

Democracy

Armed and Underground: Inside the Turbulent, Secret World of an American Militia

by Joshua Kaplan

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Richard Chance for ProPublica

This story discusses threats of violence and contains a racial slur.

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Reporting Highlights

- **Militias After Jan. 6:** Internal messages reveal how AP3, one of the largest U.S. militias, rose even as prosecutors pursued other paramilitary groups after the assault on the Capitol.
- **Organized Vigilantism:** AP3 has already sought to shape American life through armed vigilante operations — at the Texas border, outside ballot boxes and during Black Lives Matter protests.
- **Close Ties With Police:** AP3 leaders have forged alliances with law enforcement around the U.S. Internal files reveal their strategies for building these ties and where they've claimed success.

These highlights were written by the reporters and editors who worked on this story. [Were they helpful?](#)

Last February, some 20 men and their wives gathered for dinner at an upscale restaurant in Spokane, Washington, for their annual Valentine's Day celebration. The men weren't just friends; they did community service work together. They had been featured on local television, in khakis and baseball caps,

delivering 1,200 pounds of food to an area veterans' center; they were gearing up for their next food drive, which they called Operation Hunger Smash. A few days after the holiday, the men went camping in the snow-speckled mountains outside Spokane, where they grilled rib-eyes and bacon-wrapped asparagus over a bonfire.

They also engaged in more menacing activities. They assembled regularly — sometimes wearing night-vision goggles in the dark — to practice storming buildings together with semiautomatic rifles. Their drills included using sniper rifles to shoot targets from distances of half a mile. And they belonged to a shadowy organization whose members were debating, with ever more intensity, whether they should engage in mass-scale political violence.

They were among the thousands of members of American Patriots Three Percent, a militia that has long been one of the largest in the United States and has mostly managed to avoid scrutiny. Its ranks included cops and convicted criminals, active-duty U.S. soldiers and small-business owners, truck drivers and health care professionals. Like other militias, AP3 has a vague but militant right-wing ideology, a pronounced sense of grievance and a commitment to armed action. It has already sought to shape American life through vigilante operations: AP3 members have “rounded up” immigrants at the Texas border, assaulted Black Lives Matter protesters and attempted to crack down on people casting absentee ballots.

Now with the presidential election less than 100 days away, AP3 members see the fate of their country turning on a turbulent, charged campaign. They're certain that Democrats will try to steal — not for the first time, in their view — the White House from Donald Trump. “The next election won't be decided at a Ballot Box,” an AP3 leader wrote several months ago in a private Telegram chat. “It'll be decided at the ammo box.” He has said he is ready to force his way into voting centers if need be, or “whatever it takes.”

The public's impression of American militias is dominated by Jan. 6, 2021. Groups such as the Proud Boys had plotted to prevent the transfer of power from Trump to Joe Biden. They formed the vanguard of the mob that stormed the Capitol that day, according to the Department of Justice. Media coverage since has centered on the prosecutions of participants, with hundreds of rioters sent to prison.

But despite the riot and its fallout, militias are far from extinct. AP3 has expanded at a dramatic pace since Jan. 6, while keeping much of its activity out of view. This rise is documented in more than 100,000 internal messages obtained by ProPublica, spanning the run-up to Jan. 6 through early 2024. Along with extensive interviews with 22 current and former members of AP3, the records provide a uniquely detailed inside view of the militia movement at a crucial moment.

The messages reveal how AP3 leaders have forged alliances with law enforcement around the country and show the ways in which, despite an initial crackdown by social media, they have attracted a new wave of recruits. A change in the political climate has also helped: In a matter of months after Jan. 6, rioters went from pariahs to heroes in the rhetoric of prominent Republican politicians. By the summer of 2021, people were enlisting in AP3, saying that Jan. 6 inspired them to join.

A portrait emerges of a group alternating between focused action and self-destructive chaos and facing a schism over whether political engagement can still address our nation's problems — or whether violence is the only option. It can be hard to discern the line between bluster and imminent threat in the messages, a perennial struggle for FBI agents who monitor paramilitary groups. But some senior AP3 members grew so alarmed that they quit, scared by the number of people, even high-level leaders, advocating acts of terror.

The materials also shed light on what former national security officials say is the most urgent question regarding militias: Will Jan. 6 prove the high water mark of the movement's violence or merely a prelude to something more catastrophic? AP3 leaders have sometimes characterized the storming of the Capitol as a botched job, a failure of ill-formed plans that didn't go far enough. “The Jan 6 event made the movement look weak and uncommitted,” one wrote a year and a half after the riot in a secret channel. “Had the house been taken for real and held we would all be in a different world.”

This is the story of a militia fighting for its survival, determined not to make the same mistake twice.



AP3 members train in Washington state. Obtained by ProPublica

“Life Is Too Fucking Short”

On a Thursday afternoon in February 2021, Scot Seddon, national commander of AP3, sent an audio message to his deputies in a channel open only to the group’s leadership. A former Army reservist, Seddon had founded AP3 when he was in his 30s and shaped it into a national force. Now he was 50, with a receding hairline, his beard overtaken by gray. In videos from this time, typically recorded in his kitchen, Seddon favored baseball caps and tight shirts that revealed his bulky shoulders and trapezius muscles. He looked like an aging bro who had just returned from the gym. “I hate this movement more every day,” Seddon said that February day, “and I really don’t even want to be a part of it anymore.”

It had been a few weeks since the Capitol riot. The FBI was already arresting leaders of the Proud Boys and Oath Keepers, two of AP3’s prominent counterparts. Another militia was about to dissolve. One of Seddon’s lieutenants had issued a dark forecast: The reaction to Jan. 6 could destroy our movement. Everyday Americans will recoil.

At least Seddon didn’t have to fear going to prison. AP3 had spent weeks preparing to go to Washington, D.C., for Biden’s inauguration on Jan. 20, with one of his top deputies promising to “mad max this shit.” Whether through luck, foresight or miscalculation, Seddon had decided to save his forces for that event rather than deploy them at the Jan. 6 rally. Plenty of his members went anyway; some fought with police officers on the Capitol steps. But they were under orders not to wear AP3 insignia, according to two former lieutenants to Seddon, and the organization was never publicly linked to the rioters.

That did not save AP3 from the fallout. Membership plummeted. AP3ers lost friends and business. Active-duty police officers quit out of fear of losing their jobs.

What’s more, AP3’s best recruiting tool was essentially gone: Facebook had cracked down on paramilitary organizing. “Facebook has been our greatest weapon. It’s gotten us where we are today,” Seddon told his troops. He later described those months as a period of personal “misery” and self-doubt. “I had a drinking problem,” he would confide to the group. “The bottle was consuming me.”

By the middle of 2021, some AP3 leaders were ready to give up. In July, the head of its Arizona chapter announced he was stepping down. “My life is too fucking short to beg people to do what’s right,” he said. He had hardly any members left in his state, and rebuilding was proving impossible. Still, he added, “It has been a great honor to me to have been here (and stayed here) through some of the most trying times this movement has seen since April 19, 1995.”

Nobody needs to explain the significance of that date to a militia member. It was the day a Gulf War veteran with militia ties named Timothy McVeigh blew up a government building in Oklahoma City, killing 168

people and injuring hundreds more. The modern militia movement — loosely speaking, a wide variety of groups whose shared traits are military-style training, an affinity for guns and a belief that they are the last line of defense against the excesses of the government and the left — started in the early 1990s and had been growing rapidly. But after the bombing, the movement crumbled. It didn't recover until 2008, when a financial crisis and Barack Obama's presidential election kindled a new generation of leaders like Seddon.

But the political climate after Jan. 6 would be very different from the period after McVeigh's attack. Soon, Seddon's group would have momentum back on its side.

Lions and Men

Seddon seems like an unlikely commander of a paramilitary organization. Raised in the suburbs of Long Island, he bounced between jobs through his early 40s, including stints as the manager for a small-time rapper and as a model. Seddon appeared on book jackets, including a vampire romance novel titled "Love's Last Bite." And there he was, in an awkward shirtless pose with a woman in lingerie, on the cover of "How to Handle a Younger Man: A Collection of Five Erotic Stories."

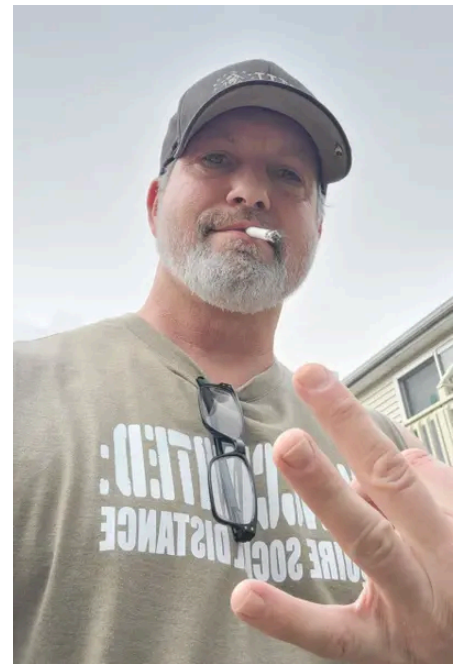
It was in internet forums for models, during the latter years of the George W. Bush administration, where Seddon's right-wing politics started to emerge publicly. He would engage in lengthy sparring with his peers, heckling them with insults: "we dominate you libs" and "you SOUND LIKE A FRENCHMEN need I say more?"

Seddon grew increasingly alienated — he would later say that he felt "very alone" after Obama was elected — and engaged. He became active on a Facebook page to support Iraq War veterans. And then, during Obama's first term, he used that as a launchpad to create AP3. At the time, Seddon did not yet own a firearm, according to one of his first recruits.

Like many militias, AP3 was suffused with a military ethos. It adopted the hierarchy and nomenclature, with ranks such as "command sergeant major." One credential most conferred authority: military service.

Seddon described himself as a veteran and, in a public resume, stated that he had served in Operation Desert Storm. He would tell Army stories to AP3 members and show them a photo of himself as a young soldier. Even his closest confidants in the group were left with the impression that he had substantial military experience.

But Seddon did not, in fact, serve in a combat zone. He joined the Army Reserve, without any prior stint in the military, more than a year after Desert Storm was over, according to his discharge papers and military personnel records. His active-duty tenure lasted for five months, the documents say, and ended when he finished his initial training.



Seddon displays the hand signal of the Three Percenters, a loose confederation of right-wing groups that AP3 is affiliated with, in a photo posted in 2023. Obtained by ProPublica



Seddon during his days as a model Screenshot taken by ProPublica via Bookmate.com

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CERTIFICATE OF RELEASE OR DISCHARGE FROM ACTIVE DUTY

1. NAME (Last, First, Middle) SEDDON, SHANNON SCOTT		2. DEPARTMENT, COMPONENT AND BRANCH ARMY/USAR		3. GRADE 100A	
4. A. GRADE, RATE OR RANK PM		4. B. PAY GRADE PM		5. DATE OF BIRTH (YYMMDD) 10/01/1971	
6. PLACE OF ENTRY INTO ACTIVE DUTY BRIDGEMAN NY		7. HOME OF RECORD AT TIME OF ENTRY (City and state, or complete address if known) STT JAMES NY		8. RESERVE ORG. TERM Year 2000 Month 01 Day 19	
8. A. LAST DUTY ASSIGNMENT AND MAJOR COMMAND 100TH CS (D) DIV (IN) 100TH DIV (ASLT) NY		8. B. STATION WHERE SEPARATED STT JAMES NY		9. STG COVERAGE Home <input type="checkbox"/> Amount \$100,000.00	
10. PRIMARY SPECIALTY (Last number, title and years and months in specialty. List additional specialty numbers and titles involving periods of one or more years.) 63810 LT WVRN MRCB-0 YRS-0 MOS//NOTHING FOLLOWS		12. RECORD OF SERVICE			
		a. Date Entered AD This Period 92 05 12			
		b. Separation Date This Period 92 10 23			
		c. Net Active Service This Period 00 05 12			
		d. Total Prior Active Service 00 00 00			
		e. Total Prior Inactive Service 00 01 22			
		f. Foreign Service 00 00 00			
		g. Sea Service 00 00 00			
		h. Effective Date of Pay Grade 92 03 20			
13. DECORATIONS, MEDALS, BADGES, CITATIONS AND CAMPAIGN RIBBONS AWARDED OR AUTHORIZED (All periods of service) NATIONAL DEFENSE SERVICE MEDAL//ARMY SERVICE RIBBON//MARSHMAN MEMBERSHIP BADGE RIFLE, M-16//NOTHING FOLLOWS					
14. MILITARY EDUCATION (Course title, number of weeks, and month and year completed) LIGHT WEDEL VEHICLE MECHANIC COURSE, 13 WKS, OCT 92//NOTHING FOLLOWS					
15. A. MEMBER CONTRIBUTED TO POST-VETERNAL EXAM ATTENDANT EDUCATIONAL ASSISTANCE PROGRAM <input type="checkbox"/>		15. B. HIGH SCHOOL CREDIT ON EQUIVALENT <input type="checkbox"/>		16. DAYS ACCRUED LEAVE PAID <input type="checkbox"/>	
17. MEMBER WAS PROVIDED COMPLETE DENTAL EXAMINATION AND ALL APPROPRIATE DENTAL SERVICES AND TREATMENT WITHIN 90 DAYS PRIOR TO SEPARATION <input type="checkbox"/>					
18. REMARKS THE INFORMATION CONTAINED HEREIN IS SUBJECT TO COMPUTER MATCHING WITHIN THE DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE OR WITH ANY OTHER APPLICABLE FEDERAL OR NON-FEDERAL AGENCY FOR VERIFICATION PURPOSES AND TO DETERMINE ELIGIBILITY FOR, AND/OR CONTINUED COMPLIANCE WITH, THE REQUIREMENTS OF A FEDERAL BENEFIT PROGRAM//NOTHING FOLLOWS//					
19. A. MAILING ADDRESS AFTER SEPARATION (Include Zip Code) 100TH CS (D) DIV (IN) 100TH DIV (ASLT) NY			19. B. NEAREST RELATIVE (Name and address - include Zip Code) SHANNON AS SEDDON 100TH CS (D) DIV (IN) 100TH DIV (ASLT) NY		
20. MEMBER REQUESTS COPY 4 BE SENT TO (City and State) STT JAMES NY			21. OFFICIAL AUTHORIZED TO SIGN (Typed name, grade, title and signature) 100TH CS (D) DIV (IN) 100TH DIV (ASLT) NY		
22. SIGNATURE OF MEMBER BEING SEPARATED Shannon Seddon					
SPECIAL ADDITIONAL INFORMATION (For use by authorized agencies only)					
23. TYPE OF SEPARATION RETIRED		24. CHARACTER OF SERVICE (Include upgrades) RETIRED		25. SEPARATION AUTHORITY 100TH CS (D) DIV (IN) 100TH DIV (ASLT) NY	
26. SEPARATION CODE 100TH CS (D) DIV (IN) 100TH DIV (ASLT) NY		27. REENTRY CODE NA		28. MEMBER REQUESTS COPY 4 <input type="checkbox"/>	
29. NARRATIVE REASON FOR SEPARATION RETIRED					
30. DATES OF TIME LOST DURING THIS PERIOD DO Form 214, NOV 88					

Previous editions are obsolete. SERVICE-2

Seddon's Army discharge papers, along with military personnel records, show he was on active duty for five months. Obtained by ProPublica. Redacted by ProPublica.

Seddon declined to be interviewed for this article. Presented with an extensive list of written questions, he responded, "Lions do not concern themselves with the opinions of men."

"J6 Made Me Want to Join"

Seddon's vision for AP3 was novel for the time: a national organization, with chapters across the country operating under his command. After Obama announced a plan for tougher gun control in his second term, membership exploded, former leaders said. One told ProPublica that their local chapter grew from four or five people to over 200 in less than a year.

By 2016, AP3 had an active presence in 48 states, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center — larger than any other organization the anti-extremism watchdog was tracking. AP3 was part of the loose confederation known as the Three Percenters, a set of right-wing groups that take their name from the claim that only 3% of colonists fought in the American Revolution. At its peak, by Seddon's likely exaggerated count, AP3 had 40,000 to 50,000 members. After the Jan. 6 riot, insiders and experts estimate the total was, at most, in the low thousands.

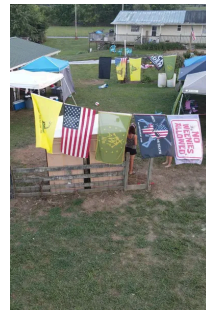
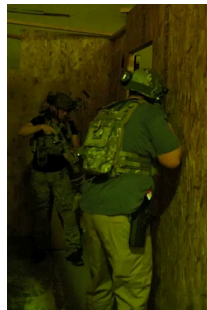
Seddon set about rebuilding the group in 2021. It was difficult initially and made even harder by his own struggles. When the pandemic started, he had a job as a doctor's technician in New York City, but he refused to get vaccinated and left the medical field. He tried to get licensed as a realtor, then as a personal trainer, and found gig economy work near Scranton, Pennsylvania. He often recorded video directives to his troops from his car while driving between deliveries for Uber Eats.

He began reinvigorating the remnants of his command. His communications offered a mix of elements that his followers found compelling. There was lots of posturing: "Fuck the federal government," he offered

as an opener in one video. “These rats, these devils,” he said in another, “the only way they’re going to start listening is fear.” But Seddon also hailed his members as patriots, heroes, and praised their deeds with an “awesome job bro.” Seddon traveled the country. He would drop by at AP3’s training exercises, where veterans might teach close-quarters gun combat at an abandoned car dealership or lead sniper rifle practice at a suburban ranch.

Recruiting new members and unifying the old ones — a disparate roster that brought together men with white nationalist ties and Black military vets — demanded constant effort. Seddon avoided getting pinned down on one controversial question: what precisely his group’s purpose was. “Resisting all efforts to undermine our constitution and the American way of life,” AP3’s mission statement read, at once lofty and vague. “Together we will return our country to the glory it once was.” Many members were furious about COVID-19 restrictions and the “LGBTQ agenda.” Gun control, they thought, was an injustice that might be worth dying over. But Seddon imposed no litmus test. “We have some [members] that are fixated on Muslims,” as one leader put it. “Most are fixated on Antifa and BLM.”

Under Seddon, AP3 was both an armed right-wing resistance group and something akin to a Rotary Club; camaraderie was as important a draw as ideology. AP3 members patrolled city streets with AR-15-style rifles and baseball bats during Black Lives Matters protests. They practiced attacking dummies with knives. But they also taught each other how to save money on groceries through gardening and organized seminars where they wrote reports on each Constitutional amendment. One member said the group dispatched trucks filled with clothes and furniture to his family after a wildfire destroyed their house. AP3 had its own monthly magazine, with militia news in the front pages and word games for kids in the back.



AP3 is both an armed right-wing resistance group and something akin to a Rotary Club; camaraderie is as important a draw as ideology. In chats, members shared images of everything from their weapons to their gardening successes. Obtained by ProPublica. The photo of a person with an American flag on his chest was cropped.

By August 2021, Seddon's lieutenants noticed that the backlash to the Capitol riot was starting to dissipate. A new type of member was signing up. "J6 made me want to join," a recruit wrote that month in a Telegram channel. He hadn't been part of a militia before, he explained, but seeing how "true Patriots" were being treated, "it was time to actually do something."

Seddon sought ways to capitalize on the improving political climate. In Alabama, members fanned out to shops around the state, where they dropped off stacks of business cards encouraging patriots to "do your part." "The APIII Alabama Recruitment line has rang non stop today," a leader reported back afterward. "I honestly wasn't expecting it to get this big."

In Washington state, AP3 members in the military reserves touted the militia to fellow reservists during their units' regular monthly drills. One chapter looked into purchasing billboard ads. In internal chats, many members agreed the "best place to recruit" is Veterans Affairs facilities.

By the fall, they had arrived at a more efficient method. Facebook's public posture hadn't wavered. AP3 was still on its list of banned "dangerous organizations." Again and again in press releases, the company said its efforts to combat militias were stronger than ever.

Inside AP3, though, leaders were seeing something different: The social media giant was gradually loosening its controls.

A Meta spokesperson said Facebook was still actively working to keep AP3 off its platform. "This is an adversarial space," she said, "and we often see instances of groups or individuals taking on new tactics to avoid detection and evade our policies and enforcement."

Seddon would soon tell leaders there were "huge opportunities to recruit using Facebook" again. AP3 experienced such an influx of aspiring members that leaders struggled to keep up. "GUYS WE REALLY NEED SOME HELP," one of Seddon's deputies wrote in a typical appeal in an internal chat. "GOT 175 PEOPLE WAITING TO GET IN."

It was a sorely needed shot of adrenaline.

"Our Force Multiplier"

In the view of many AP3 leaders, their chances of success hinged on building alliances with another heavily armed sector of society: police and sheriffs' departments. If they couldn't get the agencies to fight alongside them, they at least needed the cops to leave them alone. Many organizations like AP3 share this approach; a leaked [FBI counterterrorism guide](#) from 2015 noted that investigations of "militia extremists" often find "active links to law enforcement officers." The details of those efforts rarely come into public view.

One test of that strategy occurred in Kenosha, Wisconsin, as the prosecution of Kyle Rittenhouse was winding to a close in 2021. When Black Lives Matter protests and civil unrest overtook Kenosha the year before, Rittenhouse had ventured into the scrum with a semiautomatic rifle and killed two people. Prosecutors called it murder; Rittenhouse called it self-defense. Within AP3, he'd become a folk hero. "Kyle represents every one of us," one leader said.

In September 2021, with Rittenhouse's trial two months away, AP3 leaders were preparing for what would happen after the verdict. If he were acquitted, there might be riots in Kenosha. And if there were riots, the militia might deploy a team



The cover of the February 2022 issue of AP3's magazine. Obtained by ProPublica

that could be in the same position as Rittenhouse had been in, walking armed into a volatile situation. They wanted local law enforcement on their side.

The head of AP3's Wisconsin chapter, a truck driver, had already contacted the Kenosha County sheriff. He'd invited a couple of local officers over for beers, too. The sheriff wasn't interested in help from a militia, the chapter head reported in an internal chat. (The sheriff did not respond to attempts to seek comment.) Seddon told him he wasn't trying hard enough: "I hate these kind of excuses."



A man wears an AP3 patch at a rally with the Proud Boys in Portland, Oregon, in 2020. Maranie R. Staab/AFP/Getty Images

On Sept. 20, Seddon recorded a speech with more full-throated instructions for courting law enforcement. He already had officers as members: One AP3 leader in Alabama would send video messages while driving in his police uniform. Seddon wanted to move up the chain of command. "We need to pick the good apples and we need to have them infiltrate the minds of those on the inside that stand on the fence," he said. "It's like building an army."

He knew that was harder to achieve when you're seen as anti-government extremists. So Seddon had created a playbook for presenting AP3 as a misunderstood club for good Samaritans. Leaders encouraged members to get local police departments involved in AP3's food drives for homeless people. Seddon emphasized that these community service projects, a source of pride for many members, were invaluable public relations coups.

His members distributed brochures — "WE ARE NOT A MILITIA!!!!!" they declared — at rallies and to police officers. This was a branding decision to make people like cops feel comfortable supporting or joining AP3, Seddon said in internal messages, even though "we all know better."

Seddon pushed members to contact sheriffs in their regions and had his deputies send Excel spreadsheets to the militia's rank and file. The documents listed every sheriff in each member's state, with columns to mark whether they were Republicans and "friendly."

Sometimes it came easily. During the 2022 election, the county where Burley Ross, head of AP3's North Carolina chapter, lived had an open seat for sheriff. In an interview with ProPublica, Ross said he approached both candidates and asked: If the federal government wanted you to take someone's guns, what would you do?

"I'm 100% not taking someone's guns," Scott Hammonds, the Republican candidate, responded, according to Ross. When his Democratic opponent said he'd enforce the law, Ross suggested that if he tried that, someone would leave the encounter in a body bag.

Hammonds won. Then as sheriff, he became an "off the books" member of AP3, according to messages Ross sent in internal chats. Some of Hammonds' deputies started training with the group, Ross wrote. "For us to train with the deputies, that's a plus for us," he told ProPublica, "because we understand how they work."

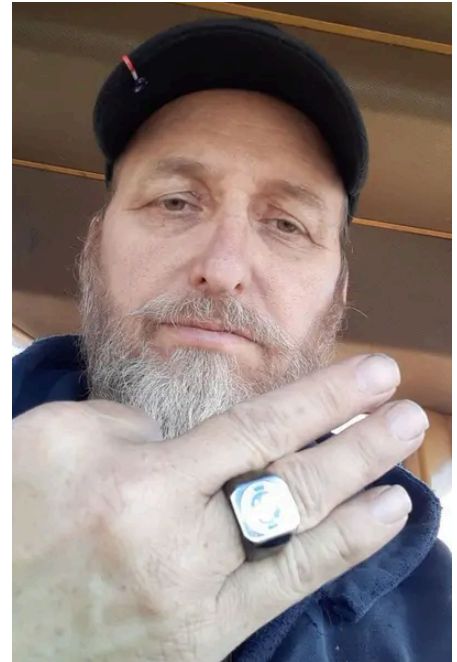
ProPublica could not independently confirm Hammonds' relationship with the group. Hammonds did not respond to repeated requests for comment.

(Weeks after publication, on Oct. 10, 2024, Hammonds told ProPublica he had no relationship with AP3 and he didn't know Ross. "I speak not on anything but what the Constitution protects," he said. "I'm not AP3. I'm not any kind of militia.")

Police officers weren't the only ones quietly allying with AP3. Some lawmakers did, too. Among them was a North Carolina state legislator who was an off-the-books member, Ross wrote in an internal chat. It was Keith Kidwell, leader of the state House Freedom Caucus. (Ross asked ProPublica to make clear he did not name Kidwell or Hammonds in interviews and that ProPublica identified them using the AP3 messages it obtained. Kidwell did not respond to requests for comment.)

AP3's "commanding officer" in Oklahoma, Ed Eubanks, took an especially calculated approach to cultivating ties with police. A competitive shooter who said he'd been a sniper in the Special Forces, Eubanks was older than most in the militia, in his 60s and retired. He was an "outcast" in his liberal family, he wrote to a group of about 100 militia members, echoing a common theme in the group. He had a lot of time to dedicate to AP3.

Eubanks announced in a 2021 internal chat that he was setting up "a PR team to start making inroads" with law enforcement across Oklahoma. He let officers use shooting ranges on his property. He built a barbecue smoker with "APIII" on the side to use for meet-and-greets with police departments. It was just the sort of creativity Seddon was hoping for.



Burley Ross was head of AP3's North Carolina chapter. Obtained by ProPublica



The barbecue smoker (as it was being constructed) that Ed Eubanks built to use for meet-and-greets with police departments Obtained by ProPublica

Eubanks would claim success with multiple law enforcement agencies, particularly the Oklahoma City police force. Messages from 2020 show the courtship in its beginnings. Eubanks described his plans to stage a counterprotest at an upcoming "defund the police" rally in Oklahoma City in order to "build a better relationship with the OKCPD." After the rally, Eubanks reported that he had made connections with city police officers who would be giving him intel (and barbecue — they'd invited AP3 members to a cookout at police union headquarters after the event).

In the years that followed, the invitations to functions at the union lodge continued, according to messages from Eubanks and another AP3 member. Eubanks said police notified him when rallies were happening and that the militia got “minute by minute updates” from officers at some events.

A spokesperson for the Oklahoma City police department said it was “going to pass” on a request for an interview and did not respond to detailed written questions. Mark Nelson, president of the local Fraternal Order of Police, said that AP3 was never invited to an official union event, but that officers can host private events at the union lodge and he would “have no idea” who was invited. In response to detailed questions, Eubanks declined to comment.

One of Eubanks’ members said he pretended to be a Black Lives Matter supporter at one protest in the city because police had asked AP3 to embed a member inside BLM and report back. “The demonic presence there when the leaders showed up,” the member wrote, “was downright oppressive.”

ProPublica could not determine the full extent of AP3’s ties to the Oklahoma City police, but Eubanks contended in a message that his efforts were “worth every second.” As he put it in another message, “This will be our force multiplier when the time arises.”



AP3 members, left, foreground, at a county GOP dinner in Washington state in late 2021. Obtained by ProPublica

AP3 on Patrol

By mid-2022, Seddon was growing ebullient. He’d toned down his drinking, he told his comrades. In videos, he looked clean cut and slimmed down. Recruiting was booming, with as many as 50 people applying each day. His members were providing security details for county GOP events again. And the militia’s first major operation since the Capitol riot was well underway.

Seddon had sounded a call to arms in late 2021. Illegal border crossings were surging, and the Texas governor had declared that his state was “abandoned” by the federal government. “Our country is being invaded at the Southern border,” Seddon said. “Haitians, Middle Easterners, South American invaders that are coming in.” He had about 20 members preparing to deploy to Quemado, Texas, he said, and was seeking more volunteers.

Anyone interested would need to bring an AR-15-style carbine and a semiautomatic pistol. They would conduct vigilante patrols, a regular feature at the border since the 1970s. Another leader explained the rules. “It is a felony to detain these folks under Texas law,” he said. “We can only report to the authorities, but we are allowed to carry live rounds.”

Many members said they didn’t want to go if they couldn’t kill migrants. “The most heard comment I get” is “there is only one way to stop them,” one leader told Seddon. AP3 joined forces with another militia and soon had members in Quemado, sleeping at a Christian charity 1,000 feet from the Rio Grande.

The charity's leaders, terrified of the Mexican cartels that helped transport some migrants, were initially grateful for the support. They put the militiamen up in twin bunk beds in little rooms that resembled a hospital ward. AP3 would keep a presence at the border for at least the next year and a half. Their members caught migrants and turned them over to the authorities. In time, messages claim, they were patrolling over 10,000 acres of land.

Eubanks helped lead the operation. At night, he'd split members up to cover more ground. Then he would don camouflage fatigues and venture alone into the pitch darkness, a shotgun in his hand.



First image: A room where AP3 members stayed in Quemado, Texas. Second image: Ed Eubanks near the border. Third image: A small vehicle used by AP3 members for their patrols. Obtained by ProPublica

In internal chats, Eubanks bragged about the allies they'd cultivated, including Brad Coe, a cowboy-hat-wearing local sheriff who had publicly praised border militias and regularly discussed immigration on Fox News. Coe shared intel with him and discussed the idea of Eubanks "running a bush team to track the cartel," Eubanks told Seddon and others. Eubanks complained in the chats that the Texas Department of Public Safety was "refusing to work with us" but said AP3 was collaborating with the Border Patrol and the National Guard, who installed "observation pads for us to use along the river."

The partnerships didn't always go smoothly. Once, an AP3 member got into an argument with a National Guardsman that turned physical. "He kicked the shit out of the national guardsman," Ross, who helped coordinate the operation, told ProPublica. "I called him and said, 'You cannot beat up the national guardsmen any more.'" (Local law enforcement arrived but decided not to make any arrests, according to Ross.)

Coe did not respond to requests for comment. A Border Patrol spokesperson did not address ProPublica's questions about its agents but said that civilians "involving themselves in border security related activities" is "unlawful" and "dangerous." In response to detailed questions, the Texas Military Department, which oversees the Texas National Guard, issued a one-sentence statement: "The Texas Military Department does not provide support to or operate with local militias."

As the operation expanded, Eubanks sent back pictures of hundreds of migrants the militias had "rounded up," huddled on the ground, often surrounded by Border Patrol or what appear to be National Guard members. The militiamen would return excited after stopping a group at gunpoint, according to Lorraine Mercer, the charity's ministry director, who got to know the men over many months as their host. They didn't always wait for government agents to arrive, Mercer said. "Some of them were trying to run them back into Mexico," she told ProPublica. They'd say, "We'll handle them, the Border Patrol doesn't know what they're doing."

Seddon wanted the operation to get even more ambitious. And he had a scheme he thought could make that possible. "The bottom line is we need to start making money," he told state leaders in July 2022. His answer was to create a nonprofit called American Community Outreach Network.

ACON's website gave no indication of its ties to AP3. It was advertised as a charity that provided services in disaster zones and to disadvantaged youth.

But in internal chats, Seddon was explicit that ACON was a way to fund the militia. “I want every single one of us to fucking get rich,” he said in one video. “I want to be sitting on a yacht in two years with every one of you,” he said in another. Members would receive a 20% cut of any donations they brought in, he promised.

This was more than a get-rich-quick ploy, in Seddon’s telling. It could help AP3 thrive in the post-Jan. 6 era. “I feel reborn,” he said as the plan moved ahead. Imagine if people didn’t need to juggle militia duties with their day jobs, “if every single one of us had the ability to do this full-time,” he said. It’d be so much easier to mobilize troops to the border or anywhere else.

“It’s Going to Be a Blood Bath”

“This election is do or die for us,” Seddon told his lieutenants in August 2022. The midterm elections were months away, and Democrats controlled the White House and both chambers of Congress. If we can’t retake Congress now, Seddon said in a video, “we’re in real, real deep shit.” He had a plan to get involved.

Seddon wanted AP3 to fan out across the country, stake out ballot boxes and deter fraudulent voting, which he claimed was rampant during the 2020 election. “We’re trying to persuade these people maybe that’s not such a good idea,” Seddon said about supposed liberal ballot stuffers. “There’s a large group of what look like some pretty badass patriots outside.” The operation was shortly underway in Arizona, Colorado and Michigan, though it’s unclear how many members heeded Seddon’s call.

Absentee ballots had barely made it into voters’ mailboxes before it all went awry. Eubanks posted a handheld video of a television screen in an internal chat: “NBC Nightly News” was showing surveillance footage of a man in Maricopa County, Arizona. The man hadn’t been identified, but inside AP3, they knew who he was: a Marine veteran named Elias Humiston. Several years before, he had pleaded guilty to an illegal firearm discharge. Now he was at the center of a national news cycle.

Humiston was captured on camera outside a drop box for absentee ballots. His face was masked, and he had a handgun and wore a tactical vest. He had gotten into a confrontation with a woman who tried to record his license plate, prompting the sheriff’s department to arrive.

“Now the DOJ is involved,” Eubanks wrote four days after the incident. Government attorneys said such activities could constitute illegal voter intimidation. But the authorities didn’t appear to know that the anonymous vigilante was a part of AP3.

Humiston had held a leadership role in AP3 and had recently won an award from the militia for his work at the border. He promptly resigned “to protect” AP3, records show. He was never charged with a crime or publicly linked to the militia. (Humiston did not respond to requests for comment.)

Some leaders said that Humiston’s efforts “should be applauded.” Another camp saw the mission as a foolhardy mistake by Seddon. “Poorly planned and horribly executed,” one leader called it.

Seddon told everyone to stop acting like cowards. “If it’s not this, it’s the fact that we’re white, that we’re Christian,” he said. The DOJ is “going to come at us no matter what we do,” Seddon continued.

“Communism — that’s where this country is leading if we don’t take a stand.”

Seddon had always had a short fuse. But he was becoming increasingly militant and inflammatory, according to several longtime members. In messages, he raged against “pedophilia” in schools and the “panels of blacks” “disrespecting white Americans” on MSNBC. When Congress increased the IRS’ budget, he declared that revenue agents were coming to “kill our kids.” Once, in a voice note he recorded while driving, he paused. “I almost ran over this nigger,” Seddon said. “I am not racist — just these dirty fucks walking these streets.”

Seven former leaders told ProPublica they became alarmed by how the rhetoric was shifting in AP3. In the days after Jan. 6, Seddon had suppressed calls for violence, telling members who wanted to assassinate politicians to stand down. But he had stopped acting as a voice of restraint, even as such talk increased.

One morning in August 2022, an ex-cop with at least 100 AP3 members under his command announced a mysterious initiative. He had previously said it was time to take a violent stand against Black Lives Matter: “We will have to suffer some and some will die,” he said, but he was “tired of waiting.” Now he said he planned to assemble a “Tac Team” of “those who will do what others won’t.”

A different afternoon, a different leader put forward his own proposal. “We havnt made any head way in the last 5 plus years,” he wrote. Let’s pick a date and descend on government buildings across the country, he suggested, and then kill the officials who’ve committed treason. “Time to stack body’s up.” (Two others told him to arrange a secret meeting offline.)

After the 2022 midterms, Ross made a plea in an internal chat. “APIII AND EVERY OTHER PATRIOT group seems to want a fight,” he wrote. “A war will leave no winners.” Ross, too, believed that civil war was inevitable, but he pushed for the group to focus on grassroots politics in the meantime. “There’s going to be a time to be violent,” he told ProPublica. “I’m the type of person who’s like, ‘Now is not the time.’” In AP3, that made him a moderate.

A growing faction had lost hope in the democratic process. Elections and activism are pointless, they maintained; even the midterms were rife with fraud. They felt out of alternatives. Their talk was now a steady drumbeat:

“Get it over with I’ll die with honor.”

“It’s going to be a blood bath.”

“When does AP3 as a whole say, that’s enough and stand up?”





First two images: AP3 members training in the light and in the dark. Third image: AP3 members with fellow militiamen from the Oath Keepers. Obtained by ProPublica

“I Know Where You Live”

Seddon’s downfall started around the turn of this year. An AP3 member, increasingly suspicious, had obtained a copy of his military discharge papers. That was enough to cause an explosion. After years of touting his Army experience, Seddon’s secret was exposed.

He tried to suppress the uprising that ensued. He threatened a former leader who confronted him about the records in private. “I know where you live,” Seddon wrote on Facebook Messenger. “Tread careful.” Ross accused Seddon of stolen valor and was kicked out.

Seddon’s command quickly began to unravel. A rumor started to spread: Law enforcement was investigating the ACON scheme. The charity had never taken off. One of Seddon’s ex-deputies told ProPublica it raised less than \$5,000. But its website falsely advertised it as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit authorized to accept tax-deductible donations, which the IRS said is not true.

Leaders who had spent months encouraging the initiative now condemned ACON as a scam to put money in Seddon’s pocket. “Not volunteering for a Rico trial,” one member wrote in a side chat, referring to the racketeering statute that prosecutors use to take down the mafia. In the spring, state chapters began to defect from AP3 in droves.

Soon Seddon had lost a significant majority of his organization. Former leaders estimate that about 10 state chapters stayed on, leaving him to try to rebuild the militia’s presence everywhere else.

Seddon appears undaunted. He’s lost a large chunk of his membership before and managed to recover. (Meanwhile, the instability in his career continues. Recently, he started a business that offers “fast cash” to cancer patients who sign over their life insurance policies.)



Seddon, left, at a 2024 training via Gab

His recent setbacks seem to have only made him more volatile. Toward the end of Trump's criminal trial in May, Seddon wrote on Facebook that Judge Juan Merchan was treating the former president unfairly. "This guy needs to meet his maker," Seddon said. He followed up by posting the judge's home address.

Facebook shut down his account, which he'd long been using to promote the militia. The platform conducted a large enforcement action against AP3 in June, according to the Meta spokesperson, removing 40 pages, 15 groups and 600 accounts that "were mostly focusing on recruitment." The spokesperson said Facebook strengthened its policies at the beginning of the year "to take an even stricter approach to enforcement against this group and other banned militia organizations."

Seddon was back on social media, this time on TikTok, after the assassination attempt on Trump in July. "This was a direct attack on us," he said. "We need to become fucking lions."

AP3's travails have not been unique. Since the Capitol riot, the militia movement has grown more fractured and decentralized. This may make it harder for one leader to spur mass action. It could also make it harder for one leader to prevent mass action and for law enforcement to track the groups and to intervene.

The presidential election could propel the militia movement in a darker direction. Experts worry that a Trump loss could spark violence from those who feel it's their only option, especially if he once again refuses to accept the results. If Trump wins and then fulfills his promise to pardon Jan. 6 defendants, they fear the most radical wing of his party could take it as a license for more extreme action.

AP3 may have splintered, but its former members have mostly just moved to other militias. John Valle, Seddon's former third in command, sees the movement's future as consisting of state and local groups, operating independently but coordinating on secure messaging apps.

He said that the 286 members of his Washington chapter are now operating as their own independent group. They didn't want to get caught up in AP3's potential legal problems, but their mission remains the same. As Valle put it, "We're just rebranding."

Alex Mierjeski contributed research.

Update, Oct. 10, 2024: This story was updated to reflect that weeks after publication, Scott Hammonds, a North Carolina sheriff, denied that he was part of AP3.

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I'm a Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter at ProPublica, where I write about the government, money and power.

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