

Jury in state court convicts three more men involved in plot to kidnap the governor of Michigan

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Three men accused of providing material support for terrorism in the plot to kidnap Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer in 2020 were convicted on Wednesday of all charges in a three-week state trial.

Joseph Morrison, 28, and Pete Musico, 44, both of Munith, Michigan, and Paul Bellar, 24, of Milford, Michigan, were found guilty by a jury in Jackson County Circuit Court of multiple felonies—including association with or membership in a gang and firearms violations. The convictions carry combined sentences of up to 42 years in prison each.

The jury deliberated for five hours on Tuesday and Wednesday, before finding that the three men were active participants in a plan to break into Governor Whitmer's summer residence, take her hostage at gunpoint, put her on trial for treason and possibly execute her in the months leading up to the 2020 elections.

Morrison, his father-in-law Musico and Bellar were members of a right-wing militia group called the Wolverine Watchmen that had been formed in the spring and summer of 2020 by people who opposed the limited lockdown measures implemented by Whitmer at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The three convictions bring to a total of seven the number of men found guilty of plotting to kidnap the Michigan governor. The other four were convicted in federal court on kidnap conspiracy, firearms violations and weapons of mass destruction charges.

Ty Garbin and Kaleb Franks pleaded guilty and testified against four others, two of whom, Daniel Harris and Branden Caserta, were found not guilty in an initial trial last April. The other two convicted men, Adam Fox and Barry Croft Jr., were tried a second time

in August and found guilty by a jury. In the first trial, the jury failed to reach a verdict against Fox and Croft.

In all, fourteen men were arrested in Michigan on October 8, 2020, and charged with crimes associated with planning and training to take Governor Whitmer hostage. Their objective was to spark a “boogaloo” or civil war as part of a far-right plan to ensure that Donald Trump would remain in the White House regardless of the outcome of the 2020 elections.

There are five more men awaiting trial in Antrim County, Michigan—the location of Whitmer's summer home—on charges related to the kidnapping plot. Jon Lewis, a research fellow at the Program on Extremism at George Washington University, told the *Detroit News* that it is possible Wednesday's convictions will lead to a plea deal for the remaining defendants. Lewis said, “I think the challenge for the defendants is that the government's hand is as strong as it has been since charges were brought.”

The members and supporters of the Wolverine Watchmen—which was founded by Morrison and Musico—and other fascistic Trump supporters were politically mobilized by the former president, who called for the state of Michigan to be “liberated” during the implementation of pandemic stay-at-home orders by the state government.

As in the previous two trials, the relationship between the kidnap plotters, other right-wing groups in Michigan, state Republican Party officials, Trump's 2020 presidential campaign and Trump himself were not investigated or referred to in any substantive manner in the Jackson County courthouse.

State prosecutors relied heavily upon the testimony of an FBI informant named Dan Chappel who posed as a

member of the militia and recorded conversation with Morrison, Musico and Bellar. They based themselves largely upon the previous federal convictions and showed that the three defendants were actively helping to train Fox and Croft and supporting their kidnapping plot in a significant way.

Assistant Attorney General Sunita Doddamani argued that Musico provided facilities and personnel and Morrison provided facilities, personnel and advice to Fox in preparing the kidnapping operation. For example, Morrison taught Fox about operational security, vetting potential members of the militia, recruiting and how to conduct firearms training.

Doddamani said, “These three defendants had been pushing toward violence for months. Even if they weren’t going to do an act of terrorism themselves, they were more than happy and willing to help someone else.”

The prosecutors also presented evidence that the men provided the Wolverine Watchmen with methods for purging inactive members, holding mandatory trainings, compartmentalizing information dispersion, issuing ultimatums and traveling long distances. The men also spent free time hosting in-person training sessions, communicating on Facebook and using an encrypted smartphone application.

Governor Whitmer, who is running for a second term in the election on November 8, responded to the verdict and demonstrated the ongoing refusal of the Democratic Party to identify the fascist politics behind the threat to her life and its connection to the Republican Party and Donald Trump.

In a statement Whitmer said, “No threat, no plot, no rhetoric will break my belief in the goodness and decency of our people. Today’s guilty verdicts are further proof that violence and threats have no place in our politics. Those who seek to sow discord by pursuing violent plots will be held accountable under the law.”

Speaking in vague generalities, Whitmer added, “This trial is another stark reminder that we must take an honest look at the state of our politics. Politically motivated plots, threats, and violence are increasingly common against public officials as well as everyday citizens.” Offering no means of stopping or preventing these “common” threats, Whitmer clearly expects them to continue.

Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel, who was responsible for the prosecution of the three men and is also up for reelection in November, said, “Terrorist attacks and mass shootings are not spontaneous events, they are the result of planning, plotting and amassing resources in a build-up to violent acts.”

Like Whitmer, Nessel is careful to not refer to the fascistic politics behind the plot to kidnap the governor and its connection with the coup attempt orchestrated less than three months later by Trump and a substantial faction of the Republican Party on January 6, 2021, to stop the certification of Biden as president.

Neither Whitmer or Nessel referred to the fact that Morrison, Musico and Bellar were all present during the armed invasion of the Michigan State Capitol building on April 30, 2020. In what proved to be something of dress rehearsal for the January 6 assault on the US Capitol, the three men were photographed as part of a group of Wolverine Watchmen standing at-the-ready with automatic weapons outside the governor’s office. This took place during a vote to approve the extension of Whitmer’s emergency declaration/stay-at-home order due during the pandemic.

Bellar was the only one of the three men in the courtroom on Wednesday when the verdicts were read. Morrison, who recently tested positive for COVID-19, and Musico watched the proceedings via remote video stream. Judge Thomas Wilson ordered the three to be jailed and said sentencing would take place on December 15.



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