

PROGRESS MICHIGAN PRESENTS A SPECIAL REPORT:

# **A Kidnapping Plot** *in the Age of Coronavirus* and Careless Incitement *of Political Outrage*

*An overview of the 2020 kidnapping plot against Governor Gretchen Whitmer, radical right-wing extremism, and reckless Republican rhetoric*

**KIDNAPPING CONSPIRACY  
CASE HEADS TO TRIAL**

**MICHIGAN HAS AN ESTIMATED  
TWO TO THREE DOZEN DIFFERENT  
ACTIVE MILITIA GROUPS**

**LAUNCHED SURVEILLANCE  
OF THE GOVERNOR'S COTTAGE**



# Introduction

The trial for some of the men involved in the alleged plot to kidnap and possibly execute Governor Gretchen Whitmer begins this month on Tuesday, March 8 with jury selection. This alleged plot initially came to light in October of 2020 when Michiganders were facing the ongoing global pandemic and the upcoming, extremely contentious election. Suddenly in the midst of headlines like: “Michigan Coronavirus Cases Up to 132,039; Death Toll Now at 6,869” and “Maskless Activists Rally Against Michigan Gov. Whitmer After Trump Diagnosis,” Michiganders were now faced with: “Militia Group Plotted to Kidnap Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer, Feds Say.”

Progress Michigan has compiled a breakdown of the alleged plot, including the environment in Michigan leading up to its inception and failed execution. Even for those not planning on following the details of the trial, it’s important to remember what led to this alleged domestic terrorist plot because so much of what was involved—social media plagued by algorithms that radicalize people, toxic masculinity and sexism, multiple active Michigan militias, armed protests, radical right-wing leaders and Republican lawmakers screaming anti-government extremist rhetoric and giving life to conspiracy theories, and a contentious election—are all still facets of the world, and the state, we are living in today.



**INCLUDING BLOWING UP POLICE  
CARS WITH MOLOTOV COCKTAILS  
AND STORMING THE CAPITOL**



# The Would-Be Kidnappers

The men who allegedly plotted to kidnap Governor Gretchen Whitmer in 2020 found each other through a network of connections inside the world of right-wing Michigan militias. They include militia leaders, militia members, former members of the military, gun rights advocates, and Trump supporters. While their political beliefs and group affiliations differ, they all share a hatred of government and in particular, of Governor Whitmer, whom they called a “tyrant.” They also share a love of guns.

The basics can be found below, but if you want more details about the individuals who plotted to kidnap Governor Whitmer, go here and here.

## ***Facing Federal Charges***

Six men are facing federal charges for conspiracy to commit kidnapping, punishable by up to life in prison. Some are also facing federal weapons of mass destruction charges, punishable by up to 10 years in prison, for allegedly possessing an unregistered destructive device in relation to the plot to blow up a bridge near Whitmer’s vacation home.

### 🕒 **Adam Dean Fox,** **37, Wyoming, Michigan**

The alleged ringleader. Lived in the basement of a Grand Rapids-area vacuum repair shop where he held meetings with his accomplices. President of the Michigan Three Percenters, an ideology that claims the United States’ government can be overthrown by a small force of armed individuals. According to the FBI, Fox previously belonged to the Michigan Home Guard, which claims to be the biggest and most active militia in Michigan.

### 🕒 **Barry Croft,** **45, Bear, Delaware**

Croft was a fan of Donald Trump and worked with Fox to recruit Michigan militia members to the group. Allegedly

said God had “granted him permission to violate His (God’s) commandments.”

🕒 **Ty Garbin,**  
**24, Hartland Township, Michigan**  
Leader of the Wolverine Watchmen, a Michigan militia first reported to the FBI in March of 2020 after local law enforcement became aware the group was looking for the home addresses of police officers. Cut a deal, pleaded guilty, and is cooperating with law enforcement against the others in the group.

🕒 **Daniel Joseph Harris,**  
**23, Lake Orion, Michigan**  
A Marine Corps veteran.

🕒 **Brandon Caserta,**  
**32, Canton, Michigan**  
Member of the Wolverine Watchmen, affiliated with the Three Percenter group. Posted a video on Facebook in October of 2020 about killing police officers.

🕒 **Kaleb Franks,**  
**26, Wexford, Michigan**  
Asked Garbin to help him create ghost guns for an unrelated matter.



Fox



Croft



Garbin



Harris



Caserta



Franks

# The Would-Be Kidnappers

## ***Facing State Level Charges***

Eight men are facing a variety of charges at the state level, including threat of terrorism, gang membership, providing material support for terrorist acts and felony firearm charges.

### **🕒 Pete Musico, 42, Jackson County, Michigan**

Founder of the Wolverine Watchmen. Father-in-law to Joseph Morrison.

### **🕒 Joseph Morrison, 26, Jackson County, Michigan**

Founder of the Wolverine Watchmen. Son-in-law to Pete Musico.

### **🕒 Paul Bellar, 22, Milford, Michigan**

Involved in the boogaloo movement. Extradited to Michigan from South Carolina. He hosted meetings at his residence, provided ammunition and coordinated logistics for trainings the group allegedly attended in preparation for kidnapping the governor.

### **🕒 Brian Higgins, 51, Wisconsin Dells, Wisconsin**

Provided night-vision goggles and used a mounted digital dash camera to record the September surveillance trip to the governor's vacation home. Tried to walk away from the plot after joining a trip to case the governor's vacation home at night.

### **🕒 Eric Molitor, 36, Cadillac, Michigan**

Tried to walk away from the plot after joining a trip to case the governor's vacation home at night.

### **🕒 William Null, 38, Shelbyville, Michigan**

Member of the Wolverine Watchmen.

### **🕒 Michael Null, 38, Plainwell, Michigan**

Member of the Wolverine Watchmen.

### **🕒 Shawn Fix, 38, Belleville, Michigan**

Member of the Wolverine Watchmen. Had Trump signs in his yard. Allegedly hosted one of the planning sessions.



Musico



Morrison



Bellar



Higgins



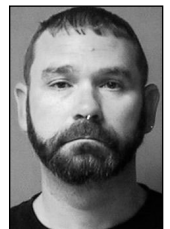
Molitor



Null



Null



Fix

# The Plot

## Overview

The alleged kidnapping scheme and the membership of the group of would-be kidnappers shifted over the course of several months. They discussed multiple ideas, including blowing up police cars with Molotov cocktails and storming the Capitol Building in Lansing with 200 men to put Governor Whitmer on trial for treason. They spoke about executing her bodyguards and taking hostages in a “wartime” attack.

Fox, the alleged ringleader, also fantasized about hog-tying the governor and displaying her body on a table while the group posed around her for a picture. They also discussed sending a fake delivery person to her house to shoot her, with Harris saying in an encrypted group chat: “Have one person go to her house. Knock on the door and when she answers it, just cap her.”

***“Have one person go to her house. Knock on the door and when she answers it, just cap her.”***

—Daniel Joseph Harris, 23,  
Lake Orion, Michigan

The plot they eventually settled on was to kidnap Governor Whitmer from her vacation home and either leave her stranded in a boat on Lake Michigan, take her to Wisconsin to stand for a sham trial for treason, or kill her.

Prosecutors argue that these would-be kidnappers not only talked about abducting the governor, but also cased her vacation home multiple times—taking pictures and video outside the cottage in northern Michigan, drew maps to help them carry out their plans, and tried to buy explosives for their plot.

The defendants took part in multiple training exercises that included using silencers on guns, breaking down doors, and extracting hostages. They spoke about sending bombs through the mail, they tested bombs, and they even held a fundraiser to pay for the explosives they wanted to purchase to blow up the highway overpass near Whitmer’s vacation home.

The plot was stopped because undercover informants and FBI agents were embedded in the group. (During the course of the investigation, it was discovered by the FBI that one of their informants was acting as a double agent, attempting to obstruct the arrest of the would-be kidnappers in order to continue the kidnapping. The informant was kicked off the case and charged separately of being a felon in possession.)

# Timeline



## April 2020

An anti-COVID-19 lockdown protest brought hundreds of protestors, including armed militia members, to the Michigan Capitol. While Republican lawmakers repeatedly bashed Governor Whitmer while she fought to protect Michiganders from a brand-new, deadly pandemic, protestors with Confederate flags, swastikas, and signs saying “Tyrrants Get the Rope” and “Tyrrant Bitch” swarmed the Michigan Capitol.

Senate Majority Leader Mike Shirkey allowed armed protestors (bringing signs into the Capitol isn’t allowed due to safety concerns but open carrying guns was permissible at that time) into the Senate gallery as the Senate voted to allow the Legislature to sue Governor Whitmer over her pandemic orders. The Null brothers, now facing charges as part of this kidnapping plot, were among those who entered the Senate gallery with long guns. (Note: Open carrying weapons in Michigan’s Capitol is now banned for everyone except law enforcement, although those with a concealed carry permit are still allowed to carry concealed guns.)

Shirkey met with protestors and would not allow reporters to hear their conversation. Republican lawmakers and leaders, rather than stand up for human decency and condemn the threats to murder Governor Whitmer, continued to attack her.

Attorney General Dana Nessel has called this event a “dry run” for the January 6 insurrection and the violent anti-government sentiment driving the insurrection has obvious parallels to the ideology that appeared to drive the would-be kidnappers. (Progress Michigan also did a recap of the events leading up to and following the January 6 insurrection and an analysis of how it is still affecting us today.)



## May 2020

Senate Majority Leader Mike Shirkey gave an interview where he said militias are “getting a bad rap” and are made up of people “not uniquely different” from you and me. He said he had asked to meet with the leaders of multiple Michigan militias ostensibly to give them public relations advice.

He then had a meeting in Lansing with leaders from three of the groups on a day the Capitol was closed. He has since refused to say which of the groups he met with and if any of the people or groups he met with were involved in the plot to kidnap Governor Whitmer.

Shirkey also attended a protest in Grand Rapids against Governor Whitmer’s pandemic orders where militia groups provided “security.” And Barry County Sheriff Dar Leaf appeared at a rally in May protesting Governor Whitmer’s stay-at-home orders with William Null.



## **June 2020**

Militia members from multiple states attended a June 6 meeting in Dublin, Ohio where the FBI had informants present. Fox and Croft discussed taking out sitting governors including Ralph Northam, the Democratic governor of Virginia, and Gretchen Whitmer. But, they said, they needed more men.

Fox reached out to the Wolverine Watchmen and on June 18, Fox attended a Second Amendment rally at the state Capitol Building where he is in multiple videos next to Musico and Morrison, founders of the Wolverine Watchmen. They are all dressed in Hawaiian shirts, trademark garb for the Boogaloo movement, which anticipates and even looks forward to a future civil war in the United States. Garbin, a member of the Wolverine Watchmen, was also at this rally.

According to prosecutors, Musico “surveilled the Capitol” during these armed protests over the summer and decided it wasn’t a good target, calling it a “fishbowl,” so pushed the group towards kidnapping public officials instead.

On June 20, Garbin brought other militia members, including an FBI informant, to meet Fox at the vacuum repair shop where he lived.



## **July 2020**

The discussions of what action to take continued to evolve, some members joined the group, others dropped out.

On the weekend of July 10-12, some of the men attended a militia training in Wisconsin (at the home of a member of the Three Percenters and the Oath Keepers, a collection of right-wing, anti-government extremists who believe the federal government has been co-opted in a conspiracy to strip Americans of their rights) where Caserta is on video practicing getting out of a car and shooting at a target.



The FBI alleges that by July 27, Fox, still the ringleader, had settled on the plan to kidnap Governor Whitmer at her vacation home.

## **August 2020**

The alleged would-be kidnappers started to panic about the possibility of a member of their group being an FBI agent or informant when Bellar’s former roommate was questioned about Bellar’s involvement in the Boogaloo movement.

They stopped communicating via Facebook and switched to an encrypted messaging app. Under Harris’ instruction, they met at Harris’ house where they were required to bring three forms of ID to prove their identity and then they set up a new encrypted chat. The informant remained a part of the group.

On August 29, Fox and the informant traveled north to find the governor’s vacation home. During the trip, Fox said, “We ain’t gonna let ‘em burn our f----- state down. I don’t give a f--- if there’s only 20 or 30 of us, dude, we’ll go out there and use deadly force.”



## **September 2020**

The night of September 12 into the morning of September 13, a larger group of the men allegedly traveled in three cars to case Governor Whitmer's vacation home. Higgins recorded the trip, where they drove right up to the house, on a dash cam. The Null brothers allegedly acted as lookouts for others in the group during this time. Croft allegedly brought components for a makeshift explosive device on this surveillance trip, which also involved a training session on land owned by Garbin in Luther, Michigan.

After this night, Higgins and Molitor tried to walk away from the plot. The men who remained in the group after this point are the ones facing federal charges.

The group allegedly decided they needed explosives to take down the bridge near the Governor's cottage in order to cut off law enforcement from the scene. The men talked about doing another training session in late October but Fox pushed back because he wanted to kidnap the governor before the November 3 election. They decided to hold the training in the middle of October and Fox purchased a Taser, which he later showed to the group in a video.



## **October 2020**

On October 7, Fox, Garbin, Harris, and Frank were arrested near Ypsilanti allegedly attempting to purchase explosives and tactical gear from an undercover FBI agent. Caserta was arrested at his place of employment the same day, and Croft was arrested in Delaware. Croft has since been extradited to Michigan.

On October 9, police raided the Jackson County home of Musico and Morrison, which was allegedly used as a training ground for the group. Neighbors reported hearing gunfire and seeing dozens of men in military-style clothes on the property in recent months.

On October 13, Franks, Harris, and Caserta were denied bond under the concern that they remained a threat to the community.

On October 26, the federal cases against six of the suspects were put on hold after law enforcement requested additional time to process the amount of evidence they had gathered.

# How This Happened

The factors that contribute to right-wing extremism and political violence are complex and there is no simple formula for how we got here. But here is what we do know: they connected on social media, this plot evolved during a time of extremist rhetoric and the careless incitement of political outrage, and Republican lawmakers have repeatedly refused to take a stand against extremism in their party for fear of losing votes.

## ***They Connected on Social Media***

Past cases of domestic terrorism have usually only included a handful of people, and experts say the large number of people involved in this case is an indication that social media is helping these anti-government extremists find each other.

A joint examination by BuzzFeed News and the Tech Transparency Project, a nonpartisan watchdog group, found that even after the FBI arrested the would-be kidnappers—who used Facebook and the Wolverine Watchmen’s group to connect and work on their plot—Facebook not only had active Michigan extremist pages and groups, but their algorithm was still directing users to like other extremist pages and groups if they were already following one.

Michigan right-wing groups, Republican Party groups, Republican lawmakers, and Republican candidates for public office on Facebook still regularly use extremist language to describe their political opposition, make vague insinuations about violence, call Governor Whitmer a tyrant, and spread conspiracy theories.

## ***This Plot Evolved During a Time of Extremist Rhetoric and Careless Incitement of Political Outrage***

After Governor Whitmer took the hard and necessary step of implementing COVID-19 restrictions in order to save lives, she quickly became a hate figure on the right and a favorite punching bag to former President Donald Trump.

Republican lawmakers continually decried Governor Whitmer’s emergency pandemic orders, calling them unconstitutional and an alleged driving factor in the kidnapping plot is that the group was convinced Michigan was one of several states violating the US constitution. This line of thinking has even become an argument used by defense lawyers in the kidnapping case.

**Whenever Trump ramped up his attacks on Governor Whitmer, threats against her surged.**

The two Democratic governors the group allegedly discussed kidnapping were from Virginia and Michigan, although they eventually focused on Governor Whitmer. On April 17, 2020, Trump posted tweets saying, “Liberate Michigan” and “Liberate Virginia, and save your great second Amendment. It is under siege!” Whenever Trump ramped up his attacks on Governor Whitmer, threats against her surged.

The computer search history of a Trump supporter arrested in April of 2021 for assaulting police officers during the January 6 insurrection at the Capitol in D.C. showed that on January 5 he was looking up gun stores, Gretchen Whitmer, and the Calhoun County Sheriff's Office, despite being from New York, not Michigan. He is now facing charges for violently threatening a 911 dispatcher after making nearly 150 calls to Calhoun County's 911 line on January 5.

The connections between the plot to kidnap Governor Whitmer and the January 6 insurrection at our nation's Capitol continue to make themselves known. On January 6, 2021, Phil Robinson, the leader of the Michigan Liberty Militia attended the pro-Trump rally at the Michigan state Capitol and told reporters the men who plotted to kidnap and possibly kill Governor Whitmer are "not guilty." The Null brothers have ties to Robinson.

A man from Genesee County, who recently became the 15th Michigander charged in connection with the violence on January 6 after he allegedly assaulted police officers in the nation's Capitol, has admitted having ties to members of the group who allegedly plotted to kidnap Governor Whitmer.

In the wake of the would-be kidnappers' arrests, Democratic lawmakers called attention to how extremist rhetoric from Republican lawmakers feeds into right-wing extremist violence. But that didn't stop it from continuing. Just hours after the arrests were made public, Senate Majority Leader Mike Shirkey told a crowd at an anti-pandemic precautions rally "this is no time to be weak in our commitment to freedom. We need to be strong ... and not afraid of those who are taking our freedoms away from us."

Trump supporters, encouraged by their leader, still chanted "Lock her up" at a Muskegon rally the week after the first series of arrests was made in October. This rhetoric is still common at Michigan rallies and protests today.

**DREW MAPS TO HELP THEM CARRY  
OUT THEIR PLANS, AND TRIED TO  
BUY EXPLOSIVES FOR THEIR PLOT.**



## ***Republican Lawmakers Have Repeatedly Refused to Take a Stand Against Extremists in Their Party for Fear of Losing Votes***

On September 29, 2020, at a presidential debate, former President Trump was asked to take a stand against the Proud Boys and instead told them to, “Stand back and stand by.” When asked by reporters in the time leading up to the 2020 election, Trump repeatedly refused to say he would accept a peaceful transfer of power.

The connection between Michigan’s right-wing militias and Michigan Republicans is undeniable. Not only do they spout the same anti-government rhetoric, they also travel in the same circles.

Republican lawmakers are often seen with militia members at events such as Second Amendment rallies. They have said militia members serve as security at events they attend or even events they hold. Militia members were commonly seen at anti-lockdown rallies organized by the American Patriot Council. Ryan Kelley, now a Republican candidate for governor with at least some support from grassroots Michigan Republicans, is a co-founder of the American Patriot Council and was also present at the January 6 insurrection.

**Republican lawmakers are often seen with militia members at events such as Second Amendment rallies.**

Molitor, one of the alleged would-be kidnappers, is a gun rights advocate who had previously presented to the entirely Republican Wexford County Board of Commissioners about making Wexford County a Second Amendment Sanctuary County. The resolution passed the Board unanimously on February 19, 2020.

Even when they aren’t actively spending time with militia groups and leaders, Republicans downplay the threat these groups can and do pose. At a late October rally in Michigan, Trump simultaneously (falsely) took credit for thwarting the kidnapping plot and (outrageously) downplayed the threat to Governor Whitmer.

Barry County Sheriff Dar Leaf, when asked if he regretted appearing at a rally in May protesting Governor Whitmer’s stay-at-home orders with William Null, not only said no, but went so far as defending the would-be kidnappers, (falsely) claiming that they were legally allowed to arrest the governor.

After the kidnapping plot was uncovered and January 6 happened, Shirkey changed his story about how his Spring 2020 meeting with militia leaders went. But it seems undeniable that he was giving militias advice on how to better ingratiate themselves with the public.

## We're Still Here

Now, it's March of the year 2022. We are still facing so much of what we were facing back in October of 2020. The repercussions of a global pandemic, a social media atmosphere ripe for conspiracy theories and radicalization, multiple active right-wing militant organizations, a Republican Party being taken over by extremists, and an election year with a volatile political climate filled with violent rhetoric and the continued careless incitement of political outrage.

U.S. District Judge Robert J. Jonker has said he doesn't want the trial to "devolve" into arguments over right-wing extremism, that he wants "the focus to be on what happened in this case." We won't say what lawyers in a legal setting should or shouldn't focus on, but we will say that we, as a public, must look at the ties between Republicans, their extremist rhetoric, and how it ties into right-wing extremist violence.

"Snatch and grab, man," Fox said in July. "Grab the f----- governor. Just grab the b----. Because at that point, we do that, dude—it's over." Now he and his cohorts await trial and a possible life sentence from where he (allegedly) belongs, in prison, and Big Gretch continues to stand up for Michiganders from where she (absolutely) belongs: the governor's office.

"That woman from Michigan" is still standing tall in her badass leather jacket after shepherding our state through a pandemic and facing a plot to kidnap and execute her. And we plan to follow her example.

A Kidnapping Plot in the Age of Coronavirus and Careless Incitement of Political Outrage:  
*An overview of the 2020 kidnapping plot against Governor Gretchen Whitmer,  
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