



A REUTERS SPECIAL REPORT

# U.S. police trainers with far-right ties are teaching hundreds of cops

Police trainer Richard Whitehead carries a gun as he teaches a class in Killeen, Texas in June. He's one of five instructors identified by Reuters who have expressed support for far-right extremists. REUTERS/Jim Urquhart

One police instructor who has taught 560 officers in recent years has joined one extremist group and supported other far-right movements. Others have echoed QAnon and other fringe conspiracy theories on social media, a Reuters examination found.

By [JULIA HARTE](#) and [ALEXANDRA ULMER](#) | Filed May 6, 2022, 10 a.m. GMT

*This story contains offensive language.*

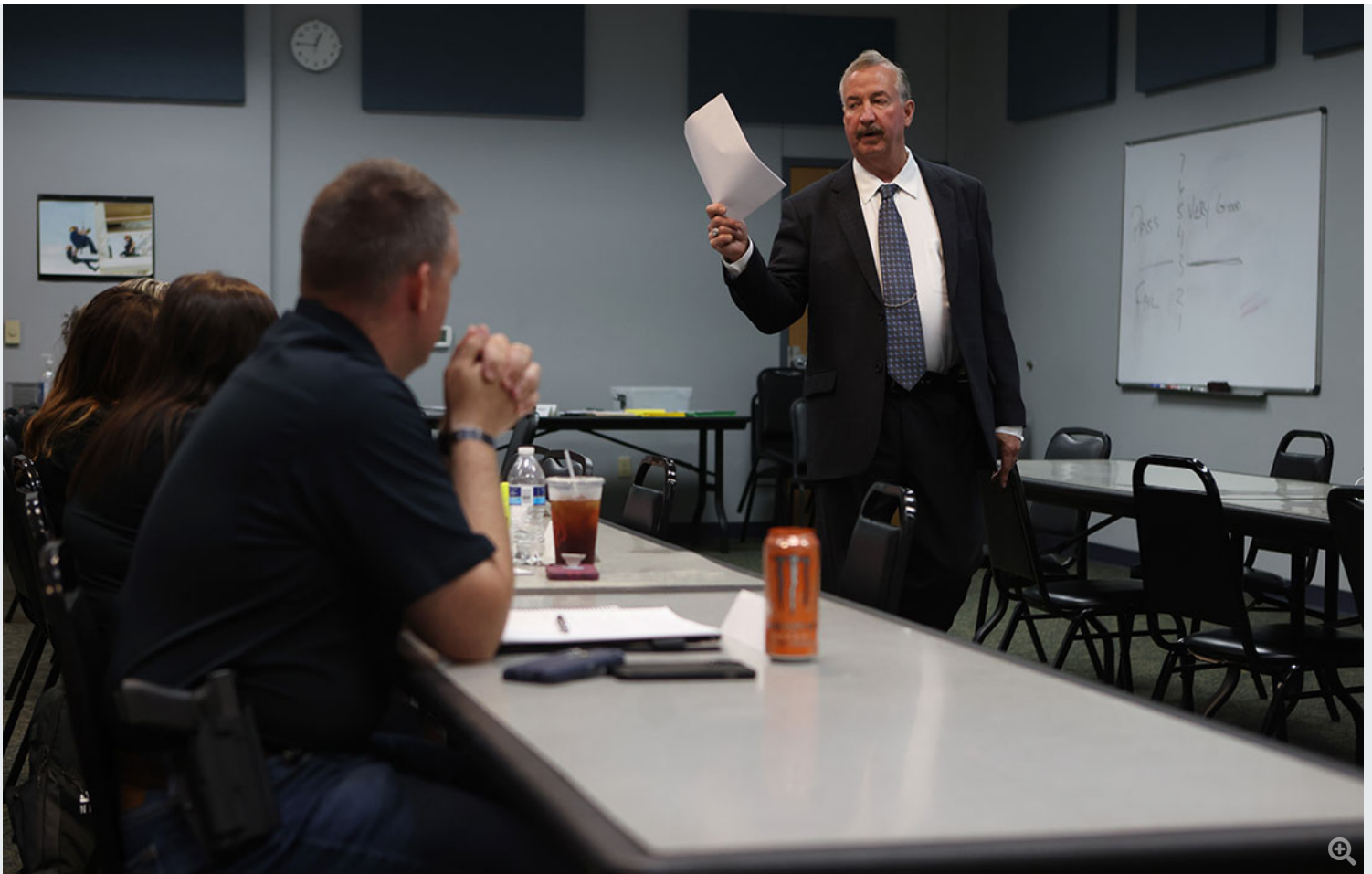
**O**n social media, Richard Whitehead is a warrior for the American right. He has praised extremist groups. He has called for public executions of government officials he sees as disloyal

to former President Donald Trump. In a post in 2020, he urged law enforcement officers to disobey COVID-19 public-health orders from “tyrannical governors,” adding: “We are on the brink of civil war.”

Whitehead also has a day job. He trains police officers around the United States.

The Idaho-based law enforcement consultant has taught at least 560 police officers and other public safety workers in 85 sessions in 12 states over the past four years, according to a Reuters analysis of public records from the departments that hired him. A Washington state training commission in 2015 temporarily banned Whitehead from advertising courses on its website because of instructional materials that referred to a turban-wearing police officer as a “towel head” and contained cartoons of women in bikinis, according to emails from the commission to Whitehead that were reviewed by Reuters. Other marketing literature touted Whitehead’s “deception detection” technique that, among other things, teaches officers not to trust sexual-assault claimants if they use the word “we” in referring to themselves and their assailant.

The commission was responding to a student complaint citing “offensive slurs” and “blatant misogyny.” Whitehead said in an interview that the commission had given too much credence to one student’s opinion and caused him to lose business. Since then, he said, he has expanded the section of his course that caused that controversy, adding more “pot-stirring” material, including a slide that ridicules transgender people: “Suspect is a gender-fluid assigned-male-at-birth wearing non-gender-specific clothing born Caucasian but identifies as a mountain panda.” Whitehead said such barbs are intended to push back against pressures on law enforcement to espouse left-wing views on gender or race.



Law enforcement trainer Richard Whitehead has publicly espoused far-right extremist views and, in the classroom, has drawn complaints of using offensive language and content targeting women, Muslims and transgender people. REUTERS/Jim Urquhart

Whitehead is part of a trend in pushing a radical-right political agenda to American police forces. He's one of five police trainers identified by Reuters whose political commentary on social media has echoed extremist opinions or who have public ties to far-right figures. They work for one or more of 35 training firms that advertised at least 10 police or public-safety training sessions in 2021, according to a Reuters analysis of scheduling data from [policetraining.net](https://www.policetraining.net), the main site where local departments connect with trainers. The news organization also reviewed materials describing classes by specific training companies.

The five trainers have aired views including the belief in a vote-rigging conspiracy to unseat Trump in the 2020 election. One trainer attended Trump's January 6, 2021, rally at the U.S. Capitol that devolved into a riot, injuring more than 100 police officers. Two of the trainers have falsely asserted that prominent Democrats including President Joe Biden are pedophiles, a core tenet of the QAnon conspiracy theory. Four have endorsed or posted records of their past interactions with far-right extremist figures, including prominent "constitutional sheriff" leader David Clarke Jr. and Proud Boys leader Joe Biggs, who is being prosecuted for his involvement in the Capitol riots.

Whitehead adheres to the constitutional sheriff philosophy, which holds that county sheriffs should ignore any law they find unconstitutional. The growing movement claims sheriffs are the supreme law enforcement authority in their jurisdictions – more powerful even than the U.S. president. A spokesperson for the Constitutional Sheriffs and Peace Officers Association disputed the characterization of its views as extreme and said it was neither right- nor left-wing.

In interviews, Whitehead and the other four trainers also said their beliefs are neither extreme nor far-right. Some said posts that appeared to urge the overthrow of the U.S. government were intended as humorous or figurative. They said they keep their politics separate from their training, which they said focused on officer safety.

Whitehead was listed in a database of members of the Oath Keepers, a far-right anti-government group, that was leaked in September by the nonprofit Distributed Denial of Secrets, which says it aims to publish data in the public interest. The members list included some 15 other people who identified themselves as law enforcement trainers and dozens more who said they were retired officers or trainers, or firearms instructors, according to a Reuters review of the data. The anti-government militia group focuses on recruiting police and military personnel, according to some experts who track extremism, and claims to have thousands of members. Oath Keepers founder Stewart Rhodes was charged with seditious conspiracy for his role in the Jan. 6 Capitol riots. He has pleaded not guilty.

Kellye SoRelle – an attorney for the Oath Keepers who has called herself the group’s acting president during Rhodes’ pretrial detention – did not respond to a request for comment on the law enforcement officers listed in the database.

Whitehead told Reuters he was an Oath Keeper for about a year, in 2016 and 2017, and continues to support its ideology of “defending the constitution.” He said he filmed a promotional video at an event of a far-right militia, the Real Three Percenters, when Whitehead ran for sheriff of Kootenai County, Idaho in 2020. He praised the Three Percenters, who train for armed resistance of what they call a tyrannical U.S. government, as being “all about community” and also defending the constitution.

Private trainers work in an unregulated industry that largely has evaded the heightened scrutiny of U.S. policing in recent years in the wake of high-profile police killings of civilians. Trainers like those identified by Reuters, a half dozen police-training specialists say, highlight a lack of standards and oversight that allows instruction that can often exaggerate the threats that officers face, making them more likely to respond with excessive force in stressful situations.

U.S. law enforcement officers receive far less initial training at police academies than their counterparts in comparable countries, said Arjun Sethi, a Georgetown University adjunct law professor and policing



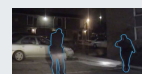
Trump allies breach U.S. voting systems in search of 2020 fraud ‘evidence’



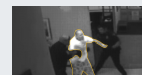
Trump campaign demonized two Georgia election workers – and death threats followed



Campaign of Fear: The Trump world’s assault on U.S. election workers



Shielded: How an obscure legal doctrine called qualified immunity protects police accused of excessive force



For cops who kill, special Supreme Court protection

specialist. That opens “immense commercial opportunities” for private trainers to fill the void with ongoing training of active-duty officers, often “in a politicized manner” that normalizes biased policing against Black people and other communities, he said.

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**“Suspect is a gender-fluid assigned-male-at-birth wearing non-gender-specific clothing born Caucasian but identifies as a mountain panda.”**

Slide from a classroom presentation by police trainer Richard Whitehead, ridiculing transgender people

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Private trainers typically advertise their courses to police and sheriffs’ departments, who often pay for their officers to take them. But individuals can also seek out and pay for courses on their own to satisfy government or department requirements for ongoing training. The courses vary widely in content and in price, from hundreds to thousands of dollars per attendee.

State-based oversight institutions, often called Peace Officer Standards and Training agencies, set requirements for police training, such as the types of classes and minimum teaching hours that officers must complete. But the institutions have little power in most states to influence course content or set standards for private police trainers, in part due to budget constraints, said Randy Shrewsberry, a former police officer. He saw unregulated police training as such a problem that in 2017 he founded the California-based Institute for Criminal Justice Training Reform.

Some officers will subscribe to the extremist ideology of their trainers, Shrewsberry said, because they perceive instructors as having authority and credibility. “Bad training is instilling bad behavior,” he added.

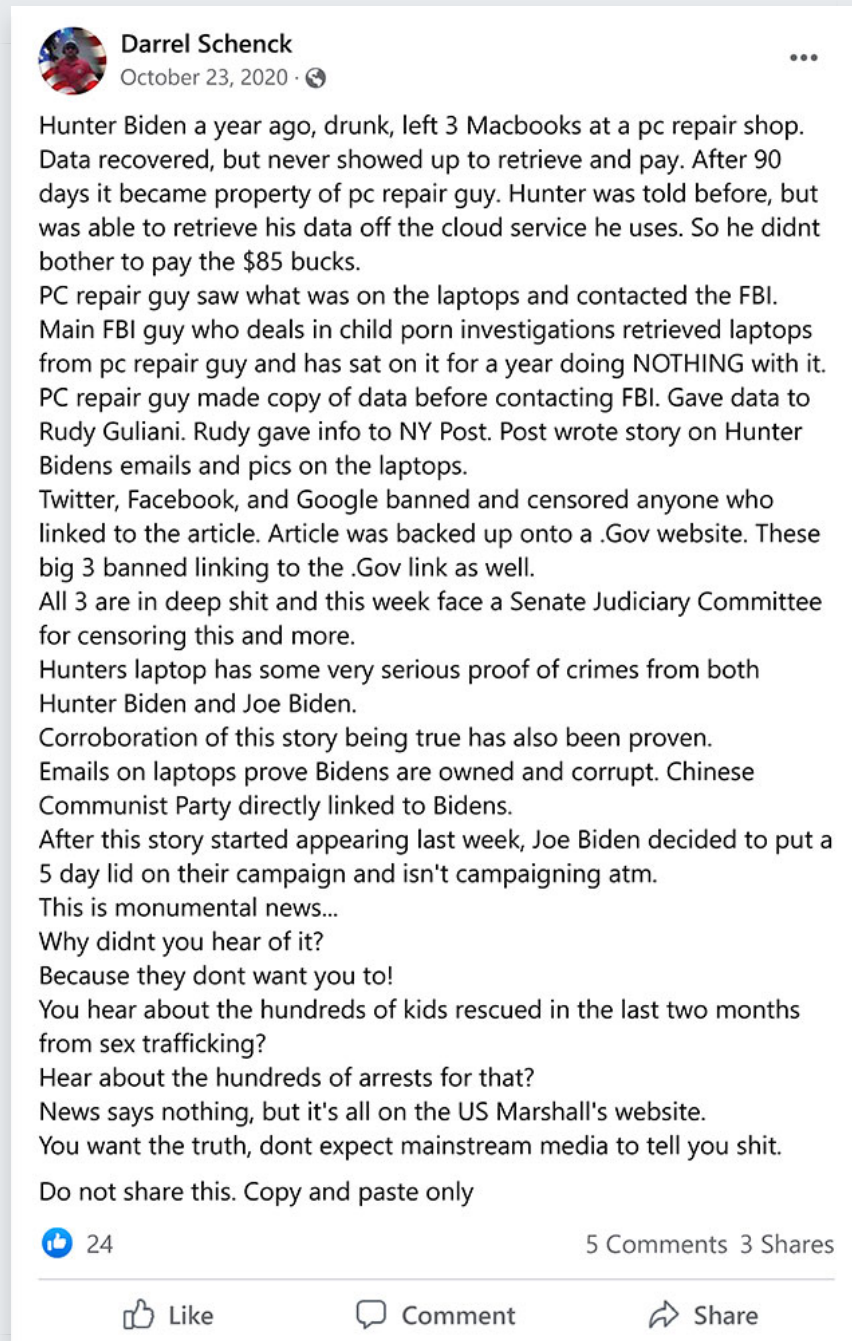
Whitehead disputed the assertion that police trainers need more oversight, noting that many states review course material. “That seems regulated to me,” he said.

## Support for QAnon, election conspiracies

On social media, some trainers have echoed core tenets of the QAnon conspiracy theory, which holds that some prominent Democrats and Hollywood celebrities are part of a cabal of Satanist pedophiles and cannibals.

Kansas-based trainer Darrel Schenck teaches firearms classes through his own company as well as through the law enforcement division of the National Rifle Association (NRA), the leading U.S. gun-rights lobby.

Schenck has voiced the belief that Democrats are pedophiles, called reports of violence during the U.S. Capitol riots “fake news,” and declared the 2020 election illegitimate, commenting: “election fraud is the real pandemic.”



**Darrel Schenck**  
October 23, 2020 · 🌐

Hunter Biden a year ago, drunk, left 3 Macbooks at a pc repair shop. Data recovered, but never showed up to retrieve and pay. After 90 days it became property of pc repair guy. Hunter was told before, but was able to retrieve his data off the cloud service he uses. So he didnt bother to pay the \$85 bucks.

PC repair guy saw what was on the laptops and contacted the FBI. Main FBI guy who deals in child porn investigations retrieved laptops from pc repair guy and has sat on it for a year doing NOTHING with it. PC repair guy made copy of data before contacting FBI. Gave data to Rudy Guliani. Rudy gave info to NY Post. Post wrote story on Hunter Bidens emails and pics on the laptops.

Twitter, Facebook, and Google banned and censored anyone who linked to the article. Article was backed up onto a .Gov website. These big 3 banned linking to the .Gov link as well.

All 3 are in deep shit and this week face a Senate Judiciary Committee for censoring this and more.

Hunters laptop has some very serious proof of crimes from both Hunter Biden and Joe Biden.

Corroboration of this story being true has also been proven. Emails on laptops prove Bidens are owned and corrupt. Chinese Communist Party directly linked to Bidens.

After this story started appearing last week, Joe Biden decided to put a 5 day lid on their campaign and isn't campaigning atm.

This is monumental news...

Why didnt you hear of it?

Because they dont want you to!

You hear about the hundreds of kids rescued in the last two months from sex trafficking?

Hear about the hundreds of arrests for that?

News says nothing, but it's all on the US Marshall's website.

You want the truth, dont expect mainstream media to tell you shit.

Do not share this. Copy and paste only

👍 24      5 Comments 3 Shares

👍 Like      💬 Comment      ➦ Share

Social media post from police trainer Darrel Schenck, including baseless conspiracy theories about alleged criminal ties between Joe and Hunter Biden, the Chinese Communist Party, sex trafficking rings and the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

In an interview, Schenck stressed he was a professional whose personal views do not affect his training. The NRA did not respond to a request for comment.

Police instructor Adam Davis characterized Biden as a “puppet and a pedophile” on Facebook. In other posts, he slammed people who protest racial bias in policing as “pawns” in the “scheme to destroy this nation.”

Davis has worked as a contractor for Street Cop Training, one of the biggest private providers of law enforcement instruction. He spoke at an industry trade conference hosted by the company in October, and he gives lectures to police agencies nationwide. Street Cop Training did not respond to requests for comment.

Davis said in an interview that he “did not know for a fact” whether Biden was a pedophile. He said his criticism of anti-racism protesters was based on the property destruction that occurred during protests in various cities in 2020. He characterized his political views as “middle of the road.”

## Texts with a Proud Boys leader

The lack of regulation gives individual trainers wide latitude to teach America’s police officers whatever they see fit. For trainer Tim Kennedy, that means training in martial arts, sharpshooting and strength-building.

In 2020, Kennedy posted on Instagram a video of himself taking out trash in combat gear, captioned: “When you want to boogaloo but you still have a bunch of honey-dos to do,” referring to household chores. That was an apparent reference to the anti-government “boogaloo” movement, whose adherents anticipate – and sometimes call for, or train for – a revolution toppling the federal government or a second U.S. civil war.

Two months later, Kennedy posted a photo of himself wearing a Hawaiian shirt and aiming a rifle. Hawaiian shirts are a trademark of the boogaloo movement. The picture was captioned: “If you choose to be an a--hole... I picked out a special shirt for the occasion.”

Kennedy said in an interview that he does not support the boogaloo movement. He said he loves Hawaiian shirts and owned many before they became a boogaloo symbol.

Kennedy’s Twitter account shows that he has been an associate of Joe Biggs, a leading organizer of the right-wing Proud Boys group who is being prosecuted for his role in the U.S. Capitol riots. Their online interactions were as recent as May 2018, several months before Biggs’ Twitter account was suspended.

In Twitter posts, Kennedy discussed going on motorcycle rides with Biggs; named Biggs as his Interior Secretary in an imaginary presidential cabinet; and posted screenshots of their text-message conversation about an anticipated rally by antifa, the loosely organized left-wing anti-fascism movement.

## **President Joe Biden is a “puppet and a pedophile.” Protestors decrying racial bias in policing are “pawns” in a “scheme to destroy this nation.”**

Social media posts from police instructor Adam Davis

“Going down town to cause havoc,” wrote Biggs.

“Same. Sounds like a date!” Kennedy replied.

Biggs is currently detained pending trial. He was charged for his role in the Capitol riots with six counts including obstruction of an official proceeding, obstruction of law enforcement, destruction of government property, and conspiracy. Reached through a lawyer, Biggs declined to comment.

Kennedy told Reuters he believed Biggs had taken a “radical” turn and said he had not had any recent contact with him. He denied ever being friends with Biggs. “I’m pretty anti-antifa, and I’m pretty anti-far right radical,” Kennedy said. “I like the middle, where logic and rational people exist.”

Kennedy said he held about 200 training sessions across the United States in 2021. He offers individual officers a discount on his courses, which cost between \$400 and \$900 per student, because most police agencies refuse to pay for Kennedy’s training out of what he described as “political” reasons and “ignorance.” Kennedy said his courses focus on cultural understanding and de-escalation techniques as well as physical training.

One teaching method he cited, however, was a chart of different mental states – each assigned its own color – describing levels of preparedness, or the lack of it, to respond to threatening situations. The chart was developed by former U.S. Marine Col. Jeff Cooper, now deceased, “as a means of setting one’s mind into the proper condition when exercising lethal violence,” according to a 2004 written commentary attributed to Cooper.

Kennedy features a fighting practice in an instructional video, showing him and students wrestling and trying to tackle one another. He described the practice as a form of “stress inoculation” that aims to improve officers’ performance under pressure.

“The point of that is to induce stress onto a person, and then we make them try to solve a problem,” such as intervening in a simulated mugging, he said. Such training is needed, Kennedy said, because officers are at “unprecedented” risk of death and assault. Police reform measures taken in the wake of the 2020 racial-justice protests across the United States have left them even less protected, he said.



Long-term data on police officer deaths shows a different trend. Officer deaths caused by felonies last year increased to 73, compared to an average of 49 in the previous four years. But 2021 was an anomaly, as crime surged amid the coronavirus pandemic and related economic turmoil.



Students of police trainer Richard Whitehead watch a video showing officers' funerals. One former police chief called instruction emphasizing violent threats "the worst kind of training to give officers today." REUTERS/Jim Urquhart

Over the long term, police deaths per 100,000 officers, from both felonies and accidents, plunged from 81 to 20 between 1970 and 2016, a decline of 75%, according to a 2019 analysis of historical Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) data in the journal *Criminology & Public Policy*. Deaths from crimes fell even faster than accidental deaths over the period.

"The number of line-of-duty deaths has declined dramatically over the last five decades," the study concluded. "The 'war on cops' thesis is not supported by any evidence."

Kennedy disputed the FBI data and said he would send figures contradicting it. He never did. The FBI declined to comment on the study of officer deaths and on the police trainers identified by Reuters.

In light of such data showing declining dangers to officers, many training agencies long ago abandoned training that emphasized putting officers through simulations of threatening situations, said Gil Kerlikowske, who led the police departments of Seattle and Buffalo, New York, before serving as commissioner of the U.S. Customs and Border Patrol from 2014 until 2017.

"That's the worst kind of training to give officers today, to make them feel more vulnerable," Kerlikowske said. "You want people to have an awareness" of violent threats, "but you don't want them to be so

hypersensitive that it impacts everything they do.”

The mindset that trainers impart, such as a feeling of constant vulnerability, can be more influential than the technical knowledge they share, said Seth Stoughton, a law professor at the University of South Carolina and former police officer with expertise in law enforcement training. Stoughton said studies show that training which overemphasizes life-threatening situations can impart a “warrior mentality,” convincing the officers that they face constant deadly threats.

In a promotional video that Kennedy released in 2020, Chris Jackson, an officer who works for a California police agency operated by a Native American tribe, said Kennedy’s course had “opened his eyes to the world” and changed the way he would respond to threats. “You never want to be a victim of anything,” he said in the video.

Jackson told Reuters in an interview that the training, which his agency paid for, made him more aware of potential threats and prepared to respond with less hesitation. “Sometimes you gotta do what you gotta do to eliminate the threat,” he said.

Asked whether Kennedy’s social media posts referring to the boogaloo movement and his association with Joe Biggs affected his perception of the training, Jackson said it did not. “What he does on his own time is his own deal,” he said.

## Moonlighting on Jan. 6

Ryan Morris, founder of Pennsylvania-based training firm Tripwire Operations Group, said in an interview that he posts political content on social media to attract customers. “It’s all marketing,” he said. “We put it out there to all different realms, hoping to spark some kind of conversation ... and then we generate classes out of that.”

In social posts reviewed by Reuters, Morris and other Tripwire trainers have cast the 2020 election as a socialist plot to seize the U.S. government, echoing Trump’s false stolen-election claims. “You have just witnessed a coup, the overthrow of the US free election system, the end of our constitutional republic, and the merge of capitalism into the slide toward socialism,” read a Facebook post that Morris shared about a month after the 2020 election.



Police training company Tripwire Operations Group posts a photo from the Jan. 6, 2021 protests at the U.S. Capitol that devolved into a deadly riot.

Tripwire trains first responders and military personnel in explosives handling, shooting and de-escalation. Morris told Reuters that he and several other Tripwire trainers were “employed” at the Jan. 6, 2021, rally at the U.S. Capitol that devolved into a riot. He declined to say who hired them or how specifically Tripwire staffers were employed. He said Tripwire is sometimes hired to help law enforcement agencies or to “protect high-level executives,” because its staff consists of bomb technicians and active law enforcement officers.

Morris retired from his part-time position as a police officer in Washington Township, Pennsylvania, in early March. The township declined to comment beyond saying Morris no longer works there.

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## **“You have just witnessed a coup, the overthrow of the US free election system.”**

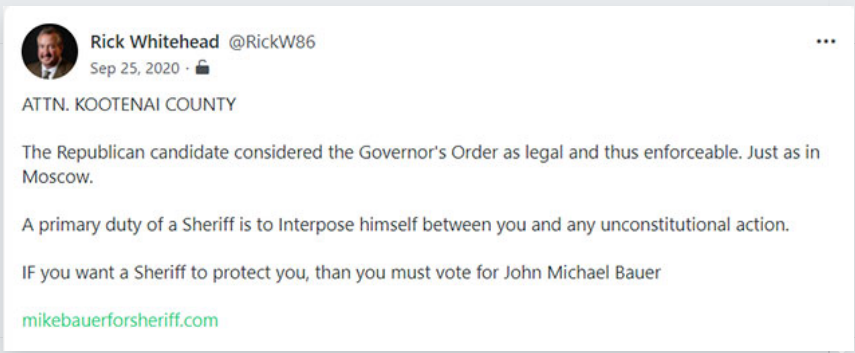
Social media post shared by police instructor Ryan Morris, supporting Donald Trump’s false claims of a rigged election

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On the day of the rally, the official Tripwire Twitter account posted a link to a since-deleted Instagram photo. The post indicated the image was taken at the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C., midway into the three-hour breach of the building. Morris said he could not recall what was pictured in the deleted post, and that neither he nor any other Tripwire employees entered the Capitol building on Jan. 6.

Tripwire held about 50 classes in 2021, of which roughly half were attended by law enforcement officers, according to Morris. Law enforcement agencies, non-profit organizations, or officers themselves typically cover tuition, which ranges from \$250 for a basic shooting class to \$2,000 for more specialized training in how to handle explosives.

Tripwire instructors are politically neutral when it comes to training, Morris said. But political views are sometimes expressed in class, he said, because “law enforcement, military have certain mindsets. I’ll just leave it at that.”



Social media post from police trainer Richard Whitehead echoing the extremist “constitutional sheriff” philosophy.

## ‘Political correctness’

Richard Whitehead, the Idaho consultant, started his training firm in 1995 during his 25-year career in the sheriff’s department of Travis County, Texas. He moved to Idaho and, in 2020, ran for sheriff of Kootenai County. During his campaign, he handed out cards identifying himself as an Oath Keeper. He ran on a “constitutional sheriff” platform, he said in an interview. Whitehead lost in the primary, placing third of four candidates.

Adherents to the constitutional-sheriff movement consider the federal government a grave threat to U.S. citizens. They argue that local law enforcement is a higher authority, with the power to countermand the decisions of legislatures, courts and presidents. They have advocated that sheriffs refuse to uphold certain laws, involving, for instance, background checks of gun buyers. Whitehead said he campaigned for sheriff because he wanted to block the government from imposing “unconstitutional” limits on citizens, including pandemic-safety regulations such as mask mandates or business restrictions.

Whitehead primarily trains police officers. He also advises a range of other public safety workers, including dispatchers, jailers and paramedics. At a paramedic training in Sandpoint, Idaho, in April 2020, he put on an “appalling show,” according to Lieutenant David Ramsey, who described the event in an email to his supervisor two days after the class. Reuters obtained the email in a public-records request.

Ramsey wrote that Whitehead dismissed the COVID-19 pandemic as a joke, called infection-control measures unconstitutional and showed a video mocking women for not saying what they mean. After showing students an image of a police car with an LGBTQ flag on the side, according to Ramsey’s email, Whitehead asked the class: “What’s next? We have to have a Muslim flag to satisfy the goat f---ers?”

Contacted by Reuters, Ramsey acknowledged writing the email but did not comment further.

Whitehead said he was not aware of Ramsey’s complaint. He said he stood by his view that putting an LGBTQ flag on a police car could create a “slippery slope” that drags law enforcement officers away from their mission of fighting crime. He denied making the comment about a “Muslim flag.”

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## “What’s next? We have to have a Muslim flag to satisfy the goat f---ers?”

Classroom comment by police trainer Richard Whitehead, as reported in a student complaint

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Ozzie Knezovich is the sheriff in Spokane County, Washington, just across the state line from the Idaho county where Whitehead ran for sheriff. He slammed Whitehead’s ties to militias and the constitutional sheriffs movement during his campaign. But Knezovich never realized until he was contacted by Reuters that Whitehead had been hired by the Spokane sheriff’s office to run 15 deputy trainings since 2015.

Knezovich, shocked that an instructor from “the lunatic fringe” had trained his own deputies, said he would ensure it didn’t happen again. The sheriff said a now-retired training coordinator had selected Whitehead.

“I’ll be having a conversation with my training unit to take somebody off the list,” the sheriff said.

Whitehead gave a Reuters reporter permission to attend a training he gave last June for police officers in Killeen, Texas. In that class, Whitehead referred to COVID-19 as the “China flu” and mocked transgender people. He also blasted some states’ efforts to end the “qualified immunity” legal doctrine that gives officers broad protection from civil lawsuits when they injure or kill suspects. “If qualified immunity goes away, that takes away your ability to make a mistake,” he said.

In an interview after the session, Whitehead said his class was about teaching officers “bulletproof” methods of documenting incidents on the job, and “not becoming susceptible to the winds of political correctness and appeasement.”

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### Extreme Policing

By Julia Harte and Alexandra Ulmer

Photo editing: Corinne Perkins

Art direction: John Emerson

Edited by Brian Thevenot

REUTERS INVESTIGATES

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