

Prosecution rests in the trial of men charged with plot against the governor of Michigan

Kevin Reed
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Federal prosecutors rested their case after calling a final witness on Wednesday in the trial of four men who are accused of conspiring to kidnap and kill Michigan Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer prior to the 2020 presidential election.

It was the 13th day of the jury trial in US District Court in Grand Rapids, Michigan, of Adam Fox, 38, Daniel Harris, 24, and Brandon Caserta, 33, from Michigan, and Barry Croft Jr., 46, from Delaware. The men were arrested on October 8, 2020, for plotting to take Whitmer hostage, tie her up and execute her in a tribunal in response to the governor's COVID-19 policies.

Chastity Knight, 40, answered questions from prosecutors about Croft, her longtime companion, telling them he was “antigovernment” and “thought the government's not for him. The government doesn't help the people out. They like to line their own pockets.”

Knight, who is from Bear, Delaware, cried on the stand when she identified Croft's daughter as the person who offered him something to eat while he was preparing an explosive during training in Luther, Michigan. During that training session, Croft was recorded saying to his young daughter, “Honey, I'm making explosives. Can you get away from me, please? ... I love you. Get out of here.”

On Tuesday, the prosecution presented the jury with Croft's Facebook posts from 2020, including one from Memorial Day that had a photo of a noose and said, “Which governor is going to end up dragged off and hung for treason first? It's really a spin the bottle match at this point and I'm sure a few mayors are in the running!!! God bless the constitutional republic!!!”

Several days later, he posted on Facebook about seizing state capitols and “putting these tyrants'

addresses out here for rioters.” According to the FBI this post was liked by accused coconspirator Fox.

Other Facebook posts from defendant Caserta were presented. In March 2020, shortly after Whitmer imposed a statewide lockdown order, Caserta wrote, “The government has stolen enough from me. They've claimed ownership over my body and my property. Now they take away my place to live and source of income because of this?”

Caserta called the governor a “psychopath” and wrote that the purpose of the Second Amendment is the “ability to kill agents of the government when they become tyrannical.” In May 2020, Caserta posted, “I may kill dozens of agents but eventually die in the process. I will not be chipped and I will not be vaccinated even if that means losing everything I have.”

In August, Caserta wrote that he would shoot “tyrants” after beating them with his hands and feet, letting them “beg til they couldn't beg any more because their mouth is so full of blood.”

He continued, “There is no remorse for immoral cowards. Empathy is only reserved for the good.”

In response, Caserta's attorney, Michael Hills, said that none of the messages presented by the prosecution referred to kidnapping. The lawyers for the four defendants have argued that their clients were frequently high on marijuana and easily manipulated by the FBI. They claim the men would never have followed through on their wild verbal threats if they had not been goaded along by government informants.

On Monday, undercover FBI agent Tim Bates who was known to the group as “Red,” testified that he fooled the others into believing that he knew someone in the mining industry who could get high-grade explosives.

He described Fox and Croft as leaders of a plot to kidnap Whitmer and said they were thrilled as they watched videos of powerful explosives, before driving north to scout her vacation home. The plans to make a bomb is key to the prosecutor's case because it was to be used to blow up a bridge near Whitmer's second home in northern Michigan to divert police response to the kidnapping. The men were arrested when they attempted to purchase the explosives they intended to use in the bomb-making.

A total of 14 men, some of whom were members of the militia group Wolverine Watchmen and linked to the fascist Boogaloo movement, were arrested and charged. Six were indicted on federal crimes and the remaining eight were charged with state offenses. Two of the six charged by the US Justice Department, Ty Garbin and Kaleb Franks, subsequently pleaded guilty and testified against their codefendants during the trial.

In their testimony, both Garbin and Franks said they willingly participated in the development of the kidnapping plan and trained for it. Garbin revealed that the kidnapping plot was intended to ignite a civil war in the US involving antigovernment groups that would prevent Joe Biden from winning the presidential election. Franks said he planned to sacrifice his life in an armed confrontation with the governor's security team and law enforcement officers.

Other key prosecution testimony was provided by several FBI informants who joined the Wolverine Watchmen after law enforcement officers were alerted to discussion of violence against government officials by members of the militia group.

When the prosecution rested the defense moved for a direct acquittal on the grounds that there was insufficient evidence against the men to move the case to jury deliberations. This standard motion in a criminal trial was quickly denied by US District Judge Robert Jonker, who said the testimony of Garbin and Franks was sufficient evidence to move forward.

The seriousness of the case and its connection with the wider threat of fascism in the US was highlighted on Wednesday when FBI agents raided a home in the Detroit suburb of Hazel Park following alleged death threats made against trial participants. According to an FBI representative, threats were made against Judge Jonker, two defense attorneys and one witness. The FBI said no arrests have been made and gave no details

about the nature of the threats.

The plot against Whitmer was part of a broader conspiracy by fascistic militia elements to kidnap and/or kill governors who opposed Donald Trump's attempt to lift all pandemic restrictions and force workers back into unsafe work locations, factories and schools in 2020. In addition to the plot against Whitmer, plots were also reported against Virginia Democratic Governor Ralph Northam and Ohio Republican Governor Mike DeWine.

Following demonstrations on April 15 at the Michigan State Capitol in Lansing and the Capitol buildings in Virginia and Minnesota, Donald Trump notoriously tweeted: "Liberate Michigan," "Liberate Minnesota," and "Liberate Virginia." Trump and other fascistic figures within the Republican Party encouraged the protests that included Confederate flags and Nazi emblems. These demonstrations and the plots against the governors were dress rehearsals for the attempt to overturn the results of the November 2020 elections that culminated in the mob assault on the US Capitol in Washington D.C. on January 6, 2021.



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