

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
HOUSE SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON MILITARY AND VETERANS' AFFAIRS

February 10, 2022

1:01 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Representative Chris Tuck, Chair
Representative Andi Story
Representative Geran Tarr
Representative Matt Claman

MEMBERS ABSENT

Representative George Rauscher
Representative Laddie Shaw
Representative David Nelson

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

PRESENTATION: OATH KEEPERS INFORMATIONAL HEARING

- HEARD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

No previous action to record

WITNESS REGISTER

ALEX FRIEDFELD, Investigative Researcher
Center on Extremism
Anti-Defamation League
New York, New York

POSITION STATEMENT: Provided a PowerPoint presentation, entitled "The Oath Keepers."

JON LEWIS, Research Fellow
Program on Extremism
George Washington University
Washington, D.C.

POSITION STATEMENT: Provided a presentation about the role of the Oath Keepers in the January 6, 2021, insurrection.

ACTION NARRATIVE

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CHAIR CHRIS TUCK called the House Special Committee on Military and Veterans' Affairs meeting to order at 1:01 p.m. Representatives Stori, Claman, and Tuck were present at the call to order. Representatives Tarr arrived as the meeting was in progress.

Presentation: Oath Keepers Informational Hearing

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CHAIR TUCK announced that the only order of business would be the Oath Keepers Informational Hearing presentation.

CHAIR TUCK explained this presentation is for informational purposes only.

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ALEX FRIEDFELD, Investigative Researcher, Anti-Defamation League, Center on Extremism, provided a PowerPoint presentation, entitled "The Oath Keepers" [hard copy included in committee packet]. He showed a photo taken at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, which shows men wearing helmets and tactical gear with their hands on each other's shoulders in an organized, stacked formation. His aim for the presentation was to trace the history and ideology of the Oath Keepers who are a part of the right-wing militia movement, which started in the 1990s and consists of armed paramilitary groups with anti-government, conspiracy-oriented, and extremist ideologies. They believe in a conspiracy called the "New World Order," which is the idea that the federal government has been co-opted to deny rights to American citizens. They believe the government is using COVID-19 pandemic responses to conspire against people and weaken them for ultimate enslavement. There is an emphasis on gun ownership and paramilitary training among militias to balance power. He said militias are not inherently white supremacist.

MR. FRIEDFELD explained that the militia movement was formed in response to the proliferation of "New World Order" conspiracies that were fueled by the collapse of the Soviet Union, the formation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and skepticism around the United Nations. Militia proponents used gun control legislation that started requiring background checks in 1993-94 and events like "Ruby Ridge," and "Waco" to urge the formation of new militias. Their growth was flagged during the Bush Administration and surged again in 2008 with

fears of socialism after the election of President Obama. The rise of social media created opportunities for militias to network and recruit. The Three Percenter concept is the myth that only three percent of colonists stood up against the British and critically achieved liberty for everyone. By 2011, there were likely over 100,000 militia followers across the country. After President Trump took office, the militia pivoted focus from the Federal Government and moved to different issues like immigration, border control, targeting Muslims, and opposing "ANTIFA." Focus was further shifted towards state and local officials, particularly democrats.

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MR. FRIEDFELD said that under the Biden Administration, militias have turned their attention to the Federal Government again by framing the Biden Administration as illegitimate with intent upon causing war with conservatives to destroy the country. Criminality and violence have emerged from the militia movement.

MR. FRIEDFELD showed a photo on slide 10 of the "Wolverine Watchmen" who allegedly plotted to kidnap Michigan governor, Gretchen Whitmer, because they believed she was using the COVID-19 pandemic to impose tyranny.

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MR. FRIEDFELD mentioned that the Oath Keepers share a conspiratorial mindset with the rest of the militia movement. What sets them apart is their focus on targeting current and former military, law enforcement, and first responder personnel with their messaging and recruitment. They are focused on preventing what they claim are "unconstitutional orders." They were founded in 2009 and led by disbarred former attorney Stewart Rhodes. There is a national organization that sets priorities, and there are also local and state chapters. There are thousands of members across the country. Mr. Friedfeld stated that it is deeply problematic that law enforcement and military members are proud members of the Oath Keepers because of security information concerns. Their membership greatly undermines civilian trust in these institutions. The training received by military and police makes them unique dangers in the event that they decide to act, as seen on January 6, 2021.

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MR. FRIEDFELD showed slide 15, which details a declaration of orders the Oath Keepers will not obey according to their website. This declaration frames the government as an inherently nefarious entity that can pursue courses of action that would undermine the legitimacy of the government. The final item on the list refers to a revolutionary spirit. Oath Keepers have demonstrated their willingness to engage in warfare, if need be, and frame the government as an entity willing to enslave people. The Oath Keepers weaponize patriotism by targeting the state. The Oath Keepers website paraphrases the military's oath and omits language that refers to obeying the orders of the President. They are attempting to create an image that the Oath Keepers are the protectors and defenders of the constitution, with some caveats to further their agenda. The "Declaration of Orders We Will Not Obey" is a primary document for the Oath Keepers and shows how they view the government.

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MR. FRIEDFELD described how the Oath Keepers utilize patriotic symbology and link their cause with the patriots of the 1700s. Many members have been arrested for illegal activity such as weapons violations and more serious crimes where small disputes have escalated to levels of tyranny. They participated in an armed standoff with federal agents at Bundy Ranch in Nevada in 2014. Other armed standoffs with federal officials occurred in 2015 in Oregon and Montana. They turned legal disputes into armed standoffs and escalated danger for everyone involved. An armed contingent showed up in Ferguson to protect citizens from protesters against the wishes of local police. They have insisted that democrats are trying to destroy Western civilization by working with "ANTIFA" to impose a socialist takeover.

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MR. FRIEDFELD said that in 2020, the Oath Keepers dramatically escalated their conspiratorial rhetoric and increased their activity. Stewart Rhodes, founder of the Oath Keepers, became more brazen in his actions which led to the January 6, 2021, attack. They were active in opposing lockdown orders and "open against government mandates." Stewart Rhodes escalated his rhetoric and encouraged his followers to "stand up and defend America from a violent leftist insurrection" enabled by internal and external agents and intent on destroying the country. In the wake of the 2020 Election, Mr. Rhodes called on President

Trump to invoke the Insurrection Act [of 1807] and call militias into federal service to stop a Marxist insurrection carried out by the "ANTIFA" and Black Lives Matter (BLM) movements. Rhodes said that if President Trump fails to invoke the Act, "he will place us in a situation we'll have to fight a bloody horrible civil war." The Oath Keepers planned, shortly after the 2020 Election, to use force to oppose the transfer of presidential power. In the year since the insurrection, the Oath Keepers have been dealing with significant legal and public scrutiny. Many are facing federal charges. The company hosting the Oath Keeper message board removed it which made it difficult for the community to connect online. Since then, the Oath Keepers have not engaged in any notable, large-scale operations.

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MR. FRIEDFELD said that even after the insurrection, Stewart Rhodes continued to insist that President Biden is a Chinese puppet. He expressed his concern as a monitor of the Oath Keepers online presence about the continued conspiratorial and occasionally violent rhetoric they use. Some Oath Keepers praise the attack and others have written it off as a false operation conducted by leftist provocateurs.

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MR. FRIEDFELD said that election conspiracy holds strong power for the Oath Keepers. They don't believe the 2020 Election was fair despite audits that show that the 2020 Election had no large-scale fraud. There hasn't yet been chatter about the 2022 Election.

MR. FRIEDFELD, in response to Representative Story, said that he watched the online chats on January 6, 2021, as events unfolded, and he noticed remarks in the Oath Keepers' chat saying that the people storming the capital were "ANTIFA" or Black Lives Matter, or some other provocateur. "Those aren't patriots, patriots wouldn't do this." Rather than large scale condemnation or denouncing the Oath Keepers' actions, more conspiracy was spun to absolve themselves.

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CHAIR TUCK mentioned that the committee reached out to the Oath Keepers organization and has not been able to make contact. A response was received from Virginia Oath Keepers chapter leader, Phil Nesbitt, who said he wasn't surprised the Oath Keepers had

not responded because the organization had been keeping a low profile since the insurrection. Virginia Oath Keepers is a separate organization from the Oath Keepers national organization founded by Stewart Rhodes. Representative Tuck pointed out that the Pennsylvania Oath Keepers wrote to say they also have nothing to do with Stewart Rhodes. He said Alaska doesn't appear to have an organized Oath Keepers office.

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CHAIR TUCK thanked Mr. Friedfeld.

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The committee took an at-ease from 2:05 to 2:06.

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JON LEWIS, Research Fellow, Program on Extremism, George Washington University, described that his presentation is narrowly focused and references the charging documents from the U.S. Department of Justice and court records for individuals charged for their alleged conduct on January 6, 2021. He reported that 736 individuals have been charged so far for their role in the events of January 6, 2021; 87 percent of them were men. Evidence in large part came from social media. About 12 percent of the total in attendance had military training and experience.

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MR. LEWIS explained that some of those charged for activities on January 6, 2021, had arranged their own travel, planned to attend a rally, and did not engage or conspire with others to commit violent activity. "Organized clusters," often friends and family, are individuals who shared belief and ideologies and were brought to the Capitol to see the rally but did not engage in violence. "Spontaneous clusters" are alleged to have engaged with other like-minded individuals they didn't know personally before the insurrection and committed egregious violent acts against Capitol police using bear spray, mace, bats, shields, batons, et cetera. The focus of today's briefing is the final category defined as "militant networks" who are domestic, violent extremists who are alleged to have travelled to the Capitol under the direction of the networks they are a part of. He said 55 individuals are currently thought to be part of those

militant networks, including 24 of the 26 Oath Keeper defendants.

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MR. LEWIS discussed those who have been indicted and the various charges against them. Some of the charges include seditious conspiracy to prevent the lawful transfer of power. He gave a disclaimer that every individual who has been charged is being treated as innocent until proven guilty. He described four categories of evidence. The first category includes public statements by Stewart Rhodes that encouraged his followers through calls to action on the Oath Keepers website that the election is fraudulent and there is a need to mobilize at the capital. The second category includes private communications between Stewart Rhodes and other Oath Keepers. The third includes actions taken by both Mr. Rhodes and the Oath Keepers to stockpile firearms and equipment and provide weapons and para-military training. The final category includes the alleged activities of the Oath Keepers on January 6, 2021. Stewart Rhodes allegedly began sharing information in an application called "Signal" in a group chat, titled "Leadership Intel Sharing Secured," and urged his followers to refuse to accept the results of the Election and claimed, "We aren't getting through this without a civil war; too late for that; prepare your mind, body, and soul." On November 7, 2021, Mr. Rhodes wrote in the leadership chat, "We must...march on mass to the capital." On November 9, 2021, he appointed an operations leader for his January 6, 2021, operation and outlined in a virtual, members-only, Oath Keepers national call, his plan to stop the lawful transfer of presidential power, including preparing for the use of force.

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MR. LEWIS, in response to questions from the committee, confirmed that there was a smaller group of invited members among the Oath Keepers who were involved in the planning process of January 6. The U.S. Department of Justice has narrowed the scope of investigation into distinct categories, including individuals who entered the Capitol Building and engaged in violence, and those who played a significant role in the conspiracies to date.

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MR. LEWIS discussed Thomas Caldwell, an Oath Keepers affiliate who allegedly provided results of a lengthy reconnaissance trip to Washington D.C. as part of the planning process for the January 6, 2021, insurrection. A group of Florida Oath Keepers held trainings on unconventional warfare. On December 11, 2020, Stewart Rhodes allegedly communicated via group chat and said that if President Biden assumed the presidency there would be a "bloody and desperate fight...that cannot be avoided." Calls for violence and organization continued to escalate through the end of 2020.

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MR. LEWIS said that Mr. Rhodes continued to make public and private claims that the use of force was required to stop the transfer of presidential power. He is alleged to have purchased tens of thousands of dollars' worth of firearms and equipment.

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MR. LEWIS detailed that on the days leading up to the insurrection, Stewart Rhodes and key leaders met near Washington D.C. in Virginia, stockpiled firearms for "quick reaction force," and created further detailed operational plans.

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MR. LEWIS stated that on January 6, 2021, Mr. Rhodes communicated with his followers. Mr. Lewis gave a minute-by-minute synopsis of the alleged communications and actions on the day of the insurrection at the capital.

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MR. LEWIS said that the patriot militia movement has grown beyond the Oath Keepers.

MR. LEWIS, in response to Representative Tarr, said that the operations leader is either cooperating due to the threat of charges against them, or the Department of Justice is waiting for further evidence to bring charges against him. He reminded the committee that Stewart Rhodes wasn't charged for over a year. New cases are coming in regularly, about 200 so far that are mainly low-level misdemeanor cases, many of which could plead out for reduced sentences.

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CHAIR TUCK thanked the presenters and provided closing remarks.

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ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, the House Special Committee on Military and Veterans' Affairs meeting was adjourned at 3:01 p.m.