

# State trial begins for defendants in 2020 plot to kidnap the governor of Michigan

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The trial of three of eight men charged with state offenses in connection with the plot to kidnap Governor Gretchen Whitmer prior to the 2020 presidential election began with jury selection in Jackson, Michigan, on October 3.

Joseph Morrison, 28, his father-in-law, Pete Musico, 44, and Paul Bellar, 23, were charged with firearm violations, gang membership and providing material support for terrorism by aiding the plot to kidnap and kill Governor Whitmer during the summer and fall of 2020. If convicted, the men face 20 years in prison.

The three were arrested along with 11 others on October 8, 2020. They were opposed to the limited shutdown and stay-at-home measures taken on an emergency basis by Whitmer in the early months of the coronavirus pandemic. They met through social media activity and during anti-lockdown protests at the Michigan State Capitol organized by fascist and far-right groups with political connections to the Michigan Republican Party and the campaigns associated with then-President Donald Trump's call to "Liberate Michigan."

As in the federal case against six of the men—which ended with two guilty pleas, two convictions and two acquittals in US District Court in Grand Rapids—prosecutors in the state case say the defendants plotted the kidnapping as part of a broader campaign to spark unrest across the country, leading to a civil war they called the "boogaloo."

The jury in the first federal trial in April acquitted defendants Brandon Caserta and Daniel Harris and failed to reach a verdict on the charges against Adam Fox and Barry Croft Jr.

State prosecutors have presented evidence that Morrison, Musico and Bellar were members of the Wolverine Watchmen, a right-wing paramilitary

organization that attracted individuals who were enthusiastic about using armed violence to achieve their political objectives and were influenced by the efforts of Trump and others to overthrow the US Constitution.

Among the evidence presented by prosecutors was the fact that Morrison founded the Wolverine Watchmen militia in November 2019 as a Facebook group, declaring as its aim to "take back your state from tyranny." At that time, Musico posted a response saying, "Yea the trees in the capital should have bodies hanging from them."

The prosecution also said Morrison and Musico hosted tactical training exercises for members of the militia on their property in Munith, Michigan, north of Jackson, as part of preparations for kidnapping Whitmer.

The prosecutor told the jury that Paul Bellar joined the militia on the "ground floor," lending his skills at weapon handling and working as a trainer for other members, while also serving as a medic. "[Bellar] shared the hatred of the police that Joe Morrison had—they had a very common, like-minded position on that," state prosecutor William Rollstin said.

Like the second federal trial in Grand Rapids, which concluded in August, the state prosecution is relying on discussions among the men as recorded by US government informants who had infiltrated the Wolverine Watchmen group.

On Wednesday and Thursday, FBI agent Henrik Impola told the jury in Jackson County Circuit Court how the investigation into the three men developed through dozens of threatening digital posts the defendants had made over several months before their arrest.

The posts included statements such as "I want to commit violence," "By bullet or ballot, restoration of

the republic is coming,” and “One, two, I’m coming for you,” meaning Governor Whitmer. Impola also showed that the men communicated with coded language to discuss plans to shoot police officers in the back.

In a tweet that was subsequently removed by Twitter, Musico blamed Whitmer and other politicians for budget problems and called for the governor to be hanged “from a noose in a tree for treason against the American people.”

Other posts celebrated the Oklahoma City bombers, who used a truck filled with explosive materials to blow up the Murrah Federal Building in 1995, destroying one-third of the building, killing 168 people and injuring more than 680 others.

Their posts described in detail tactics to commit violence, including how to select targets, and they showed weapons. Several posts discussed the “boogaloo,” a word used by fascist organizations to denote the civil war they aim to foment in the US.

All three of the state defendants had numerous points of contact with Adam Fox and Barry Croft Jr., the two men who were convicted in federal court in August on charges of kidnapping conspiracy and weapons violations.

Also as in the federal trial, lawyers for Morrison, Musico and Bellar argued that their clients did not direct violence against anyone in particular and that any practical measures taken toward actually carrying out a plot was motivated by an FBI informant going by the name of Big Dan. Leonard Ballard, attorney for Morrison, said, “[The defendants] didn’t train a terrorist—the FBI’s [informant] trained a terrorist.”

On Thursday, Andrew Kirkpatrick, the lawyer representing Bellar, objected that the words of his client were being twisted. Rollstin argued that Kirkpatrick was pandering to the jury and asked Jackson County Court Judge Thomas Wilson to make him stop.

Kirkpatrick claimed part of the conversation was left out of a recording that was played for the jury, saying the men were talking about trying to get a judge to issue an arrest warrant for the governor. When the judge interjected, Kirkpatrick shouted, “Let me finish!” and then said, “I think this teeters on prosecutorial misconduct.”

Also on Thursday, the second defendant in the federal Whitmer kidnap case, Kaleb Franks, was sentenced to

four years in prison. Franks faced a possible life sentence, but US District Court Judge Robert Jonker said he imposed the much lighter sentence because Franks had endured the stress and toll of cooperating and testifying against others.

During remarks before the sentencing, Franks said, “I want to start by saying I’m sorry to the governor and her family. I understand that this experience had to have been very traumatizing and difficult. I’m ashamed and embarrassed and I regret every decision I made.”

Franks testified in both trials and was the second defendant to plead guilty in the federal case. The first of the group of six federal defendants to plead guilty was Ty Garbin from Hartland Township, Michigan. Garbin was originally sentenced to 75 months in August 2021, but this was reduced to 30 months by Judge Jonker in mid-September.

The other defendants in the Michigan state case are being prosecuted in Antrim County. Twins Michael and William Null, who are 40 and reside in Plainwell and Shelbyville, respectively; Shawn Fix, 40, of Belleville; Eric Molitor, 38, of Cadillac; and Brian Higgins, 53, of Wisconsin Dells, Wisconsin, are accused of providing material support for terrorism and related gun charges.



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