

A REUTERS SPECIAL REPORT

The Proud Boys are back: How the far-right group is rebuilding to rally behind Trump

REUTERS/Emily Elconin. Illustration by John Emerson.

The Proud Boys say recruitment is growing and they're ready to serve again as Donald Trump's unofficial protection force.

By [ARAM ROSTON](#) | Filed June 3, 2024, 10 a.m. GMT

BEDMINSTER, NEW JERSEY

Note: This story contains offensive language

A dark SUV cruised past former President Donald Trump's supporters near his Bedminster golf club in New Jersey on a windy April afternoon. Billowing from the vehicle were three flags: one for the Trump campaign, two others with the initials "PB" – the insignia of the far-right Proud Boys movement.

Through the open windows, three Proud Boys flashed the "OK" sign with their hands, a gesture often associated with white supremacy and the far right. Trump's fans cheered. Four men dressed in the signature black-and-yellow shirts of the Proud Boys spilled out of the SUV and began glad-handing the crowd like homecoming heroes.

The Proud Boys are back. Four years after the failed effort to overturn Trump’s 2020 electoral defeat, the violent all-male extremist group that led the storming of Congress on Jan. 6, 2021, is rebuilding and regaining strength as Trump campaigns to return to the White House, according to interviews with eight Proud Boys, two U.S. law enforcement officials and four experts who track the group’s online activity.

Since the Jan. 6 Capitol riot, four former Proud Boys leaders have been convicted in federal court of seditious conspiracy, each sentenced to 15 or more years in prison. At least another 70 members were charged with participating in the violence. But that crackdown hasn’t stopped the Proud Boys.

Some Proud Boys say they are preparing to emerge once again as a physical force for Trump, drawn to his hardline nationalism and convinced their leaders will be pardoned if he wins. Trump himself promises to pardon convicted Jan. 6 rioters if he’s elected.

After last [Thursday’s historic guilty verdict](#) against Trump, an Ohio Proud Boys chapter vowed “war” and posted a video of Proud Boy street brawls that ended with the message, “Fighting solves everything.” A Miami chapter said, “Now, more than ever, we are recruiting!” Some posted images of the upside-down American flag symbolizing the “Stop the Steal” movement that falsely claims Trump won the 2020 election. One Proud Boy told Reuters that America is in a period of “calm before the storm.”

The group’s main Telegram channel, however, posted a message urging Proud Boys to stay calm and not get drawn into a trap and risk arrest. “Trump is, of course, getting railroaded but we will not be walking into any honey pots over this.”

In recent weeks, the group has become more prominent at pro-Trump events, highlighting the risk of renewed violence in this year’s presidential election.

Dozens of Proud Boys – some in body armor and helmets – marked the third anniversary of the Jan. 6 insurrection with a show of force at the statehouse in Columbus, Ohio. On April 20, nearly a dozen gathered at a rally for Trump’s Republican campaign in Wilmington, North Carolina. More recently, groups of Proud Boys from two chapters mixed with tens of thousands of Trump supporters at a campaign rally in Wildwood, New Jersey, in May.



The Proud Boys are becoming more prominent at former President Donald Trump’s events, such as at this May 11 rally in Wildwood, New Jersey. REUTERS/Jim Urquhart

On a boardwalk near the entrance of the Wildwood rally, several Proud Boys identified themselves as members of the “New Jersey State” chapter. One said they were there to provide security and stop agitators from “disrespecting or assaulting everybody.” Inscribed on his wraparound sunglasses were the initials “POYB” – short for “Proud of Your Boy.” He wore a ring with the initials

“PB” and a black shirt with the yellow laurel wreath of the Proud Boys. Three men from another chapter greeted them, their faces hidden by gaiter masks.

The re-emergence of the Proud Boys at Trump’s political rallies and events coincides with polls showing a majority of Americans fearing political violence will flare around November’s election. It also comes when Trump’s use of incendiary rhetoric is inspiring his supporters to target his opponents – including judges, prosecutors and political rivals – in a wave of threats that’s unprecedented in modern American politics.

Trump himself has not ruled out the possibility of political violence if he loses in November. “If we don’t win, you know, it depends,” he said when asked by Time magazine in April if he expected violence after the election. If he’s jailed or put under house arrest, “I’m not sure the public would stand for it,” he said in a Fox News interview that aired on Sunday. “At a certain point there’s a breaking point.”

Before the last election, Trump told the Proud Boys to “stand back and stand by.” Three months later, federal prosecutors say, the group’s leaders plotted and led the insurrection of the U.S. Capitol. Trump’s baseless, rigged-election claims inspired the gathering, and Trump himself urged the assembled crowd to march on the Capitol as Congress certified Democrat Joe Biden’s victory.

A spokesperson for Trump did not respond to questions for this story about his rhetoric, Jan. 6 and the Proud Boys.

As the Proud Boys regroup, they’ve made changes designed to make them less vulnerable to law enforcement scrutiny, including doing away with layers of top leadership, according to interviews with members. The Proud Boys now operate with self-governing chapters in more than 40 states, with little apparent central coordination, members said.

While the group’s structure has changed, its Canadian founder remains an inspirational figure to today’s Proud Boys. Gavin McInnes, a British-born far-right commentator who lives in New York, announced his resignation from the Proud Boys in 2018. But he remains deeply involved with the group, according to interviews with Proud Boys.

“When there are disputes, he mediates,” one Proud Boy said. J. Daniel Hull, a lawyer who has represented Proud Boys, agreed. “They’ll take a lot of cues from Gavin McInnes.”

Over three interviews with Reuters, McInnes said he is not seeking a leadership role but that he communicates regularly with members, makes an appearance at some events and tries to resolve infighting. Some Proud Boys affectionately refer to him as a “Godfather.”



Among the most influential figures over the Proud Boys is its Canadian founder, Gavin McInnes, shown on stage with members of the Proud Boys organization at a 2018 “Night for Freedom” event in New York City. REUTERS/Andrew Kelly

After McInnes stepped down, his successor, Henry “Enrique” Tarrio, raised the Proud Boys’ profile, pulling them from the fringe of the far-right toward the center of Trump-era Republican politics. Tarrio, a Floridian of Afro-Cuban descent, was sentenced last September to 22 years in prison for seditious conspiracy, defined as an effort by two or more people to overthrow the government or use force to hinder its operations, and other charges related to the Capitol riot. He has appealed.

Two criminal defense attorneys for Tarrio did not respond to emailed questions and phone calls.

In the past, McInnes, Tarrio and a group of leaders dubbed “Elders” spoke publicly on the group’s behalf, set the agenda and guided its confrontations with left-wing groups around the country. They sat atop a formal structure and could disband Proud Boy chapters or expel members. Now, members say, the chapters are largely independent of each other and ban communications with the media. Most members who spoke to Reuters for this report did so on condition of anonymity.

The group’s resilience has surprised some extremism experts. “The amazing thing is that so many people from the Proud Boys can be in jail and yet you have these active chapters,” said Heidi Beirich, co-founder of the nonprofit Global Project Against Hate and Extremism. “Traditionally when the head of a neo-Nazi or white supremacist group goes to jail or dies, the organization will collapse, but that does not seem to be happening with the Proud Boys.”

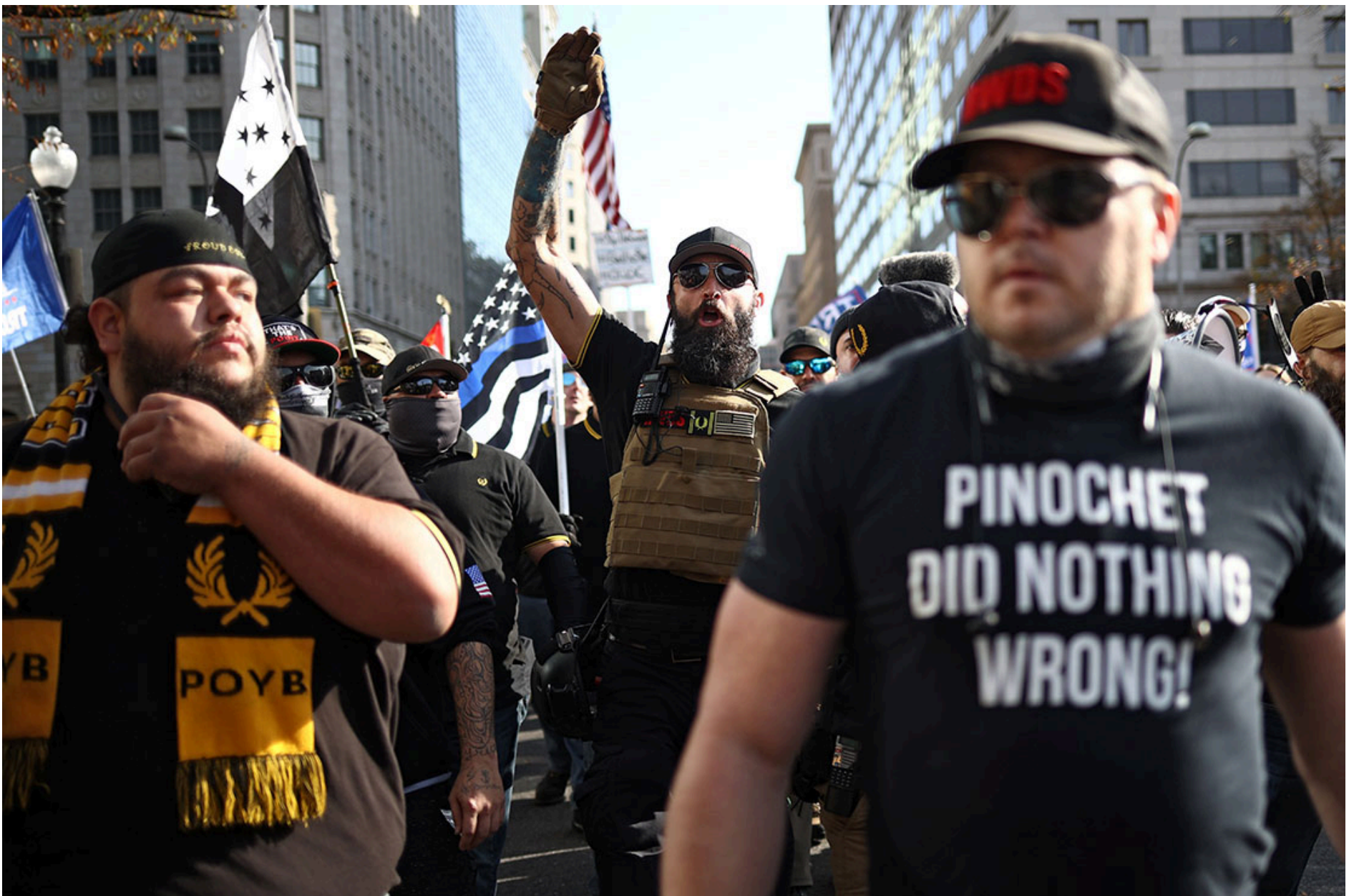
The Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Department of Homeland Security declined to comment on the group’s activities and whether authorities are monitoring the Proud Boys.



Members of the Proud Boys make 'OK' hand gestures that are associated with white supremacy during a protest in Washington against the 2020 election results. REUTERS/Jim Urquhart



A Proud Boy gestures in front of the Oregon State Capitol during a 2022 protest in support of the January 6th attack on the U.S. Capitol. REUTERS/John Rudoff



Proud Boys protest in Washington against the results of the 2020 presidential election. November 14, 2020. REUTERS/Hannah McKay



A Proud Boy carries a gun during a gathering at a local park to remember a man who was shot dead in Portland, Oregon, after street clashes between Trump supporters and counter-demonstrators. September 5, 2020. REUTERS/Caitlin Ochs

A previously unreported 2022 Department of Homeland Security intelligence report, reviewed by Reuters, refers to “Domestic Violent Extremists” identifying themselves as Proud Boys who are “primarily engaged in violence against law enforcement and ideological opponents.” It’s not against the law to be a member and most Proud Boys haven’t done anything illegal, it added.

“You can be as big a Proud Boy supporter as you want in this country as long as you’re not planning criminal activity,” said former FBI agent Mark Seyler, who investigated the Proud Boys before retiring at the end of 2021. But, he added, after the Capitol riots, “there would be no excuse this time not to take them seriously.”

“Tip of the spear”

At Tarrio’s criminal trial, one Proud Boy described the group as “foot soldiers of the right.” Today, glorification of violence remains a core feature of the Proud Boys – as does unwavering support of Trump, according to interviews with current members.

The Proud Boys describe their ideology as “Western chauvinism,” which they say is a deep embrace of Western civilization and traditions. Critics say the group uses the term “Western” rather than “white” to veil its racism – a charge the Proud Boys’ defenders deny. While the Proud Boys claim the group is a fraternal organization, in practice it promotes street violence against the left and trolls liberals, Democrats, feminists, transgender activists and others they oppose.

A handbook outlining Proud Boys rituals was revealed by prosecutors in 2023 as evidence in Tarrio’s trial. The manual says that becoming a high-ranking Proud Boy requires “engaging in a major conflict,” including “serious physical fights” or “getting arrested.” A defense lawyer in the case argued that some of the document was merely sarcastic and politically incorrect.

FOURTH DEGREE

This degree is loosely defined as “engaging in a major conflict for the cause.” Being arrested is not encouraged although those who are immediately become fourth degrees because the court has registered a major conflict. Serious physical fights also count and it’s up to each chapter to determine how serious the conflict must be to determine fourth.

In the 2023 trial of Proud Boys convicted of seditious conspiracy, federal prosecutors produced evidence of a recruiting manual detailing steps required for initiates to be promoted to the four ascending levels of Proud Boy membership. The highest, or Fourth Degree, required physical violence, according to the handbook.

A “Proud Boy Prayer” on an active website promoting a New Jersey chapter of the group puts it this way: “Strengthen us Brothers with power and hard fists to help us defend the right and defeat the wrong.” The same site says the Proud Boys don’t support acts that violate criminal law.

Federal prosecutors and a U.S. congressional investigation both named the Proud Boys as crucial plotters and leaders of the Jan. 6 attack. The Proud Boys “lined up behind Donald Trump” and were “ready to commit violence on his behalf,” Assistant U.S. Attorney Conor Mulroe said in court. “These defendants saw themselves as Donald Trump’s army, fighting to keep their preferred leader in power no matter what the law or the courts had to say about it.”

Publicly, members of the group deny the Proud Boys orchestrated the Jan. 6 violence. Instead, they characterize the riot as spontaneous and their leaders as innocent. Privately, however, some Proud Boys acknowledge that the group drove the events of that day.

“Without the Proud Boys, Jan. 6 didn’t happen,” one longtime member of the group told Reuters. “The Proud Boys were the tip of the spear.”



Federal prosecutors and a U.S. congressional investigation have both named the Proud Boys as crucial plotters and leaders of the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol. REUTERS/Leah Millis

During the Trump administration, the Proud Boys engaged in large-scale street brawls with antifa – antifascists – and other leftist groups across the country, typically by taunting demonstrators to instigate a fight. They adopted the slogan “Fuck Around And Find Out,” and emblazoned the letters “FAFO” on hats and t-shirts.

Some historians compare the Proud Boys to fascist European militias of the 1920s and 1930s such as the Brownshirts, a Nazi paramilitary group that helped bring Hitler to power in Germany. Proud Boys say they’re nothing like the Brownshirts and bear no resemblance to fascists. But street violence and extreme nationalism are features of both groups. In the weeks before the Capitol riots, some wore a patch inscribed with “RWDS,” short for “Right Wing Death Squad,” a term used to describe Central and South American paramilitaries who supported right-wing governments and dictatorships.



The Proud Boys troll liberals and promote street violence against left-wing activists. In this photo, members of the Proud Boys clash with counter-protesters during rival rallies in Portland, Oregon, August 22, 2021. REUTERS/David Ryder

“Splintering and infighting”

After Trump left the White House, the Proud Boys turned to America’s culture wars. They clashed with supporters of abortion rights and vaccine mandates, and harassed organizers of Drag Queen Story Hours, where female impersonators read at libraries or bookstores to children. Fights often ensued.

Since the 2021 Capitol attack, Reuters identified 29 incidents of political violence involving the Proud Boys, almost all of them centered around social issues. All but one of the eight cases in 2023 involved clashes between Proud Boys and left-wing activists at demonstrations supporting LGBTQ+ rights. The tally was based largely on news reports and court records of fights, assaults and other physical confrontations.

This year, the Proud Boys have returned to politics.

In the first three months of 2024, there have been far fewer Proud Boys public events than in the same period last year. But half of them have been pro-Trump and the rest have been political in nature, related to guns or immigration, said Kieran Doyle of the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, a U.S.-based nonprofit that monitors political violence.

On April 24, Proud Boys founder McInnes appeared at Columbia University’s pro-Palestinian protests. He told Reuters that the Proud Boys were not getting involved in the anti-Israel unrest, saying he was there to “ridicule” liberals by pretending to be a left-wing journalist. It didn’t work, he said, because people saw him and posted alerts on social media. “They recognized me and were scared.”

There’s no authoritative count of Proud Boy members. McInnes claims there are about 5,000, down from 8,000 during Trump’s presidency but up from lows after the Capitol riot arrests. Official estimates of the Proud Boys’ strength vary widely, from 300 to 3,000 members, said a law enforcement source who has monitored the group. Reuters could not independently corroborate its numbers.

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Some former Proud Boys have abandoned the group for other, more overtly racist and violent groups, including the neo-Nazi Blood Tribe and the underground “Active Club” scene, a white supremacist male movement, one Proud Boy told Reuters.

Julie Farnam, a former U.S. Capitol Police assistant director of intelligence who now runs a private investigative agency, said there are 154 Proud Boy chapters in 48 U.S. states. Farnam also said the Proud Boys appear to be growing overseas and have 18 international chapters in nine countries, based on her monitoring of the group’s social media activity, although their size is unclear. “It has grown and I don’t see any evidence it’s slowing down,” she said. Canada and New Zealand have designated the Proud Boys a terrorist group.

As they regroup in the United States, the Proud Boys face infighting between what insiders refer to as a “Standard” or “Rogue” wing and a “National” or “Traditional” wing. The dispute began after one leader accused another of publishing identifying information about him, forcing others to take sides, said McInnes. Rival members brawled at an autumn gathering in Las Vegas, and some of the most extreme white nationalist Proud Boys have gravitated to the Standard faction, one Proud Boy told Reuters.



A Proud Boy displays a T-shirt depicting Trump at a May 11 campaign rally for the former president in Wildwood, New Jersey. REUTERS/Jim Urquhart

McInnes said he couldn’t resolve the split and dismissed it as growing pains. “Every club, when they start getting big, they start splintering and infighting,” he said, adding that recruitment is still growing.

Born in England and raised in Canada, McInnes co-founded Vice magazine in 1994 and remains a vocal force in far-right circles. With his groomed beard and retro horn-rimmed glasses, he resembles a hipster from Brooklyn, where he lived in a luxury penthouse apartment before moving to the New York suburbs. He runs a show on his own website, Censored TV, which streams right-wing podcasts. The show’s backdrop features the Proud Boys insignia next to an American flag with “PB” where the stars ought to be.

He founded the Proud Boys during the 2016 presidential election. Two years later, after a brawl in New York City where Proud Boys were arrested, he distanced himself from the group.

McInnes told Reuters that he resigned to make it more difficult for prosecutors to allege that the group operated like a gang with top-down leadership and thus prevent arrested Proud Boys from receiving lengthier sentences.

He evoked a parallel with the Hells Angels, a hard-charging motorcycle club that revels in violence, including attacks on anti-war protesters in the 1960s. The Justice Department describes the Hells Angels as “a serious national domestic threat” and blames it for a host of criminal activity, including drug-trafficking and violent crimes. The group has no formal overall leader.

“These defendants saw themselves as Donald Trump’s army, fighting to keep their preferred leader in power no matter what the law or the courts had to say about it.”

Assistant U.S. Attorney Conor Mulroe

McInnes said the Proud Boys adopted a loose organizational structure similar to the Hells Angels partly to avoid federal charges under the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act, or RICO. That law was originally passed in 1970 to help tie Mafia bosses to the crimes of their underlings by allowing prosecutors to argue they conspired together in a criminal enterprise.

“You know, the way Hells Angels can avoid RICO charges is they have their autonomous constitution, and there’s no top-down leadership. But if you have top-down leadership,” McInnes added, “you’re going to get gang charges.”

San Francisco lawyer Jai Gohel, who has represented the Hells Angels in state and federal cases for more than 20 years, said the structure of the Hells Angels wasn’t designed specifically to avoid RICO prosecutions and that individual local chapters sometimes face such charges.

If the Proud Boys ever faced a nationwide RICO prosecution, the new structure could “lessen the damage to uninvolved chapters or uninvolved leaders,” said Columbia Law School professor Daniel Richman. But the Proud Boys still remain vulnerable to prosecution, he said, noting that Hells Angels members and leaders are often charged with crimes regardless of the group’s structure.

McInnes won’t say specifically whether or not he’s still a Proud Boy. “For legal reasons,” he said, “I have to remain ambiguous about it.” He also doesn’t like the idea of leading, he added. “That’s for megalomaniac cult leaders.”

“Bad things are going to happen”

McInnes was succeeded by Tarrío, an avid Trump supporter who served as the Florida director of “Latinos for Trump,” a political action committee. Tarrío propelled the Proud Boys into politics and, with his immigrant background, was seen by some members as helpful in deflecting charges of racism. One Proud Boy told Reuters the group considered Tarrío’s ethnicity a public relations advantage.



Former Proud Boy leader Enrique Tarrio (center) rallies in Washington, D.C., on Nov. 14, 2020, in support of Trump. Tarrio is now held at a medium-security federal prison in Kentucky. REUTERS/Hannah McKay

Tarrio built a bridge between the far-right and Trump-era Washington. He was photographed inside the gates of the White House and was an associate of Trump adviser Roger Stone, who had “a longstanding, close relationship with the Proud Boys,” according to congressional investigators. When contacted by Reuters, Stone declined to answer questions about Tarrio. He said he knows members of the Proud Boys but has “no formal nor informal relationship with the organization.”

In November and December 2020, Tarrio led the Proud Boys through the streets of D.C. after Trump’s loss and burned a Black Lives Matter banner during a demonstration by Trump supporters.

He is now held at a medium-security federal prison in Kentucky. Freeing him and dozens of other Proud Boys jailed for the Capitol riots is the group’s new call to action. In at least three rallies this year, Proud Boys have held up signs calling for their freedom.

A Proud Boy holding one such sign at Trump’s Bedminster rally said the sentences were too severe, echoing comments by many members. Asked if Trump will free the Proud Boys if elected, the member replied: “I would hope so. He said he will.”

Trump said in March that if he wins the election, one of his first acts would be to “free” those charged of crimes related to the Capitol siege – a group numbering more than 1,400, whom Trump has described as “patriots” and “hostages.” They include violent offenders caught on video brandishing stun guns, flagpoles, firearms and other weapons in the attack that injured about 140 police officers. Trump himself is facing felony criminal charges in connection with the Jan. 6 riot.



Trump said in March that if he wins the election, one of his first acts would be to “free” those convicted of crimes related to the U.S. Capitol siege of Jan. 6, 2021. In this photo from that day, pro-Trump protesters storm the Capitol during clashes with police. REUTERS/Shannon Stapleton/File Photo

At a May 2023 town hall, Trump didn’t rule out pardoning the Proud Boys. “I’d have to look at their case,” he said. Trump’s spokesperson, Steven Cheung, did not respond to an email asking if Trump planned to pardon the Proud Boys or had been in communication with them.

Farnam, the former U.S. Capitol Police assistant director, said the possibility of pardons is a powerful motivator for the Proud Boys to re-emerge as street soldiers for Trump in the upcoming election.

McInnes scoffs at that idea. Trump doesn’t control them, he said. “Give me a scenario where Trump calls Proud Boys ... and he says, ‘I need you guys. I need you here on this date.’ Like, is that what leftists really believe?”

But Trump doesn’t need a phone call to mobilize them, said some members of the group and experts who study it.

While there’s no evidence that Trump directly contacted the Proud Boys to engage in violence on Jan. 6, 2021, congressional investigators said he sent them strong signals, including a Dec. 19, 2020, tweet where he called for his supporters to mass in Washington: “Be there, will be wild!”

“For the Proud Boys,” the congressional investigators wrote, “President Trump’s tweet set in motion a chain of events that led directly to the attack on the Capitol.” After that tweet, Tarrío created a new encrypted chat to organize the Proud Boys for Jan. 6, prosecutors told a federal jury last year.

The Proud Boys also seized on Trump’s comment to “stand back and stand by” a few months earlier in September 2020. Tarrío quickly replied, “standing by,” in a post on the now-defunct site Parler. Some Proud Boys incorporated the phrase into the group’s logo. McInnes uses audio of Trump’s comment over graphics of the Proud Boys insignia on his online TV show.

A Trump attorney has said in federal court that Trump’s speeches and tweets did not incite violence.

Today, many Proud Boys want Trump back in power, not just because of the prospect of pardons. For some, his appeal reflects a deeper cultural shift in America – from unease at changing racial and ethnic demographics to anger over immigration and a perception on the right that liberals are destroying the country. Trump frequently exploits those grievances on the campaign trail in apocalyptic language that’s echoed by some Proud Boys.



A Proud Boy looks on before a May 11 campaign rally for former President Trump in Wildwood, New Jersey. REUTERS/Jim Urquhart

“If Trump loses, our republic, the country goes away. Bad things are going to happen,” said Michale Graves, a Proud Boy and former lead singer of the Misfits punk band.

Graves is an unusual figure in the movement. He doesn’t wear the Fred Perry polo shirts with a laurel wreath logo favored by the group and says he joined mainly to be contrarian. In March, he performed at Cactus Jack’s Bar & Grill in Phoenix, Arizona, to an enthusiastic crowd that included a few Proud Boys. He wore a ball cap on his shaved head and a black button-down shirt, as he sang the Misfits classic “Saturday Night,” a horror-punk ballad about murder.

Many of the Proud Boys that show up at his gigs expect mass uprisings in the coming election, Graves said. “People who come to the shows are talking about this giant confrontation.”

As he played, three men sat on bar stools near the door, their shirts embroidered with the distinctive wreath of a Proud Boys Arizona chapter: a skull in a cowboy hat, set between two revolvers.

One shunted off questions from this reporter with a warning look. “We’re just music fans,” he said.

Another had the words “Proud Boy” tattooed on his forearm and claimed he was an “Elder” in the organization. He said no one in his chapter would ever talk to the media. Reminded that Tarrio, the jailed past chairman, used to talk incessantly to reporters, he chuckled.

“We’re still here. But we’ve changed.”

Editor’s note: This story was updated to correct a misspelling of Kieran Doyle's first name in the 38th paragraph.

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