

# Three men convicted of aiding plot to kidnap Michigan governor sentenced in state court

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15 December 2022

A state judge in Jackson, Michigan, sentenced three men to prison terms on Thursday for their role in supporting a plot to kidnap and kill Governor Gretchen Whitmer in the leadup to the 2020 presidential elections.

Paul Bellar, 24, Joseph Morrison, 28, and Pete Musico, 45, were given a minimum of seven-, 10- and 12-year sentences, respectively, by Judge Thomas Wilson, chief judge of the Fourth Circuit Court of Michigan.

The sentencing came seven weeks after the men were convicted in a jury trial of providing material support for terrorist acts and illegal gang membership, as well as felony firearms charges. Although the sentences for each offense were imposed consecutively, they were far below the 20-year maximum for the terrorism charge alone.

The men were members—along with others who had already been convicted in federal court of plotting to kidnap the governor—of a right-wing paramilitary group called the Wolverine Watchmen. Evidence presented in the state trial showed that Morrison, Musico and Bellar hosted and participated in gun training exercises on their property in Munith, Michigan, in Jackson County as part of the preparations for the kidnapping.

Morrison, who is the son-in-law of Musico, founded the right-wing paramilitary Wolverine Watchmen as a Facebook group in November 2019, declaring at the time that the purpose of the organization was to “take back your state from tyranny.”

In the atmosphere of right-wing hysteria over the imposition of limited mitigation measures by Governor Whitmer in the early months of the coronavirus pandemic—which included direct incitements to political violence by then-President Donald Trump—the Wolverine Watchmen recruited individuals to a broader

fascist campaign aimed at sparking a civil war in the US known as a “boogaloo.”

The trio was arrested in October 2020, along with 11 others involved in the kidnapping plot, which included a scenario where militia members were to seize Whitmer from her vacation home in Elk Rapids, Michigan, engage in a gun battle with police and security personnel, transport the governor to Wisconsin and execute her following a military tribunal on charges of treason.

Six men were charged with federal kidnap conspiracy and other crimes, two of whom—Adam Fox and Barry Croft Jr.—were convicted in August and are scheduled to be sentenced on December 28. Two others—Ty Garbin and Kaleb Franks—pled guilty to the charges and are serving reduced sentences, while Daniel Harris and Brandon Caserta were acquitted in a trial in April.

Five others—Michael Null, William Null, Eric Molitor, Shawn Fix and Brian Higgins—are facing trial in Antrim County Court on state charges of providing material support for terrorist acts which is scheduled to begin on December 19.

Addressing the court in victim impact statement via recorded video, the governor called on Judge Wilson to “impose a sentence that meets the gravity of the damage they have done to our democracy.” She added, “A conspiracy to kidnap and kill a sitting governor of the state of Michigan is a threat to democracy itself.”

As she has done throughout the prosecution of the kidnap plotters, Governor Whitmer did not use the word fascism or point to the connection between the threat to democracy and the leadership of the Republican Party. Instead, she claimed, “violent extremism” is threatening “political leaders and their families on both sides of the aisle.”



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