

NY defense lawyer: Silk Road creator is not a drug dealer

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Supporters of Ross William Ulbricht hold signs during the jury selection for his trial outside of federal court in New York, Tuesday, Jan. 13, 2015. Murder-for-hire allegations are central to Ulbrichtt's trial. He is charged with running an online black market where drugs were sold as easily as books and electronics. (AP Photo/Seth Wenig)

A San Francisco man who launched an underground website as an economic experiment before abandoning it was fooled into taking the fall when investigators concluded it was used almost solely for drug dealing, a defense lawyer told jurors Tuesday after the government portrayed his client as the mastermind of a worldwide digital drug market.

Ross William Ulbricht was "left holding the bag" by operators of the Silk Road website after they were alerted that federal investigators were closing in, defense attorney Joshua Dratel said in his opening statement at Ulbricht's criminal trial.

"Ross is not a drug dealer. Ross is not a kingpin. Ross is not involved in a conspiracy," Dratel said. The 30-year-old has pleaded not guilty to charges of narcotics trafficking, computer hacking and money laundering.

Minutes earlier, Assistant U.S. Attorney Timothy Howard described Ulbricht as all of those things and more, calling him a kingpin who created a website where "anybody anywhere in the world could buy and sell dangerous drugs with a click of a mouse."

Howard said it was "as quick and easy as ordinary online shopping."

About a dozen protesters stood in front of the courthouse for part of the day with signs and jury nullification fliers in support of Ulbricht. After the trial finished for the day, Judge Katherine Forrest said she would consider establishing an anonymous jury to protect them if the protests persisted.

Dratel said: "People think they're helping the defense by being out there. They're not."



Supporters of Ross William Ulbricht hold signs during the jury selection for his trial outside of federal court in New York, Tuesday, Jan. 13, 2015. Murder-for-hire allegations are central to the trial of Ulbricht, charged with running an online black market where drugs were sold as easily as books and electronics. (AP Photo/Seth Wenig)

In his opening, Howard said Ulbricht made \$18 million in bitcoins by enabling drug dealers to earn over \$200 million through more than a million drug sales after the website was activated in 2011 until it was shut down by the government in October 2013.

Howard said 95 percent of items sold on Silk Road were illegal drugs, though the site also featured fake passports and tools to hack into computers and email accounts.

"This is a case about a dark secret part of the Internet that was home to an enormous marketplace for the sale of illegal drugs," he said.

The prosecutor said Ulbricht operated "like a traditional drug boss," setting rules for thousands of drug dealers who catered to customers who could "pick their drug of choice and have it delivered right to their doorstep."

Howard said Ulbricht was willing to use threats and violence to protect his turf. He alluded to murders-for-hire that Dratel dismissed as plots in which there was "no evidence the people involved ever existed." Ulbricht also is charged in Baltimore federal court in an attempted murder scheme.

Ulbricht disputes he operated online under the alias "Dread Pirate Roberts," a reference to a swashbuckling character in "The Princess Bride."

But Howard said Ulbricht was "caught red handed" in a public library in San Francisco on the day he was arrested, talking online as "Dread Pirate Roberts" with an undercover FBI agent who had infiltrated the website as a trusted member of its support staff.

He said trial witnesses would include a computer programmer who provided Ulbricht advice in 2010 and 2011.

The prosecutor said Ulbricht confessed he was running a website that sold [illegal drugs](#) and "bragged that he was the mastermind."

Dratel said Ulbricht created Silk Road as "an economic experiment" but handed it off to others after a few months because it was "too stressful for him."

He said Ulbricht was lured back to be "in that library that day to take the fall for the people operating the [website](#)."

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