

April 8, 2022

The Honorable Bennie G. Thompson
Chairman
Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th
Attack on the United States Capitol
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Liz Cheney
Vice Chair
Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th
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U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman Thompson and Vice Chairman Cheney,

On behalf of the Southern Poverty Law Center, I write to provide our insights for the Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol. SPLC strongly supports the essential work of the Select Committee. The Committee's findings and recommendations will be critical for lawmakers and the public to help understand the architects behind the January 6 attack, how to hold those planners, perpetrators, and those who inspired them to action accountable, and what actions are necessary to safeguard future elections and our country's democratic institutions. My submission focuses on the Proud Boys, a far-right hate group with a history of political violence that participated in the attack on the Capitol. We would ask that this statement be included as part of the Select Committee's official record.

Established in 1971, SPLC has been relentless in identifying and rooting out extremist groups to create a fair, inclusive, and unified nation. We are a nonprofit advocacy organization serving as a catalyst for racial justice throughout the South. We work in partnership with communities of color to dismantle white supremacy, strengthen intersectional movements through transformative policies and initiatives, and advance human rights of all people. We have deep expertise in monitoring the activities of domestic hate groups and other extremists – including the Ku Klux Klan, the neo-Nazi movement, neo-Confederates, racist skinheads, antigovernment militias, and others. We currently track hundreds of extremist groups operating across the country and publish investigative reports, share key intelligence, and offer expert analysis to the media and public.

The Proud Boys' participation in the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, was the culmination of years of activism, which included organizing violent rallies across the country, building a widespread network of dozens of individual chapters, fundraising to support their activities, and spreading propaganda that justified their acts of intimidation and violence. Since Gavin McInnes founded the group in 2016, the Proud Boys have remained consistent in their organizing principles, as well as in their stalwart support for Donald Trump. Members imagine themselves the foot soldiers in an existential battle against insidious internal

enemies: Democrats, antifascists, socialists, communists, Black Lives Matter activists, and the broader political left. Their activities are focused on mitigating the perceived threat of groups they consider their political enemies — not through the electoral process or other forms of democratic participation, but through violence and the threat of violence. Their participation in the insurrection was an attempt to overthrow democracy and liberal pluralism in favor of an authoritarian political order.

This statement will first delineate the Proud Boys' ideology and motivations and. It will then survey the history of the Proud Boys and examine how their activities prior to 2021 laid the groundwork for the insurrection. Finally, it will examine why the Proud Boys came to Washington, D.C., on Jan. 6 and what impact the insurrection has since had on the group's ability to organize, attract new members, and influence American politics.

The Proud Boys' Ideology

The Proud Boys is an authoritarian, ultranationalist group founded in 2016 by Canadian Gavin McInnes, an incendiary right-wing media figure and co-founder of Vice Media. Starting as a small group that met in a New York City bar across the street from the Compound Media studio where McInnes worked, the organization has grown to 72 chapters located across the country.¹ They are currently one of the largest far-right extremist groups in the United States.

Among far-right groups, the Proud Boys have been uniquely able to sustain and grow their membership, often despite members facing criminal charges or public backlash. This is, in part, because the group relies heavily on humor and rituals to deflect attention from their extremist views. To become a "second degree" in the group, for example, a member needs to recite the names of five breakfast cereals while being beaten by other members. But the group's stability is also a product of the claim that they reject racism and white nationalism. Proud Boys welcome men of all racial and ethnic background, as well as gay men, so long as they were assigned male at birth and agree with the group's primary tenet that "the West is the best." By including men of color in the group, the Proud Boys have constructed a barrier against accusations of racism.²

The inclusion of men of color does not diminish the Proud Boys' commitment to a political ideology that is exclusionary, or their efforts to build a hierarchically ordered society. They have defined themselves as "civil nationalists" and "alt-lite" — both terms that are designed to distinguish them from outright white nationalists. Proud Boys claim they do not define national belonging by race, and that they simply want to preserve Western *culture*. But, for the Proud Boys, Western culture is European, Christian, and governed by strict adherence to "traditional" notions of gender. People from outside of these groups, or who believe in the equality of all genders, are viewed as existential threats to Western nations. They possess special hostility for Islam, immigrants, "multiculturalists," and, particularly since 2020, Black Lives Matter activists. "We are not a 'melting pot,'" one Proud Boys Telegram channel posted to its more than 45,000 subscribers in early 2021. "Western nations have been widely recognized as multicultural societies. This is a lie told by those who wish to destroy

¹ Cassie Miller and Rachel Carroll Rivas, "The Year in Hate and Extremism," <https://www.splcenter.org/20220309/year-hate-extremism-2021>, March 9, 2020.

² Daniel Martinez Hosang and Joseph E. Lowndes provide an in-depth examine of the inclusion of people of color in the far right in *Producers, Parasites, Patriots: Race and the New Right-Wing Politics of Precarity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 2019.

us,” the post continued. “Europeans are the architects of Western culture and we will honor our forefathers by rejecting the degradation of our culture in the name of tolerance.”³

The Proud Boys’ ideological commitments are captured in their most revered text: Patrick Buchanan’s *The Death of the West: How Dying Populations and Immigrant Invasions Imperil Our Country and Civilization*. First published in 2002, *The Death of the West* argues that falling white birth rates and immigration from predominantly non-white countries will lead to the collapse of Western civilization and Christianity. The first chapter declares Europeans “an endangered species.” Buchanan’s argument is largely indistinguishable from the “great replacement” — a white nationalist conspiracy that says white people are being systematically and deliberately replaced by non-whites through immigration and cultural practices that encourage low birthrates, interracial marriage, and feelings of “white guilt.” Believers in the so-called great replacement claim the plot is orchestrated by an assortment of groups they consider foes, including Democrats, leftists, “globalists,” and Jews. The racist myth has motivated numerous terror attack in recent years, including mass shootings at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and a Walmart in El Paso, Texas.

The Death of the West is not just recommended reading. It is often read aloud during the group’s meetings — a ritual McInnes mentioned in his first public announcement about the Proud Boys in 2016.⁴ Six years later, members continue to cite Buchanan’s work and link to his blog, including a 2021 post warning that “invaders are now coming not only from Central and South America but also from Africa, the Islamic world and the largest and most populous continent, Asia. And their destiny may be to replace us.”⁵ One chapter even recently referred to Buchanan as “the Proud Boy Godfather.”⁶ Halting the perceived attacks that Buchanan’s work describes — on Western civilization, white people, and masculinity — has always been a core mission of the Proud Boys. Especially prior to the Charlottesville rally in 2017, when Proud Boys began to censor more deliberately what they said in public out of fear of scrutiny, members spoke frankly about their racial grievances. “I am not afraid to speak out about the atrocities that whites and people of European descent face not only here in this country, but in Western nations across the world,” Kyle Chapman, then a prominent member of the Proud Boys, and the founder of the group’s “tactical defense arm,” said during a July 2017 speech at the “Unite America First Peace Rally” in Sacramento, California. “The war against whites, and Europeans and Western society is very real,” he continued, “and it’s time we all started talking about it and stopped worrying about political correctness and optics.”⁷ In other instances, Chapman specifically denigrated Muslims. “How many of our children have to die before we rid our lands of Islamic invaders? Our civilization destroyed. WAKE UP YOU COWARDS! FIGHT!” he posted on Twitter in May 2017.⁸

³ Proud Boys: Uncensored Telegram channel, February 2021.

⁴ Gavin McInnes, “Introducing: The Proud Boys,” *Taki’s Magazine*, https://www.takimag.com/article/introducing_the_proud_boys_gavin_mcinnes/#axzz51jGjsfOa, September 15, 2016; article archived at https://web.archive.org/web/20220321192714/https://www.takimag.com/article/introducing_the_proud_boys_gavin_mcinnes/.

⁵ Patrick Buchanan, “Does Our Diversity Portend Disintegration?” <https://buchanan.org/blog/does-our-diversity-portend-disintegration-149674>, May 27, 2021. Shared by the Ohio Proud Boys on May 29, 2021, <https://t.me/OhioProudBoys/1880>.

⁶ Shared by New Hampshire Proud Boys, November 2, 2021, <https://t.me/officialNHPB/2634>

⁷ Southern Poverty Law Center, “Proud Boys,” <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/proud-boys>.

⁸ Southern Poverty Law Center, “Fraternal Order of Alt-Knights,” <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/fraternal-order-alt-knights-foak>.

Jason Kessler, who planned the 2017 “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville that ended with anti-racist activist Heather Heyer being murdered by a white supremacist, was a Proud Boy. Kessler even appeared as a guest on “The Gavin McInnes Show,” produced by Compound Media, less than two months before “Unite the Right.” There, he promoted the event that brought together white nationalist, neo-Nazi, and militia groups. But, in an apparent effort to protect his organization, McInnes later told his followers not to attend the rally.⁹ Not all listened. Enrique Tarrio, who later became the group’s chairman, was at the rally, in addition to a handful of other Proud Boys.¹⁰

McInnes focused his frustration on Kessler and ejected him from the group. According to members, McInnes began managing the Proud Boys with a heavier hand to shield the group — and himself — from accusations of racism. One “red pill” Proud Boy, who was an outspoken antisemite, said on a white nationalist podcast in December 2018 that the group changed in the aftermath of Charlottesville because McInnes “was so afraid to lose his career” in media.¹¹

McInnes stepped down from the group just over a year later, after 10 members of the Proud Boys were criminally charged for attacking a group of antifascists outside an October 2018 event in New York City in which McInnes was the featured speaker. “I am told by my legal team and law enforcement that this gesture could help alleviate their sentencing,” he said in a video, referencing the men facing charges.¹² Days later, Enrique Tarrio became the chairman of the Proud Boys.

Today there is a discernible difference in the rhetoric that comes from the group’s leadership — including its national chairman and official, national-level Proud Boys social media accounts — and its chapters, chapter leaders, and individual members. Leadership is clearly interested in managing public perception of the group and argues regularly that it is not a racist organization. Proud Boys chapters, though, openly warn of the “great replacement,” share overtly white nationalist texts, and link to the social media channels and pages of white nationalist hate groups. This is, in part, because chapters — especially in the post-McInnes era — have a great degree of autonomy within the group. They can generally organize their own activities without consulting national leadership, and they run their own social media accounts.¹³ But it is also because the Proud Boys have carefully constructed an organization that allows members who hold beliefs that span the continuum of the far right.

The Proud Boys “core tenets” are largely standard fare of the right: They are dedicated to “minimal government, maximum freedom, anti-political correctness, anti-drug war, closed

⁹ Southern Poverty Law Center, “Proud Boys,” <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/proud-boys>.

¹⁰ David K. Kirkpatrick and Alan Feuer, “Police Shrugged Off the Proud Boys, Until They Attacked the Capitol,” <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/14/us/proud-boys-law-enforcement.html>, *New York Times*, March 14, 2021.

¹¹ “Southern AF” podcast, Dec. 23, 2018. In far-right vernacular, a person who is “red pill” has come to believe that there are innate differences between different races.

¹² Jason Wilson, “Proud Boys Founder Gavin McInnes Quits ‘Extremist’ Far-Right Group,” <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/nov/22/proud-boys-founder-gavin-mcinnnes-quits-far-right-group>, *The Guardian*, November 22, 2018.

¹³ The national leadership has, at times, issued “stand down” orders, instructing members not to hold or participate in public demonstrations. This was the case after 10 members of the group were charged in the October 2018 attack against a group of antifascists.

borders, anti-racial guilt, anti-racism, pro-free speech (First Amendment), pro-gun rights (Second Amendment), glorifying the entrepreneur, venerating the housewife,” and “reinstating a spirit of Western Chauvinism.” But what matters most to the members are masculinity and adherence to “Western chauvinism” — a term vague enough to encompass a wide range of far-right beliefs. “We are a fraternity of men who share the bond of brotherhood ... we are all not the same, in our beliefs, in our jobs, in our lifestyle, in our daily interactions,” the New Hampshire chapter president posted to their Telegram channel in October 2021. Despite these differences, they are all “Proud Western Chauvinists” who “love this country, hate the direction its headed in and want to return to the simpler days where men were men.” The bonds of masculinity mean that it possible to be both “brothers with a party boy” and “brothers with an [sic] flashy edgelord” — a term for young fascists who tend to revel in transgressive humor.¹⁴

Mike Lasater, the leader of the St. Louis Proud Boys, was more overt about the group’s openness to racists in one of his recent Telegram posts. “If I have to hear one more [N-word] who nobody knows, and has zero mutual chats with me, tell me ‘I’m PB and PB doesn’t allow Nazis,’ I’m going to lose it,” he posted to his channel on Nov. 27, 2021. “At this organization’s founding, we allowed natsocs [National Socialists]. Then later, Gavin said no more natsocs,” he said, referring to McInnes’ attempt to manage the organization and its image more vigilantly in the aftermath of the Charlottesville rally. “Gavin’s been gone for years ... [and] Proud Boys originalism is allowing anyone who was born a man and recognizes that the West is the best—jew or natsoc, black or white identitarian, gay or anti-LGBT; as long as you’re not annoying, you’re in.” Lasater’s insistence on allowing neo-Nazis could be personally motivated — he recently argued in a Telegram post that “This is a Christian nation; jews may be citizens of this country, but they are guests of our nation, and they should remember that.”¹⁵

While Proud Boys are bonded in their embrace of militant masculinity, they are just as strongly united by their enmity toward the left. Because the Proud Boys believe that antifascists, leftists, Black Lives Matter activists, and others who hold egalitarian political ideologies are fundamentally at odds with what they perceive as “Western” culture, they treat them collectively as political enemies. Indeed, they collapse all boundaries between different ideological groups, using the labels “antifascists” and “communists” as blanket terms for the left. To the Proud Boys, leftists pose an existential threat to true “patriots,” including themselves and other followers of Donald Trump. They openly advocate using violence to eliminate the perceived threat. The sentiment was captured clearly in a photo that Proud Boy Joseph Biggs posted on social media in October 2020, in which he and Enrique Tarrio stand holding a sign that reads, “The only good communist is a dead communist.”¹⁶

¹⁴ Oct. 12, 2021.

¹⁵ Feb. 20, 2022.

¹⁶ Joseph Biggs Telegram channel, October 2020.



An image of Enrique Tarrio and Joe Biggs, posted to Joe Biggs' Telegram channel, October 2020.

History of the Proud Boys

Since their founding in 2016, the Proud Boys have argued that violence is the most effective way to deal with their political enemies and have, at times, claimed it is a necessity. "Fighting solves everything," McInnes declared the year Trump won the presidency. "We need more violence from the Trump people – Trump supporters: Choke a motherf---r."¹⁷ The group fetishizes Augusto Pinochet, the Chilean dictator who was responsible for the deaths and torture of thousands of political foes, including many whom his death squads dropped from helicopters. At rallies, Proud Boys have worn shirts that read, "Pinochet did nothing wrong," "Make communists afraid of rotary aircraft again," and "RWDS" — an acronym that stands for "right-wing death squad."¹⁸

Proud Boys have been spotted wearing those slogans frequently — the group has long been a mainstay at far-right rallies and demonstrations across the country. Indeed, the Proud Boys formed during one of the most active periods of far-right street mobilization in decades, when Donald Trump's candidacy and then presidency mobilized far-right extremists (who labeled themselves the "alt-right") across the country. Between 2016 and 2018, the SPLC documented 125 far-right rallies, marches, and protests nationwide, organized by white nationalists, neo-Nazis, Klansmen, and right-wing reactionaries like the Proud Boys.¹⁹ The Proud Boys were a crucial part of this mobilization: They attended some of the earliest rallies, and then became the preeminent on-the-ground far-right organizers in

¹⁷ Adam Leith Gollner, "The Secret History of Gavin McInnes," <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2021/06/the-secret-history-of-gavin-mcinnnes>, *Vanity Fair*, June 29, 2021.

¹⁸ Cassie Miller, "Why are Proud Boys so Violent? Ask Gavin McInnes," <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2018/10/18/why-are-proud-boys-so-violent-ask-gavin-mcinnnes>, SPLC *Hatewatch*, October 18, 2018.

¹⁹ Cassie Miller and Howard Graves, "When the 'Alt-Right' Hit the Streets: Far-Right Political Rallies in the Trump Era," <https://www.splcenter.org/20200810/when-alt-right-hit-streets-far-right-political-rallies-trump-era>, SPLC *Hatewatch*, August 10, 2020.

the aftermath of the 2017 Charlottesville rally, when the most extreme elements of the movement retreated from the streets in favor of online organizing and targeted, terrorist violence. They remain the most active on-the-ground activists today.

Holding rallies and marches is a common tactic for far-right groups: It is often low in cost, allows activists to spread their message, can bring publicity, bonds the group together, and, crucially, offers the chance for activists to physically confront their ideological opponents. At their core, Proud Boys rallies are about producing violence and propaganda. Members of the group go to rallies prepared to engage in violence — evidenced by their protective gear and weapons, as well as extensively documented online preparations — and, when they do end up in confrontations with antifascist activists on the streets, quickly post the footage online so spectators can revel in the violence. Interest in the Proud Boys, as well as recruitment of new members, increases when acts of violence go viral online. For example, the SPLC found that recruitment increased dramatically after Proud Boy Ethan “Rufio” Nordean, who is currently facing conspiracy charges for his alleged role in the insurrection, punched an antifascist unconscious at a June 30, 2018, rally. A video of the punch spread rapidly across right-wing media and online spaces, and netted Nordean interviews on shows hosted by Alex Jones and McInnes. The number of people in six of the Proud Boys “vetting pages” on Facebook, which potential recruits joined to seek membership, jumped nearly 70% in the 30 days following the rally. “Seeing that soy boy antifa scum get knocked the f--- out has been the highlight of my year. Ive [sic] watched it over and over,” one new member wrote in one of the vetting pages.²⁰

Proud Boys’ rallies play another crucial role: The group uses confrontations at their planned rallies as evidence that *the left* is out of control and violent. They can then claim any violence on their part is merely reactionary and defensive and, therefore, justified. Never mind that the group usually spends weeks planning rallies, publicly broadcasting their desire to kill antifascists, and discusses which weapons and armor to bring to demonstrations. “All I want to do is smash commies,” a Proud Boys wrote in online chats leaked to HuffPost in 2019. “Actually I’m lying, I’m way past just hitting them. When the time comes I will stop at nothing to fully eradicate them all!”²¹

Rallies, 2017-19

The Proud Boys’ first wave of protests came in 2017, when members of the group attended what the far right called the “Battle of Berkeley” — a series of demonstrations in the California city attended by a wide swath of extremists that descended into widespread violence. In the runup to the second “battle” on April 15, it was clear that violence was the main promotional vehicle for the rally. “We hope the Antifa shows up with a lot of sticks and mace. That way we can legally beat the hell out of them,” a Los Angeles Proud Boy named Sabo said in a Periscope video. Hundreds of people participated in the demonstration, which descended into chaos as participants set off firecrackers, used pepper spray, and engaged in fistfights.²² At that and other rallies that followed during summer 2017, Proud

²⁰ Hatewatch Staff, “Facebook’s Fight Club: How the Proud Boys Use the Social media Platform to Vet Their Fighters,” <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2018/08/02/facebooks-fight-club-how-proud-boys-use-social-media-platform-vet-their-fighters>, SPLC *Hatewatch*, August 2, 2018.

²¹ Andy Campbell, “Leaked Proud Boys Chats Show Members Plotting Violence at Rallies,” https://www.huffpost.com/entry/proud-boys-chat-logs-premeditate-rally-violence-in-leaked-chats_n_5ce1e231e4b00e035b928683, *HuffPost*, May 22, 2019.

²² Berkeleyside Staff, “Who exactly was it that turned Berkeley into a Battlefield April 15?,” <https://www.berkeleyside.org/2017/04/17/exactly-turned-downtown-berkeley-battlefield-april-15>, *Berkeleyside*, April 17, 2017.

Boys marched alongside such white nationalist groups as Identity Evropa and the Rise Above Movement.²³

The 2017 “Summer of Hate,” as neo-Nazi Andrew Anglin dubbed it, climaxed on Aug. 12, at the “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. Though the rally was planned by a Proud Boy and McInnes had allowed him to promote the event on his online show, McInnes later disavowed the rally and told members of his group not to attend. After Charlottesville, much of the extreme right was in disarray, facing immense public backlash and a civil suit targeting its most prominent leaders. While most groups made what the white nationalist podcaster Douglass Mackey called a “tactical retreat back to the internet,” the Proud Boys doubled-down on their on-the-ground organizing, operating under innocuous banners like “freedom” and “free speech.”²⁴

The following year saw an even more intense Proud Boys mobilization. While many of the rallies they attended in 2017 were orchestrated by other prominent far-right figures, by the following year Proud Boys were planning their own events or sharing the bill with a select group of other far-right organizations. Their rallies were predominantly focused in the Pacific Northwest — especially Portland, Oregon. This was for two reasons: First, the region (and Portland in particular) has a deep history of antifascist organizing to militantly oppose far-right extremists, especially those in the city’s once-active racist skinhead scene. Oregon was founded with Black exclusion laws on its books to maintain the state’s whiteness. That legacy runs through the state today, making it a place for both robust far-right and antifascist movements — the latter of which groups like the Proud Boys are eager to challenge. Second, the Portland area is home to Patriot Prayer, a far-right organization based in Vancouver, Washington, and led by pro-Trump activist Joey Gibson. Patriot Prayer and the Proud Boys have teamed up at dozens of pro-Trump, pro-gun, and “free speech” rallies.

Gibson’s Patriot Prayer hosted rallies in Portland throughout the summer of 2017, but the frequency of rallies picked up in 2018. At a demonstration in early June, Proud Boy Tusitala “Tiny” Toese greeted rallygoers by telling them he was prepared for a “physical fight, whatever kind of fight — we’re coming ... and we’re gonna raise hell.” Two Proud Boys, Allen Pucket and Donovan Flippo, were filmed attacking a counterprotester in a parking garage. McInnes celebrated the rally, tweeting in response, “Nowhere does antifa have a stronger hold than Portland yet 20 brave patriots barreled into 200 of them and sang anthems as they bled.”²⁵ The rally had seemingly no angle beyond sparking violence — it was merely billed as “Tiny’s Last March” before he would temporarily return home to American Samoa.

The rallies gained momentum: If violence between antifascists and members of Patriot Prayer and Proud Boys occurred at one rally, the far right called for retaliation, therefore justifying another demonstration. After “Tiny’s Last March,” the two far-right groups teamed up again to, as one Patriot Prayer members put it in their private Facebook group, “cleanse the streets of Portland.” The June 30 rally was predictably violent, with far-right activists openly pummeling and bloodying people in the streets. Police eventually declared the event a riot. Journalist David Neiwert reported that an eyewitness “saw a group of six Proud Boys

²³ Cassie Miller and Howard Graves, “When the ‘Alt-Right’ Hit the Streets: Far-Right Political Rallies in the Trump Era,” <https://www.splcenter.org/20200810/when-alt-right-hit-streets-far-right-political-rallies-trump-era>, SPLC *Hatewatch*, August 10, 2020.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Hatewatch Staff, “Patriot Prayer and Proud Boys Roll into Portland Ready to Fight,” <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2018/06/06/patriot-prayer-and-proud-boys-roll-portland-ready-fight>, SPLC *Hatewatch*, June 6, 2018.

kicking a man lying on the street, while one of them held him in a chokehold.” The eyewitness intervened because he feared the Proud Boys would kill the protester.²⁶ The most famous images to emerge from the rally were those of Nordean punching a counterprotester in the head, immediately rendering him unconscious. Nordean, who said in an interview that day that he was attending his “fourth or fifth rally out here,” did not face any charges related to his conduct.²⁷ Instead, the man he punched was arrested and accused of swinging a baton at Nordean.²⁸

Galvanized by the June melee, Patriot Prayer and the Proud Boys quickly began to organize another rally for Aug. 4. In their private Facebook group, people associated with both groups discussed protective equipment and weapons, and they openly asserted that violence was an inevitability. “Kevlar? Shield? Head Gear? Suggestions please,” one man asked in the group. “Helmet for sure,” Proud Boy associate David Willis responded. When some members suggested that people in the group seemed too eager to engage in violence, they received immediate pushback. “Sometimes fighting is necessary,” one member posted in July. “You have no right to tell those of us who are ready to fight how to believe. We are well within our rights to do what is necessary and wipe this anti-American communist scum off this planet. THESE ARE THE DOMESTIC ENEMIES OUR FOUNDERS WROTE ABOUT. We have the duty and the right to fight them.” The notion that violence was a patriotic obligation permeated the groups’ public Facebook pages as well. “This is a spiritual and physical battle,” Proud Boy Gabe Silva posted on the Patriot Prayer page on July 18. “It will get much worse. You are in historical times. Prepare for chaos. You cannot sit this out. It will be at your door soon.”²⁹

By the time the Proud Boys were planning rallies in the summer and fall of 2018, it was apparent the group had developed a complex, nationwide network. The Proud Boys had forty-four chapters across the country, each of which could collect dues from members and fundraise to host rallies. For the Aug. 4 rally, for example, members posted links to PayPal and Fundly to raise money to transport people to Portland and provide medical supplies. When Billy Sessions, the leader of the far-right group Hiwaymen, posted to Facebook that he was “working on bring [sic] 8 from Arkansas” to the Portland rally, Silva responded, “I think some funds will be thrown your way.”³⁰ Members in the New England chapter, which was gathering for a “Resist Marxism” rally in Providence, Rhode Island, sent payments to their leader — a Connecticut police officer — on Venmo to cover monthly dues and transportation to the upcoming event. “October blood money and bus,” one wrote in a message attached to the payment. “Helicopter fuel. Those filthy commies aren’t going to

²⁶ David Neiwart, “Portland far-right rally once again quickly turns violent as march becomes a riot,” <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2018/07/03/portland-far-right-rally-once-again-quickly-turns-violent-march-becomes-riot>, SPLC *Hatewatch*, July 30, 2018.

²⁷ Ethan “Rufio” Nordean interviewed on “Unite America First,” June 30, 2018.

²⁸ David K. Kirkpatrick and Alan Feuer, “Police Shrugged Off the Proud Boys, Until They Attacked the Capitol,” <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/14/us/proud-boys-law-enforcement.html>, New York *Times*, March 14, 2021.

²⁹ Posts from Patriot Prayer Facebook group.

³⁰ Gabe Silva Facebook page, July 9, 2018.

push themselves out of a helicopter,” wrote another.³¹ Proud Boys traveled across state lines to attend the Providence rally, including Vancouver, Washington, Proud Boy Toese.³²

The Aug. 4, 2018, rally in Portland was the largest the Proud Boys and Patriot Prayer held that year, attracting some 400 people.³³ Gibson claimed the police told him they would treat the event as “mutual combat,” meaning that, in the event of a fight, the police would not interfere because each side was assumed to be engaging willfully. When the SPLC asked the Portland Police Bureau public information officer about this assertion, he sidestepped the question and merely said the police bureau would “intervene to the best of its ability whenever there is a life/safety issue.”³⁴ When the day of the rally arrived, the police did not search the far-right activists for weapons, but they did keep them separated from counterprotesters, who included community groups, local labor groups, and members of clergy, as well as a small contingent of “Black bloc” activists. When projectiles were thrown, which some witnesses claimed came from the far-right side of the demonstration, police charged the counterprotesters. At least one woman was hospitalized after being hit with a police flash bang device.³⁵

Police inaction in Portland emboldened the group, allowing them to host repeated rallies with little fear that members would face arrests. But the group did not always receive the same treatment in other cities. In October 2018, Gavin McInnes spoke at an event at New York City’s Metropolitan Republican Club, where he riled a crowd of supporters by reenacting the 1960s assassination of a Japanese socialist. After his remarks ended, Proud Boys streamed out into the streets, where members of the group attacked several antifascists. The assault was caught on camera. Ten men connected to the Proud Boys were eventually charged in relation to the attack. Seven pleaded guilty to charges including attempted assault, and two were convicted of attempted assault and attempted gang assault and riot at a trial.³⁶

The charges had a chilling effect on the Proud Boys. McInnes stepped down from his leadership position to “alleviate” the sentences the members of his group were facing.³⁷

³¹ David K. Kirkpatrick and Alan Feuer, “Police Shrugged Off the Proud Boys, Until They Attacked the Capitol,” <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/14/us/proud-boys-law-enforcement.html>, New York Times, March 14, 2021.

³² G. Wayne Miller, “Group Clash in Raucous Protest,” <https://www.providencejournal.com/story/news/politics/2018/10/06/groups-clash-in-raucous-protest-at-state-house-video-photos/9602134007/>, *The Providence Journal*, October 6, 2018.

³³ Jason Wilson, “Portland Far-Right Rally: Police Charge Counterprotesters with Batons Drawn,” <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/aug/04/patriot-prayer-to-carry-guns-at-portland-rally-as-fears-of-violence-rise>, *The Guardian*, August 5, 2019.

³⁴ Hatewatch Staff, “Another Charlottesville? Threats of Violence Loom Over Upcoming Portland Proud Boys, Patriot Prayer Rally,” <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2018/07/25/another-charlottesville-threats-violence-loom-over-upcoming-portland-proud-boys-patriot>, SPLC Hatewatch, July 25, 2018.

³⁵ Jason Wilson, “Portland Far-Right Rally: Police Charge Counterprotesters with Batons Drawn,” <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/aug/04/patriot-prayer-to-carry-guns-at-portland-rally-as-fears-of-violence-rise>, *The Guardian*, August 5, 2019.

³⁶ Colin Moynihan, “Two Members of Proud Boys Convicted in Brawl Near Republican Club,” <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/19/nyregion/proud-boys-verdict-trial.html>, New York Times, August 19, 2019.

³⁷ Jason Wilson, “Proud Boys Founder Gavin McInnes Quits ‘Extremist’ Far-Right Group,” <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/nov/22/proud-boys-founder-gavin-mcinnis-quits-far-right-group>, *The Guardian*, November 22, 2018.

Miami Proud Boy Enrique Tarrio stepped into his position only days later. The Proud Boys also implemented a “stand down” order and, momentarily, stepped away from public rallies.

The pause in activity was short-lived. By early 2019, the Proud Boys were back in the streets. The momentum looked much like it had the prior year, with each rally framed as an act of retaliation for the last, and, again, the activity was focused in Portland. The rallies also increasingly attracted the attention of the right-wing press, which repeated the narrative that antifascists were causing violence and disorder in American cities. At a rally in June, the right-wing journalist Andy Ngo, who was livestreaming the event, was punched and doused in milkshakes that had been handed out by an antifascist collective. The milkshakes were rumored to contain cement — a claim that was quickly disproven but, nevertheless, helped to fuel the right-wing narrative that antifascists represented a violent threat.³⁸

The Proud Boys announced they would hold a rally on Aug. 17 in response to the Ngo milkshake incident, dubbing it the “End Domestic Terrorism Rally.” It brought together not only Proud Boys, but a wide range of far-right groups, who joined together in their shared enmity toward antifascists and the broader political left, as well as their belief that leftist violence would lead the country toward a widespread, violent conflict. Antigovernment groups, including the Oath Keepers and Washington III%ers, joined the Proud Boys in promoting the rally. Both Oath Keeper leader Stewart Rhodes and Washington III%er leader Matt Marshall went on Alex Jones’ conspiracy-centric Infowars network the month before the rally to discuss the event. “We’re already in a cold civil war,” Rhodes told Jones. “The problem is that they’re [antifa] being used and manipulated to force them to fight us and we’ll have no choice but to fight them back and defend ourselves and defend our families and defend our country. And they’ll be exterminated.”³⁹

The rally was promoted primarily by Proud Boy Joseph Biggs, who taunted antifascists in online videos, telling them, “You’re not gonna feel safe when you go out in public.”⁴⁰ He fundraised for the event on PayPal, writing in an online post, “We are booking flights to Portland, finding lodging and a rental. Anything helps. Our team appreciates all who have given before.”⁴¹ The Facebook event page for the rally was filled with violent imagery, including a post showing a person with a shirt bearing the logo of Rose City Antifa, a Portland antifascist collective, being beheaded.⁴²

The rally attracted around 500 far-right attendees. The leaders were clearly attempting to put pressure on local government officials, who they charged were ineffectively managing the threat antifa supposedly posed to the city. Gibson accused Portland Mayor Ted Wheeler of coordinating with antifascists, while Tarrio said the Proud Boys would continue coming to the city unless Wheeler acted quickly. “The path forward for Mayor Wheeler is simple, free your city from the grip of Antifa, take direct and meaningful action.” In a demonstration of how effectively the Proud Boys’ message had spread throughout right-wing media, then-President Trump tweeted, “Major consideration is being given to naming ANTIFA an ‘ORGANIZATION OF TERROR,’ the morning of the rally. “Portland is being watched very

³⁸ Ali Breland, “How a Dubious Claim of Cement Milkshakes in Portland Became a Right-Wing Meme,” <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2019/07/how-a-dubious-claim-of-cement-milkshakes-in-portland-became-a-right-wing-meme/>, *Mother Jones*, July 2, 2019.

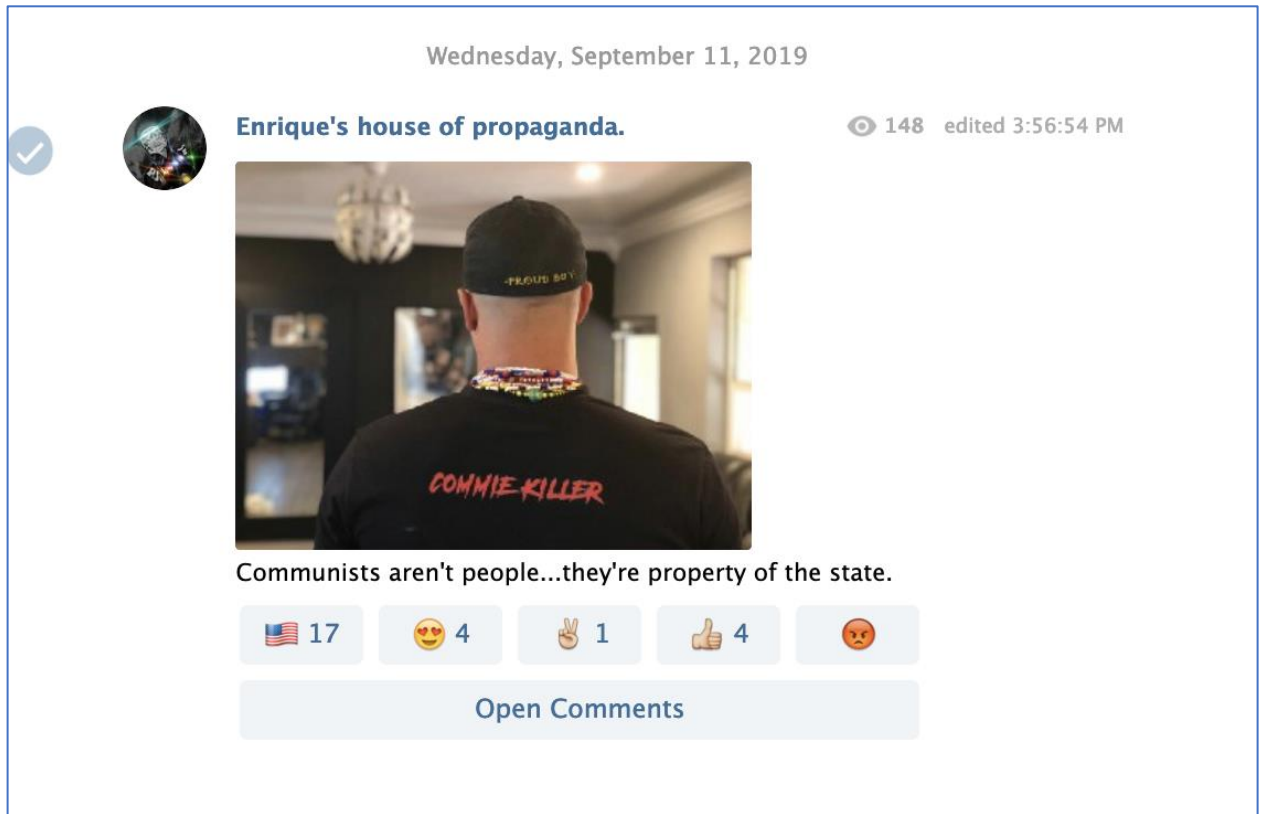
³⁹ Infowars, July 15, 2019.

⁴⁰ Jason Wilson, “Portland Prepares for City’s Largest Far-Right Rally of the Trump Era,” <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/aug/15/portland-oregon-far-right-rally>, *The Guardian*, August 16, 2019.

⁴¹ Joe Biggs, Jun 23, 2019.

⁴² “End Domestic Terrorism” Facebook event page, July 22, 2019.

closely. Hopefully the Mayor will be able to do his job!”⁴³ Creating the perception of disorder is central to the Proud Boys organizing strategy: If government — especially municipalities led by Democrats — cannot maintain civil order, then, the Proud Boys argue, their use of intimidation and force becomes necessary to impose it.



Enrique Tarrio wearing a “commie killer” shirt in an image he posted to his Telegram channel, Sept. 11, 2019.

The Proud Boys in 2020

The year 2020 provided a multitude of organizational opportunities for the Proud Boys. The group hosted and attended some of the earliest protests against state-imposed public health measures when the pandemic broke out early in the year. They appeared at an Ohio rally on April 13 and, in the days following, attended demonstrations in Michigan, Colorado, Nevada, Oregon, and Florida. Proud Boys alleged that government action would not stop with COVID health measures. The state was inherently tyrannical, members argued, would use the health crisis to clamp down on people’s freedom and, in the process, help spark widespread civil disorder. Proud Boys and other groups called this imagined breakdown “the boogaloo.” (When the Proud Boys returned to Facebook in 2019 after having been kicked off the year before, for example, they named their page, “West is the Best II: Electric Boogaloo.”) The idea of an impending civil war was welcomed by many Proud Boys, who

⁴³ Jason Wilson, “Portland Rally: Proud Boys Vow to March Each Month After Biggest Protest of Trump Era,” <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/aug/17/portland-oregon-far-right-rally-proud-boys-antifa>, *The Guardian*, August 17, 2019.

believed it would be a chance for the far right to attack communists and create a more authoritarian political system.⁴⁴

The Proud Boys also positioned themselves in direct opposition to the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement that gained widespread support across the United States in 2020 after George Floyd was murdered by a white police officer in Minneapolis. The group aggressively defended and celebrated Kyle Rittenhouse, a teenager unconnected to the group who killed two protesters and maimed another at a Black Lives Matter demonstration in Kenosha, Wisconsin, on Aug. 25, 2020, for which he claimed self-defense and was acquitted. The group called him a “hero” who “has more heart than most men.”⁴⁵ Chapters posted images of Rittenhouse depicted as a saint, rifle in hand, on their social media.

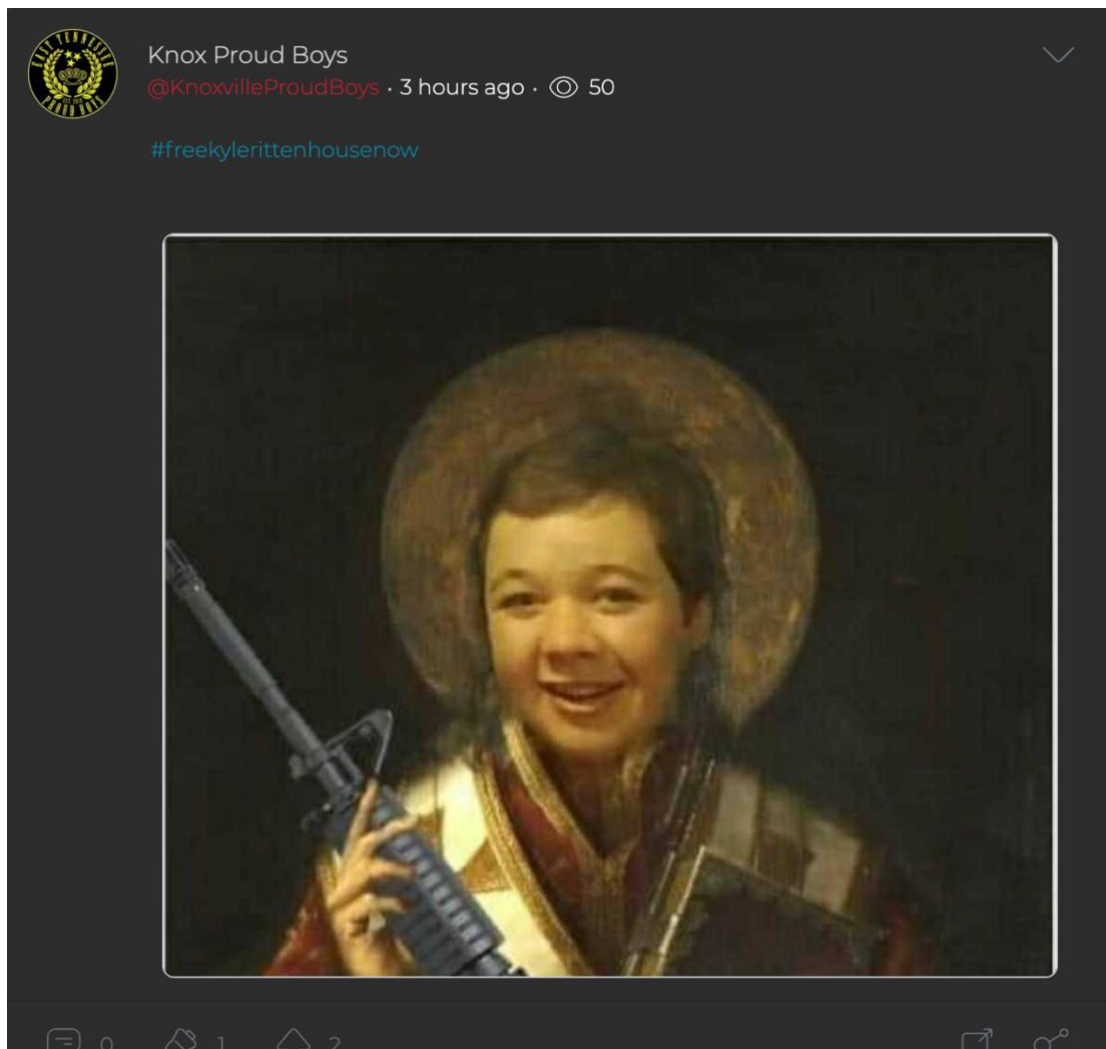


Image of Kyle Rittenhouse depicted as a saint posted on Parler by the Knoxville Proud Boys chapter, Sept. 27, 2020.

⁴⁴ Cassie Miller, “Anti-Lockdown Protests Are Providing an Opening for the Proud Boys and Other Far-Right Extremists,” <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2020/04/27/anti-lockdown-rallies-are-providing-opening-proud-boys-and-other-far-right-extremists>, SPLC *Hatewatch*, April 27, 2020.

⁴⁵ Cassie Miller, “This is the Moment the Proud Boys Have Been Waiting For,” <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2020/09/25/moment-proud-boys-have-been-waiting>, SPLC *Hatewatch*, September 25, 2020.

The Proud Boys have consistently searched for a signal of support from President Trump, and in 2020 he repeated messages that, to the group, sounded like a call to arms. Trump repeatedly criticized BLM activists and Americans demonstrating for racial justice, describing them as “thugs” and, before a rally in Tulsa, threatening that “protesters, anarchists, agitators, looters or lowlifes” would be treated aggressively.⁴⁶ His designation of Portland, Seattle, and New York City as “anarchist jurisdictions” sent the message that an authoritarian crackdown on America’s liberal cities was necessary — a move celebrated by the Proud Boys. “S--t’s about to get real,” Joe Biggs wrote on his blog after the Department of Justice put out a press release about the designation.⁴⁷ On Parler, he suggested “The Feds should just federalize is [sic] and let the Proud Boys clean up Portland, Seattle and Philly.”⁴⁸

During the summer of 2020, the Proud Boys embraced the idea that they were working together with law enforcement to maintain “law and order” in cities with the most widespread racial justice protests. Law enforcement in Portland, especially, did little to discourage this perception. While racial justice protests were being violently suppressed by law enforcement — including federal troops who charged protesters with federal crimes — local and state police embraced a hands-off approach when it came to managing far-right demonstrations.⁴⁹ Portland Police Bureau cited overtaxed resources as the reason why it chose not to intervene in a Proud Boys “Back the Blue” protest in August 2020, where far-right activists brandished guns and shot counterprotesters with paint balls.⁵⁰ Before a September rally, the Oregon State Police and the Multnomah County Sheriff’s Office both declined to offer support to the Portland Police Bureau unless the city lifted its ban on tear gas. The ban was lifted when Oregon Gov. Kate Brown declared a state of emergency for Portland. Though the rally was smaller than predicted, the two law enforcement agencies announced that their officers would remain deputized as federal marshals for the rest of the year. Biggs celebrated the development as a victory — one that was won by the Proud Boys, and that presumably would have the largest negative impact of racial justice protesters. “Portland area officers will remain federal deputies through end of year – Proud boys made this happen!!!!” he posted on Parler.⁵¹

The Proud Boys were also able to monetize this activity. Biggs, for example, solicited donations from his followers on Parler before the September 2020 Portland rally. “Thank you to everyone who has donated to us getting to Portland. I was just able to get my ticket there! along with many of us others,” he posted Sept. 22. “We still need money for lodging. So if you are able to donate, you can here at my cash app \$ssgbiggs. anything helps!” As

⁴⁶ Kevin Liptak, “Trump threatens protesters ahead of Tulsa rally,” <https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/19/politics/donald-trump-tulsa-protesters/index.html>, CNN, June 19, 2020.

⁴⁷ Joe Biggs, “BREAKING: The Department of Justice has Designated Portland, Seattle, and New York City as ‘anarchist jurisdictions,’” September 21, 2020. https://web.archive.org/web/20210118095453/https://www.thebiggsreport.com/2020/09/breaking-the-department-of-justice-has-designated-portland-seattle-and-new-york-city-as-anarchist-jurisdictions/?utm_source=right-rail-latest, September 21, 2020.

⁴⁸ Joe Biggs, Parler, Sept. 29, 2020.

⁴⁹ Mike Baker, Thomas Fuller, and Sergio Olmos, “Federal Agents Push Into Portland Streets, Stretching Limits of Authority,” <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/25/us/portland-federal-legal-jurisdiction-courts.html>, New York Times, July 25, 2020.

⁵⁰ Cassie Miller, “This is the Moment the Proud Boys Have Been Waiting For,” SPLC *Hatewatch*, September 25, 2020, <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2020/09/25/moment-proud-boys-have-been-waiting>.

⁵¹ Joe Biggs, Parler, Sept. 28, 2020.

they had been doing for many years, the group also sold branded merchandise on their online store, including clothing that capitalized on the violence of 2020. At the September rally, Proud Boys wore shirts that read, “Kyle Rittenhouse did nothing wrong!” across the front and, on the back, “The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of commies.” The shirt, as well as a hat that said “War Boys” that Tarrio wore to the rally, could be purchased at their store, 1776.shop. After Trump failed to condemn white supremacy and, from the stage of the first presidential debate, told the Proud Boys to “stand back and stand by,” the group fashioned shirts with the logo and sold them online that same night.⁵²

Trump’s comments were a major victory for the group. “President Trump told the proud boys to stand by because someone needs to deal with ANTIFA...well sir! we’re ready!” Biggs posted on Parler.⁵³ Tarrio simply wrote, “Standing by sir.”⁵⁴ When Trump lost the 2020 presidential election, the group quickly began to promote the lie that the election had been stolen. “This is an orchestrated event. The left hates America and they know the radical left will burn this country to the ground. That’s what it’s all about, the destruction of America,” Biggs wrote in a Nov. 10 blog post. “If there ever was a time for there to be second civil war, it’s now,” he predicted, before telling his followers they needed to prepare for violence and civil disorder. “This weekend in DC Thousands are expected to go to the Million MAGA march and with that you can expect left wing violence. This is all aligning for a perfect storm. Buy ammo, clean your guns, get storable food and water. Be prepared! Things are about to get bad before they get better.”⁵⁵

‘Stop the Steal’ and the Road to Jan. 6

In the aftermath of the election, Proud Boys attended rallies in D.C. and elsewhere, under the banner of the “Stop the Steal” movement. The Proud Boys’ rhetoric also became increasingly militant, with members in leadership arguing that America had become divided beyond repair. This was articulated clearly on a Nov. 19, 2020, episode of “WarBoys,” a show streamed on DLive that featured Biggs, Tarrio, and Nordean. Even police, they said, needed to pick a side: “I’m sorry, you’re not here to protect all Americans at this point in time. It’s time to f---ing put boots to skulls,” Biggs said, adding, “Guess what? If I’m a cop, I’m f---ing beating the s---t out of you with my baton until your f---ing s---t comes wide open. And I’m going to laugh about it, you f---ing commie c---suckers.” “It’s war, okay?” Nordean added, “And you know what’s the funny thing about war is that it’s ugly. But you gotta choose a side. And you gotta choose a side that’s gonna win this, uh, our freedom back, alright? And that just happens to be the people on this show.”⁵⁶

Nordean articulated the threat the Proud Boys believed was facing the United States in the aftermath of the election: BLM activists — and the left, broadly — were destroying American cities, and Democratic governors were allowing the disorder to take place. The only way to curtail the threat was by joining the Proud Boys and likeminded groups:

⁵² Nico Lang, “White Supremacists are Already Selling ‘Stand Back, Stand By’ T-Shirts,” <https://www.them.us/story/white-supremacists-selling-stand-back-stand-by-t-shirts>, *them*, September 30, 2020.

⁵³ Joe Biggs, Parler, Sept. 29, 2020.

⁵⁴ Enrique Tarrio, Parler, Sept. 29, 2020.

⁵⁵ Joe Biggs, “The Second Civil War is More Realistic Than You Think,” Nov. 10, 2020. <https://web.archive.org/web/20210224011815/https://www.thebiggsreport.com/2020/11/the-second-civil-war-is-more-realistic-than-you-think/>.

⁵⁶ WarBoys, DLive, Nov. 19, 2020.

We have a lot of — a huge network of men all around the world who are all about doing this and fighting for what's right. And I don't know what else you need to see. We've shown it time and time again for four years. But you guys need to get on board with us and support your local chapters. And you need to start supporting your local militias who are out there side-by-side with us and stop getting tangled up in this PC bulls--t that the news is telling you. You need to see what's happening flat-out in front of your face, that these antifa BLM leftists are burning your cities to the ground and, on top of it, you have these tyrannical governors who are telling you you're not allowed to leave your house and, 'oh by the way, shut down your business while we burn it down.'⁵⁷

While the Proud Boys had long used rallies to create viral acts of violence, resulting in increased recruitment, they truly honed their ability to monetize these events in late 2020. After Proud Boy Jeremy Bertino of North Carolina was stabbed at a Dec. 12 rally in Washington, D.C., for example, he set up a fundraiser on the site GiveSendGo, ultimately raising \$61,255. Bertino said that, once recovered, he would “be back out fighting off the communist threat.”⁵⁸ Matthew Walters, a Tennessee Proud Boy, posted a fundraiser to help Bertino and three others hurt in the stabbing incident, which netted \$106,107.⁵⁹ At that Dec. 12 D.C. rally, Proud Boys destroyed two Black Lives Matter banners belonging to historically Black churches. Enrique Tarrio was eventually arrested on Jan. 4, 2021, on charges related to the vandalism, as well as for bringing a high-capacity magazine into Washington, D.C. A fundraiser for a “defense fund” brought in \$113,000 in donation in just four days. Fundraising pages were often shared across Proud Boys channels on the messaging platform Telegram. A data breach of GiveSendGo in early 2021 showed that, across eleven different fundraisers related to the Proud Boys, the group was able to raise \$375,000 using the platform.⁶⁰

Some of those funds were solicited specifically to help the Proud Boys travel to D.C. Nicholas Ochs, a Hawaii Proud Boy who entered the Capitol on Jan. 6, asked for help documenting the events of the day. “Ochs and Dick Lambaste are going to DC because the president asked,” the site explained.⁶¹ Ochs and his cohost, whose legal name is Nicholas DeCarlo, also earned money through their show “Murder the Media” on the streaming platform DLive, which allows viewers to donate money to streamers. Between Apr. 4, 2020, and Jan. 9, 2020, the pair earned \$12,695.43 in donations. Their highest earning day, when they received \$2,751.06, was Dec. 20, 2020 — the same day President Trump tweeted, “Statistically impossible to have lost the 2020 election. Big protest in DC on January 6th. Be there, will be wild!”⁶² Both men are facing charges related to their role in the insurrection.

Proud Boys in the Aftermath of the Insurrection

With their participation in the Jan. 6 insurrection, the Proud Boys demonstrated that they are willing to take dramatic, violent action to disrupt the democratic process and impose their political will. The group's belief that violence in pursuit of a more authoritarian form of

⁵⁷ WarBoys, DLive, Nov. 19, 2020.

⁵⁸ “Help for Noblebeard who was Stabbed in DC,” <https://www.givesendgo.com/Noblebeard>.

⁵⁹ “Medical Assistance to DC Proud Boy Victims,” <https://www.givesendgo.com/GYJ5>.

⁶⁰ Jason Wilson, “Proud Boys and Other Far-Right Groups Raise Millions Via Christian Funding Site,” <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/apr/10/proud-boys-far-right-givesendgo-christian-fundraising-site>, *The Guardian*, April 10, 2021.

⁶¹ “Get Ochs to DC,” <https://www.givesendgo.com/GZ64>.

⁶² Data gathered by Elon University Professor of Computer Science and SPLC Senior Fellow Megan Squire.

government — in which men like the Proud Boys can curtail the speech of other groups through force — is sincerely held, as their actions have exhibited for nearly six years. In the aftermath of the insurrection, which has resulted in dozens of their members facing serious criminal charges, including conspiracy and other offenses, the Proud Boys did not back away from their beliefs, nor did they admit wrongdoing. Instead, the group has rallied around its members and celebrated their actions on Jan. 6. Less than a week after the insurrection, one popular Proud Boys Telegram channel posted an image of lawmakers hiding in the Capitol while the building was under siege by insurrectionists. “This is the moment when those politicians and system shills who play with your lives and the lives of your children as if they’re moving pieces on a chessboard, this is the moment you made them feel the fear of the potential consequences of everything they’ve ever done,” the accompanying caption read.⁶³

The Proud Boys did not see their involvement in the Stop the Steal movement and the resulting insurrection as merely an attempt to help Trump maintain the presidency. Their goal was larger: it was an effort, by force, to push back against an imagined left-wing threat, one orchestrated by the media, the Democratic Party, and antifascist activists, to curtail the rights of “patriots” like the Proud Boys and, ultimately, to fundamentally alter the United States.

The Proud Boys have used the actions taken against their members — by law enforcement, the Department of Justice, tech companies, and lawmakers — as evidence that the state is tyrannical, and must be resisted by force. A Parler account associated with a Proud Boys podcast argued in the days after the insurrection that the country was “turning into a tyrannical leftist utopia before our eyes, and their options were to conform, “take it up the a-- with no lube,” or “1776 till the wheels fall off.”⁶⁴ The group, from its leadership down, has consistently described members who face charges as “political prisoners” and “martyrs.” A “Free the Boys” campaign was launched shortly after the insurrection, which includes a Telegram channel with links to crowdfunding sites where supporters can donate to “defense funds.” Joe Biggs raised more than \$8,000 and Dominic Pezzola more than \$40,000.⁶⁵

The Proud Boys did briefly curtail their public activity in the aftermath of Jan. 6. But by the spring, members were back to engaging in public activism, though their strategies had shifted. Rather than hosting rallies with the goal of engaging counterprotesters in violence, the Proud Boys were focused on local political flashpoints, including mask mandates, the display of Confederate monuments, abortion rights, inclusive education, and vaccine policies. According to research from VICE reporter Tess Owens, the Proud Boys attended at least 114 local events in 2021, largely targeting local governments and school boards.⁶⁶ The Proud Boys predominantly saw their presence as a tool of intimidation. At a school board meeting in North Carolina, a member of the Cape Fear Proud Boys chapter told a reporter, “If our presence escalates that pressure and makes it to the point where we become a distraction to conducting business and they just change the mask mandate so we go away,

⁶³ Proud Boys: Uncensored Telegram channel, Jan. 11, 2021.

⁶⁴ Weaponized Opinions Podcast, Parler, Jan. 9, 2021.

⁶⁵ “Joe Biggs Needs Your Help and Support,” <https://www.ourfreedomfunding.com/campaign/54/joe-biggs-needs-your-help-and-support>; “Dominic Pezzola Political Prisoner,” <https://www.givesendgo.com/Pezzola>.

⁶⁶ Tess Owens, “The Proud Boys Changed Tactics After Jan. 6. We Tracked Their Activity,” <https://www.vice.com/en/article/z3n338/what-the-proud-boys-did-after-jan-6>, *Vice News*, January 5, 2022.

that's a win."⁶⁷ They even targeted students, who said the harassment was "unnerving" and "intimidating."⁶⁸

Despite the legal consequences of their role in the insurrection, 2021 was arguably the most active year the Proud Boys have had. Today's political atmosphere, which rewards combative rhetoric and where political violence is increasingly normalized, has been a boon to the group. Their numbers grew dramatically in the year after the insurrection, from forty-three active chapters in 2020 to 72 in 2021.⁶⁹

Proud Boys' activity is unlikely to diminish in the near future. Even Tarrio's recent announcement that he is stepping down from his leadership position, as well as the DOJ's announcement that he will face conspiracy charges related to the insurrection, will not likely change the group's activities or its allure for potential recruits. As political tensions ramp up in the runup to the 2022 midterms and, later, a presidential election, the group will find opportunities to insert themselves into political confrontation, with a very high chance of violence. They will likely return to street violence, some of which could be directed at polling places and state houses. The group will not shy away from any chance to publicly confront their perceived political opponent, especially in a moment when even elected officials appear to condone political violence.

We deeply appreciate the committee's commitment to thoroughly investigating the events of Jan. 6 and holding responsible parties accountable. We look forward to working with you as you continue your investigation and are happy to be of further assistance.

Sincerely,



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Senior Research Analyst, Intelligence Project



Susan Corke
Director, Intelligence Project

⁶⁷ Alexandria Sands Williams, "'It's time to ramp up pressure,' Why the Proud Boys Say They Showed Up to a New Hanover School Board Meeting," <https://portcitydaily.com/local-news/education/2021/11/10/its-time-to-ramp-up-pressure/>, *Port City Daily*, November 10, 2021.

⁶⁸ Tom Schuba, "Proud Boys Join Effort to Ban 'gender Queer' Book from School Library — Rattling Students in Suburban Chicago," <https://chicago.suntimes.com/education/2021/11/21/22789363/gender-queer-proud-boys-downers-grove-north-south-culture-wars-school-board-illinois>, *Chicago Sun-Times*, November 21, 2021.

⁶⁹ Cassie Miller and Rachel Carroll Rivas, "The Year in Hate and Extremism," <https://www.splcenter.org/20220309/year-hate-extremism-2021>, March 9, 2022.