

The Anti-Trans Hate Machine

Season Three, Episode 1 The Proud Boys' Anti-Trans Playbook to End Democracy

Imara Jones, HOST: It's March 19, 2023, and people are lined up outside of the LGBTQ Center in Manhattan's Greenwich Village. It's a place where I have been more than 100 times over the years for meetings, dances, parties and celebrations of all kinds.

But the people facing opposite of the center are not in a celebratory mood. They're there to protest an event hosted by New York State Attorney General Letitia James, one of the top law enforcement officials in the country going after Donald Trump.

Facing them is a larger crowd waving rainbow flags and chanting and singing. Now that's typical behavior for the Center, a pillar of New York's queer community, located in the neighborhood which helped birth the modern LGBTQ rights movement, just steps away from the Stonewall Inn.

But this isn't a pride fest. The queer people out here have shown up to do something that many thought was a thing of the past, to actively protect the people inside from an angry opposition.

Those protesters, just on the other side of the street, are shouting homophobic and transphobic slurs, some even wear Make America Great Again merch.

They're targeting the Center because of what's happening inside: a drag story hour.

And they're in a fighting mood.

Partway into the event, an anti-drag protestor punches someone in the head. He's arrested.

But within that crowd of protesters is a sign of where this penchant for violence is all coming from. Watch video from the event and you can spot one man dressed in a black hoodie, with a yellow leaf insignia on the front, and the words "Proud Boys" on the back.

Now, I spent hours that day reading live updates about this protest at the Center. I kept refreshing my Twitter feed to catch the latest. And when I saw that members of the Proud Boys were there I was shocked. Because this wasn't even the first time that they had made a show of force in New York City. Since storming the US Capitol in 2021, Proud Boys had been showing up closer and closer to home – and I had to figure out why. Just what was driving an authoritarian, paramilitary group to target trans and queer people in 2023?

I'm Imara Jones, and this is Season 3 of The Anti-Trans Hate Machine: A Plot Against Equality.

In our last season, we uncovered an entire pipeline of disinformation about trans people which started on the dark corners of the Internet, and ultimately ended up in legitimate news sources

like The New York Times. This flow of junk science and transphobia, dressed up as analysis, is what's used to justify hundreds of anti-trans bills each year.

But there is another segment of The Anti-Trans Hate Machine which mobilizes this disinformation and simmering bigotry, to further a simple goal: the removal of trans people from the public square by using violence.

This isn't hyperbole. To be honest this is a terrifying time for both the trans community and our country.

To put it simply, we have entered into an era of political violence, one that is unprecedented in the lives of most people in the country, with the targeting of trans people at the center.

In fact, violence motivated by political disagreements are at a level not seen since the 1970s. That's according to the news agency Reuters. And this increase is almost exclusively driven by groups on the Far Right.

And if that's not enough, extremism experts at the Southern Poverty Law Center say that far right paramilitary organizations are growing in numbers that they have never seen before.

It's all frightening stuff.

But what is perhaps new and unexpected is how an obsession with gender identity is at the core of this newly invigorated militia activity.

In 2023, nearly half of all the demonstrations of force by white power groups were organized to take aim at the LGBTQ community, with particular ire for any gathering of people who exist outside of the gender binary.

And these groups have allied with the apparatus of a major political party and its most important standard bearer, Donald Trump.

But to understand how we got to this interplay between political violence and gender identity, a good place to start is the Proud Boys.

When the Proud Boys showed up in New York, I was worried: This was a group that had stormed the US capitol. And even before the insurrection, their fighting was vicious enough that their attacks were brought up during one of the presidential debates. They had squared with peaceful protestors across the country in 2020.

ARCHIVAL FROM PRESIDENTIAL DEBATE (2020), INTERVIEWER: "Are you willing, tonight, to condemn white supremacists and militia groups, and to say that they need to stand down and not add to

the violence in a number of these cities, as we saw in Kenosha, and as we've seen in Portland?"

But former president Trump could not bring himself to disavow the Proud Boys. Even in front of an audience of more than 73 million during a 2020 debate with Joe Biden.

ARCHIVAL from presidential debate (2020):

TRUMP: *"I'm willing to do anything, I want to see peace."*

Interviewer- *"then do it sir."*

Biden - *"do it, say it."*

Trump - *"do you want to call them, what do you want to call them, give me a name."*

Interviewer - *"White supremacists--"*

Biden - *"Proud Boys"*

Trump - *"Proud Boys, stand back and stand by, but I'll tell you what, somebody's gotta do something about Antifa and the left."*

By uttering the words "Proud Boys, stand back and stand by" Trump put both the presidency and the Republican Party firmly on the side of a group committed to using violence to bring about a right wing vision for America. In so doing, he would set the organization—and the nation as a whole—on a new course.

According to the groups' former members, that mention on a national stage, nearly tripled Proud Boy membership. And when Trump lost the 2020 election, the Proud Boys saw it as a call to arms.

Fueled by election denialism, and calling themselves Trump's Army, the Proud Boys descended on the Capitol in late 2020.

In a string of brazen attacks, they terrorized DC communities in Trump's name. The Proud Boys, alongside other paramilitary groups, fought running street battles with counter protestors. They destroyed property including the burning of a Black Lives Matter Flag flying at a historically Black church.

Now, like me, you might have only faint memories of this stormy period.

But January 6, when the Proud Boys, alongside other paramilitary groups, attacked the US Capitol, now THAT remains in our collective consciousness. Because these extremist organizations came SO close to bringing about a coup in the United States.

They chased Congressional leadership from the building and draped the Confederate flag—the flag of insurrectionist slaveholders—in the Capitol. All while calling to hang Vice President Mike Pence.

ARCHIVAL from January 6th News Coverage: *Bring out Pence! Hang Mike Pence!*

But what did any of this have to do with gender, drag shows, trans people? In my research I met someone who helped me understand it all.

Jacob Glick: It's very nice to meet you.

Imara Jones: Nice to meet you

Jacob Glick is the kind of expert you dream of as a journalist. He worked with Congressman Jamie Raskin on far-right extremism. Raskin is the Representative who presented Trump's January 6 impeachment case to the Senate.

Jacob Glick: I always had a sense that I wanted to do something, worthy of expanding American democracy as you said. The Jewish, term for this, in Jewish religion, Jewish ethnic culture is tikkun olam, repairing the world. And that was always really important to me.

Jacob left law school and decided to combine his legal skills, and desire to protect democracy, into a career on Capitol Hill as a researcher in extremism. He worked on civil rights for the Oversight and Reform Committee in Congress.

But even with all of this expertise, not even Jacob was prepared for what unfolded on January 6.

Now as I watched the crowd of president Trump's supporters surge against the barricades, from my own couch in New York City, I couldn't believe what I was seeing. Having interned on the Hill, worked in DC, and lived near the Capitol, I have been to the grounds of the Capitol more times than I can remember. What I was witnessing seemed simply unfathomable. More than anything, I was concerned about the people I knew who worked there. Some of whom would be later seen running for their lives on security footage.

But I wasn't the only one.

ARCHIVAL from January 6th news coverage: *It's our country - we want it back! F*ck these democrats!*

In DC, Jacob, a seasoned Congressional employee, was having a similar experience. Working from home alongside his partner, he had cable news on in the background. And Jacob felt a growing alarm for his coworkers as he watched the crowd get closer and closer to breaching the Capitol building.

Jacob Glick: And at the time, I wasn't hearing from any of my colleagues who were inside. And so I had lost the sense of sort of visibility into what was going on.

Communications from Capitol building staffers had gone silent – because insurrectionists had finally made it into the Capitol building itself.

Jacob Glick: I really felt that fear, instinctually, because of, I think a lot of the work I had been doing, for, for a year at that point. What if they've reached the chamber and they have weapons and the Congress is unprotected, what happens?

I just was panicking like millions of people across the country, particularly because this seemed like a moment where American democracy was hanging in the balance.

And it was.

As Jacob watched all of this come through over his TV and social media, he could see the insignias for groups like the Proud Boys and others who had previously popped up in his work. Various paramilitary groups were clearly at the center of what was disguised as a disorganized mob.

And it was clear that the armed wing of Trump's political movement had reached a new level in its ambition and abilities.

Their planned violence ruled the day. And Jacob saw that some of his worst fears were coming true.

ARCHIVAL, newscaster: a fifth death announced from the siege of the U.S. Capitol. Capitol police say Officer Brian Sicknick was injured while engaging with protesters.

At the end of that day, as some of the rioters made their way back to a hotel in Jacob's neighborhood at the end of the day, Jacob and his partner stayed indoors.

Jacob Glick: And I remember thinking about stories of mob violence that defined a lot of my cultural upbringing as an American Jew. You know, my great grandparents escaped pogroms. And, my family was lucky enough to avoid Kristallnacht in the 1930s, but it all kind of felt the same.

It just still felt like this twilight zone of potential vigilante activity, that just did not square with any reality I was familiar with, but squared with a lot of the nightmares I'd worried about.

But Jacob wouldn't have much time to process the harrowing events his colleagues had been put through. The next day, he and other staffers working for Congressman Raskin's would go right back to work.

Jacob joined the House Select Committee tasked with investigating the far right groups involved in the January 6th attack. Their report became the basis for many of the eventual legal charges against the Proud Boys and Donald Trump because of that day.

As a staffer, a key part of Jacob's job was not only to find out what happened that day but why. And that meant interviewing Proud Boys. He spent hours and hours interviewing dozens of them.

He often began with the simplest of questions.

Jacob Glick: We asked them: Why did you join the Proud Boys? And I thought they were going to say I joined the Proud Boys because I want to defend our democracy, and they never said that. They almost always started talking about sort of traditional family values and that being the cornerstone of the West. And so, that just felt to me to be a sign that we were kind of missing the forest for the trees as a society, viewing the Proud Boys as a January 6th crisis.

And honestly, we heard a lot more of this sort of traditional Western talk. That, I think, shows that some of the stolen election rhetoric is really a means to an end, rather than an end in and of itself. And that end is a much more patriarchal - forcibly patriarchal society.

And this was Jacob's clue that this was about more than the mechanics of who won the election and whether the results of the election were legitimate.

What they actually cared about was keeping Trump in The White House, not because he had won it fair and square, but because in the years since he rose to political power, Trump had come to embody the America that they wanted. An America that would center unfettered masculine power above all else. That would dole out rights and privileges based upon gender; even more power if you are white, heterosexual and cis. That's why there's been this symbiosis between Trump and the Proud Boys.

And at the core of their obsession with masculinity is a hyperfocus on trans people.

Jacob Glick: There was one Proud Boy who was more verbose, who started talking about gender identity, gender ideology, as I'm sure he would have called it. And then he brought up Tucker Carlson and said that Tucker is the only person who speaks clearly on these issues.

Tucker Carlson, of course, is the former Fox News host who helped make anti-trans hate a hot topic for the Republican Party. We profiled Carlson last season.

Jacob Glick: And that was sort of his, what are you going to do? I'm talking about a mainstream idea. Try me. Right?

This focus on trans people and gender was increasingly a ubiquitous theme in Jacob's interviews with the Proud Boys who had stormed and desecrated the Capitol.

Imara Jones: When they got to what they would call gender ideology, what stood out for you about the tone or the content of what they were saying?

Jacob Glick: They clearly thought this was uncontroversial, what they were saying, and this seemed to them to be the safe answer they could say to us and basically not get in trouble, right? And so when we asked them to define Western chauvinism and they talked about the family, and then they would go into, you know, a spectrum of coded or uncoded comments about the queer community. You could see they expected agreement, and you could look in their eyes on the Zoom, on the other end of the Zoom, and they expected us not to find that to be a point of tension.

Now, that was a wow moment for me. This is when it became clear to me that anti-trans hate was given in their world. It was important to understanding their organization.

Jacob makes the point.

Jacob Glick: It was very important to me and to other investigators to actually get on record what the origin point was for these insurrectionists, and that origin point speaks to a lot of latent or explicit homophobia, transphobia, misogyny.

Anti-trans hate has been deeply ingrained in the group from the beginning. To understand this better, you have to go back to the Proud Boy's founding.

ARCHIVAL from the Gavin McInnes Show, Gavin McInnes: "Good morning homos - Wazzup - Uhuru - Proud of your boy. Welcome back to the Gavin McInnes Show"

The Proud Boys started thanks to the man you just heard, Gavin McInnes, a New York media personality and one of the co-founders of Vice Media.

Tune into any episode of the Gavin McInnes show, and you'll see a man with a beard and oiled mustache railing against feminists, gay and trans people, and immigrants. Engaging directly with listeners on a regular basis, he would go on to give his burgeoning movement a name, live on the air, in 2016:

ARCHIVAL from the Gavin McInnes Show, Gavin McInnes: the Proud Boys are over race. We don't talk about- We talk about race if you want to talk about it. But we don't have any guilt. No guilt whatsoever. No cis male guilt. None of that stuff. We're pro gun. We want to end the drug war. We're libertarians - except when it comes to immigration. We are pro dude. We think most women would be happier at home. We don't beat off... well, we beat off once every 30 days. We watch porn once every 30 days. We are traditionalists. We're sort of like the alt-right, without the racism.

And, that's what we're going to start calling ourselves.

We're living in a society where a kid gets sent home if he bites a Pop-Tart into the shape of a gun. That's not a proud boy. That society is not proud of his boy. We're proud of that boy.

I reached out to Gavin McInnes because he's been such a pivotal figure in our country's move to political violence. I wanted to hear him speak for himself. I was surprised but he agreed to an interview. I was less surprised that he showed up for our virtual conversation in a platinum blonde wig and a white dress. It was supposed to be an all audio interview, but he insisted on a video recording. He was clearly going to use our exchange for his own purposes. But I decided that this was a must have conversation no matter what.

Imara Jones: Okay, now, now you're, now you're on. I mean, this wig is giving the Dolly Parton collection. Did I nail where you got it from?

Gavin McInnes: Yeah, that's where I got it from. She's always been a huge inspiration for me, and people say she's just a pair of tits.

It's not the first time he's done this - on his show, you can find him regularly railing against trans youth while wearing the same outfit.

But Gavin isn't just chatting with me in an attempt to shock me – although he clearly tries. He's forthright about the underlying ideology of the Proud Boys, what he calls "Western Chauvinism." He says the Proud Boys are the would-be defenders of the legacy of straight men—mostly white— in the United States and Europe.

And defending patriarchy and traditional gender roles is a huge part of that idea...

Gavin McInnes: Well, the backbone of the West is Christianity and patriarchy - masculinity. Now, what defines the West is - it's a very unique culture. And America, within the West, is especially unique. America is one of the only places in the world that says, come down here, you don't have to be Christian, but you have to respect Christianity. But, there's a definite attack on the West in schools, pushing this narrative that America was stolen from the Indians and it was built by slaves, and it should be a nation of shame, a culture of shame. We need more people to come in and reinvent what the West is. No, we don't need that. We need dads. We need American families. And we need at least a respect for this country's history.

Imara Jones: So for you, it sounds like patriarchy really is the issue - it's a really important building block for the type of society that you think is the most effective and that leads to the best outcomes. So where does the issue of gender identity fit into the idea of patriarchy?

Gavin McInnes: Well, there's two genders. There's men and women. I mean, I guess there are exceptions where there's some sort of trans dad who looks like a dude but has a vagina and he acts like a cool guy, but that's just not the pattern.

While Gavin doesn't hide his true feelings about gender, he insists that this means that the Proud Boys are only "patriarchal chauvinists" and not racists or antisemites.

Gavin McInnes: If there was a guy who was a Nazi in the Proud Boys: white power, Seig heil, I don't understand why there's blacks at this meeting. He's gone. If anyone went to Charlottesville, they were gone.

But when white supremacists and neo nazis descended on Charlottesville, VA in 2017, Proud Boys were there.

ARCHIVAL, newscaster: "This was the scene last night as hundreds of mostly young white men waving tiki torches marched on the grounds of the University of Virginia in Charlottesville"

ARCHIVAL, chanting: "You will not replace us! You will not replace us!"

In news footage from Unite the Right, you can clearly see a man with a goatee and sunglasses, wearing an olive tactical vest and hat, standing with other far-right demonstrators. That man is Enrique Tarrio. Remember that name.

Because Gavin would eventually step away from being the face of the Proud Boys. And it was Tarrio who would replace him as the organization's most recognizable avatar.

Imara Jones: One, one, one other thing. I just now that we're on the subject of Enrique, you know, you said that people who were at Charlottesville weren't allowed in the organization, but Enrique was at Charlottesville and ended up running the organization.

Gavin McInnes: Yeah. Good point. He was there, though, as a reporter. He was documenting it all.

Looking at a clip of him there, Tarrio doesn't look like any reporter I've ever seen.

That's because he was wearing a symbol representing an even more violent offshoot of the Proud Boys.

Even though he came across as someone cosplaying a weekend militiaman, Tarrio would seek to transform the group into an armed, allied wing of the Republican Party. That's according to Andy Campbell.

Campbell is a reporter who spent years tracking the group for a book about them called 'We Are Proud Boys.' And Campbell says that Tarrio was strategic about building that relationship because of what he saw happen to other paramilitary organizations in the United States.

Andy Campbell: He thought to himself, well, hey, you know, if we are seen as only this street fighting group and we have nothing else to offer the world, we're eventually going to dissolve, just like the neo-Nazi factions did after Unite the Right. We need to become more politically active. We need to show ourselves as a constitutionally protected political group.

So Tarrio determined that they needed the support of the political establishment and set out to get that support.

And where Tarrio lived happened to be advantageous to his plans. Tarrio was leader of one of the Proud Boys chapters in Florida, the state that was homebase to the then-President of the United States and also to some of his most important political advisors, particularly the longtime Republican operative Roger Stone.

And the relationship between Stone and Tarrio would go on to have a consequential impact on American history. That's in no small part because of who Roger Stone is.

You've probably heard of him. Stone's been close to Trumpland for decades.

ARCHIVAL, Trump: I've known Roger Stone and his wife, who's really a terrific woman, for a long time, and Roger's definitely a character. Everybody sort of knows Roger, everybody knows him, and most people like him. Some people probably don't, but I do, and I always have.

And his relationship to Trump ran in parallel with his own shadowy career.

Stone has worked behind the scenes to help Republicans get elected since the 1970s.

His antics while working on behalf of the Nixon campaign, such as smearing Democratic presidential candidates as gay by using dubious tactics, earned him a mention in the 1974 Senate Report on Watergate.

Stone would channel his "do-whatever-it-takes to win and hold power" attitude into a profitable political consulting business in the 1980s and 1990s, both in the US and around the world. And in working with brutal authoritarians across Africa and Asia, like Ferdinand Marcos and Mobutu Sese Seko, he was never afraid to get his hands dirty.

But his sights never completely left America.

Stone helped organize the 2000 "Brooks Brothers Riot" where Republican staffers stormed a vote counting center in Miami-Dade County, Florida. That disruption halted the recount there and paved the way for George W. Bush to win the presidency by 500 votes. Many experts say that it was the precursor, the model even, for what happened on January 6.

And he was a big backer of Donald Trump, advising his campaign on matters large and small. Here is on C-Span back in 2017:

Roger Stone: I also appointed myself as the number one surrogate for Donald Trump. I probably did 5- or 600 interviews or

surrogate speeches because I felt I knew the man for almost 40 years, and I could tell people firsthand why he would be a great president, why I was for him, about his independence, about his resilience, about his toughness.

Tarrio and Stone are not on the same page about when they met. But we do know that by 2017 they were in contact. Tarrio and Stone were pictured at an upscale right-wing party in Florida. At this gathering, Stone recited the Proud Boy oath. This was just a few months before Tarrio would appear at the Unite the Right Rally.

From this initial toxic mix of physical proximity and political alignment would flow a mutually beneficial alliance that would further Stone's and Tarrio's aims. That's the sentiment that Campbell got when he was writing his book on the Proud Boys.

Andy Campbell: Roger Stone takes him in as, you know, his mentee. Really takes a liking to the kid. And, you know, he was regularly telling Tarrio how to clean up the Proud Boys' image after a big fight or after, you know, a violent event when crimes were committed.

In the wake of the Unite the Right Rally, through Stone, Tarrio had a direct connection to Trump , which bolstered the Proud Boy's political legitimacy amongst the far-right.

And Tarrio took Stone's counsel to heart. He moved the paramilitary group further into politics at all levels of government, including as local GOP candidates. But perhaps more consequentially, with Stone's guidance, he brought the organization even closer to Trump's orbit.

Now this embrace was a mutual one. So much so that it would earn them a direct mention by Trump along with orders for the coming months. That's the infamous "standby" comment.

ARCHIVAL newsclip: Tonight the president is being rebuked by members of his own party for failing to explicitly condemn white supremacy and groups that support it ... tonight at least one of those groups is welcoming the president's comments

Because of this important relationship, which brought the Proud Boys to the center of the Republican Party, I decided that I had to talk to both Tarrio and Stone.

Roger Stone, on the phone: Hello?

Imara Jones: Hello. Roger?

Roger Stone: Yes, sir?

Imara Jones: Yes. Hi. My name is Imara Jones, and I am a journalist. And I'm doing a podcast about the Proud Boys and why they are important right now. And I was wondering if I could just talk to you a little bit about that, given your knowledge of the organization.

Roger Stone: I'm not sure how you got my number, but I have nothing to say.

Tarrio himself was sentenced for 22 years on seditious conspiracy and other charges related to the insurrection. And from the federal prison where he is currently incarcerated, Tarrio also declined to speak with us.

Given that I couldn't talk to either, I decided to ask McInnes about it during our conversation. As the Proud Boys Founder, I wondered what he thought about the organization's decision to flank the Republican Party.

Imara Jones: So do you think that in your absence, the fact that Enrique Tarrio, became the captain of the ship, as it were, is a problem? What I mean by that is that: we know that he had a lot of direct connections to the Republican Party and to Roger Stone, and that that may have been part of the thing that led to the participation in January 6th. And therefore, the identification of the organization with that event. Do you think that was a mistake?

Gavin McInnes: What? Having Enrique be the chairman?

Imara Jones: No, the way in which he, and through his leadership of the Proud Boys, associated the organization with the Republican Party and with its leadership.

Gavin McInnes: I like that, actually. I like that they were getting involved in -what I liked about that direction was that they were getting involved in municipal politics. There's no way you're taking over making a federal change, but you can make a local change, and I think that's important, so I enjoyed that.

But on January 6 they did try to take it "Federal". And more than 1200 people have been charged in relation with the Jan 6th insurrection, many of them Proud Boys. Yet after this crackdown the Proud Boys followed Gavin's instinct to go local.

With patriarchy at the core of their organizational identity, local trans and queer events were a perfect place for them to flex their muscle.

To justify this focus on Drag Story Hours held in communities across the country, Gavin draws from the kind of wacky pseudoscience, and downright absurdities that listeners of this series will be all too familiar with.

Gavin McInnes: And the pattern with Drag Queen Story Hour is it's a disproportionate number of pedophiles are involved. And even if that wasn't true, it's a sexual thing.

Imara Jones: And do you think - and from your perspective, you believe that seeing, for instance, a man dressed as a woman and outrageous makeup that kids absorb that as being sexual?

Gavin McInnes: Well, they strip, they do lap dances, they accept money-

Imara Jones: *At Drag Queen Story Hour?*

Gavin McInnes: They have fake asses. They have thigh high boots -

Imara Jones: *At Drag Queen Story Hour?*

Gavin McInnes: Yes! Well, at drag queen events. Just don't do drag queen events for kids.

And Gavin asserts that when the Proud Boys show up, it's always peaceful.

Imara Jones: Are Proud Boys always peaceful?

Gavin McInnes: Yes. Tell me about a time with Drag Queen Story hour where they've even broken the law. Now, Proud Boys have fought.

Imara Jones: I said peaceful. They're always peaceful?

Gavin McInnes: They never start fights. They have a motto - we don't start fights -

Imara Jones: Are the Proud Boys always peaceful?

Gavin McInnes: Well, I don't know what that question means.

But what's actually happening on the ground reveals something ugly.

ARCHIVAL newsclip: "Drag queen story time interrupted at an East Bay library. A hate crime investigation now underway after

sheriff's deputies say members of the Proud Boys disrupted today's event"

ARCHIVAL newsclip: "An investigation is underway in Tempe where a bomb threat was called into a business hosting a drag story hour over the weekend. Last week the LGBT owned business says it was aware of plans by Proud Boys to protest the coffeeshop on Saturday"

ARCHIVAL newsclip: "Montgomery County police break up a protest and at a children's event in Silver Spring. They say members of the Proud Boys got into a conflict during the drag story"

ARCHIVAL, from storytime with Oliver ThePlace: "Costumes for the recital have arrived. Does anyone here like to wear costumes? I love to wear costumes."

Drag performers who have come face to face with Proud Boys know first hand what the paramilitary group is all about. Drag artists like Oliver ThePlace in New York City remain forever changed by their multiple encounters with the Proud Boys.

The first time that Oliver came across the Proud Boys was on a cold December day at the end of 2022. He had arrived to perform and read for kids at a Queens Public Library in the neighborhood of Jackson Heights. Proud Boys were expected to show up in force, while they were at work so the New York City Police had erected barricades outside of the public library where he was set to perform. They were there to keep supporters and demonstrators apart.

Oliver ThePlace uses eye-catching colors, patterns, and crazy hairstyles – essentially anything to keep a kid's attention while reading stories that they can relate to or learn from.

Oliver ThePlace: Story hours are just so beautiful. And it's just really a space where you can be yourself fully, and it's really like no other. And also it's just cool. It's a literacy program and seeing books that I would have loved to read as a kid.

If I was a kid and saw one of these magical beings reading a story and could understand that being a human can come in so many different forms, I think it would have been monumental for me.

Oliver has performed at many drag story hours over the years, but the one in Queens sticks in his mind.

Inside the library, drag performers were putting on the final touches of their performance attire.

Oliver ThePlace: Before the story time started, I could hear them. And we were on the top floor. But I could hear them.

And then I started to peek through the windows a little bit, and I could see. Like people with Proud Boy flags and things like that. And like, seeing these people with just such violence in their eyes.

Outside, a group of Proud Boys, neo-nazis, and anti-drag protestors shouted from across the street. They shouted at the drag artists, calling them “pedophiles” and “groomers”. And these insults rained down on parents and kids as they made their way inside, but those weren’t the only terrible things that were said with an intensity that performers and families found chilling.

Their being unnerved was not unjustified. A person charged with breaking into the Capitol during the January 6th insurrection was in the crowd that day.

Oliver ThePlace: Part of me was afraid that I was going to die that day, and I'm glad that I didn't. And then there were Nazis literally doing Nazi salutes outside there. And I just saw people who I knew would want to inflict violence on me, who were actively inflicting violence on me.

Those gathered inside the library could hear the yelling outside. Oliver tried to keep calm and let the storytelling go on, but despite his best efforts, concern was clearly on his face.

Oliver ThePlace: And I was really a little shaken right before the storytime started, and it's funny because one of the kids that was there like turns to and goes – You could use more glitter. I said, you know what? That I could do for you, that I can do.

Imara Jones: When did you reach peak fear?

Oliver The Place: When we were exiting.

Imara Jones: Tell me about that.

Oliver The Place: So, they had assigned cops to escort us outside. And as we were exiting we're ready, and we're walking to the car quickly. I have big hair. I'm a very recognizable person. So we're trying to do this very, very quickly. In my

mind, my brain is like, how can I get from here to there as quickly as possible so I don't get fucking shot right now. And the police officers were walking so slowly. And by the time we got to the car, they were way behind us. I didn't even see the cops as we got in. They just show me time and time again, they're not there to protect us. And when they're put in charge of protecting us they don't do their jobs.

Nearly two years later, Oliver is still haunted by this event. Online, he's still targeted by hate accounts and worries that it could lead to physical harm.

Oliver The Place: How I get bookings, how I make my rent is by posting where my exact location and time will be pretty much most of the time I'm doing things. So I was worried that people would show up to my events. I was worried, people were threatening me online and saying all these things.

Oliver tells me that when he leaves drag story hour events, he makes sure that no one follows him to his car. He worries about being followed, that someone will write down his license plate number, track him down, and attack him.

But despite the attacks and the misgivings, Oliver hasn't stopped reading to kids in wigs, makeup and costumes.

Imara Jones: Did you ever go, oh, maybe I'll pass on this one?

Oliver The Place: No, because that's what they want. You know, they want me to say, well, I'm not going to do this because they're mad that I'm reading the kids with a mustache drawn on my face.

Now, we decided to talk to Oliver the Place for this series because of how active they are in Drag Story Hour. But through our conversations and research it turns out that the links here were far stronger than I first realized. You see Oliver was at the event which brought the Proud Boys and the threat of paramilitary violence to my doorstep. They were at the Drag Story hour at the New York City LGBTQ Center, that's where we started this episode.

And all of this contact with this group, with the Proud Boys, with violence at their core and an obsession with trans people, has taught Oliver a thing or two.

Oliver The Place: The rhetoric that they're using around, especially drag performers and kids, they're often around the idea that we're turning kids trans very young. Like they act like we give a little goodie bag outside of the drag story hour, estrogen over here and testosterone over here. That's not what we're doing

I want people to also realize, like. These people are not just protesting the fact that we're reading to kids. They don't care about protecting kids, they scare the kids when they're coming in. Their intentions are not to really protect children because they're not. They're effectively bringing more harm to children.

For far right groups like the Proud Boys, kids are collateral damage in their effort to remove trans people – actually anyone who doesn't neatly fit into the gender binary – from public life.

What became apparent to me as we prepared for this series is that understanding the Proud Boys' obsession with gender identity is essential to understanding how we almost lost Democracy on Jan 6th. Their zeal for patriarchy, the idea that there are only two, rigidly-defined genders, and that trans people represent an existential threat to civilization are the animating, core concepts of the Proud Boys. And they are willing to set society ablaze in order to bring them about.

This explains why the Proud Boys are so dangerous. They are not a college frat for adult binge drinkers. Experts who have tracked them for years recognize them as the threat to society that they actually pose. Where there has been political violence in this country for more than seven years, you can find the Proud Boys there in some shape, form or fashion.

What disturbs me particularly is that even after members of their organization, at all levels, from the top to its foot soldiers, have been prosecuted, the Proud Boys have been undeterred. They have not relented in either their ideology or their tactics.

But fully aware that the Biden Justice Department is more aggressive in going after them at the federal level, they have strategically focused their time and energy in states and localities across the country. By targeting queer and trans communities on the ground, the Proud Boys are able to keep their membership engaged, with each encounter preparing them for the next major face-off.

And that confrontation could come within a matter of weeks. History could repeat itself. Trump might decide to not accept the election results or could decide to make a point by punishing his enemies before assuming office. If the election is undecided Trump could also call supporters to intervene more aggressively than in 2020 in election counts or the Certification of State Electors. All of these could easily be the next "standback and standby moment" for the Proud Boys.

To me, the possibility of the Proud Boys mobilizing to respond to Trump brings me back to more ominous, historical parallels. So I decided to ask Jacob Glick, the January 6th investigator, about them to see if I was alone in my thinking

Imara Jones: Kind of that focus on vigilante violence is really reminiscent for me of the Brownshirts. Where you intentionally had a group of people that were roughing up the political enemies of the Nazi Party before they got into power, were kind of this thuggish muscle, and at the same time, what was happening at the hierarchy of the Nazi Party is that sometimes they would disavow the Brownshirts, even though they were connected with the party in even more formal ways than the Proud Boys were with Trump, but they were the stalking horse for creating disorder and at the same time, was the intimidating force to squash dissent.

Jacob Glick: Yeah. I don't know how I can say it better.

Even before Trump was as openly willing to flirt with wide scale civil conflict as he was by the end of his term, showed or suggested to me that there was an appetite in American society, in dark corners of American society for this kind of broad based crisis -this discontent with how our democracy was growing larger and a willingness to participate in a crackdown.

If Trump is sworn in as president in January 2025, he'll have an extrajudicial, paramilitary organization at his fingertips. His own private army. A group willing to go after whomever Trump wants with almost no checks and no balances.

ARCHIVAL, Donald Trump: "The Supreme Court ruled that Biden's Department of Justice has wrongly prosecuted hundreds of Americans for peacefully protesting on January 6th. Free the J-6 hostages. Now they should free them now for what they've gone through. They've been waiting for this decision for a long time."

On the next episode of the Anti-trans Hate Machine, we'll continue to unpack how groups like the Proud Boys have taken white patriarchal extremism local, impacting smaller communities beyond the national gaze. We're going to Idaho to see how politicians have turned the Mountain State into a testing ground for modern paramilitary violence.

Emily Gorcenski: "They were using every sort of anti-trans trope in the book."

Heather Scott: "It's a war of perversion against our children."

Alli Megal: "To me, that spells pedophilia"

Eric Ward: "The Idaho Freedom Foundation has come into Idaho communities and ripped those communities apart."

Anita Parisot: "If the bullets start flying, I'm covering her up"

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I'm Imara Jones, the host and executive producer of the Anti-Trans Hate Machine.

Thank you for listening to the first episode of this season. You can support our journalism by making a donation to TransLash Media and help get the word out by leaving a review on Apple Podcasts. Not surprisingly, a series like this takes an entire team of dedicated people who give 100% of themselves to make it happen.

Josephine Jaye McAuliffe is the producer for this series and Rebekah Robinson is the associate producer. Our story editor is Nicole Kelly. TransLash Media's Senior Sound engineer, Xander Adams sound designed and audio engineered the Anti-Trans Hate Machine.

Fact checking for this episode was done by Henry Carnell and Steven Crighton. Lucy Little was the rough cut engineer for this episode.

Oliver-Ash Kleine is TransLash Media's Director of Podcasts.

They've all been doing extraordinary work to get this crucial investigation out in time for voters to make an informed choice in November.