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Sunday

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OATH KEEPERS, Pa.

PG INVESTIGATION: How the group tapped into Pa. and made it a hotbed for far-right militia recruiting

By Michael Korsh and Mike Wereschagin
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Years after launching a campaign for Congress in Pennsylvania, police Sgt. Ted Waga III was thrust into a scandal over a series of tweets from his account with homophobic slurs and calls for "modern day crusades" against Muslims.

The "people of the world are getting fed up" and "will/are going on the offensive" against them, one tweet said.

The Pennsylvania resident who served in the Baltimore County police in Maryland quickly drew the ire of advocacy groups and his own police force, which launched an inquiry into the tirades in 2019.

The county government's top executive called the messages "hate-

ful," while local civil rights groups said they were "blatantly racist" and demanded that he apologize and be disciplined.

By the next year, Mr. Waga was no longer on the force, but his long stint as a police officer made him an ideal recruit for one of the best known far-right militia groups in the nation: the Oath Keepers.

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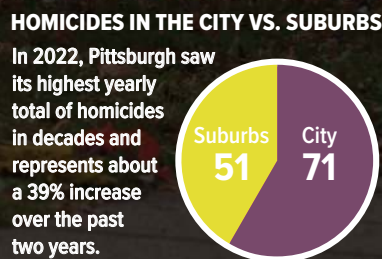
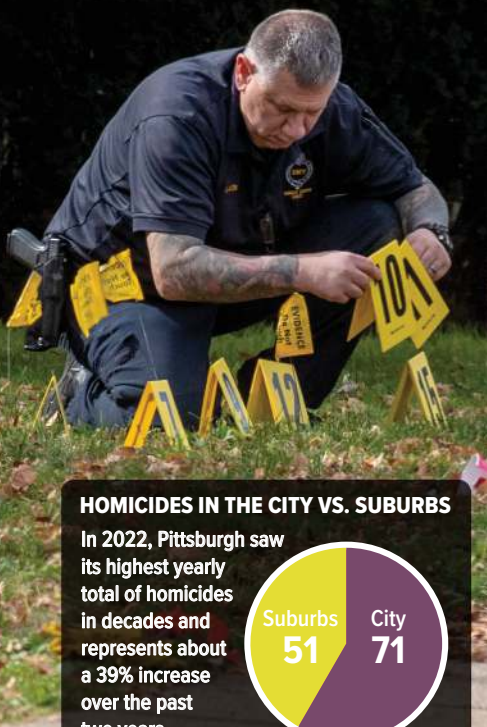


Manuel Balce Ceneta/Associated Press

Members of the Oath Keepers gather on the East Front of the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, in Washington.

A BLOODY YEAR IN PITTSBURGH

— and behind each statistic is a human life



Source: Allegheny County Office of Medical Examiner. Excludes out-of-county and Erie homicides that were listed on the medical examiner's report, as well as an Ohio homicide in which the victim was found in Allegheny County.

James Hilston/Post-Gazette

By Megan Guza
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Ceonte Young was a lanky 18-year-old with a wide smile who went by the nickname Woody and was working toward his GED.

Jaiden Brown was a 17-year-old Walmart employee who loved baseball.

Maleek Thomas was 18 and had just graduated from Pittsburgh Millionaires. He had to finish 11th and 12th grades in one year to graduate on time, and he did it, fulfilling a pledge to his mother, Camille Baskin.

"He graduated June 18. My birthday was June 19. When I say that was the happiest I've ever been since giving birth to my children ..." she said, her voicing trailing off. But regaining her composure, she added, "Because he promised me that diploma."

On June 24, he was gunned down in the Hill District in the middle of the afternoon.

Ceonte, Jaiden and Maleek all had their own lives and own stories, as did the 68 others killed in Pittsburgh last year.

The 71 homicides citywide in 2022

amounted to a grim 39% increase from the previous year, when 51 people were killed. Like many other cities, Pittsburgh had experienced a decline in killings in the years preceding the pandemic. From 2007 through 2021, the city averaged about 53 homicides annually.

"These people, these kids — because they are kids — and their families need to know how this affects the victims' families," Ms. Baskin said. "Yeah, you got your target, but I'm dead inside. I died when my son died."

SEE **HOMICIDES**, PAGE A-4

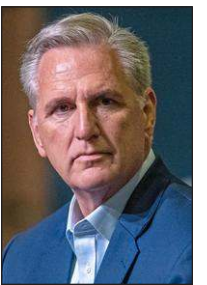
Chaos in the House

McCarthy's quest overcomes revolt

The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — It was the extraordinary moment that brought House Republicans to the brink — and ultimately the moment they found their way back.

Just one vote short of becoming speaker of the House, California Republican Kevin McCarthy stood from his chair and walked down the center aisle to the back of the chamber. It was nearing midnight, and he had already lost 13 votes for speaker over four long days. The room fell almost silent as it became apparent that the GOP leader was now asking — begging, really — the bombastic, blustering, defiant Florida Rep. Matt Gaetz to change his vote from "present" to "McCarthy."



Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., capped a chaotic, tension-filled week early Saturday when he was elected House speaker on a historic 15th ballot.

Mr. Gaetz, who had hurled personal insults at Mr. McCarthy just hours earlier on the House floor, said no.

Mr. McCarthy slowly walked back down the aisle, alone, head tilted to the ground. But he turned back around when he heard a scuffle behind him. Alabama Rep. Mike Rogers, a Republican ally of Mr. McCarthy, had angrily confronted Mr. Gaetz, telling him he would regret his decision. Lawmakers on the floor yelled in disbelief as Mr. Rogers was held back by a colleague.

Mr. McCarthy walked back to make sure the argument was over and then returned to his chair, defeated.

He lost the 14th vote. Allies moved to abruptly adjourn the House, their hoped-for

SEE **MCCARTHY**, PAGE A-6

JOSEPH A. HARDY III Jan. 7, 1923 - Jan. 7, 2023

84 Lumber magnate dies on his 100th birthday

Built his business into a billion-dollar empire

By David Templeton
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Joseph Hardy of 84 Lumber fame has been described as Homer, a lumber baron and even chairman of the boards.

He long acknowledged that he was driven to succeed as a founder of the billion-dollar 84 Lumber empire based in Washington County — the largest privately owned home improvement retailer in the United States and third overall be-

hind Home Depot and Lowe's.

He's credited with rethinking the lumber business in the late 1950s with a cash-and-carry approach focused on professional contractors and builders, then proceeded to dictate over company growth that at one point included more than 500 stores in 38 states, placing him and eventually his

daughter Maggie Hardy on the Forbes 400 list of the world's richest people.

By 2002, Ms. Hardy was included on that list, with an estimated wealth approaching \$1 billion, at a time when 84 Lumber revenues had reached \$2 billion a year. Mr.

SEE **HARDY**, PAGE A-5



Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Joe Hardy at Royal Reception XVI in 2006.

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How Oath Keepers turned Pa. into a far-right recruiting hotbed

OATH, FROM A-1

The 49-year-old former Republican candidate is among the hundreds of Pennsylvania residents whose names appear on a leaked roster of a group that was largely unknown a decade ago, but has now become infamous because of its role in unleashing violence on the Capitol two years ago to halt the transfer of power.

While there are several groups that took part in the Jan. 6 attack, the Oath Keepers have carved out their own place in the pantheon of extremism for one reason: The majority of members have served in law enforcement and the military.

Mr. Waga is among the 1,496 members from Pennsylvania — the fifth-highest number in the nation — who joined the organization while it was rapidly evolving into one of the most volatile of its kind in the country.

Others on the list include a prominent Pennsylvania lawyer who once served as a township trustee, a Pittsburgh police lieutenant, a state constable, and a former longtime mayor of Duncannon, a borough in Perry County, according to leaked records analyzed by the Post-Gazette.

Tarentum borough Councilman Raymond Kerr pledged to help recruit new members when he joined the organization in 2009 as it was about to mount protests across the country.

At the time, Mr. Kerr, a military veteran, said he was preparing to launch his own group known as “The Sheriff’s Patriot Posse” that would be a “nationwide program” and a pipeline for new members to join the cause.

“This will put your program into activity in every precinct in America,” wrote Mr. Kerr.

Joe Bennett of Lancaster County waged a public campaign and declared his county to be a “sanctuary” that was not bound by federal mandates, calling on local leaders to “resist and prosecute” federal authorities when they overstep their bounds.

“We are taking inventory of Lancaster County to identify our allies and our enemies,” he posted.

Pittsburgh police Lt. Philip Mercurio said he would spread the word about the Oath Keepers to his students in firearms training when he joined in 2010 and provided his city email to the group for a contact, the records show.

Reached by the Post-Gazette, Mr. Kerr and Mr. Bennett said they are no longer active members.

“When they started that, it sounded like a good idea,” said Mr. Kerr, who said he was attracted by the group’s rhetoric about defending the Constitution, but declined to comment any further on what occurred — if anything — with his own patriot group. Lt. Mercurio hung up on the reporter.

Positions of power

The list of about 38,000 people from every state provides a rare glimpse into the inner workings of the group that was once considered fringe, but has now burrowed its way into the mainstream of America.

At least 18 have held public office in Pennsylvania, while nearly 100 worked for law enforcement agencies, including the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and the Customs and Border Patrol.

The membership data, shared with the Post-Gazette by the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, raises serious concerns among national security experts about the numbers of people with virulent anti-government views who are put in positions of power and given the authority to make key decisions that can impact lives.

The leak also comes as the federal government ramps up its watch over extremist groups, recently declaring such organizations’ activities as “top threats” — and putting them in the same category as foreign terrorists, according to the FBI.

“History has shown us

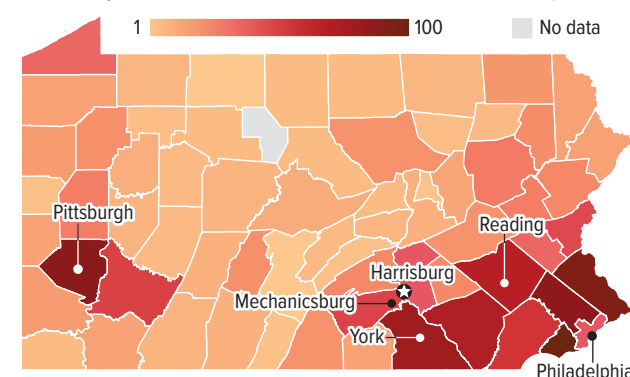


Michael Robinson Chavez/Associated Press

Several extremist groups took part in the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the Capitol, but the role of the Oath Keepers’ leaders was crucial in rallying people to the riots to halt the transfer of power and keep President Donald Trump in office, prosecutors said.

Pennsylvania Oath Keepers membership

Philadelphia and Pittsburgh lead the roster of Pa. cities having the most Oath Keepers members. Among Pa. counties, Delaware County has the highest member count — Allegheny ranks third. More than 1,490 people with Pennsylvania addresses are listed on the leaked membership roster.



FIVE COUNTIES AND CITIES WITH THE HIGHEST MEMBERSHIP COUNT

Delaware	100	Philadelphia	42
Bucks	92	Pittsburgh	35
Allegheny	88	City of York	24
Montgomery	87	Mechanicsburg	21
York	80	Reading	20

Source: Distributed Denial of Secrets, Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project

Post-Gazette

that if we leave these organizations and these players to continue what they’re doing, they’re going to make it more extreme every time,” said Jason Van Tatenhove, former spokesman for the Oath Keepers who became disenchanted with the group and left in 2016. “I don’t think it’s going to stop any time soon.”

Dating back a decade, the Oath Keepers have carried out a host of armed standoffs against federal agents in places where it said the government had gone too far.

In 2014, the group joined legions of protesters at the Bundy ranch in Clark County, Nev., in a notorious confrontation with agents from the federal Bureau of Land Management.

The Oath Keepers also took part in a 2016 occupation of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge that led to the arrests of 26 people on federal felony conspiracy charges.

‘Battlefield general’

But perhaps nowhere has the group’s ideology clashed more violently with the government than at the Capitol on Jan. 6 — two years ago on Friday — when founder Stewart Rhodes and at least 11 members helped carry out an insurrection that led to scores of injuries and at least seven deaths in connection with the attack.

Rhodes, 57, who was found guilty at a November trial, played a pivotal role in plotting the activities and staging an arsenal of weapons and gear — including batons, knives, helmets, tactical vests and radios — just prior to the riots.

Much of the government’s case against Rhodes and other group members was bolstered by text and social media messages, with Rhodes exhorting members “to rise up in insurrection” and to prepare for an “armed rebellion” to keep Donald Trump in office.

One prosecutor called

Rhodes a “battlefield general” who oversaw the rioters as they stormed the Capitol.

The assault was the culmination of the group’s actions over the years, driven by a belief known as “popular constitutionalism” — meaning that all Americans have the legal and political authority to interpret the Constitution for themselves, said Sam Jackson, author of “Oath Keepers: Patriotism and the Edge of Violence in a Right-Wing Antigovernment Group.”

Founded as a nonprofit the year after Barack Obama won the presidency, the Oath Keepers quickly expanded nationally, picking up more than 100 members in Pennsylvania in the first year and doubling the number the next. By 2013, nearly 650 had joined from nearly every county in the state, the roster shows.

In Lancaster County, Mr. Bennett spent years trying to prod local officials to ignore federal directives, saying they were unlawful.

According to the leaked roster, he served as Pennsylvania coordinator for “Operation American Spring” — which was billed as a mass rally that would attract millions to Washington, D.C., to force the resignation of President Barack Obama and Vice President Joe Biden, among others.

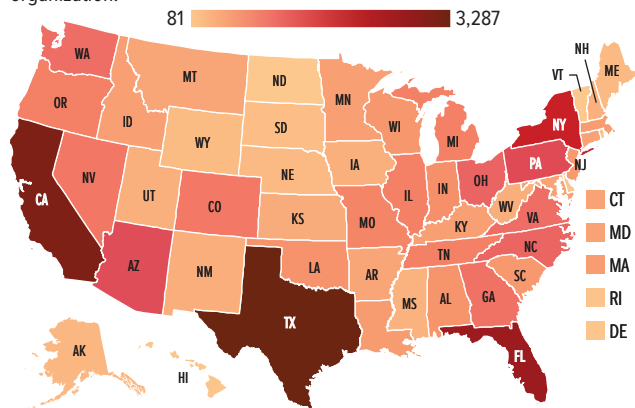
In the end, the event drew just a few hundred people in what one civil rights watchdog group called “Operation American Dud.”

In an interview with the Post-Gazette, Mr. Bennett said he has been pressing for 33 years for people to understand “enumerated powers” of the Constitution, which he says severely limits the federal government’s reach.

After joining the Oath Keepers in 2014, Mr. Bennett said he tried to enlist the group’s help in spreading the message of Constitutional empowerment and the principles behind it, but no one ever responded.

Pa. fifth in nation for Oath Keepers membership

A leaked Oath Keepers membership roster published in September 2021 by the nonprofit journalist collective, Distributed Denial of Secrets, showed more than 1,490 individuals with Pennsylvania addresses. The list was just a portion of a purported total membership of more than 38,000. At the time, this placed Pennsylvania fifth in the nation for membership in the organization.



FIVE STATES WITH THE HIGHEST MEMBERSHIP

Texas	3,287
California	3,070
Florida	2,709
New York	1,994
Pennsylvania	1,496

Source: Distributed Denial of Secrets, Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project

Post-Gazette

Right to bear arms

After his membership was revealed in a partial leak of the roster in 2021, Lt. Mercurio was placed on administrative duty. Though he said he would share information about the Oath Keepers to his colleagues, it’s not clear if he brought in any new members.

But his affiliation caught the attention of then Mayor-elect Ed Gainey, who told WESA that the police supervisor should be fired.

More than a year later, he is still on the force in a supervisory role.

While much of the Oath Keepers’ philosophy is driven by a credo that the Constitution is meant to protect citizens from the federal government, the right to bear arms frequently draws most of their attention.

In more than a dozen interviews with the Post-Gazette, people who appear on the roster said they joined for a host of reasons, including the group’s support of the military and the Second Amendment.

Others whose names appear on the roster say they have distanced themselves from the network since joining and are no longer tied to it.

“If I knew then what I know now, I would not have opened the envelope. And I don’t even remember whether it [the invitation] came in an envelope,” said Jonathan Spadt, the CEO of RatnerPrestia, a large Philadelphia law firm specializing in intellectual property law, who once served as a Lower Merion Township commissioner.

He said he was unaware of many of the group’s beliefs when he joined as an associate in 2013, other than their advocacy of the right to bear arms and backing of the military.

The leaked roster, which provides details about the

members and associates, shows Mr. Spadt learned about the Oath Keepers from his uncle, Peter Glenn, who serves as a state constable in Berks County.

Mr. Spadt said he was troubled by the Jan. 6 attack “like any reasonable person” and condemned it.

In interviews with others who joined the Oath Keepers, they criticized the siege on the Capitol, but still defend the group.

Mr. Glenn, who joined in 2010, said he questioned whether the Oath Keepers took part in the riot, which led to charges against at least 20 members.

“I would seriously doubt that they’re involved within the insurrection,” said Mr. Glenn. “They’re not that kind of people. If I joined them, and they were that kind of people, I would never have joined them.”

Kraig Nace, a former longtime mayor of Duncannon, said he only joined the Oath Keepers in 2013 for a brief period, mostly because he always believed the group supported “upholding the oath of office we were taking” when he was elected.

No longer a member, he said he nevertheless questions the news reporting about the Capitol riots.

“I worked in radio. I saw both sides of the media,” Mr. Nace said. “The media has the ability to sensationalize. There are multiple sides. There are dirtbags on both sides.”

Many of those who signed up were recruited at gun shows or through internet personalities like Alex Jones, sharing some of the same frustrations over rapid changes in the country, including the loss of manufacturing jobs, rising prices and struggles at the border to control illegal immigration.

Power vacuum

In his testimony to the House Select Committee,

Mr. Rhodes said that at its peak, the Oath Keepers swelled to as many as 40,000 members — much higher than researchers’ estimates — with one in five being law enforcement officers.

While everyday citizens can join the group as “associates,” full memberships are reserved for those who served in the military, law enforcement or as first responders.

About three-quarters of those on the roster from Pennsylvania held that status, the leaked records show.

With Mr. Rhodes convicted of seditious conspiracy, Mr. Van Tatenhove said a power vacuum has been created within the Oath Keepers, causing even greater dangers for law enforcement because of the possibility of a new leader rising up with even more violent leanings.

He said the Oath Keepers were partially a “cult of personality” around Mr. Rhodes, a pugnacious, Yale-educated lawyer who managed to avoid felony charges until his conviction two months ago.

He said the group still clings to a gospel that it must rise up against tyranny, but ironically, those same believers tried to turn back one of the hallmarks of America: the right of people to choose their leaders.

“They’re trumpeting from the walls that they are defending freedom, and yet they’re the ones that are dismantling the systems that are safeguarding real freedom and real democracy,” Mr. Van Tatenhove said.

The group’s defenders vehemently push back against the notion that they’re a threat to the nation, with some telling the Post-Gazette that they simply pay the annual dues.

Seamus Hughes, an associate fellow at the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, said they are still giving money to pay for the same anti-government activities that federal law enforcement agencies are now targeting.

“I think that level of support should preclude you from government service — full stop,” said Mr. Hughes.

But for years, that was not easy because most public agencies had not yet fully identified the group’s potential for danger, experts say.

For six years, Ted Waga, the Baltimore County police sergeant, had been on the Oath Keepers’ membership roll before the scandal erupted in 2019 over the virulent anti-Muslim tweets sent from his Twitter account.

At the time, it was not publicly disclosed that he had ever joined the group.

Not until the information was leaked to the Post-Gazette and others did his affiliation come to light, despite widespread publicity over the rants.

In one of the messages retweeted from his Twitter account, two Muslim members of Congress, Reps. Rashida Tlaib and Ilhan Omar, were called “the enemy within” and “cockroaches.”

Mr. Waga did not respond to numerous messages sent to his LinkedIn and email accounts or to phone calls.

Experts say it’s not surprising that his prior membership in Oath Keepers was not disclosed at the time.

“If you were just on the internet trying to jump into a group, it seemed relatively innocuous,” said Mr. Hughes. “The veneer wasn’t off the Oath Keepers until after Jan. 6.”

But the assault on the Capitol changed that for all the world to see, he said.

“This was always who they were,” Mr. Hughes said. “They were always going to get to that point, regardless. Jan. 6 just provided them the perfect avenue to do so.”

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