

Oath Keepers trial documents White House-militia plot to overturn 2020 election

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This past Friday marked the end of the first week of the seditious conspiracy trial of five members of the fascist Oath Keepers militia group.

In addition to the founder of the group, Elmer Stewart Rhodes III, former Army soldier Jessica Watkins, former Navy commander Thomas Caldwell, former Army soldier Kenneth Harrelson and Kelly Meggs, the leader of the Florida chapter of the Oath Keepers, are on trial.

All of the accused have pled not guilty to the Civil War-era charge, which carries a 20-year prison sentence. The defendants are also facing felony charges for conspiring to stop the certification of the election. If found guilty, they could all face decades in prison.

In laying out an evidentiary case that Rhodes and the others worked out a plan to travel to Washington D.C. and engage in violence to stop the congressional certification of the 2020 presidential election and keep Donald Trump in power, Department of Justice (DoJ) prosecutors have presented text messages, audio recordings, phone calls and statements from FBI agents, as well as testimony from three former Oath Keepers.

Each day of the trial, prosecutors have highlighted communications between Rhodes and longtime Trump political crony—and honorary member of the Proud Boys militia—Roger Stone.

On the opening days of the trial, prosecutors questioned FBI agent Michael Palian. Palian gave testimony about text messages Rhodes sent to the “FOS” (“Friends of Stone”) encrypted chat group on November 7, 2020, the day Joe Biden was declared the winner by the major media outlets. In the messages, Rhodes asked the group, “What’s the plan? We need to roll.”

Rhodes, a former Army paratrooper, congressional staffer for former Republican Representative Ron Paul, and Yale-educated lawyer, added: “I’m on my way to [D.C.] now, with my Oath Keepers tactical leaders for a possible DC [operation] to do a leaders recon and make plans. I’m available to meet face to face.”

The Friends of Stone chat group is led by Roger Stone, who, like Trump, has yet to be charged with a crime more than 21 months after the January 6, 2021 attack on the Capitol.

Prosecutors said that in the group chat, Rhodes presented a “step-by-step” action plan based on a video produced by Aleksandar Savi?, a

right-wing academic. In the video, Savi? compares the 2020 US election to the 2000 election in Serbia, saying, “When they declare their fake victory, you need to start massive civil disobedience.”

Savi? said this was not enough, however, and Trump supporters needed to have the “stamina” to “go further.”

“Yes, I’m calling you for violence, if that is the only way. Who cares? Yes, I do. Here: taboo, broken.”

After presenting a plan to the FOS group that mirrored the plan posited by Savi?, Rhodes wrote, “So will you step up and push Trump to FINALLY take decisive action?”

Prosecutors presented an audio recording of an online Oath Keepers meeting held November 9, 2020, two days after Rhodes texted about “the plan” to the FOS group. The Oath Keepers meeting included over 100 members of the group, including leaders such as Rhodes and Meggs.

It was recorded by the Oath Keepers West Virginia chapter leader Abdullah Rashid, a US Marine Corps veteran. Rashid testified at the trial that he began recording the meeting because what he was hearing from Rhodes made it sound as if “we were going to war with the United States government.”

Rashid said Rhodes described a plan “to overthrow the US government and start shooting everybody and beating up Antifa and beating up [Black Lives Matter]. That’s what I understood it to be.”

He said he continued to attend Oath Keeper meetings throughout November of 2020, and that with each meeting the violent rhetoric grew more extreme. “It sounded horrible. I didn’t like what I joined,” Rashid said, according to CNN.

After the November 9 call, Rashid decided to leave the Oath Keepers. Worried that Rhodes and others were planning for violence in Washington D.C., Rashid wrote an email to the US Capitol Police in November 2020 describing Rhodes as “a friggin wacko.”

Rashid testified that after failing to receive a response from the Capitol Police, he sent a full recording of the November 9 meeting to the FBI tip line on November 25, 2020. Rashid said, and FBI agent Palian confirmed, that the agency did not seek to interview Rashid until two months after the January 6, 2021 attack on Congress, after

Rashid had re-sent the recording to the FBI.

In his testimony last week, Michael Adams, a former coordinator for the Florida chapter of the Oath Keepers and organizer of the November 9 virtual meeting, said that he too grew disillusioned with the group as the January 6 certification drew near. Adams said he decided to leave the group after Rhodes published two public letters in December 2020 calling on Trump to invoke the Insurrection Act and federalize the Oath Keepers as his personal militia to oversee the “re-running” of the 2020 election.

Trump had previously threatened to invoke the Insurrection Act in June 2020 during mass anti-police violence protests. Since the 2014 police killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, the Oath Keepers have worked hand in glove with local police departments, from which they heavily recruit, in terrorizing peaceful anti-police violence protesters.

On Thursday, in significant testimony highlighting the close connections between the Trump White House and the militia group, another Oath Keeper-turned-government witness, John Zimmerman, testified that Rhodes told him he had the phone number of a Secret Service agent to whom he had previously spoken regarding a September 2020 Trump rally for which the Oath Keepers provided “security.”

Zimmerman also testified that the Oath Keepers previously used “QRFs” (quick reaction forces) at pro-Trump rallies held in Washington in November and December 2020. It is unclear what coordination the QRFs had with the Secret Service.

Zimmerman, the former head of the North Carolina Oath Keepers chapter and a US Army veteran, said that the QRF at the November 14 “Million MAGA March” had a stockpile of at least a dozen rifles and several handguns stowed in a van parked at Arlington National Cemetery.

Refuting the lie promoted by Trump-aligned politicians and complacent middle class elements that January 6 was simply a protest that “got out of hand,” prosecutors have laid stress on the role of former Navy Commander Thomas Caldwell in the extensive planning for the attack.

They presented photos they said that Caldwell took during “reconnaissance trips” to D.C. between the November 2020 election and January 6, 2021. Prosecutors claim Caldwell provided the Oath Keepers leadership with maps of the city and possible routes for QRFs to deploy to D.C. He is accused of offering his Virginia home as a base of operations and suggesting that QRFs use boats to ferry weapons across the Potomac River to the capital.

Prosecutors claim that in a Facebook message posted on January 6 after the coup attempt had failed, Caldwell wrote: “If we’d had guns I guarantee we would have killed 100 politicians. They ran off and were spirited away through their underground tunnels like the rats they were.”

While some members of the Oath Keepers split from the group in the lead-up to January 6, other high-level members of the group, including

Rhodes and former Oath Keeper lead counsel Kellye SoRelle, continued to organize in furtherance of Trump’s coup plot through the Friends of Stone chat group. In addition to right-wing media personalities and Republican operatives, the group counted among its members the former chairman of the Proud Boys, Henry “Enrique” Tarrío.

Tarrío, like Rhodes, has been charged with seditious conspiracy for his role in Trump’s failed coup. The trial for Tarrío, an admitted FBI informant, and four other high-level members of the Proud Boys—Ethan Nordean, Joseph Biggs, Zachary Rehl and Dominic Pezzola—is set to begin in December.

This past Thursday, Jeremy Joseph Bertino, 43, became the first member of the Proud Boys to plead guilty to seditious conspiracy. The former North Carolina Proud Boy was a top lieutenant to Tarrío. He has agreed to testify against his former comrades in the hope of securing a reduced sentence.

Bertino participated in several Trump “Million MAGA March” rallies throughout November and December of 2020. At the December Million MAGA March in Washington D.C., Bertino was stabbed, which prevented him from actively participating in the assault on the Capitol on January 6.

However, in his plea agreement he said he continued to “participate in planning sessions as he recovered from his injuries,” according to a DoJ press release.

“At least as early as January 4, 2021, he received encrypted chat messages indicating that members of MOSD leadership were discussing the possibility of storming the Capitol,” the DoJ said.

Bertino was part of the “MOSD” (Ministry of Self Defense) Proud Boys encrypted chat group reserved for leading members. During the attack on the Capitol, Bertino texted in the MOSD group that those at the Capitol should “form a spear” to penetrate the building.

After the attack on the Capitol, which resulted in hundreds of injuries and multiple deaths, Bertino messaged Tarrío, telling him, “You know we made this happen” and “1776 motherfucker.”

Bertino previously testified before the January 6 House Select Committee. At one public hearing, the committee played a brief recording of testimony in which Bertino said that Proud Boys membership increased “exponentially ... tripled probably” after Trump commanded the group to “Stand back and stand by” in his September 2020 debate with Biden.



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