

Oath Keepers

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Oath Keepers Background

Formed in 2009.

Led since then by Stewart Rhodes.

- One of 11 members charged with seditious conspiracy.

Part of the patriot/militia movement.

- Organized around a perception that government is or will soon be tyrannical.
- Encourages those it considers patriots to be ready to resist government, perhaps using violence.

Oath Keepers Background

Claims to be a non-partisan organization merely meant to encourage current and former law enforcement and military to honor their oaths.

- Unclear how much of the group's membership has military or law enforcement experience.
- Leaked membership data from Oath Keepers "[revealed](#) more than 200 people" who self-identified as current or former law enforcement.
 - Most members did not provide information about their profession. Unknown how many others were law enforcement at some point.

Oath Keepers Background

Claims to be a non-partisan organization merely meant to encourage current and former law enforcement and military to honor their oaths.

- This is also not an accurate description of what the group says and does.
 - Bundy Ranch standoff (2014)
 - Ferguson, MO (2014-2015)
 - Sugar Pine Mine (2015)
 - 2016 presidential election
 - 2016-2020 street clashes
 - Jan 6, 2021

Oath Keepers Background

Has long claimed 30,000+ dues-paying members.

- Leaked database of almost 25,000 names in 2019 – seems to be everyone who ever joined to that point, not a list of current members at any one point.
- Around 2018, watchdog orgs estimated less than 5,000 active members at any time.

Oath Keepers Background

Has long promoted conspiracy theories about perceived plots to destroy America.

- Jade Helm 15
- Agenda 21
- Gun control
- Black Lives Matter

Martial Law

Before 2016: Oath Keepers anticipated that the government would use this to violate the rights of those who dissented from government.

By 2020: Oath Keepers called on the government to use this to violate the rights of those who dissented from government.

Oath Keepers's Threat to the Rule of Law

Popular constitutionalism and popular nullification

- Individuals have the authority to decide that decisions and interpretations by the Supreme Court (and other institutions) are not legally binding.
- If an individual believes a law is invalid (typically described as unconstitutional), they do not need to obey it regardless of any legal decision saying otherwise.

Nullification in Action

Bundy Ranch standoff

Offer of armed security for Kim Davis

Support for noncompliance with COVID-19 pandemic mitigation policies

Law Enforcement Involvement

“County supremacy” – sheriff as highest law enforcement authority in a county, with the legal right and obligation to prevent federal law enforcement action that the sheriff sees as unconstitutional *regardless of a court order*.

- Constitutional Sheriffs and Peace Officers Association (CSPOA)
 - Richard Mack, long-time Oath Keepers board member
 - Oath Keepers hosting or posting CSPOA content online

Riverside County, California

Sheriff Chad Bianco

- Former member of Oath Keepers.
- In September 2021, [declared](#) he would not enforce vaccine mandates for his staff.
 - “The government has no ability and no authority to mandate your health choices.”
 - Also [described himself](#) as “the last line of defense from tyrannical government overreach.”
- In October 2021, defended the group while condemning the Jan 6 insurrection.
 - [Said](#) the group doesn’t “promote violence and government overthrow.”
 - But Rhodes: If Trump doesn’t act, we will

Rowan County, Kentucky

As part of the offer of security for Kim Davis, the group planned to “educate” Rowan County sheriff on rights and responsibilities to prevent federal judges from issuing orders that the sheriff perceives as unconstitutional.

- Part of this planned effort: former Kentucky sheriff Denny Peyman

Attempts to Justify Violence

The group typically has tried to rhetorically justify possible violence as defensive.

But in practice, the group takes action that increases the chances of violence.

Conspiracism and Conflict

Much of this is driven by a “paranoid style” of making sense of the world:

- Rather than recognizing some bad outcomes as the result of the complex convergence of a wide range of factors, they see all bad outcomes as the result of a nefarious plan by evil-intentioned elites.

It is also driven by a view of the world as driven by conflict between good and evil:

- There is no good-faith disagreement. Any disagreement is the result of nefarious action by evil-intentioned elites.
- Those who aren't evil-intentioned elites can be on the other side of disagreement if they are persuaded by the lies of the elites.

The Problem of Oath Keepers in Public Roles

Law enforcement:

- Deciding for themselves which laws to enforce based on whatever they think the Constitution says or means.

Policymakers:

- Making policy based on a worldview that sees conspiracies and unavoidable violent conflicts behind everyone who doesn't agree with them.