

Retired Navy commander charged in Capitol assault worked for FBI, his lawyer claims

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Retired Navy commander and alleged Oath Keeper leader, Thomas Caldwell, 66, worked for the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) as a section chief and has held a “top secret” security clearance since 1979, according to a motion filed by his lawyer on Monday. The motion seeks Caldwell’s release from house arrest. He is facing multiple charges, including conspiracy, for his role in the January 6 assault on the U.S. Capitol.

Of the roughly 200 people thus far facing federal charges in connection with the pro-Trump insurrection, those hit with the most serious charges are Oath Keeper and Proud Boy militia members who spearheaded the assault on the Capitol. That attack was the culmination of a conspiracy headed by President Donald Trump aimed at blocking the congressional certification of the electoral vote, won by Joe Biden, and paving the way for Trump to declare martial law and assume dictatorial powers.

Prosecutors allege that Caldwell, from Berryville, Virginia, along with Army veteran Jessica Watkins, 38, and Marine veteran Donovan Cowl, 50, both from Woodstock, Ohio, are members of the fascistic Oath Keepers militia group. The Oath Keepers played a leading role in organizing the fascist mob that invaded the Capitol with the intention of capturing and/or killing members of Congress and Vice President Mike Pence, who was presiding over the joint session called to officially count the electoral vote.

Previous charging documents showed messages allegedly sent between Caldwell and his fellow insurrectionists as they were storming the building. One of the messages received by Caldwell reportedly said that “all members [of Congress] are in the tunnels under the capital. Seal them in turn on gas.”

Another message read: “Tom all legislators are down in the Tunnels 3 floors down,” and “go through back

house chamber doors facing N left down hallway down steps.”

In seeking his client’s release from house arrest, attorney Thomas Plofchan claimed that Caldwell is not a member of the far-right group and instead has “been vetted and found numerous times as a person worthy of the trust and confidence of the United States government.”

Testifying to the close connections between his client and the US government, Plofchan wrote that after his stint with the FBI, Caldwell founded a consulting firm that did business with the Drug Enforcement Administration, the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Coast Guard and the Army Personnel Command.

As of this writing, the FBI has yet to confirm or deny Caldwell’s claims. Peculiarly, Plofchan’s motion states that his client was paid as a GS-12, which is a significantly lower pay grade than what is typically associated with an FBI section chief—a position that is analogous to a special agent in charge—the highest pay grade for a field agent.

If Caldwell was previously employed by the FBI, he was not the only participant in the siege who has had a working relationship with the domestic intelligence agency. Last month Proud Boy Chairman Enrique Tarrio was revealed to have been a “prolific” FBI informant.

In addition to his potential ties to the FBI, Caldwell is an active member of his local Republican Party. He was chosen as a delegate to Loudoun County’s Republican convention in Berryville last March, according to Virginia Republican state delegate Dave LaRock, who was also at the Capitol on January 6. In an interview with the *Loudoun Times-Mirror* after the assault, LaRock said that “Tom is a wonderful man” who has

been “very supportive of me.”

Defending the coup attempt, LaRock issued a statement on January 7 in which he claimed that “paid provocateurs” were “sent in to taint an otherwise orderly protest.” He then blamed “several decades of secularism and socialism seeping into our schools and our culture,” which have brought “severe division to America.”

Such examples of the integration of fascists into the Republican Party and its political apparatus at the federal, state and local levels abound. The GOP is increasingly aligning itself with militia groups, such as the Oath Keepers, the III Percenters and the Proud Boys.

A recent article by the *New York Times* entitled, “‘Its Own Domestic Army’: How the GOP Allied Itself With Militants,” details the intimate connections between Michigan Republican politicians and militia groups.

The lead organizer of the armed, anti-COVID-19 lockdown protest at the Michigan state Capitol in Lansing last April 30 was Republican planning commissioner Ryan Kelley. Kelley, who has announced that he will be running for governor in 2022, admitted in an interview with WMMT last week that he was at the US Capitol on January 6. He has openly courted militia groups, telling the *New York Times*, “Becoming too closely aligned with militias—is that a bad thing?”

The *Times* noted that of the six Michiganders arrested so far for their role in the assault on the US Capitol, one, a former Marine, had previously joined armed militiamen to disrupt the counting of ballots in Detroit in the November election. That protest was organized by Meshawn Maddock. The *Times* wrote, “Ms. Maddock helped fill 19 buses to Washington for the Jan. 6 rally and defended the April armed intrusion into the Michigan Capitol.”

The highest-ranking Republican state official to ingratiate himself with the militia movement has been State Senate Majority Leader Mike Shirkey. Two weeks after armed militia members forced their way into the Michigan state Capitol on April 30, Shirkey attended the American Patriot Rally in Grand Rapids to speak in support of the militias’ efforts.

The *Times* wrote: “Prominent party members formed bonds with militias or gave tacit approval to armed

activists using intimidation in a series of rallies and confrontations around the state. That intrusion into the Statehouse now looks like a portent of the assault halfway across the country months later at the United States Capitol.”

Flanked by Michael Null, who has since been charged in a plot to kidnap and assassinate Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer, Shirkey thanked his fascist friends for threatening lawmakers. “Sometimes politicians get it backward,” he said. “That’s when these groups need to stand up and test that assertion of authority by the government. We need you now more than ever.”

Demonstrating that the feckless response of the Democratic Party to the coup attempt has done nothing but embolden the far right, on Tuesday, MLive reported that during a meeting with county Republican Party leaders, Shirkey claimed that the January 6 coup attempt was a “hoax from day one.”

“That wasn’t Trump’s people,” he said. “That was all prearranged. It was arranged by somebody who was funding it. ... It was all staged.”

Repeating a well-worn anti-Semitic trope, Shirkey suggested that “there are people above elected officials. There are puppeteers.”

After a video of the meeting was released, he issued a brief statement apologizing for his “insensitive comments.”



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