

Oath Keepers and the Age of Treason

Glenn Beck loves them. Tea Partiers court them. Congressmen listen to them. Meet the fast-growing "patriot" group that's recruiting soldiers to resist the Obama administration.

—By [Justine Sharrock](#)



Photos by Lucian Read.

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THE .50 CALIBER Bushmaster bolt action rifle is a serious weapon. The model that Pvt. 1st Class Lee Pray is saving up for has a 2,500-yard range and comes with a Mark IV scope and an easy-load magazine. When the 25-year-

old drove me to a mall in Watertown, New York, near the Fort Drum Army base, he brought me to see it in its glass case—he visits it periodically, like a kid coveting something at the toy store. It'll take plenty of military paychecks to cover the \$5,600 price tag, but he considers the Bushmaster essential in his preparations to take on the US government when it declares martial law.

His belief that that day is imminent has led Pray to a group called [Oath Keepers](#), one of the fastest-growing "patriot" organizations on the right. Founded last April by Yale-educated lawyer and ex-Ron Paul aide Stewart Rhodes, the group has established itself as a hub in the sprawling anti-Obama movement that includes Tea Partiers, Birthers, and 912ers. Glenn Beck, Lou Dobbs, and Pat Buchanan have all sung its praises, and in December, a [grassroots summit](#) it helped organize drew such prominent guests as representatives [Phil Gingrey](#) and [Paul Broun](#), both Georgia Republicans.

There are scores of patriot groups, but what makes Oath Keepers unique is that its core membership consists of men and women in uniform, including soldiers, police, and veterans. At regular ceremonies in every state, members reaffirm their official oaths of service, pledging to protect the Constitution—but then they go a step further, vowing to disobey "unconstitutional" orders from what they view as an increasingly tyrannical government.

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Pray (who asked me to use his middle name rather than his first) and five fellow soldiers based at Fort Drum take this directive very seriously. In the belief that the government is already turning on its citizens, they are recruiting military buddies, stashing weapons, running drills, and outlining a plan of action. For years, they say, police and military have trained side by side in local anti-terrorism exercises around the nation. In September 2008, the Army [began training](#) the 3rd Infantry's 1st Brigade Combat Team to provide humanitarian aid following a domestic disaster or terror attack—and to help with crowd control and civil unrest if need be. (The ACLU has expressed concern about this deployment.) And some of Pray's comrades were guinea pigs for military-grade sonic weapons, only to see them used by Pittsburgh police against protesters last fall.

Most of the men's gripes revolve around policies that began under President Bush but didn't scare them so much at the time. "Too many conservatives relied on Bush's character and didn't pay attention," founder Rhodes told me. "Only now, with Obama, do they worry and see what has been done. Maybe you said, I trusted Bush to only go after the terrorists.* But what do you think can happen down the road when they say, 'I think you are a threat to the nation?'"

In Pray's estimate, it might not be long (months, perhaps a year) before President Obama finds some pretext—a pandemic, a natural disaster, a terror attack—to impose martial law, ban interstate travel, and begin detaining citizens en masse. One of his fellow Oath Keepers, a former infantryman, advised me to prepare a "bug out" bag with 39 items including gas masks, ammo, and water purification tablets, so that I'd be ready to go "when the shit hits the fan."

When it does, Pray and his buddies plan to go AWOL and make their way to their "fortified bunker"—the home of one comrade's parents in rural Idaho—where they've stocked survival gear, generators, food, and weapons. If it becomes necessary, they say, they will turn those guns against their fellow soldiers.

PRAY AND I DRIVE through a bleak landscape of fallow winter fields and strip malls in his blue Dodge Stratus as Drowning Pool's "Bodies"—a heavy metal song once [used to torment](#) Abu Ghraib detainees—plays on the stereo. Clad in an oversize black hoodie that hides his military physique, Pray sports an Army-issue buzz cut and is seriously inked (skulls, smoke, an eagle). His father kicked him out of the house at age 14. Two years later, after working jobs from construction to plumbing—"If it's blue collar, I've done it"—he tried to enlist. It wasn't long after 9/11, and he was hell-bent on revenge. The Army turned him down. Blaming the "THOR" tattooed across his fist, Pray tried to burn it off. On September 11, 2006, he approached the Army again and was accepted.

Now Pray is both a Birther and a Truther. He believes he is following an illegitimate, foreign-born president in a war on terror launched by a government plot—9/11. He admires soldiers like Army reservist Major Stefan Frederick Cook, who volunteered for a deployment last May and then sued to avoid it—claiming that Obama is not a natural-born citizen and is thus unfit for command. Pray himself had been eager to go to Iraq when his own unit deployed last June, but he smashed both knees falling from a crane rig and the injuries kept him stateside. In September, he was demoted from specialist to private first class—he'd been written up for bullshit infractions, he claims, after seeking help for a drinking problem. His job on base involves operating and maintaining heavy machinery; the day before we met, he and his fellow "undeployables" had attached a snowplow to a Humvee, their biggest assignment in a while. He spends idle hours at the now-quiet base researching the New World Order and conspiracies about swine flu quarantine camps—and doing his best to "wake up" other soldiers.

Pray isn't sure how to do this and still cover his ass. He talks to me on the record and agrees to be photographed, even as he hints that the CIA may be listening in on his phone. Although I met him through contacts from the group's Facebook page, Pray, fearing retribution, keeps his Oath Keepers ties unofficial. (Rhodes encourages active-duty soldiers to remain anonymous, noting that a group with large numbers of anonymous members can instill in its adversaries the fear of the unknown—a "great force multiplier.") For a time, Pray insisted we communicate via Facebook (safer than regular email, he claims). Driving me from the mall back to my motel, he takes a new route. He says unmarked black cars sometimes trail him. It sounds paranoid. Then again, when you're an active-duty soldier contemplating treason, some level of paranoia is probably sensible.

The next afternoon we join Brandon, one of Pray's Army buddies, for steaks. Sitting in a pleather booth at Texas Roadhouse, the young men talk boastfully about their military capabilities and weapons caches. Role-playing the enemy in military exercises, Brandon says, has prepared him to evade and fight back against US troops. "I know their tactics," brags Pray. "I know how they do room sweeps, work their convoys—if we attack this vehicle, what the others will do."

A strapping Idahoan, Brandon (who doesn't want his full name used) enlisted as a teenager when he got his girlfriend pregnant and needed a stable job, stat. (She lost the baby and they split, but he's still glad he signed up.) Unlike his friend, he doesn't think the United Nations must be dismantled, although he does agree that it represents the New World Order, and he suspects that concentration camps are being readied in the off-limits section of Fort Drum. He sends 500 rounds of ammunition home to Idaho each month.



Pfc. Lee Pray vows he'll fight to the death if a rogue US government "forces us to engage." EVERY YEAR ON April 19, history buffs gather on the village green in Lexington, Massachusetts, to reenact the first battle of the Revolutionary War. For Stewart Rhodes, it was the ideal setting to unveil the organization his followers consider the embodiment of a second American Revolution.

Rhodes, 44, is a constitutional lawyer—his 2004 Yale Law School paper, "Solving the Puzzle of Enemy Combatant Status," won the school's award for best paper on the Bill of Rights. He's now working on a book tentatively titled *We the Enemy: How Applying the Laws of War to the American People in the War on Terror Threatens to Destroy Our Constitutional Republic*. Raised in the Southwest, Rhodes enlisted in the Army after high school, receiving an honorable discharge

after he injured his spine during a night parachute jump. He enrolled at the University of Nevada and in 1998, after graduating, landed a job supervising interns for Congressman Ron Paul. Rhodes has also worked as a firearms instructor and a sculptor—for Vegas' MGM Grand hotel, he produced a fiberglass Minuteman statue—and has practiced law in small-town Montana ("Ivy League quality without Ivy League expense"). He writes a gun-rights column for *SWAT* magazine. He's a libertarian, staunch constitutionalist, and devout Christian.

It was while volunteering for Ron Paul's doomed presidential bid that Rhodes decided to abandon electoral politics in favor of grassroots organizing. As an undergrad, he had been fascinated by the notion that if German soldiers and police had refused to follow orders, Hitler could have been stopped. Then, in early 2008, *SWAT* received a letter from a retired colonel declaring that "the Constitution and our Bill of Rights are gravely endangered" and that service members, veterans, and police "is where they will be saved, if they are to be saved at all!"

Rhodes [responded](#) with a breathless column starring a despotic president, "Hitlery" Clinton, in her "Chairman Mao signature pantsuit." Would readers, he asked, obey orders from this "dominatrix-in-chief" to hold militia members as enemy combatants, disarm citizens, and shoot all resisters? If "a police state comes to America, it will ultimately be by *your* hands," he warned. You had better "resolve to not let it happen on your watch."

He set up an Oath Keepers blog, asking soldiers and veterans to post testimonials. Word spread. Military officers offered assistance. A Marine Corps veteran invited Rhodes to speak at a local Tea Party event. Paul campaigners provided strategic advice. And by the time Rhodes arrived in Lexington to speak at a rally staged by a pro-militia group, a movement was afoot.

Rhodes stood on the common that day before a crowd of about 400 die-hard patriot types. He spoke their language. "You need to be alert and aware to the reality of how close we are to having our constitutional republic destroyed," he said. "Every dictatorship in the history of mankind, whether it is fascist, communist, or whatever, has always set aside normal procedures of due process under times of emergency...We can't let that happen here. We need to wake up!"

He laid out 10 orders an Oath Keeper [should not obey](#), including conducting warrantless searches, holding American citizens as enemy combatants or subjecting them to military tribunals (a true Oath Keeper would have refused to hold [José Padilla](#) in a military brig), imposing martial law, blockading US cities, forcing citizens into detention camps ("tyrannical governments eventually and invariably put people in camps"), and cooperating with foreign troops should the government ask them to intervene on US soil. In Rhodes' view, each individual Oath Keeper must determine where to draw the line.

The crowd was full of familiar faces from patriot rallies and town hall meetings, with an impressive showing by luminaries of the rising patriot movement. There was Richard Mack, a former Arizona sheriff who had refused to enforce the Brady Law in the mid-'90s. Also present was Mike Vanderboegh, whose [Three Percenter](#) movement styles itself after the legendary 3 percent of American colonists who took up arms against the British. Rhodes singled out Marine Charles Dyer, a.k.a. July4Patriot—whose [YouTube videos](#) advocate armed resistance—as a "man of like minds." When Rhodes finished, Captain Larry Bailey, a retired Navy SEAL, Swift Boater, and founder of the anti-antiwar group [Gathering of Eagles](#), asked the crowd to raise their right hands and retake their oath—not to the president, but to the Constitution.

**Correction: An earlier version of this story omitted "Maybe you said." We have corrected the error.*

[Next Page: Last Fourth of July, Oath Keepers were dispatched to more than 30 Tea Party rallies across America.](#)