

Proud Boys leaders convicted of conspiracy against democracy

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Five leaders of the Proud Boys militia group were convicted Thursday of most of the charges against them, stemming from the January 6, 2021 attack on the US Capitol instigated by Donald Trump in an effort to remain in power.

Four of the five—Henry “Enrique” Tarrío, the group’s former leader, Joe Biggs, Ethan Nordean and Zachary Rehl—were convicted of the most serious charge, seditious conspiracy, for conspiring to overthrow US democracy by blocking the transfer of power from Trump to his elected successor, Joe Biden.

These four were also convicted on the charge of conspiracy to block Congress in the performance of its duty, the certification of the Electoral College vote in which Biden defeated Trump 306-232. Both conspiracy charges carry a legal maximum of 20 years in prison.

Dominic Pezzola, who joined the group just before January 6 and played a major role in the events of that day, but not in the planning, was acquitted on the conspiracy charges but convicted of a half dozen other felonies, many of them involving violent assaults on the Capitol Police. He played a lead role in the physical violence, as he seized a policeman’s shield and used it to smash a window and open the first breach in the Capitol, allowing the mob to pour through to the inside of the building.

The jury initially declared itself deadlocked on the seditious conspiracy charge against Pezzola, but returned to deliberation on the judge’s instruction. Two hours later, they acquitted Pezzola on seditious conspiracy and were deadlocked on conspiracy to obstruct Congress, but had convicted him on nine other counts of the indictment.

The jury deliberated for 30 hours over seven days, not that long for a case with five defendants, facing as many as ten separate charges (and 11 charges in the

case of Pezzola). In the end, the jury found the defendants guilty on dozens of charges, acquitted on one, and were deadlocked on 10, on which the judge declared a mistrial.

The most significant conviction, from a legal standpoint, was that of Tarrío, since he was not actually present at the Capitol, although he had participated in meetings to plan the attack and remained in contact with the Proud Boys throughout. He had been banned from the District of Columbia by a judge in relation to another case of right-wing violence, when Tarrío attacked anti-Trump counterprotesters during a December 12, 2020 demonstration against the results of the 2020 election, one of the precursors of the mob assault on January 6.

From an evidentiary standpoint, the trial provided a mass of material showing Trump’s role in the attack on American democracy. The prosecutors repeatedly charged that the Proud Boys saw themselves as Trump’s “army” and were inspired by his directive to “stand by” during a September 2020 presidential debate, and went into action on January 6 in response to his summons.

This was not even contested by the defense attorneys, who themselves sought to pin the blame for January 6 on Trump, saying their clients were being made scapegoats for an attack they did not plan but that Trump had incited.

Hundreds of social media messages, many encrypted, were introduced as evidence both of the deliberate planning of the events of January 6 and the general intention to use violence to keep Trump in office. Meetings and phone and text contact between Tarrío, Nordean and Biggs took place daily before the attack, as well as contacts with Oath Keepers leader Stewart Rhodes and Ali Alexander, an organizer of the “Stop

the Steal” rallies.

Attorney General Merrick Garland gave a brief statement to the press hailing the verdicts. He praised the work of Department of Justice (DOJ) prosecutors and FBI agents who reviewed tens of thousands of photos and videos and millions of pages of testimony to carry out prosecutions that have resulted in more than 600 convictions of those who participated in the January 6 attack.

He made the statement flanked by FBI Director Christopher Wray and four other top Department of Justice officials, a display that seemed calculated to underscore the significance of the Proud Boys’ verdict. He then left without taking any questions from the press. This avoided any discussion either of possible charges against Trump, or of Tarrío’s connections to the FBI, where he was a frequent informant.

There was a celebratory tone to the media coverage of the verdict in the cable television networks and on the websites of the major newspapers, which was deliberately misleading. It suggested that with the successful prosecution of leaders of the Proud Boys, following the conviction of leaders of another fascist group, the Oath Keepers, the cases arising from January 6 had reached their pinnacle.

The reality is that Tarrío & Co. represent only the foothills of the conspiracy. Not a single Republican politician, nor Trump nor anyone from his inner circle have been indicted, let alone prosecuted or convicted. The Proud Boys and Oath Keepers have been convicted of a seditious conspiracy in which they were nothing more than the instruments of violence. The leaders of the conspiracy, who planned, set the date and gave the green light for the January 6 attack have so far gone scot-free.

January 6 was the culmination of a coordinated inside-outside strategy. On the one hand, Trump was whipping up the fascist thugs to whom he had said, during a presidential debate, “Stand back and stand by.” He gave the signal for the final mobilization with a December tweet urging his supporters to come to Washington on January 6, promising them it “will be wild.”

On the other, Republicans in both the House and Senate delayed recognizing the obvious results of the election, legitimized Trump’s bogus legal challenges and refusal to concede, and, even after the mob had

been cleared from the Capitol on the night of January 6, voted in the majority not to certify Biden’s election as president.

The two operations were connected through Trump and his entourage, who discussed legal stratagems for overturning the results of the vote in various states, actions like seizing ballot boxes and voting machines to carry out spurious “recounts,” and maintained regular contact with the fascist goon squads.

Republican congressmen spoke at the November and December “Stop the Steal” rallies in Washington, where Proud Boys, Oath Keepers, III Percenters and other fascist groups played prominent roles. Trump crony Roger Stone was a key link, as he talked to Trump regularly, while using Proud Boys for his personal security.

They all came together at the final “Stop the Steal” rally on January 6 outside the White House, where Trump told his supporters to “fight like hell or you won’t have a country,” while telling the Secret Service to stop using magnetometers that would deter them from carrying firearms as they marched on the Capitol.

Trump planned to go to the Capitol and personally lead the rioters into the building to confront the members of Congress and block certification of his election defeat, and was only blocked when his own guards refused to take him into what was becoming a battle zone.



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