As federal trial opens, prosecutor lays out evidence of fascist plot to kidnap and murder Michigan Governor Whitmer

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The trial of four far-right militia men charged with plotting to kidnap and kill Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer ended its third day in the US District Court in Grand Rapids, Michigan on Thursday.

According to court records, the trial was then suspended due to "an essential trial participant" testing positive for COVID-19. It is expected to resume on March 17.

Jury selection was completed on Tuesday, followed by opening arguments on Wednesday and Thursday and initial questioning of witnesses.

The defendants—Adam Fox, 38; Barry Croft, Jr., 46; Daniel Harris, 24; and Brandon Caserta, 33—are accused of conspiring to kidnap Whitmer in retaliation for temporary anti-COVID lockdown measures she imposed in March of 2020. Three of the defendants are also charged with conspiracy to use a weapon of mass destruction. If convicted, all four face up to life in prison. The trial is expected to last a month.

The defendants were arrested on October 8, 2020, following the issuance of a federal complaint two days earlier. Their arrest and trial were the outcome of an FBI investigation that began in the spring of 2020 based on information obtained from social media that a "group of individuals was discussing the violent overthrow of certain government and law enforcement components."

Initially, a total of 14 men, some of whom were linked to the paramilitary Michigan Watchmen and the fascist Boogaloo movement, were arrested and charged in connection with the terror plot. Six were indicted by federal authorities and the remaining eight were charged by Michigan prosecutors. Two of the six indicted by the US Justice Department, Ty Garbin and Kaleb Franks, subsequently turned state's evidence and are expected to testify for the prosecution in the current trial.

The prosecution alleges that the plot was conceived in April of 2020, the same month that far-right militia forces held armed demonstrations at a number of state capitols calling for the lifting of temporary lockdowns and other social distancing measures taken by state governments to contain the spread of the coronavirus. Then-President Trump and his fascistic allies within the Republican Party encouraged the protests, replete with Confederate and Nazi insignia. Billionaire far-right Republicans, including the Koch Brothers and the Grand Rapids-based DeVos family, funded groups that organized the protests.

Following such demonstrations on April 15 at the Michigan State Capitol in Lansing and the Capitol buildings in Virginia and Minnesota, Trump notoriously tweeted: "Liberate Michigan," "Liberate Minnesota," and "Liberate Virginia."

The Michigan plot was part of a broader conspiracy by fascistic militia elements to kidnap and/or kill governors who were resisting the efforts of the corporate ruling elite, spearheaded by Trump, to lift all pandemic restrictions and force workers back into unsafe work locations, factories and schools. Plots were reported against Virginia Governor Ralph Northam—like Whitmer, a Democrat—and Ohio Governor Mike DeWine, a Republican.

These plots and the forces involved were incorporated into the conspiracy led by the Trump White House that culminated in the January 6, 2021 storming of the US Capitol for the purpose of overturning the presidential election and imposing a fascistic regime.

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In his opening argument on Wednesday, Assistant US Attorney Jonathan Roth outlined evidence that the plotters planned to kidnap Whitmer at her vacation home in Elk Rapids, Michigan, hogtie her, blow up a nearby bridge and kill any police who sought to stop them. Roth told the jury: “To accomplish that, they would shoot, blow up and kill anybody who got in their way, in their own words, creating a war zone here in Michigan.”

Citing evidence provided by informants and surveillance of the defendants, Roth said they cased Whitmer’s vacation house, drew up maps, held training exercises, conducted target shooting using human silhouettes, and built practice bombs.

“This was not just talk,” he said. “Their actions were louder than and just as disturbing as their words. It is their actions that show just how serious they were about doing this.”

Roth said the defendants were followers of the far-right Boogaloo movement, which calls for a second American Civil War. Prosecutors showed the jury a photo of alleged ringleader Adam Fox carrying a rifle on the lawn of the Michigan State Capitol in 2020, wearing the standard Boogaloo attire—a floral Hawaiian shirt.

As for the defendants’ words, he cited Fox, as saying, “We just want the bitch, we want the tyrant bitch.” Other suspects talked about murdering her and crushing her skull.

Defendant Barry Croft, Jr. was recorded in April 2020 as saying, “All it’s going to take is one state to burn out and hang its governor and then those dominos will start to fall.”

All four defense attorneys presented their clients as individuals enraged by the pandemic restrictions who made violent boasts among themselves, often under the influence of drugs, but never intended to carry out their threats and violated no laws. They were, according to the defense narrative, merely hapless victims of an FBI plot to entrap them and set them up for prosecution.

Christopher Gibbons, who represents Fox, played up the alleged role of “Dan,” an undercover informant. Gibbons said it was Dan who recorded conversations by members of the group and took the lead in planning actions and training exercises.

“Dan is continuing to provide access, but there’s no crime,” Gibbons told the jury. “The Watchmen aren’t breaking the law. The Watchmen are talking. They’re talking political talk, militia talk. But they’re not breaking the law.” He described his client as a broke “misfit.”

Joshua Blanchard, the attorney for Barry Croft, Jr., said, “This was stoned, crazy talk, and not a plan.” Referring to a militia meeting in Dublin, Ohio, he said, “Virtually everyone there was stoned, absolutely bonkers, out-of-their mind stoned.”

The presiding judge, Robert James Jonker, is a George W. Bush appointee. Jonker allowed a motion to release the names and identities of the FBI informants who will be testifying against the militia members. Before the jury was selected, he told the prospective jurors that they were not to consider the politics of the defendants. “The only thing that matters is the evidence, what witnesses say under oath, and what the exhibits show you. That’s the only basis of your decision,” he instructed the jury pool.

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