

Who is Barry County, Michigan Sheriff Dar Leaf?

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As details continue to emerge surrounding the right-wing, interstate conspiracy to kidnap, try, and execute Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer and Virginia Governor Ralph Northam, Barry County Sheriff Dar Leaf publicly solidarized himself with the alleged conspirators.

In one statement to Grand Rapids FOX17, Leaf mused, "Are they trying to kidnap? Because a lot of people are angry with the governor, and they want her arrested. So are they trying to arrest or was it a kidnap attempt?"

This statement was given in response to questions about Leaf's political connections to the right-wing militia members who are being indicted. In May, Dar Leaf appeared on stage at a rally in Grand Rapids against Michigan's stay-at-home order alongside William Null, one of the alleged conspirators.

The extent of Leaf's political connections to the fascist groups remains unclear, but his own political history highlights the rise of the far-right into the main stream of US politics and the danger posed by these fascists in the coming period.

Dar Leaf has been Sheriff of Barry County since 2004, according to CBS affiliate WWMT. Online election records for Barry County only go back to 2012, and these records show that he ran unopposed in 2012 and 2016, and that he is running unopposed in 2020. A rural county located between the cities of Grand Rapids, Lansing, and Kalamazoo, Barry County voted 60–70% Republican in the last three presidential elections.

Starting in 2014, Leaf began developing a media persona of militarism and distrust of the government, combined with an orientation towards religious groups. This process accelerated after the election of Donald Trump in 2016.

In August 2014, Dar Leaf gave a radio interview to WMUK for a piece on the 1033 program of police militarization. Playing on the public's horror at school shootings, Leaf attempted to justify his department's owning an armored Humvee. "So this gives me peace of mind. If you look at it, if you picture little kids, if you pack them all up through here, you could fit 30 kids in here. It's gonna be tight, but I can pack them up in here and get them out."

In what might be considered a fascist dog whistle, he added, "We're not here to intimidate people. This is still a badge, it's not a swastika. We have to prepare for the worst. We have to prepare for things you don't like talking about."

After the occupation of Malheur National Wildlife Refuge by a right-wing militia in Oregon, Leaf gave a television interview to WWMT in support of right-wing militias in Michigan. "We don't just have a right to protect ourselves from our government, we also have a duty to do it. Militias, what they're doing is legal," he said. "It depends on how far they go. There is going to be a point, certain things they're going to have to do before they pull the guns out and so on."

In November 2017, WWMT ran a segment of Sheriff Leaf appealing to churches to arm themselves against mass shooters. Claiming that he has seen increased interest in armed-guard training from churchgoers, and acknowledging that his department can take 15–20 minutes to respond to calls, he said, "If there is [sic] some people who are there who could defend themselves then that is all the better for people inside that church."

Leaf gave a scaremongering television interview to NBC affiliate WOOD in November 2018 about overcrowding at his county jail. "This is definitely a public safety issue," he said. "We had 16 we were able

to release today. Yeah, you probably passed them on the way walking back out the door. If they were grinning ear-to-ear, that was them.” In the interview, Leaf also proposed the solution: a new \$16–20 million jail facility. The next year in November 2019, Leaf gave a camera walk-through to WWMT of his dilapidated facilities in order to garner public support for the new jail. This November, a millage is on the ballot to pay for the facilities.

Since April, Dar Leaf has been outspoken in his opposition to the stay-at-home order in Michigan. After four northern-Michigan sheriffs announced they would not enforce the order, Leaf issued a statement that he would follow suit. Citing Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia’s majority opinion in the 1996 Supreme Court case *Printz v. USA*, which concerned federal background checks for purchasing firearms, Leaf said the other sheriffs were serving the public’s interest. “They don’t want to start to see us lose our liberties, and then never give them back again.”

This was followed shortly after by Leaf’s May 18 appearance at the “American Patriot Rally” in downtown Grand Rapids, where Leaf was photographed on stage next to the alleged conspirator William Null. Speaking to WWMT reporters on the scene, Leaf downplayed the danger of the virus and made the economic case for forcing workers back into unsafe conditions in order to maintain the flow of profits. “The curve is flattening out. We’re doing fine. Pretty soon, Michigan is going to have to decide whether you want to go back to work, accept the fact that this COVID is going to be here for a while. Are we going to go back to work and help the economy out, suck it up with COVID, or are we going to stay at home and suck it up with COVID?”

On June 4, Dar Leaf’s public Facebook page, which has since been removed, condemned the use of mail-in ballots and suggested that they would lead to widespread voter fraud. After commenting that he had received a ballot application for a deceased former resident at his house, Leaf said, “If you have received one similar please bring it to the Barry County Sheriff’s Office. Do not throw it away.” After asserting that Sheriffs are responsible for investigating election fraud, he concluded the initial post, “Let’s make sure we have a clean election this year.”

This follows the narrative laid out by Trump that the

November election will be illegitimate because of widespread mail-in voter fraud, a claim which has no factual basis but which nonetheless plays a role in the Trump campaigns coup plot for November. As the ongoing revelations about the Michigan conspiracy show, Trump’s plot also involves right-wing militias with ties to fascistic police like Dar Leaf.



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