

Oath Keepers founder Stewart Rhodes and top lieutenant found guilty of seditious conspiracy

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After three days of deliberations, a Washington D.C. federal jury found Oath Keepers founder Elmer Stewart Rhodes III, 56, and Florida Oath Keepers chapter leader Kelly Meggs, 53, guilty of orchestrating a months-long plot against the US government to keep former President Donald Trump in power through political violence.

Five members of the fascist militia group formed by Rhodes in 2009 were facing the Civil War-era crime, the most serious charge leveled against the over 900 people prosecuted in relation to Trump's failed coup.

Oath Keepers Kenneth Harrelson, 42, Jessica Watkins, 39, and Thomas Caldwell, 68, were found innocent of seditious conspiracy. However, all five were found guilty on felony charges of obstructing an official proceeding, which carry a maximum 20 year sentence.

Four other Oath Keepers—Roberto Minuta, Edward Vallejo, Joseph Hackett and David Moershel—are also facing sedition charges. Their trial is starting this week.

The Oath Keepers, along with the Proud Boys and other right-wing militia groups, spearheaded the January 6, 2021 attack on the Capitol to stop the certification of president-elect Joe Biden after months of planning between themselves, Republican operatives, elements within the US intelligence apparatus, and politicians linked to Donald Trump.

Since its founding by Rhodes, a former Army paratrooper, the Oath Keepers has focused heavily on recruiting from current and former police and military members. In addition to Rhodes, both Harrelson and Watkins served in the US Army, with Watkins deployed to Afghanistan from 2001 to 2003. Caldwell is a retired navy intelligence officer with close ties to the Loudoun County Republican Party and the FBI.

In addition to the sedition charges, all five members of the right-wing group were facing several other serious felony charges. Meggs and Watkins were found guilty of conspiring to obstruct an official proceeding. Rhodes, Harrelson and Caldwell were found innocent on that charge.

On the count of conspiracy to prevent an officer from discharging his official duties, Meggs, Harrelson and Watkins, all of whom entered the Capitol on January 6, were found guilty. Rhodes and Caldwell, who remained outside the Capitol coordinating with heavily armed “quick reaction forces” stationed at a nearby hotel in Arlington, Virginia, were found not guilty.

Watkins, one of several Oath Keepers who breached the Capitol as part of a military “stack” formation, was found guilty of rioting inside the Capitol. For deleting incriminating texts and Facebook messages shared between themselves and others involved in the conspiracy, Rhodes, Meggs, Harrelson and Caldwell were found guilty of tampering with evidence.

In total, Rhodes faces a maximum 60 years in prison. Meggs is facing the longest sentence, a possible 86 years in prison. Watkins, Harrelson and Caldwell could also be facing upwards of 40 years in prison.

US District Court Judge Amit Mehta, a Trump appointee, has not yet set a sentencing date.

Rhodes' attorney, Ed Tarpley, characterized the verdict against his client as a “mixed bag” and indicated that Rhodes would be filing an appeal.

The jury's verdict obliterates any claims by Trump, his Republican allies or disorientated pseudo-left and middle-class layers that the January 6 attack on the Capitol was a “spontaneous” First Amendment “demonstration” that simply got out of hand. The violence that erupted on January 6 was the culmination of a months-long plot, hatched from the White House and aimed at overturning democratic forms of rule in the United States.

The trial confirmed that following Trump's electoral defeat, the Oath Keepers and other militia groups used the “Stop the Steal” rallies as a nexus point to coordinate with the Trump campaign and US Secret Service agents in the months leading up to the attack, obliterating lying claims from the FBI and other domestic police intelligence agencies that there was no evidence that an attack on

Congress was imminent.

During the attack itself, Oath Keepers, Proud Boys, QAnon fascists, neo-Nazis and white supremacists overwhelmed the undermanned and underequipped Capitol Police officers, sending politicians fleeing. As the fascists broke into the Capitol at 1:49 p.m., former D.C. National Guard Commander William Walker called his superiors at the Pentagon to request permission to deploy soldiers under his command.

Walker's urgent request to save Congress went unanswered for 199 minutes, allowing Trump's mob hours to roam the Capitol to capture and/or kill Trump's political enemies, with Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi and Vice President Mike Pence at the top of the list. The fact that only five people died during the violent attack is more a function of the fascists' disorganization than any active resistance by the numerous military and intelligence agencies charged with defending the US government.

To illustrate that Rhodes' plan was months in the making, prosecutors presented text messages, recordings of online meetings, and the testimony of former Oath Keepers. Revealing that Rhodes' plan was coordinated with elements tied to the White House, prosecutors began their case by presenting text messages Rhodes sent to the "Friends of Stone" chat group on November 7, 2021, immediately after Biden was declared the winner.

"What's the plan? We need to roll ASAP," Rhodes texted the group, which was headed by Trump political confidant Roger Stone. Other members of the group included Oath Keepers lead counsel Kellye SoRelle, "Stop the Steal" lead organizer Ali Alexander and Proud Boys leader and FBI informant Henry "Enrique" Tarrio, who is also facing seditious conspiracy charges.

Prosecutors said Rhodes followed up his texts to the group over the next several weeks by laying out a "step-by-step" action plan that called on militia elements and Trump supporters to violently storm and occupy Congress. Prosecutors provided evidence that Rhodes spent over \$150,000 on military equipment, including three semi-automatic assault rifles, and travel expenses in furtherance of Trump's coup.

In addition to text messages, jurors heard testimony from former Oath Keepers who have already pled guilty to conspiracy, such as James Dolan.

Dolan, a 19-year veteran of the US Marine Corps and former infantry unit leader, testified that he understood that the Oath Keepers planned to use weapons to stop the certification of the 2020 election. Dolan acknowledged on the stand that it "would be treasonous fighting against what I saw as an illegitimate form of government," but that he had discussed it with Rhodes and they decided to "act to stop the certification of the election... by any means necessary. That's why we brought our firearms."

Jurors also heard an audio recording made by former US Marine and Oath Keeper, Abdullah Rashid, from a November 9, 2020

national Oath Keeper meeting chaired by Rhodes and Meggs, in which they talked about their plans to keep Trump in power.

Rashid testified that he found the content of the call so alarming he recorded it and sent it to the FBI tip line. The FBI ignored Rashid's recording until he resent it to the agency in March 2021, two months after the Capitol attack.

The trial revealed that despite the fact that Congress certified the election following the violent attack, Rhodes continued to lobby Trump intermediaries to invoke the Insurrection Act and federalize the Oath Keepers.

Jason Alpers, a military veteran with special operations experience in Iraq and Afghanistan, testified during the trial that he held a face-to-face meeting with Rhodes on January 10, 2021 in Texas. Alpers testified that he had an "indirect" line to Trump.

In the January 10, 2021 meeting, which Alpers recorded, Alpers said that Rhodes asked him to pass along a message to Trump. In the recording, which was played for the jury, Rhodes told Alpers to tell Trump to invoke the Insurrection Act and arrest congressmen and state legislators.

In the same meeting with Alpers, Rhodes lamented that Oath Keepers did not bring their guns with them into D.C. and instead left them behind with the "quick reaction force."

"My only regret is that should have brought rifles," Rhodes is heard on the call. "I'd hang fuckin' [Nancy] Pelosi from the lamppost," he added.

Following the verdict, January 6 House Select Committee Chairman Bennie Thompson (Democrat-Mississippi) and Vice Chair Liz Cheney (Republican-Wyoming) released a statement claiming the jury's decision was "a victory for the rule of law."

Meekly acknowledging that the ringleader of the coup, Trump, had yet to be charged with a crime nearly two years after the fact, the statement said that the committee supported "ongoing efforts to ensure that accountability at all levels."



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