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CONFRONTING HATE



# 'This isn't your granddad's KKK!' Inside the hate group expanding its presence in Tennessee

From their participation in a conference in Middle Tennessee, to the compound being built in East Tennessee, Patriot Front has become a growing presence in Tennessee. Who are they?

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By: Phil Williams



They are the largest hate group in America, wrapping themselves in the red-white-and-blue of the flag, marching into the middle of American cities and claiming to be patriots.



NASHVILLE, Tenn. (WTVF) — They are the largest hate group in America, wrapping themselves in the red-white-and-blue of the flag, marching into the middle of American cities and claiming to be patriots.

Yet, a NewsChannel 5 investigation discovered that those flag-waving marches hide the hate behind their cause.

Behind the scenes, Patriot Front is preparing for war, building a compound in Tennessee where they train men for battles that sometimes play out on the streets of America.

"These are hardened white supremacists who want to see a white ethno-state created somewhere in the United States," said Jeff Tischauser, the senior researcher who tracks Patriot Front and other hate groups for the Southern Poverty Law Center.

Our NewsChannel 5 investigation began last fall as antifacist activists protested an annual white supremacist gathering inside the lodge at Montgomery Bell State Park, about 40 miles west of Nashville.



Mike Rose/WTVF

American Renaissance Conference attendees take a break on a balcony at Montgomery Bell State Park in Burns, Tenn.

**Related: [Inside the influential white-supremacist conference that calls Tennessee 'home away from home'](#)**

One of the protesters tried to warn law enforcement who prevented the activists from getting to the lodge where the American Renaissance Conference held its annual meeting.

"Right now, they've got an enemy," the protester called out to police. "If they get rid of all their enemies, they are going to have to find a new one. It might be you."

Jared Taylor, the founder of the American Renaissance Conference, had insisted that NewsChannel 5 not take video of any faces while we were inside the lodge to interview

him. The participants, he insisted, were “smart, observant, thoughtful Americans who see that our country is going in the wrong direction.”

Yet, over the years, there had been reports of neo-Nazis who attended the Tennessee conference.

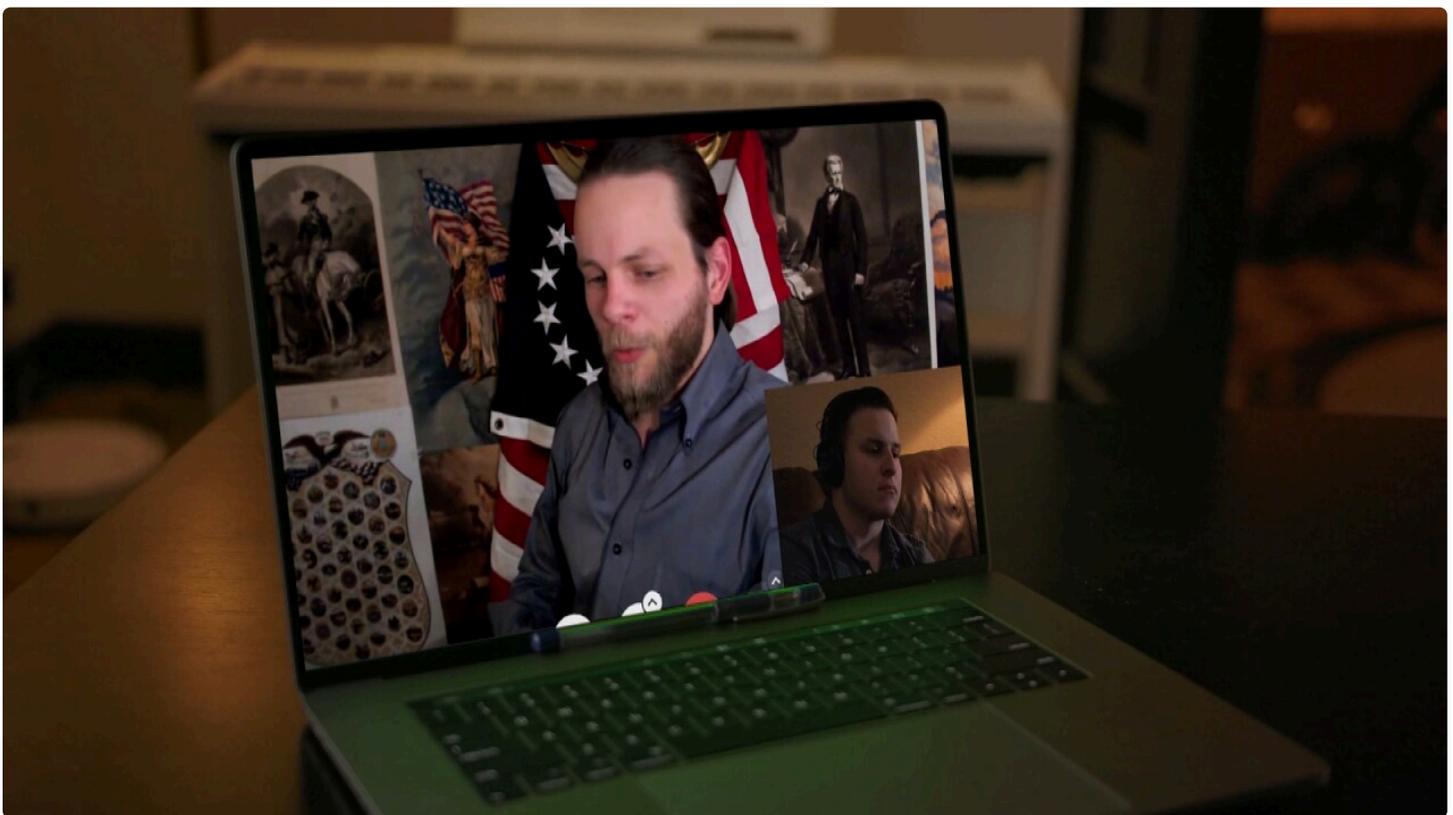
“I don't even know a neo-Nazi,” Taylor insisted.

Tischauer's reaction?

“That is absolutely false. Jared Taylor lied to you.”

In fact, using facial recognition software, *NewsChannel 5 Investigates* had identified some of the conference participants we had spotted outside as they stood on a balcony.

Among them: Thomas Rousseau, the 26-year-old founder of the Patriot Front.



Rumble

Patriot Front founder Thomas Rousseau in recent podcast interview.



Telegram

Patriot Front members in march through downtown Nashville in the summer of 2024, as depicted in Patriot Front propaganda video.

Known for their flash mob protests that suddenly spring out the backs of rental trucks, Patriot Front members wear white gaiters to hide their faces. They are also active in plastering communities across the country with their hate-filled flyers and graffiti.

"We are Americans, we are not White Americans – because there are no other kind of Americans than those who are White and from Europe," Rousseau argued in a recent podcast interview.

Patriot Front members have also been implicated in defacing murals celebrating the accomplishments of Black Americans.

"When you get within their private spaces online, members of Patriot Front worship Hitler," Jeff Tischauser noted.

"They deny the Holocaust. They use a tremendous amount of racial slurs between each other."



Unicorn Riot

Patriot Front members give Nazi salutes in leaked video obtained by the non-profit media outlet Unicorn Riot.

*NewsChannel 5 Investigates* noted, "They're very clever, though. They wrap themselves in patriotism – *Patriot Front*."

"Right," Tischauer acknowledged. "That's a way for Patriot Front to appeal to the larger conservative movement."

In fact, leaked video from inside Patriot Front reveal that, beneath that polished veneer, members of the group feel comfortable throwing Nazi salutes. That video was obtained and published by the nonprofit media outlet Unicorn Riot.

Outside the American Renaissance Conference, we had also spotted two men who facial recognition software helped identify as Robert Benjamin Whitted of Texas and Garret Joseph Garland of Illinois.



Bryan Staples/WTVF

Images from American Renaissance Conference in Tennessee in fall 2024 matched to Patriot Front members arrested in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, in 2022.

Both were among 31 Patriot Front members arrested three years ago in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, accused of plotting to create a riot at a Pride celebration.

"They wanted to basically promote a fight," said Coeur d'Alene prosecutor Ryan Hunter. "They wanted to get people to respond, make them angry, make them attack them – and their history is that they then try to play that they are the victims."

Never-before-seen police video shows what happened when Coeur d'Alene police intercepted two Patriot Front U-Hauls on their way to that Pride event.

In the video, *NewsChannel 5 Investigates* spotted the men from that balcony, Robert Whitted and Garret Garland, as they were being processed by police.

While Thomas Rousseau tried to tell officers that their intentions were peaceful, police discovered what a witness called a "small army" prepared for war – including being equipped with riot shields that leaked video shows Patriot Front prepares for use in battle.

"Those shields can be used offensively – and, in fact, in riot training, they are," Hunter said.

"They are intended to push and to move people out of the way or to certain areas – and we actually got testimony on cross examination that, yes, that's how they had been trained to use those."

When police unmasked the Patriot Front members, they found their caps secured to their heads by chin straps – and the caps were no ordinary head gear. Inside, officers found hardened plastic designed to protect the Patriot Front members' heads in battle.

Police also discovered tactical radios for communicating over long distances and first-aid kits to treat the injured.



Coeur d'Alene Police Department

Patriot Front arrests in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, in 2022.



Coeur d'Alene Police Department

Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, police video shows the use of "bump caps" by Patriot Front.



Coeur d'Alene Police Department

Smoke grenade seized by Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, police from a Patriot Front member in 2022

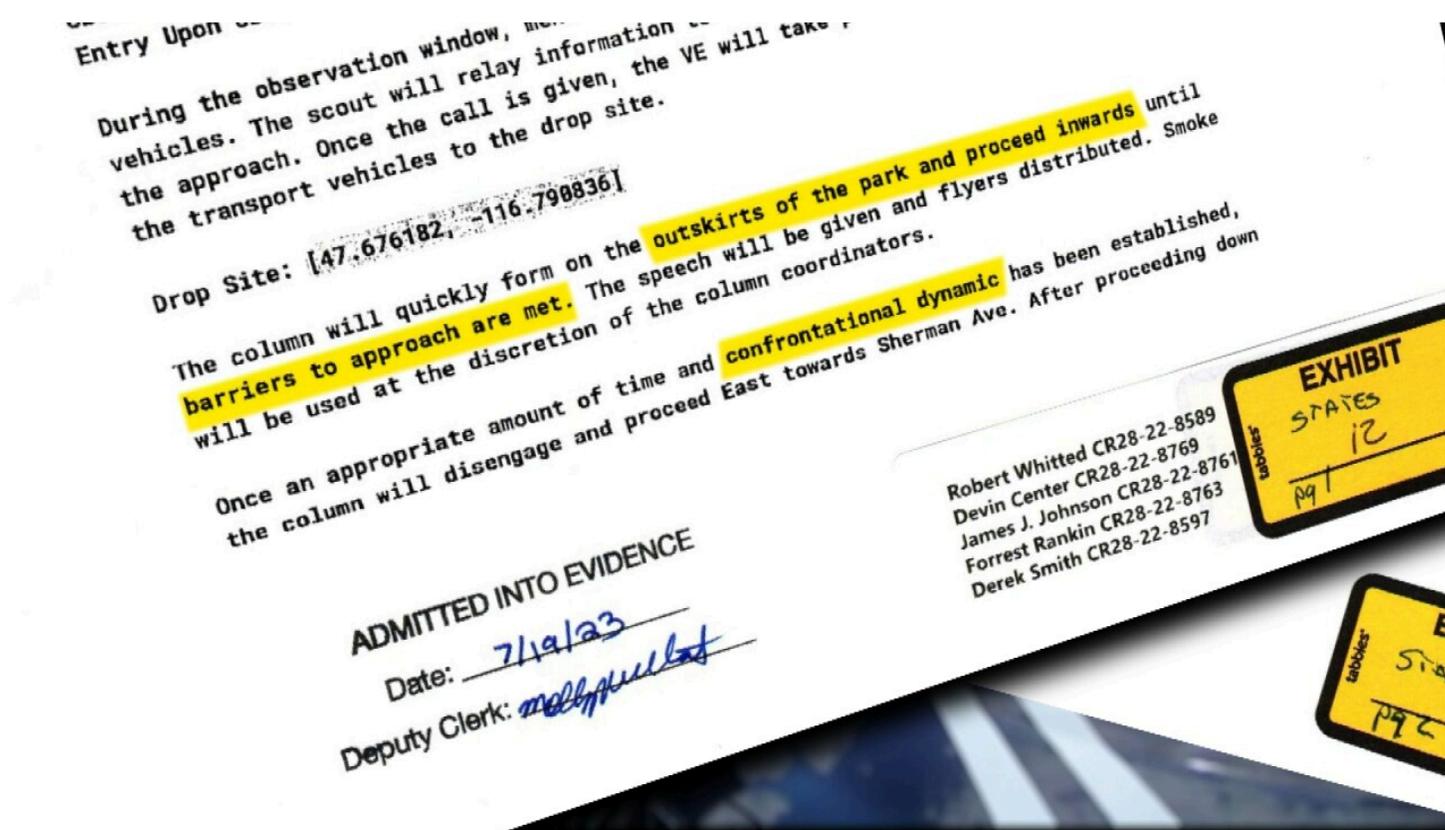
One Patriot Front member even carried a smoke grenade.

"You don't come to a boxing match with gloves on and dressed to fight if you don't intend to fight – and that was the circumstance that we faced with this group," Hunter said.

"They were ready to fight. They were prepared to fight. They had trained to fight."

Police also seized the group's operations plan for the day, which indicated the Patriot Front army would line up on the outskirts of the park where the Pride festival was being held, then proceed inwards until "barriers to approach" were met.

There, they planned to create what they called a "confrontational dynamic."



WTVF

Patriot Front ops plan for Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, operation

"During the testimony that we were able to elicit from them on cross examination, they confirmed that people – they didn't really consider those barriers that they would stop for," Hunter added.

*NewsChannel 5 Investigates* followed up, “So you are saying if they encountered people at the Pride fest, they were just going to plow through them?”

The prosecutor answered, "That was effectively what they said at trial."

NewsChannel 5 also identified another man – Ian Michael Elliott – from the balcony at the American Renaissance Conference.

"Ian Michael Elliott is a longtime member of white-power groups, including Patriot Front," the Southern Poverty Law Center's Jeff Tischauser said.

"Within Patriot Front, he has been one of the lead recruiters. He also is the personal security guard for Thomas Rousseau when they are out in public."

Our NewsChannel 5 investigation discovered that Elliott is one of the people behind a 122-acre Patriot Front compound in Tellico Plains, Tennessee – located between Chattanooga and Knoxville.



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View of Patriot Front compound in Tellico Plains, Tennessee, from Sky5

When we flew over in Sky 5 back in the fall, it appeared to be very much still under construction.

"It appears that they are using this place to network and strategize," Tischauser said. "They are inviting white supremacists from across the country to network and strategize."

A photo obtained by *NewsChannel 5 Investigates* shows Elliott with Rousseau at that East Tennessee compound, hosting another white supremacist group from Texas.



Telegram

Patriot Front's Thomas Rousseau and Ian Michael Elliott, center, with group from Texas at East Tennessee compound

And video posted online shows Elliott, in a studio adorned with neo-Nazi symbolism, training men for bare-knuckled battle – battle that often leaves the Patriot Front warriors bruised and bloodied.

"Patriot Front will claim they are non-violent, but they are training in mixed martial arts," Tischauser said, adding: "Then, when they are confronted by an activist, they are

not using these skills that they are learning – these mixed martial arts skills – to de-escalate the situation.

“They are using their training in mixed martial arts to escalate the confrontations and to hurt people.”



Telegram

Screenshot from a video showing fight training at a Patriot Front-connected compound in East Tennessee

That is what happened to a musician who tried to confront the group in Boston in 2022. A federal judge recently awarded \$2.7 million in damages to the victim, although it's not clear he will ever collect.



AP Photo

Musician assaulted by Patriot Front in Boston in 2022

Police video shows that when a Patriot Front U-Haul was stopped shortly after that incident, one of the people present was Garret Garland.

Garland is one of the men we identified from the American Renaissance Conference back in the fall.

"This isn't your granddad's KKK. This isn't the old school white supremacists," said the prosecutor, Ryan Hunter.

"These guys are smart – I'll give that little bit of credit. They are smart in how they approach it."

Hunter said he believes it's critical that Americans see beyond the images that Patriot Front would like to project, to see that what they represent is neither good nor American.

"And it's incumbent for all of us who see it for what it is to combat it every chance that we get and tell what this group is about and what their message is all about. So that's

probably my biggest takeaway from this."

*EDITOR'S NOTE: The original version of this story included aerial images of the Patriot Front compound in Tellico Plains that also inadvertently showed a neighboring property. For clarity, those images have been replaced.*

**Do you have information that would help me with my investigation? Send me your tips: [phil.williams@newschannel5.com](mailto:phil.williams@newschannel5.com)**

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