

Who Are The Oath Keepers? Militia Group, Founder Scrutinized In Capitol Riot Probe

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Stewart Rhodes, founder of Oath Keepers, is pictured in Forth Worth, Texas, on Feb. 28. A number of Oath Keepers members or associates are under investigation for the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol. **Aaron C. Davis/The Washington Post via Getty Images** [hide caption](#)

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Stewart Rhodes, founder of Oath Keepers, is pictured in Forth Worth, Texas, on Feb. 28. A number of Oath Keepers members or associates are under investigation for the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol.

Aaron C. Davis/The Washington Post via Getty Images

In April of 2009, a bespectacled former Army paratrooper and Yale Law School graduate took the microphone at a small rally just outside of Boston to introduce his new self-styled militia.

"I'm Stewart Rhodes," he said. "And I'm the founder of Oath Keepers."

That event on Lexington Green served as a coming-out party for Rhodes and Oath Keepers, a group that touts itself as a defender of the rights of Americans from what it views as a tyrannical government.

Twelve years later, Rhodes and his group are under intense scrutiny for their alleged role in the deadly attack on the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6. At least a dozen members or associates of the Oath Keepers are facing conspiracy charges in connection with the siege, and court papers indicate that investigators are taking a close look at Rhodes himself.

The scope of the organization

Rhodes has been from the beginning the driving force behind Oath Keepers, which has emerged as one of the largest anti-government extremist groups in the far-right patriot militia movement.



Investigations

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"Broadly speaking, the group started as a response to a perception of what the group would describe as federal tyranny or continued patterns of violations of fundamental rights of Americans by the American government," said Sam Jackson, a professor at the University at Albany and the author of a book about Oath Keepers.

From the start, the group has tried to recruit military and law enforcement into its ranks. The name "Oath Keepers" itself is a call-back to the oath such individuals swore to defend the Constitution from all enemies, foreign and domestic.

It claims to have tens of thousands of members, although researches estimate the number is probably no higher than 5,000. But even that would make Oath Keepers one of biggest groups in the patriot militia movement.



Law

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Investigations

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Still, it's not a rigid, cohesive organization. Instead, researchers say, it's loosely knit. The Justice Department describes it as a "large but loosely organized collection of individuals."

Rhodes leads the national organization and spearheads efforts to build the group and its brand. It is responsible for things like overseeing the membership list, collects dues, and administers the organization's online presence, according to Jackson.

The group has local chapters spread across the country, which operate with an enormous amount of independence.

Sometimes the national leadership supports a chapter's activities and will encourage Oath Keepers nationwide to get involved, Jackson said. Sometimes the leadership disapproves of a local chapter's actions and will tell it to knock it off.



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The group first grabbed national headlines in 2014 when its gun-toting members took part in a standoff with federal authorities at the Bundy Ranch in Nevada.

"Rhodes talks about some of the members of the organization engaging in what they described as security patrols or surveillance, trying to figure out where federal law enforcement was, figure out where their armed units were, and to try to anticipate and respond to or possibly even just prevent some sort of violent conflict," Jackson said.

Heavily armed Oath Keepers also showed up in Ferguson, Mo., during unrest following the shooting of Michael Brown, a Black 18-year-old, by a white police officer. They said they were there to protect local businesses and "keep the peace," but their presence raised alarm among protesters rallying against police violence.



Reported members of the Oath Keepers walk along West Florissant Street as demonstrators mark the anniversary of the shooting of Michael Brown in August 2015 in Ferguson, Mo.

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The 2016 election and support for Trump

For the first half of its existence, Oath Keepers criticized politicians on the left and right for, in their view, not adhering to the political system envisioned by the nation's founders.

But in the 2016 presidential election, the group threw its support behind Donald Trump.

Jackson says the organization didn't abandon its anti-government extremism and become loyal members of the Republican Party. Instead, he says, Oath Keepers viewed Trump as an ally in a fight "against a corrupt elite, which you can see in rhetoric about the 'deep state' or about 'drain the swamp,' those sorts of things."

As the group embraced Trump, Rhodes was increasingly embracing conspiracy theories prevalent on the far right. He warned about a deep-state cabal seizing control of the government.

"By the end of 2020, Stewart Rhodes is basically advocating for the QAnon conspiracy theory," Jackson said.



After the 2020 election, Rhodes pushed Trump's false claims that the ballot was rigged. Days after the vote, Rhodes addressed a small "Stop the Steal" rally in Virginia, where he urged people not to accept the results.

"What do you have right now if nothing but a communist insurrection intent on overthrowing our Constitution?" he said.

Rhodes called Joe Biden a puppet of the Chinese communist party, and he called on Trump to use the U.S. military to put down the alleged communist-globalist insurrection.

The Jan. 6 investigation

Fast forward to Jan. 6 and the attack on the U.S. Capitol. Prosecutors say that Oath Keepers were in the mob of Trump supporters who stormed Congress that day.

A dozen alleged members or associates of the group are now facing conspiracy charges in connection with Capitol siege. The Justice Department says the defendants worked together to try to disrupt Congress' certification of the Electoral College vote.

Rhodes himself has not been charged, although he is referred to as Person One in court papers. Those documents show that he was in contact with some of the defendants for months ahead of Jan. 6, and on the day itself was in direct communication via phone and text as the attack progressed.



Rhodes stood outside the Capitol that day, but he is not known to have entered the building. Still, the evidence prosecutors have presented so far suggests the government is looking at a possible case against Rhodes.

"They're saying in a public filing that he participated in communications showing that they were actively planning to use force and violence, so if they've got that evidence, that seems to me pretty strong evidence on which to charge him," said Tom Firestone, a former federal prosecutor.

Rhodes is clearly aware that his actions in connection with Jan. 6 are under scrutiny. In a speech late last month in Laredo, Texas, he claimed the government was persecuting his group for its political beliefs.

"I may go to jail soon," he told the small crowd. "Not for anything that I did, but for made-up crimes."

Rhodes also denied that Oath Keepers made plans to storm the Capitol on Jan. 6.

"We were there to protect Trump supporters from antifa," he said. "That's why my guys were wearing helmets and body armor and goggles."



What would it mean for Oath Keepers if Rhodes were to face criminal charges?

Rhodes is the central figure of the organization. He is the founder, leader and center of gravity for the group. In theory, then, an indictment against Rhodes could lead to the group's collapse.

But Jackson argues that the overall impact would be limited because Oath Keepers is only one part — albeit a big part — of the broader anti-government militia movement.

"If Oath Keepers were to disappear tomorrow, that would not change the movement, that would not change the landscape or anti-government extremism in the U.S.," he said.

Militia membership is loose and flexible, and people can float from group to group without changing any of their beliefs. Allegiance to the ideology is more important than allegiance to a specific organization.

In other words, if Oath Keepers were to disappear, its members would likely just find a new home with some other self-styled militia.