Proud Boys

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HOW TO CITE

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SUMMARY

Formed: September 15, 2016

Disbanded: Group is active.

First Attack: October 12, 2018: Proud Boys members assaulted counter-protesters in New York City, leading to criminal convictions. Since the formation of the group, its members have frequently engaged in violent brawls, street-fighting, and riots.

Last Attack: January 6, 2021: The Proud Boys figured prominently in the January 6 assault on the U.S. Capitol.

OVERVIEW

The Proud Boys is an all-male, far-right extremist organization formed in the United States in 2016. The group is Islamophobic, anti-Semitic, homophobic, transphobic, misogynistic, and xenophobic. The Proud Boys attend events with far-right organizations that advocate white supremacist and anti-government ideologies, though the Proud Boys leadership deny ties to white supremacy and neo-Nazism. The group is also semi-accelerationist in that it advocates violence in readiness for civil war in the United States. Most of the group's public activity involves protesting or attending political rallies and events, typically with the intent to provoke violence.

NARRATIVE SUMMARY

Gavin McInnes founded the Proud Boys in 2016 as a far-right fraternal organization. The group has since grown more extremist. In February 2019, McInnes filed a defamation lawsuit against the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) over their designation of the Proud Boys as a hate group. The SPLC replied that "rank-and-file Proud Boys and leaders regularly spout white nationalist memes and maintain affiliations with known extremists."[1] The group was designated a terrorist entity by the Canadian government in 2021. The Proud Boys were a major player in the riots at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021.[2]

Gavin McInnes is a far-right political pundit who openly describes himself as xenophobic. McInnes was born in England and raised in Canada. He immigrated from Canada to the United States in 1999 when *Vice* magazine, a publication that McInnes co-founded, moved its offices from Montreal to New York City.[3] Throughout the early 2000s, McInnes developed increasingly radical views on racism and white supremacy – ideas that came through in his writing for *Vice*. In 2008, McInnes left *Vice* after the organization filed a separation agreement. After leaving *Vice*, McInnes was hired to write a weekly column for *Taki's Magazine*, an online magazine that publishes far-right content.[4] McInnes has praised the magazine for being a "place where you can say whatever you want."[5]

In 2016, McInnes launched "The Gavin McInnes Show" with Compound Media, a subscription-based media platform.[6] There, McInnes regularly brought on right-wing guests and began cultivating "an ideological space for frustrated young men to rally around."[7] These men began holding meetings in New York City dive bars, from which the Proud Boys eventually developed. In July 2016, it was reported that McInnes had "convened his local 'Proud Boys' chapter for their first in-person meeting."[8] Several months later, on September 15, 2016, McInnes publicly announced the formation of the Proud Boys in an article he wrote for *Taki's Magazine*. In the article, McInnes reported that the Proud Boys had over 1,000 members on its private Facebook page. He claimed that there were Proud Boys chapters around the world, including in New York City, New Jersey, Louisiana, Minnesota, Nashville, Texas, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia. McInnes also outlined steps for readers to start their own Proud Boys chapters.[9]

The group's official ideology includes allegiance to western culture and stresses elevating masculinity, opposing Islam, and defending its community from a perceived "war on whites."[10] Members of the Proud Boys undergo a series of initiation rituals in order to gain degrees of status within the group. There are four ranks, or degrees, within the Proud Boys, which "serve as a basic rule set each member must follow in his ongoing pursuit of promotion."[11] The degrees of membership symbolize an individual's allegiance to the group, and the higher a member is ranked, the more he is trusted and respected by other members. As such, "many Proud Boys boast their rank by displaying the degree symbol wherever they can, be it on their bodies or social media profiles."[12]

To attain the first degree, members must publicly declare: "I am a Western chauvinist and I refuse to apologize for creating the modern world." Reaching the second degree of membership involves getting repeatedly punched until members can recite five kinds of breakfast cereal. According to Yosef Ozia, a member of the Southern Proud Boys chapter in Atlanta, Georgia, this step in the initiation process has no real significance and originated from the following nonsensical rule that McInnes and his friends had in the past: "if someone farted, they'd get beat on until they could list five kinds of breakfast cereal."[13] Second-degree members are also required to adhere to the group's masturbation policy, which restricts members from masturbating more than once a month.[14] To progress to the third level, members must get a Proud Boys logo tattoo.[15] Members achieve the highest level of status once they engage in violence on the group's behalf, such as assaulting a left-wing activist. For example, in January 2017, McInnes was filmed punching a counter-protester at the Deploraball, a far-right gathering in Washington, D.C. When discussing his assault at a speaking event the next month, McInnes declared: "I cannot recommend violence enough. It's a really effective way to solve problems."[16]

Some Proud Boys goals include ending welfare, closing borders, and promoting traditional gender roles.[17] The name "Proud Boys" references a song from the musical *Aladdin,* "Proud of Your Boy," a name McInnes reportedly chose because he believed that the song denigrated men.[18] He regarded the name as an ironic way to celebrate far-right views of gender roles and masculinity.[19]

The Proud Boys have a large online following and a smaller core group of members who instigate operations and attend events in person. Analysts estimated that, by the end of 2017, there were 6,000 official Proud Boys members and more than 40,000 followers on the group's social media pages.[20] In

more recent years, the extent of the group's online following has become less clear since Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube banned the group in 2018.[21]

Proud Boys activities range from deliberately provoking, or trolling, leftists online to participation in overt action, notably by targeting political adversaries at protests.[22] In March 2017, a Proud Boys member named Brandon Vaughan of the Ottawa, Canada, chapter assaulted a Palestinian-American community college professor. Videos of the assault show Proud Boys members fighting alongside the Jewish Defense League, a right-wing militant organization.[23]

In March 2017, a man named Kyle Chapman was arrested for beating a counter-protester with a wooden dowel rod during the "Battle for Berkeley," a pro-Trump rally in northern California. Members of the Proud Boys and the Oath Keepers, an anti-government militant group, also attended.[24] Shortly after, the Proud Boys fundraised more than $87,000 to pay for Chapman's bail and legal fees. Chapman was also contacted by Proud Boys leader Gavin McInnes and subsequently brought into the organization.

In April 2017, after the violent "Second Battle of Berkeley" protest, Chapman announced the formation of the Fraternal Order of Alt-Knights (FOAK). The FOAK was originally organized as the "tactical defense arm" of the Proud Boys.[25] In a Facebook post, Chapman wrote that the FOAK aimed to "protect and defend our right wing brethren when the police and government fail to do so."[26] FOAK members have wielded weapons at rallies and events, such as hammers, daggers, and pepper spray.[27] While the FOAK and the Proud Boys insist that they only engaged in violence in self-defense, Chapman encouraged members to provoke confrontation. For example, he told followers in June and July 2017 to declare "open season on Antifa," "smash on sight," and lynch politicians who endorse immigration.[28]

The Proud Boys has frequently attended far-right demonstrations, such as the "March Against Sharia" rallies in June 2017, which were organized by the Islamophobic hate group, ACT for America. In July 2017, the Proud Boys joined other anti-government militant groups, namely the Oath Keepers and the Three Percenters, to caravan through Islamberg, New York. They claimed that the rural community was "an Islamic training ground."[29]

The next month, in August 2017, the Proud Boys received national attention following the "Unite the Right" rally held in Charlottesville, Virginia. One woman was killed, and more than 30 people were injured at the event.[30] The rally was organized by former Proud Boys member Jason Kessler, who, along with other organizers, was found liable for injuries to counter-protesters in a civil suit in Virginia.[31] McInnes later attempted to distance the group from the event, claiming that the Proud Boys had "nothing to do with it."[32] However, Jason Kessler discussed the rally less than two months earlier on McInnes's talk show, "The Gavin McInnes Show," and many Proud Boys members (including future Proud Boys leader Enrique Tarrio) attended the rally.[33]

Throughout 2017 and 2018, the Proud Boys continued to engage in street violence targeting those on the political left. The group often coordinated with Patriot Prayer – a Washington-based far-right group – to target left-wing activists in the Pacific Northwest.[34] Following June 2018 protests in Portland, Oregon, several Proud Boys members were arrested for assaulting counter-protestors.[35] Two months later, Twitter suspended the accounts of both the Proud Boys and McInnes. Facebook and Instagram followed suit shortly after.[36]

In October 2018, at the Metropolitan Republican Club in New York City, McInnes gave a speech in which he "railed about socialism and political correctness."[37] Members of the 211 Boot Boys, a local neo-Nazi skinhead group, were reportedly in attendance.[38] After the event, a fight broke out between the Proud Boys and counter-protestors, resulting in the arrests of several Proud Boys members on charges including attempted assault, gang assault, and riot. Convictions and prison sentences followed.[39]

In the face of mounting pressure and legal threats, in late November McInnes announced in a YouTube video that he was "officially disassociating" himself from the Proud Boys. He called this move a legal gesture that would "show jurors they are not dealing with a gang and there is no head of operations."[40] This was in contrast to a 2017 interview, where McInnes had proclaimed, "I started this gang called the Proud Boys" that engages in violence "for fun."[41]

When Proud Boys leader and founder Gavin McInnes stepped down in November 2018, Jason Lee Van Dyke was elected as the group's chairman by members of the Proud Boys leadership council, known as the Elders Chapter.[42] Van Dyke was a practicing lawyer, and he served as the Proud Boys primary legal counsel and the sergeant-at-arms of the Dallas/Fort Worth Proud Boys chapter. In August 2017, Van Dyke had filed an application to trademark the name "Proud Boys," which was registered with the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office in May 2018.[43] However, Van Dyke served only two days as chairman before he was removed for failing to redact the Elders' names when he published the group's new bylaws online.[44] The Proud Boys website announced that Van Dyke left the group on November 29, 2018, although Van Dyke remains the owner of the trademark.[45] In an interview with the *Huffington Post* reporter Andy Campbell, Enrique Tarrio described the decision to appoint Van Dyke: "We picked [Van Dyke] and I thought that was a horrible, horrible idea. He didn't have the chill. The chairman position was pitched as more of a PR person, and I just felt he was too emotional."[46]

Tarrio, who previously led the Miami, Florida, chapter, was then appointed as national chairman. Tarrio has been known to use his Afro-Cuban ethnicity, as well as the ethnicity of other non-white Proud Boys members, as evidence that the group does not promote white supremacy. However, Tarrio has espoused racist sentiments on his personal social media accounts and attended white supremacist gatherings.[47]

According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, the groups' paramilitary wing, the Fraternal Order of Alt-Knights, was dissolved in early 2018 because of infighting and legal pressures facing FOAK leader Chapman.[48] However, Chapman remained involved with the group.[49] In 2020, Chapman expressed dissatisfaction with the Proud Boys' leadership. In a post published on Telegram, Chapman complained that the Proud Boys was not radical enough and should take a more hardline white supremacist, anti-Semitic, and homophobic stance. Chapman wanted to reorient the group to better address issues of "White Genocide" and the "failures of multiculturalism." In his post, Chapman claimed to take over leadership of the group: "Due to the recent failure of Proud Boy Chairman Enrique Tarrio to conduct himself with honor and courage on the battlefield, it has been decided that I Kyle Chapman reassume my post as President of Proud Boys effective immediately."[50] Despite this rhetoric, however, Chapman did not successfully take over control of the Proud Boys.[51]

In November 2018, there were reports that the Proud Boys was designated as an "extremist group with ties to white nationalism" by the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI).[52] However, the FBI soon issued a correction to clarify that the FBI had not designated the Proud Boys as extremist.[53] There is no legal mechanism in the United States to designate a domestic group as terrorist or extremist.[54] However, the FBI can list individuals on its Terrorist Screening Database, a watchlist that is distinct from the "No Fly" list and the designation of foreign terrorist organizations. At the time of the attack on the Capitol, the FBI's Terrorist Screening Database reportedly contained the names of dozens of participants in the riot, many of whom were suspected white supremacists.[55] The names of individuals listed in the Terrorist Screening Database are not made public, and it is unknown whether Proud Boys members are or were included.

The wave of civil and political unrest associated with the 2020 presidential election gave the Proud Boys new opportunities to engage in coordinated violence, specifically against left-wing protestors in Democrat-heavy areas like Portland, Oregon. The Proud Boys engaged in near-daily violent

demonstrations in Portland during the summer of 2020, leading Oregon's governor to declare a state of emergency in September.[56] Proud Boys members were videoed using baseball bats and other weapons to assault opposing protestors.[57]

Proud Boys member Alan Swinney was arrested on numerous assault and unlawful weapon charges following a Portland demonstration on August 22.[58] In September, Swinney gained national attention when news outlets published a series of leaked messages between Proud Boys members and other far-right militia groups – such as Patriot Prayer, Resist Marxism, and American Guard.[59] A message from Swinney read: "We need to inflict as much damage as possible in the time we have." Another group member, Anthony Mastrostefano, proclaimed: "When the time comes, I will stop at nothing to fully eradicate them all," referring to the Proud Boy's political enemies.[60]

In late 2020, the group generated new interest and membership. Tarrio claimed that over 20,000 new members joined the Proud Boys.[61] This surge may have been due in part to the comments of then U.S. President Trump during the first presidential debate. When asked if he would publicly denounce white supremacist groups like the Proud Boys, Trump responded, "Proud Boys stand back and stand by. But I'll tell you what, somebody's got to do something about antifa and the left."[62] Analysts found that Proud Boys members on the conservative social media site Parler and the encrypted messaging app Telegram interpreted Trump's comments as an endorsement of the group. One Proud Boys member said that Trump was giving them permission to attack counter-protestors.[63] Other Proud Boys members turned the former president's comments into an opportunity for recruitment and fundraising, selling merchandise with the group's logo and the message, "PROUD BOYS STANDING BY."[64]

Following the November 2020 presidential election, the Proud Boys participated in "Stop the Steal" events across the United States.[65] Between the election and President Biden's inauguration on January 20, 2021, more than 70% of Proud Boys-related events took place in state capitals and Washington, D.C., which suggests a shift to focusing on the government as the enemy.[66]

On December 12, 2020, the Proud Boys descended into Washington, D.C. for a "Stop the Steal" campaign event dubbed the "2nd Million MAGA March." The demonstration mostly featured Proud Boys members, other Trump supporters, and far-right conspiracy theorist Alex Jones.[67] As was typical, the Proud Boys provoked fights with counter-protestors. At least four people were stabbed near Harry's, a dive bar where the Proud Boys gathered during the march. Although several eyewitness and video reports showed Proud Boys members involved in the stabbings, no arrests were made. On the National Mall, Proud Boys members and other far-right rioters were filmed assaulting a counter-protestor.[68] Later that day, several Proud Boys members tore down and set fire to Black Lives Matter banners at two historic Black churches in Washington, D.C., Asbury United Methodist Church and Metropolitan African Methodist Episcopal Church.[69] The latter congregation filed a lawsuit against Tarrio and the Proud Boys, claiming they "violated D.C. and federal law by trespassing and destroying religious property."[70] On June 30, 2023, a federal judge in Washington, D.C., ordered the Proud Boys to pay more than one million dollars in damages to the church.[71]

The "Stop the Steal" campaign culminated in the January 6, 2021, assault on the U.S. Capitol to prevent the certification of the 2020 election. Tarrio had encouraged Proud Boys members to travel to D.C., asserting on his personal social media pages: "We will not be wearing our traditional black and yellow. We will be incognito and we will spread across downtown DC in smaller teams."[72] However, when Tarrio arrived in D.C. two days before the rally, he was arrested in connection with the December 2020 attack on United Asbury Methodist Church, mentioned above, when he burned a Black Lives Matter banner and was found to be in possession of high-capacity firearm magazines.[73] In August 2021, he was sentenced to five months in prison after pleading guilty. Tarrio admitted to the court that he had made a grave mistake for which he apologized profusely.[74]

Ethan Nordean took charge after Tarrio's arrest. U.S. prosecutors allege that Nordean led the Proud Boys in executing their plan to split up into groups and attack the Capitol from as many points as possible.[75] Video evidence shows Proud Boys member Dominic Pezzola shattering a window on the west side of the building, allowing Proud Boys members William Pepe, Gilbert Garcia, and Joseph Biggs to be among the first rioters to enter the Capitol.[76] In November 2021, the House Select Committee investigating the January 6 assault on the Capitol issued subpoenas naming Proud Boys International and Enrique Tarrio.[77]

In February 2021, the Canadian federal government designated the Proud Boys as a terrorist entity, citing its role in the riot at the U.S. Capitol.[78] Shortly after, at least one Proud Boys chapter in Canada announced that it had "officially" dissolved itself.[79] The Proud Boys' U.S. chapters also began to split off, especially after leaked reports about Tarrio's past as an informant for local authorities and the FBI.[80] Several Proud Boys chapters issued social media posts distancing themselves from the national leadership or "any subsequent body that is formed to replace them," with some chapters claiming they had disbanded altogether.[81]

Analysts argue that reports of Proud Boys disbanding or distancing from the national leadership should be viewed with caution.[82] They warn that new factions of the organization are drifting further right and growing increasingly violent. Infighting about what direction the Proud Boys should take allows more extreme members to gain prominence among the group's large network of followers.[83] For example, the former "Proud Boys Uncensored" Telegram channel was rebranded, dropping the "Proud Boys" name to focus more on spreading ultra-nationalism and other neo-fascist ideologies.[84]

Statements from Proud Boys members also indicated a growing disillusionment with the Republican Party. Nordean accused President Trump of abandoning the group by failing to pardon himself and other Proud Boys members charged in connection to the insurrection, lamenting: "Yes he woke us up, but he led us to believe some great justice was upon us ... and it never happened."[85]

Despite internal and external pressures, the Proud Boys have shown no sign of slowing down. In fact, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center, the period since the insurrection "has been the most active [one] in the group's history."[86] In 2021, the Proud Boys continued to mobilize—sometimes violently—in response to persistent narratives related to the "Stop the Steal" campaign and the COVID-19 pandemic. Reports found a strong presence of COVID-19 conspiracy theories on social media accounts associated with the Proud Boys, with the majority of disinformation posts arguing that COVID-19 was created by Bill Gates.[87] Proud Boys appeared at more than 20 events in 13 cities across North America in the six months after January 6, 2021.[88] Between 50-60 Proud Boys members attended an April 2021 protest in Fresno, California, where fights broke out.[89] In August 2021, dozens of Proud Boys engaged in street fights with counter-protestors, shooting paintball guns and smashing windows.[90] In 2022, the Proud Boys significantly increased their attacks on reproductive justice and the LGBTQ community.[91] As of July 1, 2022, according to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), the group has participated in 27 abortion-related events, which "amounts to a 160% spike over the previous year."[92] Moreover, during the first six months of 2022, the group targeted eleven LGBTQ-related events, the majority of which featured drag queens.[93]

In December 2021, it was reported that Proud Boys chapters were becoming increasingly involved in local politics as well as cultural issues. Members of the group have been present at school board and town council meetings in several states, including Wisconsin, Illinois, and North Carolina. The shift from national to local politics is seen by some researchers to be part of a larger strategy to attract new members by championing local causes, such as challenging coronavirus restrictions and mask mandates.[94]

In September 2022, the Proud Boys held its annual "WestFest" convention in Las Vegas, which McInnes attended. There, the former leader found the group "bitterly divided, split roughly evenly between two factions that call themselves 'Standard' and 'National.'"[95] According to McInnes, "Both sides say that the other side is racist and tolerates pedophiles." This split dates back to the revelation that Enrique Tarrio was previously a federal informant. Whereas the National faction still maintains allegiance to Tarrio, the Standard faction does not, opting instead to be governed by a "Standard" of behavior. It is unclear what such behavior refers to; however, one supporter on Telegram explained that the two main rules of the faction are "No snitches. No sex criminals."[96] Days after the event, McInnes attempted to quell the infighting on Telegram, claiming without evidence that the division was the result of a ploy by the federal government to break up the Proud Boys. Soon after, McInnes expelled two members from the Standard faction, including Brien James, a longtime white supremacist. According to Will Sommers, a reporter for *The Daily Beast*, these actions suggest that McInnes "still holds leadership power over the Proud Boys, despite his claims to the contrary."[97]

In June 2022, five leaders of the group – Enrique Tarrio, Ethan Nordean, Joseph Biggs, Zachary Rehl, and Dominic Pezzola – were federally indicted on seditious conspiracy charges "for their actions before and during the breach of the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021."[98] On May 4, 2023, after a four-month trial, Tarrio and three of the other defendants were convicted of seditious conspiracy, a charge which carries a maximum sentence of 20 years in prison. Dominic Pezzola was found not guilty on the sedition charge, but he was convicted of other major felonies.[99] On September 5, 2023, Tarrio received a sentence of 22 years in prison; previously, Ethan Nordean was sentenced to 18 years in prison, Biggs to 17 years, Rehl to 15 years, and Pezzola to 10 years.[100]

At least 40 other members of the group were charged in relation to their participation in the January 6 riot. Several were convicted or pleaded guilty to the charges.[101] They include Jeremy Bertino, a leader in the group who pleaded guilty to seditious conspiracy, also Nicholas Ochs, the founder of the group's Hawaii chapter and Nicholas DeCarlo, both of whom pleaded guilty to the felony of obstructing an official proceeding.[102] Another member, Joshua Pruitt, was sentenced to 55 months, or 4.5 years, in federal prison.[103]

In the wake of the 2023 convictions of the Proud Boys national leadership, no members have come forward to lead the group.[104] Like other far-right extremist organizations in the United States, the Proud Boys is a highly decentralized organization does not require an active national leader to continue operations. Semi-autonomous local chapters can make decisions and plan activities without direction from a central leadership. As of September 2023, it remains to be seen whether a new national leader or leadership will emerge to publicly replace Tarrio and claim control of the group.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

A. LEADERSHIP

The Proud Boys is a decentralized organization with semi-autonomous chapters in several U.S. states. Its national leadership council, known as the Elders Chapter or Elders Council, was established in November 2018 after Proud Boys founder and leader Gavin McInnes dissociated himself from the group.[105] According to new group bylaws issued in November 2018, the Elders Chapter was to be composed of eight Proud Boys members elected to one-year terms. These Elders Chapter members also retain their membership in their local Proud Boys chapter. A ninth member would be elected by the Elders to serve as the Proud Boys Chairman.[106]

The Elders Chapter serves as "the administrative, executive, and judicial head of the Fraternity," though it holds no special authority over local chapters. The November 2018 bylaws make clear that "each chapter of this fraternity is independent and autonomous from every other chapter of this fraternity." The Elders Chapter does not have the power to set the bylaws for any local chapter. Each chapter must have a President "for the purpose of receiving communications from the Elders Chapter concerning matters important to the fraternity."[107]

Among members, there are four tiers, or degrees, of membership. Higher degrees of membership signify higher levels of commitment, and degrees are reached by completing requirements such as getting a Proud Boys tattoo or assaulting an antifa member.[108] For a more detailed explanation of how members attain each of the four degrees of membership, see this profile's "Narrative Summary."

The Proud Boys also has two major subgroups, including the Proud Boys' Girls and the Fraternal Order of Alt Knights (FOAK). The Proud Boys' Girls is the group's informal contingent for women, who are mostly the spouses and significant others of Proud Boys.[109] FOAK was the "tactical arm" of the Proud Boys from April 2017 until it was dissolved in early 2018 because of infighting and legal pressures facing FOAK leader Kyle Chapman.[110] In 2020, Chapman expressed dissatisfaction with the Proud Boys' leadership and tried unsuccessfully to take control of the group.[111]

Gavin McInnes (September 15, 2016 - November 21, 2018): McInnes founded the Proud Boys in 2016 and served as the group's president until November 2018.[112] Born in England and raised in Canada, he relocated to New York after co-founding the Montreal-based *Vice Magazine* in 1994. After McInnes left *Vice* in 2008, he released independent content including books, a talk show with Compound Media, and articles for various right-wing media groups such as VDARE and Taki's Magazine, where he later announced the formation of the Proud Boys.[113] As leader of the Proud Boys, McInnes focused on the group's image. He consistently condemned white supremacy and disputed the group's ties to white nationalism. McInnes also instructed Proud Boys members to refrain from attending controversial events (such as the 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia).[114] However, McInnes openly identifies as Islamophobic and misogynistic and did not prevent Proud Boys members from instigating white nationalist and accelerationist operations.[115] In November 2018, McInnes claimed to have left the Proud Boys, citing legal pressure over the Southern Poverty Law Center's hate group designation and reports of an FBI extremist designation.[116]

Jason Lee Van Dyke (unknown - May 2020): Van Dyke served as the Proud Boys' primary legal counsel and the sergeant-at-arms of the Dallas/Fort Worth Proud Boys chapter in the group's early years. In August 2017, Van Dyke filed an application to trademark the name "Proud Boys," and subsequently registered it with the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office in May 2018.[117] Van Dyke reportedly held the position of chairman of the Proud Boys for two days when Gavin McInnes stepped down on November 21, 2018. Van Dyke was elected as the group's chairman by members of the Proud Boys leadership council, known as the Elders Chapter. However, Van Dyke was soon removed after he failed to redact the Elders' names when he published the group's new bylaws online.[118] The Proud Boys website announced that Van Dyke left the group on November 29, 2018.Van Dyke remains the owner of the trademark and only confirmed that he is no longer affiliated in May 2020.[119]

Enrique Tarrio (November 29, 2018 - present): Tarrio joined Proud Boys in 2017 after meeting the co-president of the Miami chapter, Alex Gonzalez, at a far-right speaking event. In November 2018, Tarrio took over the chairman position after Van Dyke was removed.[120] Like McInnes, Tarrio denies that the Proud Boys have ties to white supremacy and extremism and claims to personally reject anti-Semitism and misogyny. However, Tarrio is openly transphobic, actively supports violence against the far-left, and has not tempered white nationalist operations and rhetoric within the group.[121] Tarrio

also owns and operates a T-shirt business, which he often uses to print attire with far-right and Proud Boys slogans.[122] He is also the Florida state director for the national grassroots organization Latinos for Trump.[123] Tarrio was sentenced to five months in jail in August 2021 in connection with the December 2020 attack on Asbury United Methodist Church in Washington, D.C.[124] In June 2022, Tarrio and four other members of the Proud Boys were federally indicted on seditious conspiracy charges "for their actions before and during the breach of the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021."[125] On May 4, 2023, after a four-month trial, Tarrio was found guilty of seditious conspiracy. On September 5, 2023, he was sentenced to 22 years in prison.[126]

B. NAME CHANGES

There are no recorded name changes for this group.

C. SIZE ESTIMATES

The Proud Boys have a large online following and a smaller core group of members who instigate operations and attend events in person. Estimates of the number of core members range from a few hundred to 6,000, although Proud Boys chairman Enrique Tarrio alleged in 2020 that 8,000 is a closer estimate.[127] A year later, in 2021, Tarrio claimed that the group had a national membership of 30,000.[128] At the end of 2017, official Proud Boys Facebook and Twitter pages each had over 20,000 followers.[129] In more recent years, the extent of the group's online following became less clear since Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube banned the group in 2018.[130] Although exact numbers are difficult to estimate, Proud Boys appeared to enter a growth period after January 6. According to a report from the Southern Poverty Law Center, the number of active Proud Boys chapters increased from 43 in 2020 to 72 in 2021.[131]

- 2017: 6,000 (core) (Southern Poverty Law Center)[132]
- 2017: 40,000 (online) (Rewire News Group)[133]
- 2020: 3,000 (core) (International Centre for Counter-Terrorism Brief)[134]

D. RESOURCES

The Proud Boys have a wide variety of funding sources. One such source is membership dues. Although the group's current chairman, Enrique Tarrio, previously claimed that the group did not collect dues, payments revealed by data researchers confirmed that some chapter leaders do collect monthly dues, which individually amount to around twenty dollars.[135] In addition, public Venmo payments indicate that individual members "pool their own money for extracurriculars, such as transportation to events, room and board," and drugs and alcohol.[136]

Another source of funding comes from 1776.shop, an e-commerce site owned and managed by Enrique Tarrio that sells far-right merchandise.[137] Tarrio has claimed that the site nets the Proud Boys tens of thousands of dollars each year and that he makes only a small commission from its sales.[138] In late 2021, however, Tarrio told *The Wall Street Journal* that the website was "effectively out of commission…because the group couldn't find a card-processing company that would allow it to process credit-card and debit-card payments."[139] Tarrio also told *The Wall Street Journal* that he had launched a secret online business selling merchandise with liberal slogans like "Black Lives Matter" and "Impeach 45," a reference to former President Donald Trump.[140] Tarrio refused to share the name of the business, and *The Wall Street Journal* was unable to "independently verify [its] existence."[141]

Proud Boys has also used crowdfunding to bankroll larger events or pay legal fees. In March 2017, the Proud Boys raised over $87,000 on WeSearchr to cover bail and legal fees for Kyle Chapman, who was arrested for assaulting a teenage counter-protestor at a pro-Trump rally in Berkeley, California. Chapman partnered with the Proud Boys soon after as the head of the Fraternal Order of Alt Knights subgroup.[142] In fall 2020, Proud Boys member Keith Lee allegedly raised tens of thousands of dollars online to organize multiple pro-Trump caravans, including one that attempted to run a Biden campaign bus off the road in Texas.[143]

The Proud Boys also helped raise at least $181,700 on the site Wild Protest to fund nationwide travel to storm the U.S. capitol on January 6, 2021.[144] Proud Boys used GiveSendGo, the Christian equivalent of GoFundMe, to raise money for the legal fees of Enrique Tarrio, who was arrested for burning a Black Lives Matter flag taken from a historic Black church in Washington, D.C. Tarrio's GiveSendGo raised more than $100,000, with other accounts raising more than $247,000 for costs and legal fees connected to the January 6 assault.[145] PayPal later ceased working with GiveSendGo because of its ties to the Proud Boys.[146] The future fundraising ability of the group is unclear, due to both increased scrutiny from financial companies and Canada's designation of the Proud Boys as a terrorist organization, which heavily criminalizes supporting the group through financial or any other means in Canada.[147]

E. GEOGRAPHIC LOCATIONS

Disclaimer: This is a partial list of where the militant organization has bases and where it operates. This does not include information on where the group conducts major attacks or has external influences.

Proud Boys is headquartered in New York City and is most active in the United States and Canada, although the group reports that it has chapters in over forty countries, including Australia.[148] The largest U.S. chapters are in California, and the group also has chapters in many major cities across the country including Portland, Philadelphia, and Miami.[149] According to the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, the most active Proud Boys chapters are in the Pacific Northwest, Miami, and New York. Specifically, these chapters "have been the most actively involved in street fighting (particularly in Portland, Oregon) and getting involved in political activism."[150]

Chapters in Indiana, Alabama, Oklahoma, Missouri, and Las Vegas apparently disaffiliated from the organization after January 2021. The Proud Boys Canadian chapter dissolved in May 2021 as a result of the Canadian government's terrorist designation. Before the designation, radical members of the Canadian chapter split off as Canada First in 2020.[151] Canada First has posted neo-Nazi content and has advocated the use of violence against anyone who is not White.[152] The mainstream Proud Boys Canada chapter reportedly attempted to distance itself from Canada First, and some members blamed Canada First for the Proud Boys' terrorist designation by the Canadian government.[153]

STRATEGY

A. IDEOLOGY AND GOALS

The Proud Boys has an official ideology, but its members hold a variety of beliefs. The group's official ideology includes an oath of allegiance to Western culture and stresses elevating masculinity, opposing Islam, and defending its community from a perceived "war on whites."[154] Some Proud Boys goals include ending welfare, closing borders, and promoting traditional gender roles.[155]

Public statements from leaders have often contradicted members' actions and the group's online propaganda. For example, Proud Boys member Jason Kessler organized the August 2017 Unite the Right

rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, an explicitly white nationalist event that was attended by many Proud Boys members. However, McInnes denied that the Proud Boys is a white nationalist group, and current Proud Boys national chairman Enrique Tarrio has taken the same position.[156]

Proud Boys public relations tactics focus on minimizing an extremist image through denial and dismissal. Online, the group pushes its ideology through memes and satire. When challenged, the group typically defends its rhetoric by downplaying it as a joke.[157] In response to accusations of white nationalism or instigating violence, the Proud Boys often rely on outright denial. For example, after the Proud Boys attended events alongside openly white nationalist groups, founder Gavin McInnes stated that he had no idea who the other groups were or what they stood for.[158]

The Proud Boys patterns its recruitment tactics after fraternal organizations and drinking clubs.[159] Becoming a member involves hazing, initiation rituals, and taking an oath that the member is "a Western chauvinist and refuses to apologize for creating the modern world."[160] Different degrees of membership signify higher levels of commitment, and degrees are reached by completing requirements such as getting a Proud Boys tattoo or assaulting an antifa member. The Proud Boys also identify themselves by wearing black and yellow Fred Perry shirts to protests and political events.[161] Following January 6, however, Proud Boys members celebrated their decision to "forego colors" at the Capitol in an attempt to anonymize themselves during the attack. Proud Boys leader Charles Donohue concluded, "We should never wear colors ever again for any event."[162]

B. POLITICAL ACTIVITIES

Proud Boys members participated in monthly meetups that could draw "as many as a few hundred" individuals in large U.S. cities like New York.[163] The group's founder, Gavin McInnes, described these meetups as social events where men gather to drink, share jokes, and talk about their families and lives. Women are not allowed to attend, but the Proud Boys' Girls, a subgroup composed of members' spouses, may join for "warm-up sessions" before meetings.[164] These meetings may include initiations for new members, fights, and reading aloud from *The Death of the West*.[165]

The Proud Boys' public political activities have included acting as "bodyguards" for ultraconservative speakers, such as Ann Coulter or Milo Yiannopoulos, who are said to be threatened by left-wing and antifa protestors.[166] In addition, several Proud Boys members have attempted to run for local and national office, sometimes successfully. For example, Morgan Bolles of Fennville, Michigan, became city commissioner in late 2019 after being involved in a Proud Boys rally in Lansing, Michigan, in September 2019.[167] In 2020, current Proud Boys president Enrique Tarrio tried to run in the Republican primary for a congressional seat in Florida but dropped out due to limited financial support.[168]

After January 6, Enrique Tarrio stated that Proud Boys would "start getting more involved in local politics." Former Proud Boys member Joel Campbell ran for City Council in Topeka, Kansas (he was defeated). Campbell was a third-degree Proud Boys member, meaning he has a tattoo of the group's logo.[169] Members of the group have also been present at school board and town council meetings in several states, including Wisconsin, Illinois, and North Carolina. The shift from national to local politics is seen by some researchers to be part of a larger strategy to attract new members by championing local causes, such as challenging coronavirus restrictions and mask mandates.[170] Experts also interpret this turn toward local politics as a reaction to increased media and law enforcement scrutiny and perceived "marginalization" of the group at the national level.[171]

The group's largest political success at the local level was with the Miami-Dade Republican Party.[172] According to *The New York Times*, at least six current and former Proud Boys gained seats on the Miami-

Dade Republican Executive Committee. Of those individuals, several face criminal charges for participating in the January 6 attack on the Capitol, including Gilbert Fonticoba and Gabriel Garcia.[173]

In 2022, evidence emerged that several former Proud Boys members had signed up and qualified to serve as poll workers in Miami-Dade County in Florida for the midterm election in November.[174] One of them, Gabriel Garcia, was dismissed when officials learned that he was awaiting trial for several felonies related to his role in the January 6 Capitol riot. Suzy Trutie, Miami-Dade's deputy county supervisor of elections, told the *Miami Herald*, "the Supervisor of Elections learned about Mr. Garcia's indictment and made the decision not to assign him to work on Election Day."[175]

Several prominent American right-wing figures and politicians have provided encouragement to the Proud Boys. In September 2020, the group gained national prominence when then President Donald Trump was asked if he would condemn white supremacy and replied that the Proud Boys should "stand back and stand by." Although the administration attempted to walk back the remark, Proud Boys chairman Enrique Tarrio's T-shirt company immediately began printing shirts with the statement. Tarrio later said that neither he nor the group viewed the statement as an endorsement. However, Proud Boys founder Gavin McInnes said he believed Trump was expressing his appreciation and saying, "go in and fight [antifa]."[176] After January 6, 2021, Ethan Nordean accused President Trump of abandoning the group by failing to pardon himself and other Proud Boys members charged in connection with the Capitol assault."[177]

C. TARGETS AND TACTICS

The majority of recorded incidents of violence have consisted of street fights and brawling at protests, but Proud Boys members have also committed hate crimes. For example, five Proud Boys members were under investigation for hate crimes "after shouting homophobic and transphobic slurs" at a "Drag Queen Story Hour" library event in San Lorenzo, California.[178] The main targets of the Proud Boys are left wing counter-protestors, especially antifa members.[179] The group claims to oppose violence but also asserts, "we don't start fights, we finish them." Assaulting antifa members is also an initiation requirement for group members.[180] Videos of violent attacks have been distributed as propaganda and recruitment tools.

Proud Boys members have been associated with physical violence since the formation of the group in 2016.[181] For example, in July 2016, Joseph Biggs attacked a protester at the Republican Convention in Cleveland. A Proud Boys member helped organize the "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017 and was later found liable for injuries sustained by counter-protesters at the event.[182] In June 2018, Ethan Nordean exchanged blows with a counter-protester in Portland, Oregon. Nordean punched the counter-protester unconscious, though he claimed self-defense and was not arrested. However, two other Proud Boys were arrested for violence during clashes with Portland counter-protestors.[183] In October 2018, Proud Boys members engaged in brawls at a rally in Providence, Rhode Island.[184]

According to Andy Campbell, a senior editor at the *Huffington Post* and the author of the book *We are Proud Boys: How a Right-Wing Street Gang Ushered in a New Era of American Extremism*, the Proud Boys have succeeded in normalizing political violence, most notably among the mainstream of the Republican Party. Campbell cites the "Republican National Committee's decision to classify the violence of Jan. 6 as 'legitimate political discourse.'"[185] For this reason Campbell characterized the Proud Boys as "the most successful extremist group in the digital age."[186]

For more information about the Proud Boys' violent activities, see the Major Attacks section of this profile.

MAJOR ATTACKS

Disclaimer: These are some selected major attacks in the militant organization's history. It is not a comprehensive listing but captures some of the most famous attacks or turning points during the campaign.

October 12, 2018: Proud Boys founder McInnes gave a speech on October 12, 2018, at the Metropolitan Republican Club in New York City, reportedly attended by members of a local neo-Nazi skinhead group, the 211 Boot Boys.[187] A fight broke out after the event between the Proud Boys and counter-protestors, resulting in the arrests of 10 Proud Boys members on charges including attempted assault, gang assault, and riot. Convictions and prison sentences followed.

August 15 and 22, 2020: The Proud Boys engaged in near-daily violent demonstrations in Portland during summer 2020, leading the state's governor to declare a state of emergency in September.[188] On August 15 and August 22, Proud Boys member Alan Swinney violently attacked people in Portland protesting the murder of George Floyd. He used a paintball gun to shoot protestors, causing serious injury in one instance. Swinney also used bear mace and aimed a loaded handgun at a crowd. Swinney was found guilty of assault and unlawful use of a weapon with a firearm in an October 2021 trial. In December 2021, he was sentenced to 10 years in prison.[189]

December 12, 2020: Proud Boys leader Enrique Tarrio vandalized a Black Lives Matter Banner at the United Asbury Methodist Church during a protest in Washington, DC in December 2021. Tarrio was arrested in January 2021 before the riot at the U.S. Capitol. At the time of his arrest, Tarrio was found to be in possession of high-capacity firearm magazines.[190] In August 2021, he was sentenced to five months in prison after pleading guilty.[191]

January 6, 2021: The Proud Boys participated in the storming of the U.S. Capitol along with members of other far-right organizations, including the Three Percenters, Oath Keepers, adherents of the QAnon conspiracy theory, and other supporters of then-U.S. President Donald Trump in an attempt to halt the certification of Joe Biden's victory in the 2020 presidential election. While it is unclear how many Proud Boys members were in attendance that day, more than 60 of them were involved in an encrypted messaging channel, known as "Boots on the Ground," to communicate before and during the attack.[192] As of January 2023, 55 of the group's members have been indicted on charges connected with the assault.[193]

Post-January 6, 2021: In the wake of the Jan. 6 insurrection, the Proud Boys "have shied away from large-scale protests, especially those held in Washington D.C., out of fear of attracting law enforcement attention."[194] They have not, however, slowed down their activities. In fact, in the months since the insurrection, the group has been more active than ever.[195] According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, in 2021, the Proud Boys attended at least 114 public events, "largely targeting local governments and community institutions such as public schools."[196] Throughout 2022, the Proud Boys have significantly increased their attacks on reproductive justice and the LGBTQ community.[197] As of July 1, 2022, according to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), the group has participated in 27 abortion-related events, which "amounts to a 160% spike over the previous year."[198] Moreover, during the first six months of 2022, the group targeted eleven LGBTQ-related events, the majority of which featured drag queens.[199]

INTERACTIONS

A. DESIGNATED/LISTED

- Canada: In February 2021, Canada added the Proud Boys to its terror entity list.[200]
- New Zealand: In June 2022, New Zealand designated the Proud Boys as a terrorist organization.[201]

B. COMMUNITY RELATIONS

The Proud Boys attracts members from a range of communities and backgrounds. The majority appear to be white, although a significant number in early social media groups had Latino surnames. The group's online following seems to include individuals with criminal records as well as those with military or law enforcement backgrounds.[202] The Proud Boys primarily recruits white males aged 15-30 and targets those with a sense of threatened masculinity and a fear of losing their place in society "amidst changing demographics and issues surrounding immigration."[203]

The Proud Boys coordinates its activities and widens its reach through social media and online publications. Initially, the Proud Boys relied on mainstream social media to support its online communities, but the group was banned from Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube in 2018.[204] Subsequently, the Proud Boys moved to smaller far-right sites including Gab and Minds, where they acquired a small following of 1,000-2,000 adherents. Recently, the group came to rely on the encrypted messaging app Telegram, with an estimated audience of 5,000, as well as the conservative social media site Parler. The Proud Boys' main Parler account had over 50,000 subscribers before vendors such as Amazon.com Inc. took it offline in January 2021.[205] The vendors stated that Parler violated content-moderation rules because it was used to plan the assault on the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021.[206]

In public communications, the Proud Boys engages in intentional provocation as well as careful image management. The group's national leadership consistently asserts that the group is not and does not have ties to white nationalism, white supremacy, or extremism.[207] In 2019, Proud Boys founder Gavin McInnes filed a defamation lawsuit against the Southern Poverty Law Center for labeling the Proud Boys a hate group.[208] Yet, the Proud Boys' online and physical activities center on deliberately provoking or "triggering" others through violence or offensive rhetoric, clothing, and memes. The group is also known for "cultural hijacking," including the repurposing of symbols and language from civil rights movements for far-right messaging.[209]

C. RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER GROUPS

Ties to other Right-Wing Extremist Groups

The Proud Boys limits ties to similar groups to obfuscate its connections to extremist and white nationalist ideologies. The Proud Boys does not maintain any public alliances or sustained relations with other far-right organizations. However, it has participated alongside anti-government and white supremacist groups in different events and operations, such as the January 6 assault on the U.S. Capitol. In addition, individual members have been linked to other far-right groups with differing ideological positions. Membership in such groups appears fluid; individuals move from group to group and can be members of several groups simultaneously.

As an organization, the Proud Boys have interacted with groups including the Oath Keepers, Three Percenters, and Patriot Prayer. Oath Keepers is a far-right anti-government organization composed primarily of current and former members of the military and law enforcement.[210] Most interactions between the Proud Boys and Oath Keepers have been through mutual participation in grassroots pro-Trump rallies, most recently the assault on the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021.[211] Three Percenters is

also a far-right, anti-government militia that is anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant. The group has worked alongside the Proud Boys to antagonize and attack far-left counter-protestors. It was also involved in the January 6 Capitol assault.[212] Patriot Prayer is a far-right group based near Portland, Oregon, that organized pro-Trump rallies in predominantly liberal cities in the 2016-2019 period. Some of these rallies were attended by Proud Boys members.[213]

Proud Boys Splinter Groups

Widespread splintering followed the January 2021 assault and the release of reports about Tarrio's past as a law enforcement informant. The more extreme, anti-establishment members of the group were angered, and several chapters across the U.S.–including Proud Boys Alabama, Indiana, and Oklahoma–distanced themselves from the national leadership in February 2021.[214] In 2022, an investigation by *The Daily Beast* revealed that the Proud Boys are now divided among two main factions, the "Standard" and the "National." According to Gavin McInnes, "Both sides say that the other side is racist and tolerates pedophiles." Whereas the National faction still maintains allegiance to Tarrio, the Standard faction does not, opting instead to be governed by a "Standard" of behavior. One Standard supporter explained on Telegram that the two main rules of the faction are: "No snitches. No sex criminals."[215]

Although the Proud Boys Canada organization dissolved itself in May 2021, an offshoot, Canada First, remained active. It advocates neo-Nazi principles, including the violent removal of anyone who is not White.[216]

It is difficult to determine the number of splinters as well as their degree of autonomy from national Proud Boys leadership. The authors of a report published in August 2021 by the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point identified more than a dozen splinters or imitator groups in the United States, many of which adopted Proud Boys' tactics or aesthetics.[217]

D. STATE SPONSORS AND EXTERNAL INFLUENCES

There are no identifiable external influences for this group.

MAPS

- Global Right-Wing Extremism

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