

Why Matt Gaetz promised Trump he was 'standing back and standing by'

It's about cultivating a movement primed for extralegal action.

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Rep. [Matt Gaetz's](#) entire political brand revolves around provocation. But even by his usual standards, the Florida Republican's post on X on Thursday was genuinely surprising. Gaetz published a photo of himself and other congressional Republicans standing behind [Donald Trump at his criminal trial](#) in New York, with the former president blurry in the foreground and Gaetz in focus in the background, staring gamely at the camera. Alongside the photo ran the words "Standing back and standing by, Mr. President."

Gaetz's caption echoes Trump's infamous response when asked in a 2020 presidential debate whether he would condemn white supremacist and militia groups. "Proud Boys, stand back and stand by," Trump said. The Proud Boys took Trump's words as a signal of approval: The extremist group's members [reportedly called it "historic"](#) and viewed it as an endorsement of their violent tactics. A Proud Boys Telegram channel [posted the phrases](#) "Stand Back" and "Stand By" above and below the group's logo in the channel. Less than six months later, the Proud Boys were integral to organized efforts to storm the U.S. Capitol during the Jan. 6 insurrection.

Now Gaetz is reviving the phrase as Trump's Manhattan trial enters its fourth week of proceedings. Gaetz isn't a Proud Boy, nor should one expect to see him rush the courthouse in an attempt to induce a favorable verdict. But the broader insinuation is clear — that Trump should view his supporters as ready to intervene by any means possible to protect him, including breaking the law.

One way we're seeing this manifest is the way Trump has begun to rely on Republican allies to circumvent the gag order he's under during his trial. As my colleague Hayes Brown recently [explained](#), Trump has leaned on his allies as de facto surrogates in a manner that might violate the law:

Republican officials have queued up outside the courtroom to take the swipes that Trump can't risk anymore. They have included attacks on [Judge Juan] Merchan's daughter, a political consultant who has worked for Democrats, whom Trump railed against before a revised gag order prohibited attacks on the judge's family. They've also pilloried the witness testifying this week, former Trump fixer Michael Cohen, in ways that would see Trump in hot water with the judge.

As Brown notes, it's unclear whether or not Trump will continue to get away with this, since he's banned from directing others to violate his gag order, yet it's difficult to prove if

he is. But the spirit of this phenomenon is already evident: Trump's allies are seemingly helping Trump defy a judge's order, toward the end of delegitimizing the trial and influencing its outcome. It's all predicated on an outright disdain for the criminal justice system if it threatens their movement's power.

More broadly, Gaetz is signaling to the conservative movement as a whole that it should continue to embrace the sentiment behind the "stand back, stand by" directive. He is actively inviting everyone on the right to view themselves as a militia on behalf of Trump, willing to use force to bend society to their movement's will. Trump's language at that 2020 debate wasn't a warning to his base that it should avoid violence or renounce its authoritarian impulses but that it be *strategic* about it. One of those strategic moments was Jan. 6, 2021. It's unclear when the next one will be, but we know that Trump's allies are actively preparing the base for it.