

FBI investigates pre-U.S. Capitol attack meeting of far-right groups

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Henry Enrique Tarrio (C), chairman of the Proud Boys, speaks at a rally in Delta Park in Portland, Ore., in September 2020.

Washington, February 9 (RHC)-- The Federal Bureau of Investigation is probing a meeting in a downtown DC garage the day before the January 6th Capitol Hill riot between the then-leader of the Proud Boys extremist group, the now-indicted leader of the Oath Keepers militia and other far-right figures, according to two witnesses interviewed by FBI agents.

Among the half dozen people gathered at a garage near the Phoenix Park Hotel was Oath Keepers head Stewart Rhodes, who was indicted this year on charges of “seditious conspiracy” in the insurrection.

Proud Boys Chairman Enrique Tarrio, who was not present at the riot, was also at the garage meeting but left Washington afterward.

The meeting put the heads of the nation's two best-known violent far-right pro-Trump groups in immediate proximity to each other 24 hours before the breach of the Capitol. Three attendees or their representatives contacted by Reuters say they did not discuss matters related to January 6.

Bianca Gracia, who heads a pro-Trump coalition called Latinos for Trump and an affiliated Political Action Committee named Latinos For America First, was at the garage meeting as well, according to witnesses and video taken by a documentary film crew.

Also present was Kellye SoRelle, a lawyer for the Oath Keepers and Latinos for Trump. SoRelle told Reuters she was invited by Gracia to meet Tarrio and share information about criminal defense attorneys. She said her role in the meeting was brief, and did not concern plans for the next day.

A U.S. House of Representatives committee is investigating the January 6 riot, in which supporters of then-President Donald Trump sought to block Congress' certification of Joe Biden's election as president.

Democrats, alongside some constitutional scholars and pro-democracy advocates, have been quietly exploring ways to bar Donald Trump from ever holding office again. The committee has subpoenaed the phone records of a photographer who accompanied Tarrio to parts of the garage meeting.

Tarrio told Reuters last June that his meeting at the garage with Rhodes was unplanned and not significant. "By coincidence," Tarrio said, "he was inside ... that parking garage." He said he shook hands with Rhodes solely to be polite. "He's here, I'm not going to not shake somebody's hand." He has denied any Proud Boys planning ahead of January 6.

Reached again in January, Tarrio said he would not answer further questions. "I usually speak to all reporters," he texted back after one question, "but when they become conspiracy theorists ... that's usually when I sever ties." Tarrio has said he stepped down as Proud Boys chairman earlier this year.

An attorney for Rhodes, who is being held pending trial, emailed Reuters that "there was no coordination" between Rhodes and Tarrio. The FBI's investigation of the meeting has not previously been reported, nor have the circumstances of the gathering.

A short clip of the gathering appeared in a British Channel 4 documentary last year about the Proud Boys, spurring some chatter on Twitter. Michael Simmons, who was present during part of January 6 with Rhodes, said Rhodes had not mentioned meeting Tarrio.

When Reuters told him of the meeting, Simmons said he was shocked because, he said, Rhodes had been critical of Tarrio and the Proud Boys. "Why would you meet Enrique in a f***ing parking garage?" said Simmons, who has not been charged. "It just blows my mind. That's crazy!"

Federal prosecutors have charged multiple leaders of the Proud Boys and Oath Keepers with playing leading roles in the mayhem of January 6. Tarrio has not been indicted in the case. The Proud Boys is an all-male group that encourages street brawling against leftist protesters and calls itself "Western chauvinist."

Oath Keepers wear military-style uniforms, train in military tactics and often carry firearms in operations. Last March, prosecutors cited the social media messages of one Oath Keeper leader indicted in the January 6 case.

"This week I organized an alliance between Oath Keepers, Florida 3%ers, and Proud Boys," he allegedly wrote in a Facebook message before the riot, citing a different gathering, prosecutors said in a court filing.

The Three Percenters is a loosely organized far right militia, some of whose members have been charged in the Capitol attack. So far, however, the Justice Department has not disclosed clear evidence that the far-right groups plotted to come together on January 6.

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