

The Oath Keepers

Anti-Government Extremists Recruiting Military and Police

In the past several years, the Oath Keepers, an anti-government right-wing fringe organization, attracted considerable media attention for activities that included showing up in Ferguson, Missouri, during protests and unrests following the shooting of a young African-American male by a Ferguson police officer in 2014.

Oath Keepers also appeared as self-appointed armed guards at military recruiting centers in different parts of the country following the deadly shooting attacks by Mohammad Abdulazeez on two military facilities in Chattanooga, Tennessee, in July 2015. In August, they set up a so-called “security mission” at a Montana mine to prevent “unlawful action by the United States Forest Service.”

More recently, the Oath Keepers tried to exploit the controversy surrounding Kim Davis, the Kentucky county clerk who refused to issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples. After Davis was released from several days in jail for contempt of court, the Oath Keepers, claiming to have “boots on the ground” in Rowan County, offered Davis “protection...to ensure she will not be illegally detained again.” They claimed that she had been illegally arrested and held without due process. However, Davis declined their “offer.”

Who are these Oath Keepers who keep showing up across the United States?

THE OATH KEEPERS

The Oath Keepers are a large but loosely organized collection of anti-government extremists who are part of the broader anti-government “Patriot” movement, which includes militia and “three percenter” groups, sovereign citizens, and tax protesters, among others. What differentiates the Oath Keepers from other anti-government extremist groups is that the Oath Keepers explicitly focus on recruiting current and former military members, police officers and firefighters (although they accept anyone as members).

The ideology of the Oath Keepers most closely resembles that of the militia movement, whose adherents believe that the United States is collaborating with a one-world tyrannical conspiracy called the New World Order to strip Americans of their rights—starting with their right to keep and bear arms. Once Americans are rendered defenseless, the theory goes, they too will be enslaved by the New World Order.

The Oath Keepers aim much of their propaganda at military and police, reminding them that they swore an oath to defend the Constitution “from all enemies, foreign and domestic” and asking them to pledge to disobey unconstitutional orders they might get from superiors—orders that explicitly or implicitly refer to various militia-related conspiracy theories, such as mass gun confiscation or rounding up Americans to put them in concentration camps. Each theory relates to the notion that the United States government is falling under global governance and will at some point use police and military members to enforce the New World Order’s dominance. The Oath Keepers urge military and law enforcement personnel to step up to stop the conspirators.

Founded in 2009 by Stewart Rhodes, a Montana attorney and Army veteran who acts as the group's main mouthpiece, the Oath Keepers are essentially a current and more successful version of a similar 1990s group, Police against the New World Order, started by retired police officer Jack McLamb, who died in 2014. McLamb warned of post-cold war chaos perpetrated by an elitist-controlled New World Order, while Rhodes warns of an insidious global oligarchy bent on destroying America's constitutional republic.

The number of active duty police and military personnel who have admitted to being Oath Keepers is quite small; the number of closeted members may be larger but is still probably relatively small. The Oath Keepers have had more success in recruiting former military personnel, a much larger manpower pool to draw upon. They have also recruited people already involved in the anti-government extremist movement. Many Oath Keepers do not have any current or former ties with military, police, or first responders. Many more people identify with or support the Oath Keepers without ever officially joining (which requires paying dues).

The Oath Keepers claim to have tens of thousands of members. It seems clear that they do not have anywhere near that number of members, but they do have at least a couple thousand, which makes them one of the largest anti-government extremist groups in the U.S., larger than any militia group. Though there is a formal national leadership, on the local level many Oath Keepers are essentially self-organized, forming official, semi-official or informal groupings of Oath Keepers in specific, sometimes even overlapping, geographic areas.

There is a lot of overlap between people who belong to or support the Oath Keepers and people who support the very similar but even more loosely organized "three percenter" movement, an anti-government movement whose adherents think of themselves as standing up to the federal government as American revolutionaries once stood up to the British government. There is also overlap between some individual Oath Keepers and various militia groups.

OATH KEEPERS RHETORIC AND IDEOLOGY

With conspiratorial rhetoric as their food and drink, the Oath Keepers have several mainstay theories they repeatedly peddle to serve as proof that their "constitutional republic" is being taken over and destroyed by evil forces. These primary beliefs, which encapsulate the one-world government conspiracy theories that underpin the anti-government movement, stoke paranoia, fan anti-government sentiment and give them purpose.

These include:

Impending Martial Law: One of the most prominent Oath Keeper theories is that a large scale pandemic, natural disaster, or terrorist attack will give the government an excuse to impose martial law resulting in (but certainly not limited to) door to door gun confiscation, the ban of interstate travel, and concentration camp-like detainment of citizens en masse. To prove the imminent threat of martial law, Rhodes often points to the World War II internment of Japanese Americans and to the gun confiscation by police and military members in the chaotic aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 (a federal court subsequently

ordered New Orleans officials to return all confiscated firearms). Some Oath Keepers have claimed that the government may even stage a terrorist attack or other incident as an excuse to declare martial law.

Anti-United Nations Sentiments: Oath Keepers view the United Nations (UN) as a tool of the “New World Order” that is actually designed to undermine American sovereignty. Some looming UN transgressions anticipated by Oath Keepers include the implementation of global taxation and a global currency that would end the use of the dollar. Overreaching laws or regulations are also expected. For example, the Oath Keepers believe that a UN Small Arms Treaty will be implemented to bypass the second Amendment and prohibit firearms. Many believe a voluntary UN sustainable development plan known as Agenda 21 is a scheme to take away private property and civil liberties in the name of sustainability.

NDAA is Treason: Rhodes and the Oath Keepers are vehemently opposed to the 2012 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA; the regular Congressional military budget appropriation legislation) and have characterized it as a declaration of war on the American people and an act of treason. Rhodes claims that the NDAA allows the government to treat American citizens as they would treat a foreign enemy in time of war, giving the government the unconstitutional power to assassinate or detain American citizens without due process. Oath Keepers have also argued that the government will use drones to kill Americans. In a March 2013 Internet post, Rhodes wrote that “30,000 drones will be used to kill Americans on U.S. soil. Which is why we cannot allow them to be put into our skies. We are on a short track to open conflict. They are driving us to it.” Indeed, in 2014, during the confrontation in Nevada on the ranch of Cliven Bundy between the federal government and anti-government extremists supporting Bundy, the Oath Keepers at the ranch became convinced they would be subjected to a military drone strike and pulled out of the standoff—to the anger of militia leaders and others at the ranch.

The Second Amendment Under Assault: Oath Keepers call for the nullification of all gun laws and view any gun control measures as schemes designed to dismantle the Second Amendment. Rhodes insists the government wants to track gun owners like it does sex offenders and is using mass shooting incidents as an excuse to violate Second Amendment rights. Rhodes has said the purpose of the Second Amendment is to “preserve the ability of the people, who are the militia, to provide for their own security” and “to preserve the military capacity of the American people to resist tyranny and violations of their rights by oath breakers within government.” He has also said that semi-automatic, military pattern rifles are the single most important kind of weapon people can own. According to Rhodes, “We are supposed to have the same military capacity as any infantry squad, any infantry platoon.” Another Oath Keeper theory claims the Veterans Administration is busily deeming veterans mentally unfit in order to legally disarm Americans trained to fight, thereby paving the way for a foreign (New World Order) takeover.

Prepper Movement Targeted: Oath Keepers allege that the government views survivalists or “Preppers,” as they are often now called, as future military opponents. According to Rhodes, a Prepper is a person who is awake and aware, and takes responsibility for themselves and their family. He says the government fears them because they are not subservient, but could resist the government. This conspiracy can also include claims that such “dissidents” will be locked away in concentration camps constructed by the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

THE OATH KEEPERS' PLEDGE

The Oath Keeper's belief that the allegedly tyrannical American government will use law enforcement and military personnel against its people leads to their avowed purpose of opposing such conspiracies. This sentiment is encapsulated in the so-called Oath Keeper's Pledge, which they ask all members and supporters to take. The pledge, which refers to the honorable vow of service given by those in uniform, reminds Oath Keepers that they swore an oath to defend the Constitution "from all enemies, foreign and domestic." By taking this pledge, Oath Keepers vow that they will refuse to cooperate with the "tyrannical government" by making a declaration that there are certain "orders" from superiors that they will refuse to obey.

The list of "orders" the Oath Keepers vow to refuse reveals their extreme conspiratorial mindset, because the "orders" are not instructions ever likely to be actually handed down by officials; instead, they are reflective of the anti-government conspiracy theories embraced by the extreme right. The first "order," for example, that they refuse to follow is any order "to disarm the American people." They also pledge to disobey any order to impose martial law or to support foreign troops on American soil. The other "orders" they refuse to follow are of a similar sort.

Orders Oath Keepers "refuse":

1. We will NOT obey orders to disarm the American people.
2. We will NOT obey orders to conduct warrantless searches of the American people.
3. We will NOT obey orders to detain American citizens as "unlawful enemy combatants" or to subject them to military tribunal.
4. We will NOT obey orders to impose martial law or a "state of emergency" on a state.
5. We will NOT obey orders to invade and subjugate any state that asserts its sovereignty.
6. We will NOT obey any order to blockade American cities, thus turning them into giant concentration camps.
7. We will NOT obey any order to force American citizens into any form of detention camps under any pretext.
8. We will NOT obey orders to assist or support the use of any foreign troops on U.S. soil against the American people to "keep the peace" or to "maintain control."
9. We will NOT obey any orders to confiscate the property of the American people, including food and other essential supplies.
10. We will NOT obey any orders which infringe on the right of the people to free speech, to peaceably assemble, and to petition their government for a redress of grievances.

OATH KEEPERS TACTICS

In addition to peddling conspiracy theories and paranoia, the Oath Keepers use a number of strategies to stay in the forefront of the anti-government extremist movement in the United States. Most relate to their recruitment and promotional efforts.

Community Preparedness Teams (CPT): In October 2013, the Oath Keepers announced the formation of “civilization preservation cells” (since renamed Community Preparedness Teams), which Rhodes claims are necessitated by the country’s impending (and possibly government-created) economic collapse. The formation of these cells, patterned after military Special Forces, closes the narrow gap that separates the Oath Keepers from the militia movement. In 2015, various Oath Keeper CPTs have held militia-like training sessions on topics such as weapons use, patrolling techniques, first aid, and emergency communications.

Infiltrating the Tea Party: Since its founding, many Oath Keepers have tried to play a role within the Tea Party movement. In so doing, they have had more success than other right-wing extremist groups or movements who have tried similar outreach. Oath Keeper leaders have spoken at numerous Tea Party events around the country. In 2012, the Oath Keepers funded a pro-Tea Party billboard outside the gate of the Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, military base. The billboard was in response to an officer at the base who had written an article illustrating legal and doctrinal issues about military operations within U.S. borders that used a hypothetical scenario depicting a right-wing uprising by militia groups and others ostensibly “motivated by the goals of the ‘tea party’ movement.”

Targeting NASCAR/stock car fans: The Oath Keepers have sponsored NASCAR driver Jeffrey Earnhardt at races in Delaware and New Hampshire. Hoping to reach NASCAR fans, the Oath Keepers paid thousands of dollars to have the Oath Keeper logo displayed across the car’s hood. At a local level, Georgia Oath Keepers similarly sponsored local stock car driver Dusty Jones.

Promotional billboards: In an effort to recruit military members, the Oath Keepers have placed “Honor your oath” promotional billboards near military bases around the country. Other Oath Keeper billboards display reminders of the orders members should refuse to obey, e.g. refuse to detain Americans, refuse to conduct warrantless searches, and refuse to disarm Americans. More recently, the Oath Keepers used DC Metro billboards to show support for intelligence leaker and whistleblower Edward Snowden, with billboards claiming that “Snowden honored his oath.”

Care packages for military members: The Oath Keepers court military members by sending them care packages that include Oath Keeper propaganda such as the Oath Keepers handbook, Oath Keeper patches, bumper stickers, and outreach brochures and cards.

OATH KEEPERS ACTIVITIES

Oath Keepers across the country have engaged in a wide array of activities, some of which have gotten considerable media attention. Recent activities include:

Patrolling Ferguson: A small group of armed local Oath Keepers, led by Sam Andrews, contributed to the unrest and controversy in Ferguson, Missouri, that arose after a grand jury declined to indict a former police officer for the 2014 shooting death of a black teenager. During these appearances, Oath Keepers wearing military fatigues and flak jackets stationed themselves on building roofs and conducted street patrols, claiming they were there to protect local businesses and reporters from angry protesters. The local Oath Keepers at first seemed aligned with police, but their anti-government nature eventually asserted itself in 2015. They sided with protesters after the Ferguson police chief announced that the Oath Keepers

could not openly carry weapons while the city was in a state of emergency and could not act as security guards without first obtaining required licenses. In August 2015, Andrews vowed the Oath Keepers would return to Ferguson and sponsor an “open carry” march of at least 50 African-American men armed with AR-15’s. However, Rhodes did not support the planned march, saying Oath Keepers would instead train “law-abiding citizens” to protect themselves from rioters, not to confront cops. Andrews then quit the Oath Keepers to form his own group, claiming that Rhodes’ decision showed a racist double standard.

The Ferguson incident highlights an internal tension between the Oath Keepers’ anti-government ideology and their focus on military and police personnel. In reaction to various controversial shootings by and of police in 2014-2015, most Oath Keepers have tended to side with law enforcement against protesters such as Black Lives Matters. However, a minority of Oath Keepers are so anti-authoritarian that they have been less willing to express support for law enforcement. At the same time, Oath Keepers have also organized or participated in armed confrontations with law enforcement in different parts of the country, such as the Bundy Ranch standoff in Nevada in 2014. The Oath Keepers seem to be trying to resolve this tension by focusing their confrontational tactics primarily against various *federal* law enforcement agencies, while often siding with local law enforcement officers in these other controversies. There is no doubt that the Oath Keepers are openly hostile to federal law enforcement, while their attitudes about local law enforcement are more ambiguous or variable.

Operation Protect the Protectors: Following a July 2015 attack on two separate Tennessee military facilities by Mohammad Abdulazeez, the Oath Keepers launched “Operation Protect the Protectors.” During this short-lived call for action, members of the Oath Keepers (as well as some others) armed themselves and stood guard outside various military recruitment centers around the nation under the pretense of guarding unarmed military recruiters. By mid-August, however, organizers were struggling to find volunteers, especially after law enforcement and military officials asked them to stand down. Undeterred, Rhodes called the exercise a success and wrote that “a new current is now moving across the nation, unseen. That move is to take the PTP program ‘covert.’ Think about that, eh? There are a lot more Patriots ready to stand up for America, without talking to the news stations or revealing their presence, as daily the face of the government is revealed more and more.”

Acting as armed security during land disputes: The Oath Keepers have issued calls for action during disputes between land owners and federal agencies, such as the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the U.S. Forest Service. In 2015, armed Oath Keepers along with various individuals from the broader “Patriot” movement guarded mines in Montana and Oregon during regulation compliance disputes related to mining rights versus surface rights. At the White Hope mine in Lincoln, Montana, the U.S. Forest Service took issue with an unauthorized shed and surface disturbances related to the cutting of firewood. Similarly, the owners of Sugar Pine Mine in Josephine County, Oregon, were in a dispute with BLM over unauthorized surface structures. The Oath Keepers also provided armed security for Nevada cattle rancher Cliven Bundy during a 2014 grazing dispute with the BLM. In this case, the Oath Keepers and other right-wing extremists opposed BLM’s efforts to impound Bundy’s cattle, which had been illegally grazing on federal land. In his call for action, Rhodes asked all Oath Keepers to come to the Bundy Ranch and “stand up against a corrupt government that would subvert us all,” though, as noted, fear of drone strikes caused an Oath Keepers retreat.

Advocacy for the Constitutional Sheriff and Peace Officers Association: The Oath Keepers routinely show support for fellow Oath Keeper Richard Mack. Mack, a former Arizona Sheriff and well-known figure on the

far right, leads the Constitutional Sheriff and Peace Officers Association (CSPOA), which promotes the notion that local sheriffs do not have to obey federal authorities and that the federal government lacks real authority. Mack was influenced by the doctrine of the Posse Comitatus, a loosely-organized extreme anti-government movement that blossomed in the 1970s and 1980s, whose core belief was that the county was the highest level of government because it was the level of government closest to the people.

Participation in Alex Jones' talk show: Stewart Rhodes is a regular guest of conspiracy talk show host Alex Jones, repeatedly appearing on The Alex Jones Show to promote the Oath Keepers and spread his conspiratorial doctrines. The Texas-based Jones is one of the most prominent conspiracy theorists in the United States, and has been responsible for spreading and popularizing a wide variety of conspiracy theories, the majority espousing some form of extreme anti-government viewpoint.

CRIMINAL ACTIVITY

Oath Keepers members have not limited their activities to spouting extreme anti-government conspiracy theories. Even though the group is relatively new, a number of people associated with the Oath Keepers have been involved in criminal incidents since its founding in 2009.

Some of these incidents include:

Las Vegas, Nevada, April 2015: FBI agents arrested Nevada Oath Keeper (and Bundy standoff participant) Richard Lee Cook after he was indicted on charges of being a felon in possession of a firearm. Cook had previous convictions for possessing stolen property, grand larceny and attempted possession of a controlled substance.

Brentwood, New Hampshire, February 2013: Federal authorities charged open carry activist and Oath Keeper Johnathon Irish with five felonies stemming from an investigation into the alleged sales of homemade assault rifles to undercover agents. As part of a December 2014 plea agreement, Irish admitted to lying to authorities. He also admitted to persuading his girlfriend to purchase assault rifle parts for him in order to avoid a background check. In return, prosecutors agreed not to re-impose the other three charges, which had been recently dropped, against Irish. In February 2015, Irish was sentenced to 18 months in prison.

Herndon, Virginia, July 2013: Gun rights activist and Oath Keeper Adam Kokesh was arrested in Washington, D.C., on weapon charges after a search warrant on his Virginia home turned up firearms and illegal drugs. In a separate incident, the U.S. Park Police arrested Kokesh for bearing arms at the Freedom Plaza in violation of Washington D.C. law by loading a shotgun. A District of Columbia judge sentenced Kokesh to two years' probation on the shotgun charge in November 2013. In September 2014, following an Alford plea by Kokesh, a Fairfax County, Virginia, judge ordered a suspended sentence for the warrant-related felony drug and gun charges. In cases of an Alford Plea, a defendant does not admit guilt, but acknowledges that prosecutors have enough evidence for a conviction. Prior to his arrest, Kokesh claimed to be an Oath Keeper and promoted the Oath Keepers through his a radio talk show, "Adam vs. the Man."

Westfield, Massachusetts, March 2011: Oath Keeper David M. Phillips was arrested in Massachusetts on charges of possession of ammunition without the required Firearms Identification Card and four counts of possession of a large capacity firearm feeding device. The charges followed a March 2011 vehicle stop by the Worcester Police Department due to an invalid license plate and driving with excessive speed. When questioned, Phillips allegedly told the officer that he was exempt from having to register or insure his vehicle. The officer towed the vehicle after a check revealed that the vehicle registration and insurance had been cancelled. During an inventory search of the vehicle's trunk, police found nine large-capacity ammunition magazines along with 2,156 rounds of ammunition. Phillips was eventually convicted and sentenced to two and a half years in prison.

Dallas, Georgia, and Madisonville, Tennessee, April 2010: Darren Huff, a Georgia militia member and Oath Keeper, traveled to Tennessee with an AK-47 and a .45 caliber Colt handgun in order to make "citizens arrests" of government officials who had refused demands to indict President Obama. He was charged with carrying a firearm in interstate commerce with intent to use it for civil disorder, as well as a second count of using a firearm in relation to another felony. He eventually reached a plea deal on local charges against him, pleading no contest to one charge in exchange for the state dropping other charges. A federal jury convicted him on the carrying a firearm charge but acquitted him of using a firearm in relation to another felony. In May 2012, a federal judge in Knoxville sentenced Huff to four years in prison.

Cleveland, Ohio, April 2010: Matthew Fairfield, president of the local Oath Keepers chapter, was arrested in 2010 on a large number of explosives and other charges, including child pornography allegations. When executing a search warrant, law enforcement officers discovered a live napalm bomb and dozens of other explosives in a storage locker; he eventually was indicted on 97 different charges, including 18 counts of unlawful possession of dangerous ordnance, 23 counts of receiving stolen property, 23 counts of possession of criminal tools, 10 counts of failure to secure dangerous ordnance, one count of perjury, and 21 counts of pandering obscenity involving child pornography. Following a 2011 no contest plea, Fairfield received a 16-year sentence.

Duncan, Oklahoma, January 2010: Charles Dyer, an Oklahoma Oath Keeper, was arrested by local law enforcement in January 2010 on charges of raping a young child; during his arrest, authorities also discovered an unregistered grenade launcher in his residence that had been stolen from a military base in California. Dyer failed to show up in court for his trial, becoming a fugitive. He was tracked down and arrested the following week in Houston, Texas, extradited back to Oklahoma, where (after several abortive attempts) he finally stood trial, was convicted, and sentenced to 30 years in prison. Prior to his arrest, Dyer had posted a YouTube video in which Dyer, a former Marine, said, "Join the military? Depends on what you want to do with it. Me? I'm going to use my training and become one of those domestic terrorists that you're so afraid of from the DHS reports." He still has many supporters within the "Patriot" movement.

Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, April 2009: Daniel Knight Hayden, an Oath Keeper supporter, was arrested in April 2009 by the FBI after posting a series of Twitter messages threatening to attack Oklahoma officials (including police officers) on April 15 (Tax Day). He was subsequently convicted of knowingly transmitting a threatening communication and received an eight-month sentence.