

A tangled web of St. Louisans in the Jan. 6 insurrection

Many of the St. Louisans who played roles in fomenting the Jan. 6 insurrection had relationships with one another and with national figures in the chaos at the Capitol that have not been explored. Many haven't even been previously identified. What follows is an account of some of those roles and relationships.

Jim Hoft, the Gateway Pundit

With the exception of *The Riverfront Times*, the St. Louis media have long mostly brushed off the man behind the Gateway Pundit, a right-wing conspiracy website founded in 2004. But James ("Jim") Hoft, who moved to St. Louis from Iowa in the late 1980s, has now built such a large following and achieved such impact that he cannot be ignored.

Hoft's role as a champion of "the big lie" that Trump won the election has been well-documented. By his own estimate – possibly an overestimate, but still revealing – he had published 3,000 to 4,000 stories just by last September (there have been many more since) – alleging fraud against Trump in Arizona, Michigan, Georgia and elsewhere. Videos he posted proved his argument, he claimed. And he named the names and ran photographs of specific individuals whom he blamed for the fraud.



(Photo via Flickr)

An aspect of Hoft's activities that has received less attention, however, is his specific promotion of the Stop the Steal rally in Washington. The website began running stories with the words "Stop the Steal" even before the election, and then ran about a dozen more in late December and early January. In one piece, under his own by-line, Hoft [announced he would speak](#) at the "ENORMOUS rally" to be held Jan. 6, which, he wrote, in bold face type and in an echo of language Trump had used, "**will be wild!**" Roger Stone and Ali Alexander would also be speakers, he said. Alexander did speak Jan. 5, leading protesters in a chant of "[Victory or death!.](#)" and [Stone spoke that day as well](#). But the GJR found no evidence that Hoft or any of [the other speakers he promised](#) actually spoke on Jan. 6.

There is no indication that Hoft has been contacted by the authorities in connection with the day's events. Hoft was interviewed by the GRJ last spring for a [profile](#), but this past January he did not respond to a request for a new interview or to specific questions sent to his and his attorney's email addresses.

Hoft & Ali Alexander

Alexander, who was born Ali Abdul-Razaq Akbar, is a prominent alt-right-wing activist who was a key organizer of Stop the Steal in Washington and of rallies in other cities that preceded it.

Hoft and Alexander had known each other since at least September 2019, when they met at the Marriott St. Louis Airport hotel for the annual conference of the Eagle Council, made up of supporters of the late Phyllis Schlafly. The Gateway Pundit was one of four [co-sponsors](#) of the three-day meeting. Alexander was a panelist. Among the speakers was Steve Bannon, the Trump adviser, Breitbart News executive, and old friend of Hoft's; Bannon had stewarded the Gateway Pundit when Hoft was ill in 2013. [Missouri Secretary of State Jay Ashcroft](#) was another speaker, as was [Kris Kobach](#), who had recently left office as Kansas Secretary of State.

A [group photo](#) features Hoft and Alexander together at the hotel. A group photo taken at the same meeting the [year earlier, in 2018](#), also at the Marriott St. Louis Airport hotel, showed Hoft with Michael Flynn Sr., the former lieutenant general who served briefly as Trump's National Security Adviser and who received an award at the 2018 gathering from former St. Louisan Edward "Ed" R. Martin Jr., who had taken over the Schlafly organization. Also in the photo is Michael Flynn Jr., who had earlier achieved notoriety as a purveyor of the theory that Hillary Clinton was involved in a child-sex trafficking ring at a Washington, D.C. pizza parlor.

But Hoft and Alexander may have met earlier. Both [attended](#) a July, 2019 "social media summit" at the White House, to which Trump invited various social media figures he favored. Also attending that event – and singled out for commendation there by the president – was Sen. Josh Hawley.

And even before that, in 2016, Alexander had [lived and worked in New York with Lucian Baxter Wintrich IV](#), who soon thereafter served as the Gateway Pundit's White House correspondent. Hoft also published at least two stories in 2017 ([here](#) and [here](#)) featuring Wintrich and Alexander, still known then as Ali Akbar. So Hoft and Alexander appear to have known each other for years.

None of this is surprising. The universe of prominent alt-right conspiracy theorists to which Hoft, Alexander and Wintrich belong is not that large. It does, however, raise questions about whether Hoft and Alexander were in communication in the days and weeks before Jan. 6.

Hoft, Alexander, Ed Martin & the Schlaflys

Meanwhile, both Hoft and Alexander had independently connected with Martin.

Martin had moved to St. Louis from New Jersey in the 1990s to earn his law degree at Saint Louis University. After serving as director of the Human Rights Office of the Archdiocese of St. Louis, he was appointed in 2005 as chairman of the St. Louis Board of Election Commissioners by Missouri Gov. Matt Blunt. A year later, Blunt named Martin as his chief of staff. In 2007, however, Martin resigned, having been found to have hidden personal and political emails from the public. The emails showed he had “turned the office into a political operation, using his position to galvanize special-interest groups on issues such as abortion and the judiciary,” the [Post-Dispatch later reported](#).

In 2010, Martin ran for Congress, with Hoft’s flattering support – [“Awful Liberals Turn Classy Ed Martin Into Vulgar Sexual Display.”](#) When he lost, Hoft’s headline offered a foreshadowing of things to come: [“Tea Party Protesters Flock to St. Louis Board of Elections After St. Louis Dem Machine Dumps Suspect Ballots at Midnight to Steal Race from Ed Martin.”](#)

In 2012 Martin lost another race for political office, but the next year got elected as chairman of the Missouri Republican Party. His enthusiasm there for the Tea Party, however, may have cost the group donors; the Post-Dispatch reported that when Martin took the job, the organization had a surplus.

When he resigned, in 2015, it was in [debt](#).

But Martin landed on his feet. He soon [succeeded Phyllis Schlafly](#) as president of the Eagle Forum.

Commonly referred to in the media as an “Alton (Ill.) housewife,” Schlafly did indeed live in Alton for decades after she married. But her life was actually bracketed by her years in St. Louis and St. Louis County. She grew up in the city, attending public and parochial schools as well as Washington University. And after her husband, Fred, died in 1993, she bought a home in Ladue, where she lived until her death in 2016.

Her impact cannot be overstated, according to Harvard professor Jill Lepore.

“If the wrenching polarization that would later bring the Republic to the brink of a second civil war has a leading engineer, that engineer was Schlafly,” Lepore wrote in her 2018 book, *These Truths: a History of the United States*. By turning the party against the Equal Rights Amendment and abortion, she transformed the once-moderate Republican Party into the image of her hero, Arizona Sen. Barry Goldwater. In the end, she was “one of the most influential women in the history of American politics.”

For decades, it is worth noting, rumors abounded that Schlafly had been a member of the far-right John Birch Society. Richard Dudman of the *Post-Dispatch* wrote in 1965, for example, that Schlafly “denies that she is a member of the John Birch Society, although its founder and head, Robert Welch, called her ‘a very loyal member of the John Birch Society’ in the organization’s bulletin for March 1960.” In 2020, an independent researcher [reported newly uncovered evidence](#) that Schlafly had dropped her membership because she feared knowledge of her association would hurt Goldwater’s 1964 presidential campaign.

In any case, Schlafly's legacy lives on in the St. Louis area.

After her death, a legal battle broke out between Schlafly's adult children, centered in part on Martin's influence over their mother in the months before her death. A schism ensued. One daughter, Annie Schlafly Cori, who opposed Martin, now runs the Alton-based [Eagle Forum](#). Although it's the namesake of the organization her mother ran, it appears to be only a shadow of what it once was, with little online presence and assets of only \$1.1 million at the end of 2020.

Three of Annie's brothers, however – John, Bruce, and Andrew Schlafly – were loyal to Martin and are now officers or board members in at least three organizations that also lay claim to their mother's name and legacy. These are the [Phyllis Schlafly Eagles](#), based in Alton, and the Eagle Forum Education & Legal Defense Fund and America's Future, Inc, both based at 7800 Bonhomme Avenue in Clayton. The Clayton address is a two-story brick building which also houses other Schlafly-related operations and which the organization refers to as the Phyllis Schlafly Center. Serving as treasurer of all three organizations is John F. Schlafly, an attorney. He and his brother Bruce, an orthopedic surgeon, both live in the St. Louis area.

Martin, despite having [moved](#) to Virginia in 2016, is president of all three Schlafly entities.

Under the umbrella of the Schlafly organizations, Martin started a podcast in 2018 that is now known as "The ProAmerica Report with Ed Martin." On [Dec. 23, 2020, he featured as his guest Ali Alexander](#). And as he did on many occasions in the weeks before Jan. 6, Alexander invoked violence: "We've got to punch the left in the nose and we've got to stop being nice about it," Alexander told Martin's audience.

Martin, however, was more than a platform for Alexander: He

was a Jan. 6 player in his own right. The House Select Committee investigating the events of Jan. 6 has identified the former St. Louisan as an “organizer, both individually and through your organization, the Phyllis Schlafly Eagles, of the Stop the Steal (“STS”) movement.”

Several of the Eagles’ staff people, including the Eagles’ directors of research and communications as well as the producer of Martin’s podcast, work at the 7800 Bonhomme Avenue location. Ryan Hite, the communications director (and former communications director for the Senatorial campaign of Todd Akin), was listed as the contact on a [Dec. 29 press release](#) the Center issued promoting the Jan. 6 rally – a release that specifically identifies Martin as “co-founder of Stop the Steal 2020.” The release also said that John Schlafly would speak at the event.

There is no evidence that he did. But John and his brother Andy did write in their [Dec. 29, 2020](#) weekly column, that Vice President Mike Pence “has ample basis for declining to accept and open Electoral votes from contested states” and should do so.

Like Martin, John Schlafly is no stranger to the publisher of the Gateway Pundit. Hoft introduced Schlafly as a [speaker at the Eagle Council meeting](#) in 2018. Schlafly also spoke at a [2019 rally in Clayton](#) organized by Hoft in support of Trump’s border wall.

The GJR sent Hite a list of questions related to Martin and John Schlafly and the events of Jan. 6. He did not respond. Separately, the GJR reached out to Schlafly. He also did not respond.

Hoft, in an interview with GJR last April, said he had attended the rally because he had been invited by Stop the Steal and wanted to hear Trump speak but left before the violence. He called that violence “outrageous” and “wrong.”

Asked who he thought had been responsible for it, he said, “I do believe that some violence was Antifa,” but “I’m not the person who is going to tell you they did all the damage there. I don’t believe that.”

Nonetheless, searches for Gateway Pundit stories about the violence turn up only pieces like [this one](#), alleging government use of flash bombs and rubber bullets to provoke the “peaceful protesters,” and calling those arrested for the violence [“political prisoners.”](#) Hoft has also set up a new website, AmericanGulag.org, “to provide sunshine and publicity to the scores of political prisoners wrongfully imprisoned as a result of the protest on January 6th.”

In the months after Jan. 6, Hoft’s fortunes continued to boom. Even in November, 2021, a full year out from the election, his site had nearly 29 million visits, the analytics firm [Similarweb reported](#). That compared with 5.3 million for stltoday.com.

Similarweb estimated the Gateway Pundit’s annual revenues at \$10 million to \$15 million; an online advertising expert consulted by the GJR offered a slightly lower \$8 million to \$12 million. After expenses for buying his own advertising on other ad networks, Hoft, who is the Gateway Pundit’s sole owner, probably realizes annual earnings in the range of \$1 million to \$3 million, the expert said. This person asked not to be identified for fear of reprisals by readers of the Gateway Pundit.

Hoft’s legal woes, however, are apparently mounting.

Across the country, 25 workers in the 2020 election had been targeted for violence by people who cited pieces they’d read about them on Hoft’s site, [Reuters reported](#). Some of them sued.

One was Eric Coomer, the security chief for Denver-based Dominion Voting Systems. He said he’d received death threats

and had had to go into hiding after Hoft wrote a story accusing him of having personally guaranteed Antifa members that Dominion election machines had been rigged to elect Biden. Hoft was [deposed](#) in that case last Sept. 17.

During that deposition, one of Coomer's attorneys asked Hoft: "You have no evidence that Dr. Coomer interfered with the 2020 presidential election; right?"

"Correct," Hoft answered.

Hoft also acknowledged to the attorney that he had not reached out to Coomer or his employer before accusing either. He said he'd based his initial pieces on a social media post by another far-right activist, Joe Ortmann, who is also a defendant in the suit Coomer filed, along with the Trump campaign, Giuliani, Sidney Powell, One America News and Newsmax, among others.

This past Dec. 2, [two Georgia election workers also sued Hoft and his identical twin brother, Joe](#), who contributes to his website from his home in Miami, in St. Louis Circuit Court. The two workers, a mother and daughter, also claimed defamation, and said they too had received death threats, as well as other forms of online and in-person harassment and abuse. The suit was brought by a collaboration of attorneys including St. Louis-based Dowd Bennett, and signed by, among others, Dowd Bennett attorneys James Bennett, John Danforth and Matt Ampleman.

Postscripts:

Hoft is not the only figure in this story who may face legal jeopardy. Here are some of the others.

Ed Martin [got a subpoena](#) from the Jan. 6 committee. On his very active Twitter account he has complained that the House investigation has been politicized and should itself be investigated.

Ali Alexander also got a subpoena and has been deposed by the House Jan. 6 committee. He has not been charged with a crime in the case and has denied working with anyone to attack the Capitol, CNN has reported. In early April he said he had received another subpoena, this time to appear before the grand jury the Justice Department is using to investigate Jan. 6.

Steve Bannon got a subpoena from Congress but ignored it, leading to a charge of contempt of Congress. His daily podcast, "Bannon's War Room," became one of the main purveyors of the big lie, according to [this](#) and other reports. Hoft has been a frequent guest. Hawley appeared in May to discuss his book.

Timmy Teepell, who describes himself in the first line of his [biography](#) as "lead consultant" in Hawley's successful 2018 race for Senate, remains a partner at the Alexandria, Va.-based political consulting firm of OnMessage Inc.

Teepell's connection with Hawley has renewed salience in part because last November, Giffords, the gun safety group founded by former Congresswoman Gabby Giffords, [sued the Josh Hawley for Senate campaign](#) in federal court in Washington, along with two affiliates of the National Rifle Association (NRA) and another defendant.

The suit asserted that OnMessage had "evade(d) campaign finance regulations by using a series of shell corporations to illegally but surreptitiously coordinate advertising with at least seven candidates for federal office," including Arkansas Sen. Tom Cotton, Wisconsin Sen. Ron Johnson, and Trump as well as Hawley. The suit said the scheme enabled OnMessage to funnel as much as \$35 million from the NRA to these candidates since 2014. Some of the Hawley advertising ran on KMOV-TV (Channel 4 in St. Louis), the complaint said.

The complaint said an organization based in Alexandria, Va.

used the name “OnMessage” when it developed ads and media strategy for the candidates, but “Starboard” when it did the same things for the NRA. And in placing those ads for the politicians and the NRA, it used two more names. But the suit said the leadership for all the organizations were the same people – and two of them were Teepell and Brad Todd, one of his partners at OnMessage and Starboard who had also been active in Hawley’s 2018 campaign.

Neither Teepell, Todd nor OnMessage is named as a defendant. But in naming the Hawley campaign, it says: “In 2018, Josh Hawley for Senate accepted contributions of up to \$973,411 from NRA-PVF (one of the NRA affiliates) in the form of coordinated expenditures ...” Both the acceptance of the funds and the failure to report them represented violations of federal election laws, the complaints said, for which Hawley and the other defendants should pay an “appropriate civil penalty.”

The Hawley campaign filed Jan. 21 to have the case dismissed. If that motion is rejected, however, the discovery phase could provide considerably more information, the Giffords lawyer said, because the complaint has been based to date entirely on public documents.

Meanwhile, Rep. Vicky Hartzler, another Republican senate candidate, hired OnMessage last summer to help her in her campaign for the Republican nomination for Missouri Senator. The Washington Examiner [reported](#) that the OnMessage executives who would be working with her would include Teepell and Todd. Hawley has endorsed Hartzler for senator.

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