



The Free Press Is Under Attack. We Need Your Help. [See More](#)

[U.S. NEWS](#) [DONALD TRUMP](#) [JAN 6](#) [EXTREMISM](#)

The Biggest Players of Jan. 6 Walk Free Thanks To Trump

Members of the biggest far-right extreme groups are now out of prison.

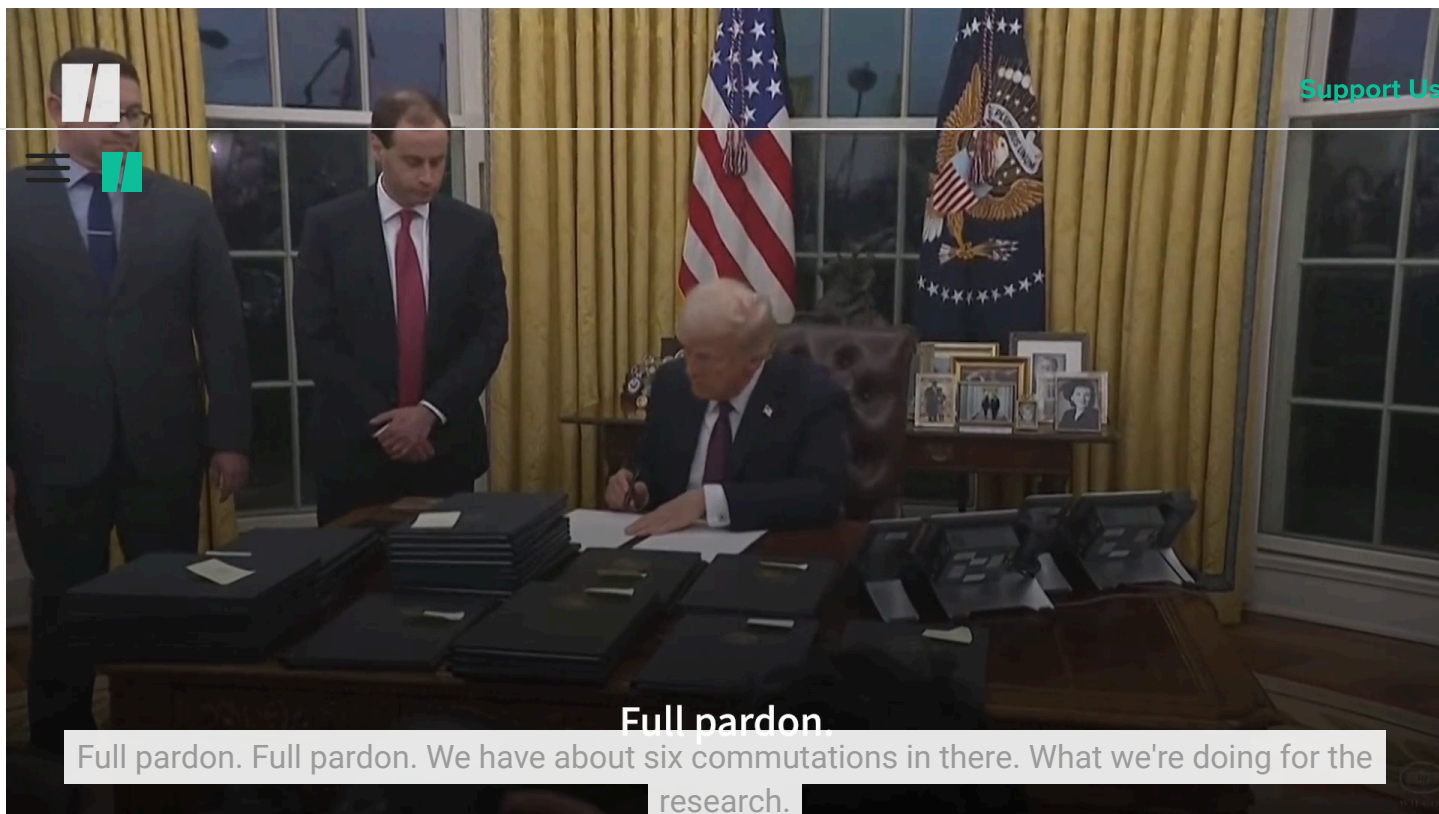
By **Brandi Buchman**

Jan 21, 2025, 11:33 AM EST

Updated 3 hours ago



152 COMMENTS



It is a victorious day for the Oath Keepers and Proud Boys.

Some 14 members of the right-wing extremist groups who faced the most serious charge to emerge from the events of Jan. 6, 2021 — seditious conspiracy — including former Oath Keepers leader Elmer Stewart Rhodes and [former Proud Boys leader Henry “Enrique” Tarrio](#) — will now walk free because President [Donald Trump](#) commuted their sentences or pardoned them Monday.

Tarrio and Rhodes were released from prison Tuesday morning.

The commutations were part of a sweeping executive order the president signed hours after taking office, in which he also [granted a full pardon](#) to the more than 1,500 people who have been charged with crimes connected to the attack on the U.S. Capitol — including those convicted of assaulting law enforcement officers.

A pardon removes the record of a conviction, while a commutation reduces a person’s sentence but does not remove their conviction record. Individuals who saw their sentences commuted by Trump will not have all of their civil rights restored, including rights to own a firearm or vote.

Rhodes was [sentenced to 18 years](#) in May 2023 after a jury found him guilty of conspiring to stop the transfer of power and other charges. In September 2023, Tarrio, who [asked Trump for a full pardon](#) on the fourth anniversary of the insurrection, was [sentenced to 22 years](#).

Tarrio was not among the people on Trump’s list of commutations. However, the executive order states it grants “a full, complete and unconditional pardon to all other individuals convicted of offenses related to events that occurred at or near the United States Capitol on January 6, 2021” — meaning he has been pardoned. Trump’s clemency [list](#) specifically commuted Proud Boy Jeremy Bertino. Bertino pleaded guilty to seditious conspiracy and [admitted on the](#)

[stand](#) that when Proud Boys were storming the Capitol, he was in a back channel urging those on the ground to “form a spear” and “drive your way through a crowd if you need to.”

But Bertino hadn’t yet been sentenced.

Most of the people who stormed the Capitol were not members of the Oath Keepers, Proud Boys or other extremist groups. But there was a [sprawling constellation](#) of far-right groups and affiliates who descended on the Capitol that day, including Three-Percenter, members of the QAnon conspiracy movement and state militia groups, according to the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism. As prosecutors proved to jurors at trial, however, the Oath Keepers and Proud Boys were instrumental in coordinating and executing the attack as Congress met to certify the results of the 2020 election.

Pardon Power

Michael Bloch is a New York litigator with experience handling cases involving white supremacists and extremist ideology — he represented civil rights groups and activists when they sued organizers of the “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, and neo-Nazi groups like Identity Evropa and Vanguard America. He told HuffPost earlier this month that there was “no question” a sweeping pardon of Jan. 6 defendants would [embolden extremists throughout America](#) “in the same way that white supremacists have been emboldened by Trump and his supportive rhetoric for the last eight years.”

“The pardon power is intended to be an exercise in mercy and used appropriately,” Bloch said. “It really is an important power that frankly should be used more often. I think what’s different about this case is twofold: First, for Trump to exercise blanket pardon power for Jan. 6

defendants, [he] would be doing it to reward those who are loyal to him, and [second], he's also doing it in a scenario where he was actively involved in the crime itself."

Pardons are not meant to be "a reward for political loyalists," Bloch said. There are people serving "extraordinarily excessive sentences for crimes" who may be more deserving of being pardoned, but Bloch said now he's worried Trump's abuse of the pardon power may cause the general public to disapprove of using the practice at all.

Bloch also worries that newly pardoned Jan. 6 rioters, especially those who were part of extremist movements or displayed unique acts of violence, will take the news of their pardon as yet more proof that Trump approves of their actions.

[Evidence at Jan. 6 trials](#) showed defendants "expressly viewed themselves as Trump's army and talked about committing an all-out war to keep Trump in power," Bloch said.

If any pardoned Jan. 6 rioters go on to commit other criminal offenses, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in 1914 that their pardoned offense could still be weighed by courts under something known as "[habitual offender laws](#)." The high court ruled in [Carlesi v. New York](#) that while a pardon may effectively wipe away a federal crime, that criminal record can still be considered if there is recidivism going forward.

The Oath Keepers And The Proud Boys

After Jan. 6, so many [Oath Keepers](#) were charged with seditious conspiracy that they could not all physically fit in the courthouse's chamber at the same time. Instead, over a dozen Oath Keepers accused of a variety of crimes — including seditiously conspiring to stop the transfer of power, obstructing Congress, assaulting and

impeding police and tampering with evidence — were tried in batches over a series of weeks.

Jurors reviewed a vast trove of Oath Keepers' text messages and forensic data. They listened to phone calls and voicemails and watched extensive video footage of the attack. They listened to firsthand accounts from Oath Keepers who said the group was ready to go to war to overturn the election, and they heard from [FBI](#) special agents as well as former and current members of the group. Rhodes took the stand at one point, offering defiant testimony in which he painted himself as the savior of a movement to keep Trump in power and to keep Trump's supporters "safe."

Under cross-examination, Rhodes [told prosecutors he wanted Trump to invoke the Insurrection Act](#) because, he believed, only then could the president expose the election fraud and leak sensitive data, including information he believed would out government officials as pedophiles. Trump, Rhodes said, had a constitutional duty, "just like Lincoln," to overturn the 2020 election results.

Rhodes' associate and Oath Keeper Florida chapter leader Kelly Meggs was sentenced to 12 years for seditious conspiracy and other charges. Rhodes and Meggs' co-defendants at trial included Oath Keeper and former founder of the Ohio Regular Militia Jessica Watkins, Florida Oath Keeper Kenneth Harrelson and Thomas Caldwell, a veteran Navy intelligence officer. They were acquitted of seditious conspiracy but convicted on other charges.

Watkins [led fellow Oath Keepers in an aggressive push](#) through the Capitol, recruited new members and communicated with Oath Keepers leadership about an arsenal of weapons stashed just outside Washington, D.C., known as a "quick reaction force." At trial, she tearfully declared to jurors that she was "[just another idiot](#)

[running around the Capitol](#),” but she was sentenced to eight years in prison in 2023.

Harrelson received a four-year sentence after he was convicted for obstruction of an official proceeding, conspiracy to prevent an officer from discharging duties, and tampering with documents or proceedings. A federal judge ruled that the 53 days Caldwell spent in detention after he was first arrested in 2021 was sufficient for his conviction on a single count of tampering with evidence, according to CBS affiliate [WUSA9](#).

The [other Oath Keepers convicted of seditious conspiracy](#) and who prosecutors said helped oversee the weapons arsenal were: Roberto Minuta of Texas, Joseph Hackett and David Moerschel of Florida, and Edward Vallejo of Arizona. Minuta was sentenced to just over four years in prison; Hackett was sentenced to just over three years; and Moerschel and Vallejo were each sentenced to three years.

All of their sentences were commuted.

Other Oath Keepers [found guilty](#) of conspiring to stop police or of obstructing an official proceeding were Connie Meggs, wife to Rhodes’ seditious conspiracy co-defendant Kelly Meggs; another husband-and-wife duo, Sandra and Bennie Parker; and Oath Keepers William Isaacs and Laura Steele.

Early on in the Justice Department’s probe of Jan. 6, Oath Keepers [Brian Ulrich](#) and [Joshua James](#) pleaded guilty to seditious conspiracy and cooperated extensively with investigators. Both James and Ulrich admitted that on Jan. 6, they were willing to use lethal force against anyone who would dare keep Trump from the White House, despite his 2020 electoral defeat by [Joe Biden](#).

James, who was tapped as Roger Stone's security guard on Jan. 6, admitted to prosecutors that even after Oath Keepers had failed to stop the transfer of power, he and Rhodes kept amassing guns and more tactical equipment ahead of Biden's inauguration in 2021.

As for the Proud Boys, Tarrio, who at the time was the leader of the [self-proclaimed "western chauvinist"](#) group, and chapter leaders, including Joe Biggs, Ethan Nordean and Zachary Rehl, were all convicted of seditious conspiracy. Their co-defendant at trial, Dominic Pezzola, was charged with seditious conspiracy but was the only member of the group acquitted on that count. Prosecutors and the judge in Pezzola's case saw his use of a stolen police riot shield to smash open a window and let rioters stream inside the Capitol as an integral spark to the chaos and violence of Jan. 6.

Tarrio was not on Capitol grounds on Jan. 6 after developing what prosecutors said was a useful alibi for his whereabouts. Instead, Tarrio watched the violence unfold from a hotel room in Maryland as he cheered on his "boys" on social media. He took credit for the destruction in chat messages with Jeremy Bertino, a former Proud Boys member who [pleaded guilty](#) to seditious conspiracy before Tarrio's trial ever got underway.

A Supreme Court decision in June to [narrow the meaning of a charge](#) applied in dozens of Jan. 6 cases — obstructing an official proceeding — theoretically benefited many Oath Keepers, Proud Boys and individual rioters. But the Justice Department reported in January that [just six](#) defendants had received a sentencing reduction because of the Supreme Court's decision.

Tarrio, [according to CBS News](#), was expected to be reunited with his family in Miami on Monday. An attorney for Tarrio expressed gratitude to Trump, saying it "marks a pivotal moment in our client's life, and symbolizes a turning point for our nation."

“We are optimistic for the future as we now turn the page on this chapter, embracing new possibilities and opportunities,” attorney Nayib Hassan said.

Retribution And Betrayal

Police officers like Michael Fanone who were brutalized by rioters expressed a profound sense of betrayal upon learning about the pardons. Fanone told [CNN's Anderson Cooper](#) on Monday that he, his children and his family are “less safe because of Donald Trump and his supporters.”

Biden issued preemptive pardons to members of the Jan. 6 congressional committee, investigators and police officers who defended the Capitol out of an abundance of concern that they would be targeted by punitive litigation from the incoming Trump administration.

Former U.S. Capitol Police Officer Harry Dunn said he wished Biden's pardon wasn't necessary but “unfortunately, the political climate we are in now has made the need for one somewhat of reality,” he said in a statement to HuffPost.

Dunn said he was just “doing my job and upholding my oath” that day.

Former U.S. Capitol Police Sgt. Aquilino Gonell also told HuffPost on Monday: “I can't believe I need a pardon for doing the right thing while the person who set Jan. 6 in motion is inaugurated.”

The next four years will change America forever. But HuffPost won't back down when it comes to providing free and impartial journalism.

[Would you help us provide essential information to our readers?](#) We can't do it without you.

SUPPORT HUFFPOST

Already contributed? [Log in to hide these messages.](#)

“I did not seek a pardon and I did nothing wrong,” Gonell said. “American citizens attacked the Capitol, injuring me and my colleagues. We protected all elected officials, regardless of political party. I, an immigrant, nearly lost my life defending the Constitution and the rule of law in the building where President Trump was inaugurated.”

RELATED

DONALD TRUMP

JAN 6

EXTREMISM

PARDON

< GO TO HOMEPAGE



VIEW 152 COMMENTS

[Suggest a correction](#) | [Submit a tip](#)

WHAT'S HOT

JFK's Grandson Says JD Vance's Wife Is 'Way Hotter' Than His Grandma Jackie Onassis, Social Media Reacts

