

'You've been warned': Florida sheriff says he may deputize gun owners against protesters

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JACKSONVILLE, Fla. — Clay County Sheriff Darryl Daniels, no stranger to making viral videos appealing to tough-on-crime politics, released a video Tuesday that said he will make “special deputies of every lawful gun owner in this county” if he feels the county is overwhelmed by protesters.

The three-minute video shows Daniels standing in front of 18 deputies as he derides civil rights protesters as godless disruptors and tells them to stay out of Clay County, a suburb of Jacksonville.

"If we can't handle you, I'll exercise the power and authority as the sheriff, and I'll make special deputies of every lawful gun owner in this county and I'll deputize them for this one purpose to stand in the gap between lawlessness and civility," he said.

"That's what we're sworn to do. That's what we're going to do. You've been warned."

Daniels, the county's first Black sheriff, is himself under investigation by the Florida Department of Law Enforcement related to an affair he had with a fellow officer when he was at the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office and a subsequent false arrest of that officer.

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Daniels is a first-term sheriff up for reelection who has said he wants to one day be a congressman. He is being challenged by six opponents, including former Atlantic Beach Police Chief Michelle Cook, former Clay County Sheriff's Office Emergency Management

Director Ben Carroll and Mike Taylor, a former FDLE agent and state attorney's investigator who has earned the endorsement of former Gov. Jeb Bush.

His challengers accused him of inviting chaos to Clay County and insulting the training necessary to become a sheriff's deputy.

"We train under intense situations to control the adrenaline dump," Taylor said, "and we don't do a perfect job at it, but we train to be prepared to make decisions under pressure. That's necessary to be effective. To think we can put anyone in that role and it'll be OK, we're asking for a much bigger problem and inviting chaos and anarchy in the streets. The citizens of Clay County deserve better than that."

Taylor added that deputizing private citizens could make the county liable to pay out lawsuits if the newly deputized citizens don't act appropriately. "I don't believe it was intended to be a pro-police message. I believe it was intended to be a propaganda message. Real police professionalism actually acknowledges that professionally trained police officers cannot be replaced by a swearing-in ceremony."

Cook said the video was a sign Daniels wasn't capable of leading. "What Daniels said yesterday may sound tough and macho. But, instead, it is a call for vigilantism and another signal that he is incapable of leading the sheriff's department and keeping Clay County safe."

She added: "Instead of dealing with real issues in a meaningful way, he is behaving like a reality show sheriff and calling attention to himself. To make matters worse, he pulled 18 officers off the streets to be used as props for his taxpayer-funded campaign stunt. It's no wonder morale is so low among our fine officers."

Carroll, who spent 14 years at the Sheriff's Office, said he runs a nonprofit that trains churches and private schools, and he believes it's foolish to think private citizens could replace deputies.

"I'm sure that was a political production for the sheriff. I doubt seriously that there will ever be the need in Clay County to deputize all the citizens to stand in the gap. I believe the sheriff's department is totally capable of standing in the pike."

Carroll said he supports citizens owning and training to use firearms to protect themselves, but he believes the Sheriff's Office must be capable of handling protesters on its own.

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