working there.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

SIGNAL IS NO MOM AND POP OPERATION...BASED IN THIS TOWER IN MOBILE, ALABAMA, THE COMPANY OWNS THREE LARGE-SCALE INDUSTRIAL SHIPYARDS ON THE GULF COAST.

AS A PRIVATE COMPANY, MOST OF SIGNAL'S BOOKS ARE CLOSED. BUT NOW THE COMPANY IS GETTING SOME UNWELCOME ATTENTION -- FROM BOTH THE U.S. GOVERNMENT AND A HIGH-PROFILE LAWSUIT THAT COULD END UP BEING THE LARGEST OF ITS KIND... THE CHARGE IS HUMAN TRAFFICKING. MORE THAN FIVE HUNDRED FOREIGN WORKERS ALLEGE THAT SIGNAL LURED THEM TO THE U.S. WITH FALSE PROMISES, TRAPPED THEM IN DEBT, AND USED THREATS OF FINANCIAL RUIN TO KEEP THEM IN LINE.

THE STORY BEGINS HERE, THOUSANDS OF MILES AWAY...ON THE STREETS OF INDIA. DESPITE A GROWING ECONOMY, THE LURE OF LIVING AND WORKING IN AMERICA IS STILL A DREAM FOR MANY HERE. SO WHEN ADVERTISEMENTS FOR WORK WITH A U.S. SHIP BUILDING COMPANY STARTED SHOWING UP IN INDIAN NEWSPAPERS IN 2006, HUNDREDS LINED UP TO APPLY.

SIGNAL HAD HIRED RECRUITERS TO SEARCH ACROSS INDIA FOR SKILLED WELDERS AND PIPE FITTERS. THE COMPANY WAS STRUGGLING TO REBUILD ITS RANKS AFTER HURRICANE KATRINA. SIGNAL'S RECRUITERS PLACED ADS PROMISING NOT ONLY GOOD WAGES BUT ALSO THE PROSPECT OF PERMANENT RESIDENCE IN THE UNITED STATES FOR WORKERS AND THEIR FAMILIES.

WHEN ABY RAJU SAW ONE OF THE ADS, IT SEEMED LIKE THE OPPORTUNITY OF A LIFETIME. AS A WELDER HE MADE A PRETTY GOOD MIDDLE-CLASS LIVING AT HOME IN INDIA. BUT THE PROMISE OF UP TO \$18 AN HOUR -- NOT TO MENTION THE CHANCE TO START A LIFE IN THE U.S. -- WAS TOO GOOD TO PASS UP. AND THE TIMING COULDN'T HAVE BEEN BETTER EITHER: HE AND HIS SOON-TO-BE-WIFE BINCY WERE PLANNING THEIR WEDDING...

ABY RAJU

If I'm going to get—married, financially I need to be secure. So I think it's a good opportunity to take care -- my new family and stuff. They-- told us -- within nine months, our family can bring it over here. So-- and I think, okay, that's a good-- good thing so I can bring her with me here. I can work here and she can live with me.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

BUT THIS OPPORTUNITY DIDN'T COME CHEAP. SIGNAL'S RECRUITERS DEMANDED UP TO \$20-THOUSAND DOLLARS FROM EACH PROSPECTIVE WORKER....

IN RAJU'S CASE, HIS FAMILY SOLD THEIR JEWELRY AND TOOK A LOAN AGAINST THEIR HOME TO PAY THE FEE.

RAJU

My father was-- serving-- 19 years in Indian army. His savings in all 19 years he saved us house. And-- I mean-- give to the bank -- I was like-- scary and shaky. If I got some problem, and he have to pay that money back and otherwise the bank going to sell it.

ALAN HOWARD, ATTORNEY

They had to go into substantial debt. In India, that amount of money is staggering.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

ALAN HOWARD IS A PROMINENT NEW YORK ATTORNEY WHO IS REPRESENTING THE INDIAN WORKERS IN THEIR CLASS ACTION LAWSUIT AGAINST THE COMPANY. HE SAYS IT WAS THIS INSURMOUNTABLE DEBT, RATHER THAN PHYSICAL FORCE, THAT THE COMPANY USED TO IMPRISON THE WORKERS.

HOWARD

Servitude-- doesn't require chains and iron. Economic coercion, psychological coercion-- the debts that are incurred to pay recruiting fees to come to the country-- they can be just as effective instruments of-- of-- exploitation.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

HOWARD SAYS THERE WERE SIGNS THE COMPANY WAS UP TO NO GOOD BEFORE THE WORKERS EVEN LEFT INDIA.

HOWARD

The workers in India had to appear at the U.S. Consulate for consulate interviews. And they were coached by the recruiters ahead of time not to disclose the fact that they were-- expecting to obtain permanent residence or green cards. And under no circumstances to disclose the fact that they had paid up to \$20,000 a man in recruiting fees.

RATHER

If that happened, that's a fraud of at least a sort, is it not?

HOWARD

Absolutely.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

THIS IS AN APPLICATION THAT SIGNAL FILED WITH THE U.S. GOVERNMENT TO OBTAIN VISAS FOR THE INDIAN WORKERS... SIGNAL WAS BRINGING THEM IN UNDER WHAT'S KNOWN AS AN H2B VISA. THAT IS DESIGNED FOR TEMPORARY WORKERS WITH NO INTENTION OF STAYING IN THE U.S. LONG TERM.

SO WHILE SIGNALS' RECRUITERS WERE PROMISING WORKERS PERMANENT RESIDENCY, SIGNAL WAS TELLING THE U.S. GOVERNMENT THAT IT ONLY WANTED THE WORKERS FOR NINE MONTHS. THE COMPANY ASSERTED IN ITS APPLICATION THAT THE WORKERS QUOTE "WILL NOT BECOME A PART OF THE PERMANENT WORKFORCE" AND "WILL RETURN TO THEIR HOME COUNTRY AT THE END OF EMPLOYMENT."

AND IN THIS EMAIL, A SIGNAL RECRUITER WARNED THE COMPANY THAT ANY MENTION OF THE PROMISED GREEN CARDS TO THE U.S. CONSULATE WOULD JEOPARDIZE THE VISA APPLICATION. HE WROTE QUOTE "IF ONE OF THOSE GUYS SAYS... SIGNAL IS SPONSORING HIM FOR PERMANENT RESIDENCE... HE'S A GONER."

BUT EVEN THOUGH THE WORKERS SAY THEY WERE TOLD TO LIE TO THE CONSULATE, THEY WERE ASSURED THAT SIGNAL WOULD KEEP ITS PROMISES.

RAJU

When we go into the consulate they said "Right now you guys going to get a H2B visa," that's a nine month. And-- they say, "You guys get that visa and go there and we going to do the paperwork in nine months you-- you going to get a residence we said and then you can bring your family."

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

FOR RAJU, THIS WAS ESPECIALLY IMPORTANT. WHEN HE LEFT INDIA, HE HAD JUST LEARNED THAT HIS WIFE WAS PREGNANT.

IN OCTOBER 2006, THE FIRST INDIAN WORKERS BEGAN ARRIVING IN THE U.S...SOME WENT TO A SIGNAL PLANT IN TEXAS AND SOME ENDED UP HERE, IN PASCAGOULA....

HEMANT KHUTTAN

When someone think about America, they never think worse, they always think better. But when I came here it was worse. It was like a nightmare to me that day.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

HEMANT KHUTTAN LED A MODEST BUT COMFORTABLE LIFE IN INDIA. HIS FATHER WAS A GOVERNMENT WORKER, BUT KHUTTAN CHOSE A CAREER IN WELDING - A JOB HE WAS GOOD AT. LIKE RAJU, HE STARTED WORK AT SIGNAL \$20-THOUSAND IN THE HOLE... BUT HE WAS HOPEFUL ABOUT HIS NEW LIFE IN THE U.S...

KHUTTAN

I thought like in couple years I become more work I pay that money back. And after that my life is good, I'll be making good money. I can take care of my father, mother, my brother.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

SIGNAL'S SHIPYARD IS AT THE END OF A LONG ROAD MILES FROM DOWNTOWN. THIS IS WHERE THE INDIAN WELDERS AND PIPE FITTERS WOULD BE WORKING -- AND LIVING. FOR MONTHS TO COME, THEY WOULD SEE LITTLE ELSE.

RATHER

When they arrived in the United States, they paid the recruiter, they arrive here, what was life like for them?

HOWARD

Miserable from the outset.

RATHER

From the outset?

HOWARD

From the outset. The first thing they're shown is a labor camp on the premises, the work site, made up of prefabricated trailers, which would house 24 men to a trailer.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

SIGNAL WOULDN'T LET US ON ITS PROPERTY TO SEE THESE HOUSING FACILITIES... SO WE DECIDED TO TAKE A LOOK FROM ABOVE.

SIGNAL CALLED THEM MAN CAMPS...IN AN AREA NO LARGER THAN A BASEBALL INFIELD, HUNDREDS OF WORKERS WERE CRAMMED INTO ROW AFTER ROW OF TRAILERS...TOILETS AND SHOWERS WERE IN SHORT SUPPLY... FOOD WAS SERVED ON A STRICT SCHEDULE AND WORKERS WHO ARRIVED LATE COULDN'T EAT UNTIL THE NEXT MEAL. AND NO ONE OTHER THAN SIGNAL STAFF AND THE INDIAN WORKERS THEMSELVES WERE ALLOWED INSIDE THE GUARDED CHAIN-LINK FENCE THAT SURROUNDS THE FACILITY.

SIGNAL REFUSED OUR REQUESTS FOR AN ON CAMERA INTERVIEW. THROUGH A LAWYER, THE COMPANY DID RESPOND TO OUR QUESTIONS IN WRITING AND DENIED ANY MISTREATMENT OF ITS INDIAN WORKERS.

THE COMPANY TOLD US IT BUILT THE MAN CAMPS TO MAKE LIFE EASIER FOR THE WORKERS. THE COMPANY SAYS THERE WAS A MAJOR HOUSING SHORTAGE AFTER KATRINA AND IT WANTED TO ENSURE THAT THE INDIAN WORKERS HAD A CLEAN AND COMFORTABLE PLACE TO LIVE.

BUT WORKERS SAY THE MAN CAMPS WERE ANYTHING BUT...AND ONE SURREPTITIOUSLY RECORDED THIS VIDEO ON A CELL PHONE. IT IS THE ONLY KNOWN FOOTAGE OF LIFE INSIDE THE TRAILERS.

KHUTTAN

The way they put the beds in, one person can walk at one time. It was so tight. I used to put my clothes on my bed. - use them as my pillow, 'cause if I got my pillow I don't have no space to put my clothes somewhere else.

HOWARD

The facility was onsite and there was a day shift and night shift running, so they had the machinery working day and night.

KHUTTAN

I can hear the noise, people, the noise of hammer, welding, everything. I can't sleep, I never sleep for 6 months.

RAJU

We got some leaking from the-- toilet and we have to close our nose when we are walking there. And it's-- it's-- it was really bad. Sometimes really bad food, we can eat that food, and some people got problem with their stomach and they going to the hospital and stuff.

HOWARD

One of our class representatives told me he lost 33 pounds in six months-- from lack of food and lack of sleep.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

IN THE PRE-TRIAL INVESTIGATION, HOWARD'S TEAM TURNED UP A KEY-PIECE OF EVIDENCE STORED ON A COMPANY COMPUTER: THE PRIVATE JOURNAL OF THE SIGNAL EMPLOYEE IN CHARGE OF RUNNING THE MISSISSIPPI MAN CAMP. HIS JOURNAL PROVIDES AN UNVARNISHED VIEW OF THE HOUSING FACILITY: OVERCROWDED... POORLY BUILT... AND UNSANITARY. ONE ENTRY BEGINS QUOTE "OUR INDIANS HAVE BEEN DROPPING WITH SICKNESS LIKE FLIES."

HOWARD

The workers were getting sick all the time. He himself felt that-- that he was exposed and getting sick from the conditions in the camp. That there was shoddy plumbing, standing water-- bacteria.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

BUT DESPITE THE DISMAL CONDITIONS IN THE MAN CAMPS, SIGNAL WAS CHARGING THE WORKERS TOP DOLLAR TO LIVE THERE: MORE THAN \$1000 A MONTH PER WORKER -- ROUGHLY ONE THIRD OF EACH WORKER'S MONTHLY SALARY.

THE WORKERS ALSO HAD TO LIVE BY THE COMPANY'S RULES: NO ALCOHOL... NO VISITORS... AND FINES FOR NON-COMPLIANCE. IT WAS ALL PART OF LIFE BEHIND THE GATES OF SIGNAL.

RAJU

There's two, three-- security guys always surrounded there. When we going out they going to ask how long you go, what time you want to come back. And-- when we going to come back they're going to check up like-- like-- TSA in the airport. Doing the whole body check up. They going to check up everywhere, what you got.

KHUTTAN

My badge number was number 375. They never call me Hemant. They always call me "375 go there, weld there." And the same time if an American, they want him to work somewhere "Chris, can you do that? And take 375 with you." We were just numbers for them.

HOWARD

They were living-- living in a segregated, guarded camp. What happens at 5:00, 5:30? The whistle blows. The American workers go home to their home. They have their family there. They can pop open a beer, turn on the TV, watch the ballgame, have friends come over. These workers from India are sent back to these camps that Signal referred to as "the reservation." Can't have visitors, can't have alcohol, can't do anything but try to wait in line, get a shower, get a meal, and try to get a few hours sleep before their next shift begins.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

BUT SIGNAL EXECUTIVES THOUGHT THESE LIVING CONDITIONS WOULD BE GOOD ENOUGH FOR WORKERS FROM A POOR COUNTRY LIKE INDIA.

ACCORDING TO THE PRIVATE JOURNALS, A SIGNAL EXECUTIVE JOKED THAT THE INDIANS WOULD PROBABLY THINK THESE CROWDED, DIRTY TRAILERS WERE QUOTE "...LIKE BEING AT THE TAJ MAHAL." AND IN AN EMAIL, THEN SENIOR VICE-PRESIDENT RONALD SCHNOOR WROTE THAT THE MAN CAMPS WOULD QUOTE "...LIKELY BE AN IMPROVEMENT OVER THEIR CURRENT LIVING CONDITIONS... I WOULD THINK THEY'LL BE HAPPY CAMPERS."

RONALD SCHNOOR DEPOSITION

The income was good, the jobs were good. They'd be happy campers. That was our goal...

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

IN A DEPOSITION, ATTORNEY ALAN HOWARD PRESSED SCHNOOR TO EXPLAIN.

HOWARD (FROM DEPOSITION)

Now you understood that they would be living up to 24 people per trailer?

SCHNOOR (FROM DEPOSITION)

Initially, yes.

HOWARD (FROM DEPOSITION)

And that they would be operating under rules which said they could have no visitors, correct?

SCHNOOR (FROM DEPOSITION)

In the camp, correct.

HOWARD (FROM DEPOSITION)

No alcohol?

SCHNOOR (FROM DEPOSITION)

Correct.

HOWARD (FROM DEPOSITION)

And yet your view was this would be an improvement over their current living conditions in India; is that true?

SCHNOOR (FROM DEPOSITION)

Yes. Uh-huh.

HOWARD (FROM DEPOSITION)

And how did you know that?

SCHNOOR (FROM DEPOSITION)

I don't have firsthand knowledge. Based on what I was told, based on where they came from, based on their economic situation, from what I understood, this was an improvement

KHUTTAN

I used to have my own bike, I used to have my own car. I sold all these things to come here. I got my own room to sleep. Nobody shared that room, even not my brother shared that room with me. So in that condition I used to live there. And now in what condition I live here?

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

SIGNAL'S LAWYER TOLD US THE COMPANY TOOK GREAT PAINS TO MAKE THE INDIAN WORKERS COMFORTABLE AT THE MAN CAMPS -- PROVIDING INDIAN MEALS, LOUNGES WITH SATELLITE TELEVISION, LAUNDRY SERVICE AND A PRAYER ROOM. AND THE COMPANY SAYS IT TRIED TO ADDRESS REASONABLE COMPLAINTS.

BUT WHEN COMPLAINTS KEPT COMING, SCHNOOR DISMISSED THE INDIANS AS QUOTE "CHRONIC WHINERS".

SCHNOOR (FROM DEPOSITION)

Some of the Indians just seemed to have a tendency to want to complain, and if they got more and they got more and they got more and they got more and they got more, they'd never stop complaining.

HOWARD (FROM DEPOSITION)

And those, to you, were chronic whiners?

SCHNOOR (FROM DEPOSITION)

Yes. Some people are chronic whiners, yes. Whine all the time.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

WORKERS TOLD US THAT THEY COULD HAVE RENTED A TWO BEDROOM APARTMENT NEARBY FOR HALF OF WHAT THEY HAD TO PAY TO LIVE 24 TO A ROOM. BUT WHEN WORKERS ASKED SIGNAL FOR PERMISSION TO LIVE OFF COMPANY PROPERTY, THEY WERE IN FOR ANOTHER SURPRISE.

RAJU

Actually, they answered like very funny. And-- they said-- "Yeah, good, that's a good idea. If you want to go to live there you can go live there. But, still, we going to deduct this money from your paycheck."

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

THE INDIAN WORKERS HAD TO PAY RENT TO SIGNAL WHETHER THEY LIVED IN COMPANY HOUSING OR NOT -- THAT WAS PART OF A CONTRACT THEY HAD TO SIGN WHEN THEY GOT TO THE U.S.

HOWARD (FROM DEPOSITION)

And if an employee had chosen at that time not to sign that agreement, their only choice would have been to fly back to India and eat the \$15,000 in fees that they paid to come to Signal; is that right?

SCHNOOR (FROM DEPOSITION)

That would have been one of their options.

HOWARD (FROM DEPOSITION)

What other option do they have?

SCHNOOR (FROM DEPOSITION)

Absconding.

HOWARD (FROM DEPOSITION)

And –

SCHNOOR (FROM DEPOSITION)

They did that, too.

HOWARD (FROM DEPOSITION)

And becoming out of legal status in the U.S., correct?

SCHNOOR (FROM DEPOSITION)

Yes.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

BUT WHY DID THE COMPANY INSIST THAT ITS INDIAN WORKERS PAY RENT NO MATTER WHAT? ACCORDING TO THIS EMAIL FROM SIGNAL'S CHIEF FINANCIAL OFFICER, THE COMPANY SAW THE MAN CAMPS AS A PROFIT CENTER...A WAY TO MAKE EXTRA MONEY ON TOP OF ITS SHIPBUILDING OPERATIONS. COMPANY DOCUMENTS SHOW THAT THE MAN CAMPS GENERATED A \$700,000 PROFIT IN 2007.

RATHER

If I were one of these workers from India living in the kind of conditions you describe and the situation, why don't you just say, "I'm going back home. I'm going to the airport, I'm outta here."

HOWARD

That was not an economically viable option for them. If they had left voluntarily to go back to India-- they'd be in economic ruin. Their family would have nothing.

KHUTTAN

How I can face my family, my brother? By making them worse [than] before. I can't even think about that. I have to work there to get that money

RAJU

I think it's just temporarily. So they going to give us a permanent visa. I think, okay, just keep going on. I have to survive.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

THAT'S WHAT KEPT THE WORKERS GOING... KNOWING THAT SOON THEY WOULD HAVE A GREEN CARD AND BE ABLE TO BRING THEIR FAMILIES TO AMERICA. RAJU'S LONGING FOR THIS BECAME EVEN MORE URGENT -- WHEN ONE DAY HIS WIFE CALLED WITH BIG NEWS.

RAJU

I talked to her and my mom and dad. They said, "You got a boy." And-- then I come back to-- to all my friends working in there, and I-- I told everyone. I want-- I want to see my-- my son. And I want to stay with my wife and my family this-- this moment. I just-- I just really miss her. I-- I know I can do nothing. I can't go.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

WHEN WE COME BACK, SIGNAL'S INDIAN WORKERS REACH THEIR LIMIT...AND TAKE A STAND.

ACT 2: HUMAN TRAFFICKING

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

DAY AFTER DAY, MONTH AFTER MONTH, LIFE WAS A NEVER-ENDING STRETCH OF HOMESICKNESS AND HUMILIATIONS FOR THE INDIAN WORKERS AT SIGNAL. THERE WAS LITTLE ESCAPE.

WORKING AND LIVING AT SIGNAL MEANT ALMOST ALWAYS BEING UNDER THE COMPANY'S WATCHFUL EYE. BUT SUNDAYS GAVE THE WORKERS A CHANCE FOR A LITTLE TIME OUTSIDE THE GATE. THAT'S WHEN WORKERS MADE THE LONG TREK ON FOOT TO THIS PASCAGOULA CHURCH.

MANY OF THE WORKERS ARE ROMAN CATHOLIC...AND AT FIRST, THEY JUST CAME TO WORSHIP. BUT BEFORE LONG, THE CHURCH WOULD BECOME A BASE FOR THEIR FIGHT AGAINST SIGNAL.

SAKET SONI, HEAD NATIONAL GUESTWORKER ALLIANCE

These were clandestine meetings after Mass-- that the company didn't know about and couldn't know about.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

SAKET SONI IS A NEW ORLEANS-BASED LABOR ORGANIZER AND HEAD OF THE NATIONAL GUESTWORKER ALLIANCE. IN LATE 2006, HE STARTED HEARING THAT SOME INDIAN WORKERS AT SIGNAL WERE BEING MISTREATED. HE REACHED OUT TO THE WORKERS...AND EVENTUALLY CONVINCED THEM TO MEET AT THE CHURCH.

SONI

I remember coming to Pascagoula that morning, thinking that I was coming to meet with five workers. I walked into the Sacred Heart Church and there were 110 workers waiting for me.

RATHER

Wow.

SONI

And I sat down to listen to their stories and they weren't talking about a bad day at work or conditions that needed to be improved. What they were describing sounded like human trafficking.

RATHER

How hard was it to get workers to organize among themselves, try to reverse their situation?

SONI

The first time I met the workers-- they wanted to know, "What could I do?" And I said, "Look, there's very little I can do. There's a lot we can do. But it will take a lot of time. The most important thing is that you need to know what rights you have and what rights you don't have."

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

SONI BROUGHT LAWYERS TO THE MEETINGS, WHO ADVISED THE WORKERS THAT, EVEN AS FOREIGNERS, THEY HAD A RIGHT TO ORGANIZE AND SUE THE COMPANY.

BUT THE MEETINGS AT THE CHURCH DIDN'T STAY SECRET FOR LONG. AND WHEN SIGNAL FOUND OUT THAT THE WORKERS WERE TALKING TO LAWYERS, THE COMPANY STRUCK BACK. SIGNAL MANAGEMENT ROUNDED UP THE WORKERS AND THEN-VICE-PRESIDENT RONALD SCHNOOR WARNED THEM NOT TO CAUSE TROUBLE. ONE OF THE WORKERS SECRETLY RECORDED THE CONVERSATION.

SCHNOOR AUDIO TAPE

I want you to think very, very carefully about suing Signal. We have lawyers, too, very good lawyers. If we have to spend a lot of energy and effort fighting frivolous lawsuits, we won't be doing any visa extensions or anything.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

THE COMPANY ALSO SINGLED OUT TWO WORKERS IT SAID WERE SPEARHEADING THE UNREST.

HOWARD

They made the decision to deport those workers. To fire them and deport them back to India. But they decided to do it in a way that would make an example in front of the rest of the camp.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

BUT SIGNAL'S ATTEMPT TO QUIETLY SEND THE TROUBLEMAKERS HOME DIDN'T GO AS PLANNED.

WLOX NEWS

Six immigrant workers say they were held hostage at a Pascagoula business. The workers are from India, and they live and work at Signal International.

HOWARD

They hired outside security guards to come in and do a roundup of these workers and put them in a trailer, telling them, 5:30 in the morning, saying, "You're gonna sit here until noon, and the van is gonna come and take you to the airport and send you back in debt to India."

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

ONE OF HEMANT KHUTTAN'S FRIENDS WAS AMONG THE MEN BEING FIRED... AND THE THOUGHT OF GOING HOME IN DEBT DROVE HIM TO DESPERATION.

KHUTTAN

They got him and they locked him in the TV hall. They got guns with them and when they says, "OK we're going to deport you to India," he took a razor blade and cut his hand.

SONI

I was woken up by a phone call with workers describing-- the situation: there was a predawn raid, there are armed guards and one of the workers has entered such a state of distress that he tried to cut his veins. They were discussing going on strike. I said that if they did, they would probably be deported. They did it anyway.

WLOX NEWS

The 280 Indian workers that gathered outside Signal's gates today say they've been treated unfairly. They allege they've been sleeping 24 to a room with only two bathrooms at the shipyard.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

WHILE THE WORKERS WENT ON STRIKE, KHUTTAN'S FRIEND WAS RUSHED TO THE HOSPITAL.

KHUTTAN

He was there for like 3-4 days. And even then they don't care, they say, 'he did that himself so we're not responsible for that.' They don't care even when we die or live. They just want their work.

WLOX NEWS (Indian worker crying)

All my property, my house, everything is at the bank. To come here.

SONI

Pulling workers out of bed and locking them in the room wasn't just about those four workers. It was also significantly to demonstrate to the rest of the workforce what would happen if the organizing continued.

RATHER

Well my question is when the company did that and put them under armed guard, is that legal in this country for a company to do that?

SONI

Well, Dan-- I hope not. I'm pretty confident that it's not legal.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

AND SONI IS RIGHT: COMPANIES DO NOT HAVE THE AUTHORITY TO DETAIN WORKERS OR FORCE THEM TO RETURN TO THEIR HOME COUNTRIES. BUT SONI SAYS HE LEARNED THAT U.S. IMMIGRATION OFFICIALS HAD ADVISED THE COMPANY ON HOW TO HANDLE THE FIRINGS...AN ALLEGATION SIGNAL CONFIRMED TO US IN WRITING.

SONI

It's extraordinary that law enforcement would actually advise the company to do it. Far from that-- it should've been the case that law enforcement-- immediately said, "Look-- there's something wrong here. This has all of the alarm bells of human trafficking."

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

WE CONTACTED U.S. IMMIGRATION AND CUSTOMS ENFORCEMENT, BUT A SPOKESMAN REFUSED TO COMMENT ON QUOTE "ONGOING INVESTIGATIONS." HE REFUSED TO ELABORATE.

IN THE END, THE FIRED WORKERS WERE NOT DEPORTED -- BUT WITHOUT THEIR JOBS, THEY NO LONGER HAD A LEGAL RIGHT TO STAY IN THE U.S. THIS WAS ENOUGH TO SCARE THE REMAINING INDIAN WORKERS. THEY WENT BACK TO WORK AND FOR MONTHS THERE WERE NO MORE MEETINGS. THE INDIAN WORKERS WERE STILL HOLDING OUT HOPE THAT IF THEY PLAYED BY THE RULES, THEY WOULD EVENTUALLY GET PERMANENT RESIDENCY IN THE U.S.

BUT FINALLY, SIGNAL CAME CLEAN: GREEN CARDS WERE NEVER COMING.

SONI

There were never any Green Cards to be had. They were all false promises. In fact according to U.S. law it is not possible to transition from an H2B visa to a Green Card. The entire point of the guest worker program is to supply workers for short periods in jobs that are temporary. In this case it wasn't the jobs that are temporary. It was simply temporary workers doing permanent jobs.

RATHER

You've talked to-- people high and low in Signal. How do they justify what happened? What is their story, basically?

HOWARD

They say they didn't know about the false promises being made on their behalf by their agents. They claim they didn't know that they were being charged \$20,000. And they said if they had known that, they would've stopped the program and not brought in the workers. The problem with that, as a factual matter- they learned those core facts when the first workers came to Signal at the end of October in 2006. And for months thereafter, they brought in hundreds of more workers with full knowledge of the facts. How do you explain that?

HOWARD (FROM DEPOSITION)

Did you give consideration at that meeting or at any time in November of 2006 of saying there's something wrong here and I'm stopping this whole process, we are not going to bring in any more workers who have paid these fees and potentially been lied to by our agents?

SCHNOOR (FROM DEPOSITION)

No.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

SIGNAL SAYS IT ALWAYS INTENDED TO GET GREEN CARDS FOR WORKERS AFTER THEIR VISAS EXPIRED-- BUT WAS UNFAMILIAR WITH IMMIGRATION LAWS THAT MADE THE WORKERS INELIGIBLE. THE COMPANY SAYS THAT WHEN IT LEARNED OF THE HIGH RECRUITING FEES, IT TRIED UNSUCCESSFULLY TO GET THE RECRUITERS TO REIMBURSE THE WORKERS, AND FIRED ONE OF THE RECRUITERS. BUT THE COMPANY KEPT TWO OTHERS WHO CONTINUED LURING MORE INDIANS TO WORK FOR SIGNAL WITH THE SAME FALSE PROMISES.

HOWARD (FROM DEPOSITION)

You were unsuccessful in getting them to refund any money, correct?

SCHNOOR (FROM DEPOSITION)

Yes.

HOWARD (FROM DEPOSITION)

But you kept bringing more workers in, correct?

SCHNOOR (FROM DEPOSITION)

Yes.

HOWARD (FROM DEPOSITION)

Why?

SCHNOOR (FROM DEPOSITION)

We needed the workers.

HOWARD (FROM DEPOSITION)

Did you give any thought to what was in the best interests to the Indian workers who were still in India in making the decision and continue to bring them in to Signal?

SCHNOOR (FROM DEPOSITION)

Um, eventually.

DAN RATHER (VOICE OVER)

BUT IT WAS TOO LATE. WITH GREEN CARDS OFF THE TABLE AND A MOUNTAIN OF DEBT WAITING FOR THEM BACK HOME, THE WORKERS FINALLY REACHED A POINT WHERE THEY HAD NOTHING LEFT TO LOSE.

KHUTTAN

Once I know, I have to die. I'm done. But if I do something before I die maybe I can save my life. That was my thought before I left the company.

SONI

On March 9th, 2008, hundreds of workers walked out of the labor camp. They threw their hardhats against the fence. They declared themselves free.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

MOST OF THE WORKERS QUIT THEIR JOBS AT SIGNAL...AND MARCHED TOWARD AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE.

BY LEAVING THE COMPANY, THEY HAD LOST THE LEGAL RIGHT TO STAY IN THE UNITED STATES. SO FOR MONTHS THEY FOUGHT DESPERATELY TO BRING ATTENTION TO THEIR PLIGHT -- WHILE AT THE SAME TIME FACING THE SPECTRE OF DEPORTATION. IT TOOK MONTHS OF ORGANIZING, MARCHING, SPEECHES AND A HUNGER STRIKE IN FRONT OF THE WHITE HOUSE -- BUT THE WORKERS WERE FINALLY HEARD.

RENOWNED CIVIL RIGHTS GROUPS, INCLUDING THE SOUTHERN POVERTY LAW CENTER, TOOK UP THEIR CAUSE...AND ARE NOW REPRESENTING THE WORKERS IN THEIR CLASS ACTION LAWSUIT AGAINST SIGNAL. ALAN HOWARD, WHO IS ON THE BOARD OF THE SOUTHERN POVERTY LAW CENTER, WAS ALSO ABLE TO

ENLIST STAFF AND RESOURCES OF HIS MASSIVE NEW YORK-BASED FIRM --
DEWEY & LBOUF.

THE FIRM HAS SO FAR DONATED NEARLY \$5 MILLION WORTH OF ITS LAWYERS'
TIME TO THE CASE...BUT HOWARD SAYS IT'S BEEN WORTH EVERY CENT -- HE
SAYS IT WAS TIME THE WORKERS HAD SOMEONE POWERFUL IN THEIR CORNER.

HOWARD

These are not workers who came to the country illegally, looking to take jobs away from
Americans. These were guest workers. And as the name implies, they were invited here by the
U.S. government with visas, legal, to do a job here. And for them to be exploited in the way they
were-- it's startling. Hundreds of lives were effectively ruined here in the interest of profits.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

BUT NOW, THE U.S. GOVERNMENT HAS STEPPED IN TO MAKE THINGS RIGHT FOR
THE INDIAN WORKERS. IN AN EXTRAORDINARY MOVE, THE GOVERNMENT
GRANTED MANY OF THE WORKERS SPECIAL VISAS FOR VICTIMS OF HUMAN
TRAFFICKING. THE VISAS ALLOW THEM TO STAY IN THE U.S. AND APPLY TO
BRING THEIR FAMILIES HERE.

AND IN APRIL 2011, THE FEDERAL EQUAL EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITY
COMMISSION CHOSE TO MAKE AN EXAMPLE OF SIGNAL IN ITS EFFORT TO
COMBAT HUMAN TRAFFICKING. THE AGENCY FILED ITS OWN LAWSUIT AGAINST
THE COMPANY -- ONE THAT LARGELY SUPPORTS THE WORKERS' CLAIMS.

NOW, MANY OF THE WORKERS WHO LEFT SIGNAL ARE FINALLY INCHING
CLOSER TO THE AMERICAN DREAM.

TODAY, KHUTTAN WORKS IN A GAS STATION. IT'S NOT QUITE THE LIFE HE
PICTURED FOR HIMSELF HERE -- HE TOLD US IT WILL TAKE ANOTHER TEN
YEARS BEFORE HE HAS COMPLETELY PAID OFF HIS DEBT. BUT AT LEAST HE'S
FREE.

KHUTTAN

I got my own apartment. I can go out. I can go to movie. I can go to shopping. I can go to
wherever I want to. So I'm with my life I'm happy now.

RAJU IN CONGRESS (IN TRANSLATION)

I'm here to share with you the experiences of what I saw and heard and felt in my life as a guest worker in this country...

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

IN 2009, ABY RAJU WAS INVITED TO TESTIFY BEFORE CONGRESS FOR A HEARING ON HUMAN TRAFFICKING.

RAJU WAS SEPARATED FROM HIS FAMILY FOR FOUR YEARS. HE WATCHED HIS SON GROW UP ON VIDEOS HIS WIFE SENT.

RAJU

Every month, she is sending the CDs. They can make a 50 minutes long video. I bought a small video player. Then I-- I see it.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

IN 2010, RAJU'S WIFE AND SON WERE FINALLY ABLE TO JOIN HIM IN THE UNITED STATES. IT WAS A JOYFUL END TO A LONG ORDEAL.

RAJU

Now I am-- living with my all freedom. Nobody searching me, or nobody watching me when I walk off from here. Nobody threatening me, "You have to do this job today. Otherwise, you are going to deport from here." So I am just feeling like-- after a long time, and I get out from a prison, you know. I just feel like that.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

THE FAMILY NOW LIVES IN MACON, GEORGIA, WHERE RAJU IS MAKING A GOOD LIVING AS A WELDER AT A POWER PLANT. HIS WIFE IS PREGNANT WITH THEIR SECOND CHILD, WHO WILL BE BORN AN AMERICAN.

ACT 3: CASTLE DOCTRINE

RATHER (ON CAMERA)

TO SHOOT OR NOT TO SHOOT? FOR EVEN THE MOST SEASONED POLICE OFFICER, THAT'S THE ULTIMATE DILEMMA. BUT IT'S NO LONGER JUST POLICE WHO ARE DECIDING WHETHER OR NOT TO PULL THE TRIGGER. THERE'S A NEW BREED OF LAWS THAT ARE EXPANDING THE RIGHTS OF CIVILIANS - SO CALLED CASTLE DOCTRINE LAWS MAKE EXCEPTIONS FOR PEOPLE TO USE DEADLY FORCE FOR WHAT THEY CALL DEFENSE OF THEIR PROPERTY OR "CASTLE".

THE NATIONAL RIFLE ASSOCIATION SAYS THE NEW LAWS RESTORE A TRADITION OF SELF- DEFENSE THAT DATES BACK TO MEDIEVAL ENGLAND, WHEN A MAN'S HOME WAS CONSIDERED HIS CASTLE. BUT OTHERS SAY THESE LAWS ARE USHERING IN A VIOLENT NEW ERA.

WE FIRST TOLD YOU ABOUT THE CASTLE DOCTRINE ON THIS PROGRAM IN 2009 AND SINCE OUR ORIGINAL REPORT SEVERAL MORE STATES HAVE PASSED SOME VERSION OF THIS IDEA INTO LAW.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

PASADENA, TEXAS, IS IN THE HEART OF OIL COUNTRY ABOUT A HALF HOUR SOUTHEAST OF HOUSTON. IT'S MOSTLY A BLUE COLLAR TOWN WHERE REFINERIES AND CHEMICAL PLANTS LOOM OVER THE HORIZON. IN THIS UPSCALE SUBDIVISION, TWO SUSPECTED BURGLARS WOULD LOSE THEIR LIVES. WHETHER THE KILLINGS WERE ACTS OF SELF-DEFENSE OR MURDER DEPENDS ON YOUR POINT OF VIEW.

JOE HORN

There was two of them, officer, there was only one of me. I am not physically - ain't, no way I coulda handled them, ok?

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

THIS IS POLICE VIDEO OF JOE HORN, JUST HOURS AFTER THE 62-YEAR-OLD RETIRED COMPUTER CONSULTANT SHOT TWO MEN FROM THE FRONT YARD OF HIS HOUSE.

HORN

I shot 'em, ok. I'm not denying that. I did not come out here with no intent to shoot anybody.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

HORN SAID THAT HE OPENED FIRE OUT OF FEAR FOR HIS LIFE.

HORN

I thought I'd been scared in my life but I'd never been scared like this, I aint' ever been scared like this.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

BUT HORN'S TONE WAS QUITE DIFFERENT A FEW HOURS EARLIER WHEN HE CALLED 911, A CONVERSATION THAT HAS BECOME A FLASH POINT IN THE CONTROVERSY.

911 OPERATOR

Pasadena 911. What is your emergency?

HORN

Uh, burglars breaking into a house next door. Uh, I've got a shotgun. Uh, do you want me to stop 'em?

911 OPERATOR

Nope. Don't do that. Ain't no property worth shooting somebody over, OK?

HORN

I understand that. OK, but I have a right to protect myself, too sir.

911 OPERATOR

Yes, you do.

HORN

And you understand that and the laws have been changed in this country since September the first, and you know it and I know it. I have a right to protect myself.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

TEXAS'S NEW CASTLE DOCTRINE LAW, WHICH HAD BEEN ON THE BOOKS FOR JUST TEN WEEKS, EXPANDED CIVILIANS' RIGHTS TO USE LETHAL FORCE TO PROTECT HOME AND PROPERTY. STILL, THE POLICE DISPATCHER TELLS HORN TO STAY INSIDE AND WAIT FOR POLICE.

HORN

God Dammit --they just stole something. I'm going out the window. I'm sorry. I-

911 OPERATOR

No, I don't want you going outside, Mr. Horn.

HORN

Well, here it goes buddy. You hear the shotgun clicking and I'm going.

911 OPERATOR

Don't go outside.

HORN

Move -- you're dead.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

BOTH THIRTY-EIGHT-YEAR-OLD HERNANDO RIASCOS TORRES AND THIRTY-YEAR-OLD DIEGO ORTIZ WERE SHOT IN THE BACK AND DIED OF THEIR WOUNDS. THE TWO MEN, POLICE SAID, WERE COLOMBIANS IN THE COUNTRY ILLEGALLY AND WERE FOUND WITH CASH AND JEWELRY STOLEN FROM THE NEIGHBOR'S HOUSE. OVERNIGHT -- IN PASADENA AND ACROSS THE COUNTY - HORN WAS HAILED AS A HERO AND DECRIED AS A COLD- BLOODED KILLER.

PASADENA POLICE OFFICER

At this point, where's your shotgun at?

HORN

I got it here.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

POLICE AND THE LOCAL PROSECUTOR WERE NOT CONVINCED THE SHOOTING FELL UNDER THE NEW CASTLE DOCTRINE LAW. BUT ULTIMATELY - HORN WAS VINDICATED BY THE PEOPLE. ON JUNE 30, 2008 A HARRIS COUNTY GRAND JURY REFUSED TO INDICT JOE HORN. HE WALKED AWAY A FREE MAN.

RATHER (ON CAMERA)

STATES HOUSES ACROSS THE COUNTRY HAVE BEEN PASSING A SLEW OF NEW GUN LAWS, AND NONE OF THEM HAVE TAKEN HOLD MORE QUICKLY THAN THE CASTLE DOCTRINE LAWS. WHERE DID THIS ALL BEGIN? LIKE SO MANY GOOD STORIES, THIS ONE STARTS WITH A GIRL AND A GUN.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

THE SCENE: A LATE NIGHT ENCOUNTER IN THIS PARKING GARAGE IN DOWNTOWN TALLAHASSEE, TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO.

MARION HAMMER, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF UNIFIED SPORTSMEN OF FLORIDA, REPRESENTATIVE OF THE NATIONAL RIFLE ASSOCIATION IN FLORIDA

One of the guys leaned out of the back window of the car, the backseat, had a long-neck beer bottle in his hand and proceeded to tell me what he was gonna do with it when they caught me.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

MARION HAMMER SAYS SHE WAS WALKING TO HER CAR AFTER A LONG DAY AT THE OFFICE WHEN SHE WAS ACCOSTED BY A CAR FULL OF MEN. BUT SHE HAD A SURPRISE FOR THEM.

HAMMER

I drew the gun up through the headlights of the car, and I aimed at the driver. And somebody in the car screamed, "The bitch got a gun!"

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

THE 69-YEAR-OLD GRANDMOTHER, WHO STANDS ABOUT 4'11", SAYS THE GUN IS THE ONLY THING THAT SAVED HER THAT NIGHT. BUT A FEW WEEKS LATER, DURING AN APPEARANCE WITH THE LOCAL POLICE CHIEF ON A TV TALK SHOW, SHE LEARNED IT ALSO COULD'VE GOTTEN HER INTO TROUBLE.

HAMMER

The police chief told me, "Well, in that situation, if you'd called the police, we'd have arrested you, because you were the only one who employed the use of deadly force." And that made me angry, because a 2000- pound car and six drunk men, and they would have arrested me? When you are prosecuting law-abiding people for defending themselves against criminals, it's wrong and it has to be fixed. And the castle doctrine laws fixed that.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

THE PARKING LOT ENCOUNTER MADE HAMMER REALIZE STAYING SAFE WAS ABOUT A RIGHT TO SELF-DEFENSE. SHE SAYS THAT RIGHT WAS BEING UNDERMINED BY A PROVISION IN FLORIDA LAW THAT SAID PEOPLE ATTACKED IN PUBLIC HAD A "DUTY TO RETREAT" -- IN OTHER WORDS, THEY MUST TRY TO ESCAPE BEFORE RESORTING TO DEADLY FORCE.

HAMMER APPROACHED FLORIDA LAWMAKERS WITH THE BILL THAT WOULD BECOME THE NATION'S FIRST CASTLE DOCTRINE LAW.

HAMMER

The castle doctrine law sailed through the Florida legislature.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

THE LAW SAID CIVILIANS COULD SHOOT ATTACKERS WITHOUT TRYING TO ESCAPE FIRST AND ALSO REQUIRED LAW ENFORCEMENT TO PRESUME THAT SHOOTERS ACTED OUT OF FEAR FOR THEIR LIVES. THERE WAS OPPOSITION FROM PROSECUTORS AND CRITICS DUBBED IT THE "SHOOT FIRST LAW."

RATHER (ON CAMERA)

FLORIDA PIONEERED THE CASTLE DOCTRINE LAWS, BUT THEY'VE TAKEN HOLD AROUND THE COUNTRY. AND PERHAPS NOWHERE HAS THE CASTLE DOCTRINE BEEN TESTED MORE THAN IN JACKSON, MISSISSIPPI. THAT PART OF OUR STORY WHEN WE RETURN.

ACT 4: CASTLE DOCTRINE

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

IT WAS JUST AFTER TEN ON A HOT MISSISSIPPI NIGHT LAST AUGUST, AT A GAS MART ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF JACKSON. A MAN IN A BLACK SUV PULLED INTO THE LOT, WALKED INSIDE, GRABBED A CASE OF BEER FROM THE COOLER AND WALKED RIGHT OUT THE DOOR. WITHOUT PAYING. A SINGLE CASE OF BEER WASN'T GOING TO BREAK THE BANK, BUT ACCORDING TO THE PROPERTY OWNER, MR. SURINDER SINGH --WHO OPERATES SEVERAL SISTER STORES NEARBY -- THE MAN WAS JUST THE LATEST OF A SEEMINGLY ENDLESS STREAM OF THIEVES.

SURINDER SINGH, OWNER BP STATION PROPERTY

They come, they take stuff...By the time we call the police they are already gone. And they know that. So when -- when the police come, they say, "Well, call us if they come back."

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

BUT THE CLERK MANNING THE COUNTER THAT NIGHT WASN'T WILLING TO WAIT FOR ANYONE TO COME BACK. ACCORDING TO POLICE, HE RAN OUTSIDE WITH A .357 MAGNUM, AIMED AT THE MAN IN THE BLACK SUV, AND FIRED THREE SHOTS.

SINGH

Somebody got to stop him. The police cannot be there 24 hours. The only person who was there to stop him was the clerk. And he stopped him, whatever means he could.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

THIRTY-SIX-YEAR-OLD JAMES HAWTHORNE JR. WAS PRONOUNCED DEAD AT THE HOSPITAL. JUST A FEW NIGHTS LATER, ANOTHER SHOOTING AT A GAS MART A FEW MILES AWAY - POLICE SAY A MAN IN A CLOWN-MASK BURST THROUGH THE DOOR WAVING A GUN, DEMANDING MONEY FROM THE REGISTER. IT WAS THE THIRD TIME IN RECENT WEEKS THE STORE WAS ROBBED BY A MAN IN A CLOWN MASK, AS CAPTURED ON THIS SURVEILLANCE VIDEO. BUT WHEN THE MASKED-MAN RAN OUT WITH THE CASH, THIS TIME THE CLERK DIDN'T LET HIM GET AWAY.

REPORTER, WJTV LIVE BROADCAST

The clerk went after him and shot him outside the store...

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

TEN ROUNDS, ACCORDING TO THE POLICE REPORT. TWENTY-THREE-YEAR-OLD TERRENCE PRIOR WAS PRONOUNCED DEAD AT THE HOSPITAL.

REPORTER, WJTV LIVE BROADCAST

Store clerk shooting is our big story at five. It is the second time in a week...

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

ONE WEEK: TWO ROBBERIES, TWO SUSPECTED THIEVES SHOT FROM BEHIND, TWO CLERKS SAYING THE CASTLE DOCTRINE GAVE THEM THE RIGHT TO USE DEADLY FORCE. BUT IS IT OR IS IT NOT SELF DEFENSE TO SHOOT A FLEEING FELON? IS IT LEGAL TO SHOOT A MAN FOR STEALING A CASE OF BEER?

MALCOLM MCMILLIN, JACKSON POLICE CHIEF AND HINDS COUNTY SHERIFF

The punishment just doesn't fit the crime.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

MALCOLM MCMILLIN IS AN OLD- FASHIONED LAW AND ORDER POLICE CHIEF WHO ALSO WEARS THE BADGE OF COUNTY SHERIFF. CHIEF MCMILLIN SAYS CITIZENS HAVE A RIGHT TO PROTECT THEIR PROPERTY, BUT HE SAYS THE CASTLE DOCTRINE LAW MAY BE MAKING PEOPLE TOO QUICK ON THE DRAW.

MCMILLIN

I, as a police officer, have been told for-- ever since I've been on the department, that you can't shoot at a fleeing felon. You come up on a burglar, and he flees the building and he's trying to get away, you don't have that right to shoot him.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

BUT WHETHER CIVILIANS HAVE THAT RIGHT HAS BEEN AN OPEN QUESTION SINCE 2006, WHEN THE MISSISSIPPI LEGISLATURE PASSED THE CASTLE DOCTRINE. HERE IN JACKSON THE CONSENSUS ON THE NEW LAW CAN BE SUMMED UP IN THIS HEADLINE: CONFUSION. THESE DAYS, IT SEEMS NO ONE IS EXACTLY SURE WHO CAN SHOOT WHOM, WHEN, OR FOR WHAT.

MCMILLIN

The castle doctrine, I think, has good points. And I know what it was meant to do. The thing that I'm concerned about is people have a misconception of what they can or can't do.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

IN JACKSON, POLICE AND NEWS REPORTS INDICATE THE NEW CASTLE DOCTRINE HAS ALREADY BEEN INVOKED BY AT LEAST 14 CIVILIANS WHO USED DEADLY

FORCE -- FROM TENANTS IN HOUSES TO BUSINESS OWNERS TO STORE CLERKS. MANY OF THEIR TARGETS WERE UNARMED OR FLEEING, OR BOTH. SEVEN OF THEM WERE KILLED. BUT ONLY MR. SABRINDER PANNU, THE CLERK WHO KILLED THE BEER SHOPLIFTER, HAS BEEN CHARGED WITH MURDER.

MCMILLIN

People are at the stage now where they don't feel that the police can protect them. That they have to do more. And that there's a general feeling of-- insecurity. And it's not just here. I think that it applies everywhere.

RATHER

You know I'm a Texan. And it at least used to be sort of popular to say, "God made us free. But Colt made us equal." Short way of saying I'm gonna pack. I'm gonna pack a gun. I'm gonna have a gun in my house and if you could be trouble, then I might be able to blow your arse off.

MCMILLIN

I don't have to be a Texan to believe that, do I?

RATHER

No.

MCMILLIN

Okay, 'cause then we definitely agree on that. Don't come into my home and threaten me with bodily harm and put me in fear of my life 'cause I'm where I'm supposed to be.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

BUT THE CHIEF SAYS THE CASTLE LAW DOES NOT GIVE CIVILIANS A FREE PASS TO OPEN FIRE AND HE CITES THE TWO CONVENIENCE STORE SLAYINGS AS

PROOF. THE POLICE DECIDED THAT IN THE CASE OF THE ARMED ROBBERY -- A FELONY -- SHOOTING WAS JUSTIFIABLE UNDER THE CASTLE DOCTRINE LAW. BUT IN THE CASE OF THE SHOPLIFTED BEER -- A MISDEMEANOR -- IT WAS MURDER.

MCMILLIN

I'm sayin' the law specifies a felony committed upon 'em. Not a misdemeanor. So, I think we have to draw the line somewhere. We're not going to kill people, we're not going to shoot people over a case of beer.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

BUT ACCORDING TO MR. SINGH, THE CASTLE DOCTRINE GAVE CIVILIANS THE RIGHT TO STOP THE THIEVES -- WHETHER THEY'RE TAKING CASH FROM THE REGISTER OR A CASE OF BEER.

SINGH

This is our castle. This is our bread and butter. Just like in a house, this is our property. You got to do whatever you can to protect it.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

JAMES HAWTHORNE'S FAMILY ADMITS TAKING THE BEER THAT NIGHT WAS A MISTAKE. IT WAS NOT HIS FIRST. HAWTHORNE HAD A CRIMINAL RECORD. BUT THE FAMILY SAYS THEY BELIEVE THAT HIS WRONGDOINGS WERE FOR THE COURTS TO JUDGE - NOT THE GAS MART CLERK, SARBRINDER PANNU.

KIMBERLY ROBINSON, JAMES HAWTHORNE'S SISTER

What he did was vigilante justice to me because he took the law into his own hands.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

PANNU GOT *HIS* DAY IN COURT AND ARGUED HE SHOT HAWTHORNE IN SELF DEFENSE. A JURY AGREED AND DECIDED HE WAS NOT GUILTY OF MURDER.

RATHER

Do you or do you not think that the castle doctrine has shifted the line - between crime fighting and vigilantism?

MCMILLIN

Oh, yeah-- I mean, we have evidence of that already. I think this can lead to that.

RATHER

Vigilantism?

MCMILLIN

Right, I mean anarchy. I mean we're gonna shoot people for soapin' windows and spray-painting the sidewalk in front of your house. Rollin' your trees with toilet paper? That's the point I'm getting at. If it goes from shopliftin', you know, where will it end?

RATHER (ON CAMERA)

IN JUNE PENNSYLVANIA BECAME THE 27TH STATE TO ENACT A CASTLE DOCTRINE LAW THAT PERMITS CITIZENS TO USE DEADLY FORCE TO PROTECT THEIR HOMES, BUSINESSES AND VEHICLES. THE NRA CALLED IT A "COMMON-SENSE MEASURE."

AND THAT'S OUR PROGRAM FOR TONIGHT. WE ALWAYS LIKE HEARING WHAT YOU HAVE TO SAY, SO PLEASE JOIN IN ON THE DISCUSSION ON OUR FACEBOOK PAGE, OR SEND YOUR COMMENTS TO VIEWER@HD.NET. FROM NEW YORK, FOR HDNET, DAN RATHER REPORTING. GOOD NIGHT.