

# Stop the Steal

## *The Insurgence: Sheriffs—Season 1, Episode 6*

**CLIP** STOP THE STEAL! STOP THE STEAL. STOP THE STEAL.

**CLOEE:** What you just heard is a clip from the January 6, 2021, Insurrection. J6, as we will refer to it from here on, was all over the news, all done out in the open.

**CLOEE:** In the aftermath of J6, members of CSPOA's longtime partner, the Oath Keepers, publicly faced convictions of seditious conspiracy for their role planning and executing the breach of the Capitol. The organization and their leaders were named all over the news. And they kept using their now infamous phrase:

**CLIP** STOP THE STEAL! STOP THE STEAL. STOP THE STEAL.

**CLOEE:** Meanwhile CSPOA is playing another role. A more covert one. Fanning the flames of voter fraud, and sowing further distrust in democratic elections.

**CLOEE:** For instance, Sheriff Dar Leaf of Barry County Michigan, who serves on the board of the CSPOA. He also appeared onstage at an anti-mask rally in 2020 with [members of a militia group known as the Wolverine Watchmen](#). They were later prosecuted for an attempted plot to kidnap Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer, a Democrat.

**CLOEE:** Sheriff Dar Leaf has [been investigating voter fraud in his small county in Michigan since 2020, all with the legal help of a pro-Trump lawyer](#). He says lawyers came to him indicating there were signs of voter fraud in his county, a county that normally votes Republican which overwhelmingly voted in favor of Trump.

**CLOEE:** Dar Leaf's [investigation](#) into this unfounded claim of voter fraud had been rejected in the courts. But, as the Barry county clerk notes, his efforts seem to be more about creating a sense of doubt over the integrity of the *entire* election process.

**CLIP** "I believe that they are using Barry county as a template to see if these voting machines have the ability to switch votes... in other words, Republican to Democrat."

**CLOEE:** This is Michigan's Barry County Clerk Pam Palmer in 2022.

**CLIP** "We did nothing wrong. It's put a cloud over our entire county with people wondering if their votes are gonna really count, if their votes are gonna make a difference. And they ask me and my township clerks what we're gonna do

different. And the answer is, we aren't gonna do anything different. We ran a perfect election."

**CLOEE:** The Barry county sheriff Dar Leaf's investigation was backed by multi-million dollar right-wing efforts, including a non-profit whose goal was to investigate so-called voter fraud. And it may have provided a blueprint for sheriffs in other parts of the country.

**CLOEE:** All this, against the backdrop of the historical and current efforts of right-wing, white supremacist, and anti-democratic actors in the U.S. to limit and suppress the vote.

**CLOEE:** Particularly for women and people of color and in areas where demographic changes threaten party interests. What's next, and what role is CSPOA playing in the battle to roll back civil rights, and back an ultra-nationalist and right-wing Christian project, by undermining elections?

**CLOEE:** I'm Cloee Cooper and you're listening to The Insurgence: Sheriffs. Episode VI, Stop the Steal.

**CLOEE:** Take a moment right now to recommend this series to someone who'd love to listen to it.

**CLOEE:** We're back at a gathering in Las Vegas with Sheriffs. But now... it's [July 2022](#). [CSPOA](#) is partnering with [True the Vote](#) to investigate voter fraud at the county level.

**CLOEE:** Following the election of former President Barack Obama, True the Vote was founded by then-tea party activist Catherine Engelbrecht. It became a multi-million-dollar non-profit organization after false claims of voter fraud following the 2020 election. The organization has since been [embroiled](#) in lawsuits for [allegations of mass voter intimidation of Black and brown voters in Georgia](#). And for [using non-profit funds for personal gains](#).

**CLOEE:** And back at the CSPOA gathering in 2022, True the Vote had just come around to seeing the powerful role of some *particular* elected officials in pursuing their efforts:

"It's the sheriffs. That's who we can trust."

**CLOEE:** Catherine Engelbrecht explained the role she hopes sheriffs will play in a recent interview with a Christian Right leader, discussing plans for the 2024 elections:

**CLIP** "And so what we are doing at True the Vote is taking it an extra step and working with sheriffs to identify areas that sheriffs would be willing to allow us to grant them camera equipment that then they can monitor and we can livestream"

**CLOEE:** Sheriffs... playing a role in monitoring the elections? Mary McCord, who we heard from back in episode 2, explained how the widespread claims of election fraud are baseless.

**Mary McCord:** And there was just no there, there. As we all know, every single claim of election fraud was basically thrown out of court, more than 60 cases in 2020, yet the false narrative about election fraud continues.

**CLOEE:** [Nearly a third of Americans, and about two thirds of Republicans, continue to believe that Biden did not legitimately win the 2020 election.](#) And True the Vote has continued to cast doubt over election integrity in the lead up to the 2024 elections. The small but loyal network of CSPOA are key allies.

**CLOEE:** Two years after the 2022 Las Vegas convention with True the Vote, CSPOA held its annual conference right back in Las Vegas in the spring of 2024. It had some of the same players in the room. But the group's primary focus had turned to countering so-called election fraud. Here's Alex Newman of the John Birch Society introducing -- Wayne Allyn Root, a right wing talk show host, who had a few things to say about their election plans...

**Alex Newman:** Coming up next, a real treat. We have with us Wayne Allyn Root. He's known by his initials War. The national media calls him the conservative warrior. The Daily Beast calls him the Donald Trump of Las Vegas. Stephen Bannon calls him the original organized gangster for Trump and the MAGA movement.

**Wayne Allyn Root:** So I'm telling you, when you ask why are the borders open, they're open because they want every one of them to vote and drown out the massive landslide that's forming right now for President Donald J. Trump. Cause he's gonna win by a landslide with real votes, but whether the end result will be a win will be determined by how much cheating and rigging and whether the election is completely stolen or not.

**CLOEE:** Wayne Allyn Root explicitly referenced the Great Replacement Theory -- [the white nationalist idea](#) -- that white Americans and Europeans are being actively "replaced" by non-white immigrants. The argument was made by Root to motivate sheriffs to defend what they call "election integrity."

**Wayne Allyn Root:** They want to replace American citizens who love the country with people who have no love for the country. And of course it's a great replacement. They're almost all military age males.

**CLOEE:** He's referring here to undocumented people -- [a debunked and unfounded claim](#) that there are widespread cases of undocumented immigrants illegally voting in elections, and rigging the vote in favor of Democrats.

**CLOEE:** This rhetoric has dangerously reverberated throughout right-wing echo chambers --including in [Trump's very own speech](#) ahead of the January 6 insurrection. The former

National Security Advisor to the U.S. during the Trump Administration, Michael Flynn, added his take...

**Michael Flynn:** So now we have the United States of America, we have the leading opposition candidate in the name of Donald J. Trump. They just throw these things at him, these accusations and these allegations. And it's clearly election interference. This country is at really severe risk. We are at severe risk.

**CLOEE:** And then, there was Barry county Sheriff Dar Leaf of Michigan. The same sheriff you've been hearing about this episode...

**Dar Leaf:** So, we're not quitting.

**CLOEE:** ...who was lifted up as a model by the CSPOA.

**Dar Leaf:** Usually when we get something that is potentially the greatest fraud ever committed on to the American people ever, usually you'd have an Attorney General asking if they could help. Not this one. It was weird, I've never seen anything like it before in my career. Keep chugging, keep, keep charging the castle. Thank you.

**CLOEE:** He has since become the subject of a state investigation for tampering with [voting tabulators](#).

**CLOEE:** The particular role sheriffs were playing in fanning the flames of this election conspiracy, a role which is relatively new for the county sheriff, caught the attention of Jessica Pishko. She's a lawyer and the author of "The Highest Law in the Land: How the Unchecked Power of Sheriffs Threatens Democracy."

**Jessica Pishko:** True the Vote is training all these sort of vigilante groups that are like policing ballot rolls and policing drop boxes, etc etc. Now this is all coming, of course, at a time at which states have made it actually harder to vote.

**CLOEE:** Some of the concern is sheriffs drumming up local distrust in elections which could lead to marginalized communities not turning up to vote, particularly in red or rural counties.

**Jessica Pishko:** I think part of what the goal, honestly, of this move is to like generate a chaos such that people are worried about voting.

**CLOEE:** And Jessica recalls a case where militias did exactly that.

**Jessica Pishko:** [So, for example, in Yuma County, Arizona, a group of Latina women were, in fact, investigated by the sheriff, who got a tip from vigilantes.](#) These vigilantes had filmed and sent to the sheriff, which the sheriff then

investigated, knocked on doors in a Spanish speaking community and arrested people who did go to jail.

**Jessica Pishko:** They've always reported on people who are recent immigrants, people who don't speak English as a first language, people of color, people who are Black, people who are sympathetic to anti racism.

**CLOEE:** This is the concern. Including intimidation of inmates who are eligible to vote. Jessica highlighted such a case in Texas, where a Black woman [named Crystal Mason, who had been caught up in the system, was](#) attempting to cast a vote during the 2016 presidential election. She was initially convicted and then released. But the public scrutiny exacerbated a sense that the democratic system isn't built for people who have been historically disenfranchised.

**Jessica Pishko:** I think this is a great concern. I mean, we see people afraid. Everyone I've talked to who is formerly incarcerated don't want to vote. Because they're afraid of what happened to Crystal Mason. She was prosecuted, she was sentenced to years in prison for a mistake. These people don't want to go back to prison. I think this is very real and will continue to go on because honestly, the laws are designed and the system is designed such that there's very little to stop it.

**CLOEE:** Not only is there very little to stop it. There are more people that are being empowered to enforce intimidation.

**Jessica Pishko:** To me, the posse and the militia is like expanding the franchise of who gets the privilege of law enforcement to more people, right? It's mostly white guys, former military, former cops. This is becoming increasingly popular, I think for two reasons. One is that, um, It becomes really popular in a time when people don't have money. So, like the first thing is like, posses are free and everyone will tell you a posse's free and we love free stuff. And so you get people to be cops for free. What could be better?

**CLOEE:** And this is where it gets even more sinister. Stay with me for a moment while I explain. While sheriff's advocacy in favor of voter fraud might intimidate some people from voting, for groups in the right wing and MAGA ecosystem, it results in invitations for collaboration. The Claremont Institute is one of the leading MAGA-think tanks in the country. And in 2021, they started a sheriff fellowship, [drawing on CSPOA-affiliated sheriffs](#). In 2022, the sheriff we were talking about, Dar Leaf from Michigan, was selected as a fellow at the Claremont Institute's sheriff fellowship.

**CLOEE:** Jessica reported on Dar Leaf's application, which noted that quote "the Civil Rights Act is racist," and that "this form of government is communism on steroids."

**CLOEE:** The Institute's stated goals are to train law enforcement in quote "American political thought, from the country's top constitutional experts and political theorists". They saw something strategic, particularly in county sheriffs. Pishko explained.

**Jessica Pishko:** I mean I think they realized a few things, I think one, they realized that sheriffs were just far more likely to be right wing. They were far more likely to be immensely popular in rural areas, right? So 80 percent of counties voted for Trump. Which doesn't mean 80 percent of people voted for Trump. Sheriffs are going to be as a whole, more Republican, more conservative, more likely to be white and male, more likely to hold ideas that are, you know, really conservative, far to the right, really pro gun, really anti diversity, anti DEI, as they would say now, right? Anti Black Lives Matter.

**CLOEE:** These are all indeed characteristics that are generally true of sheriffs. But sheriffs are also a critical symbol of the American West...

**Jessica Pishko:** Um, the second thing is sheriffs are very good at this, and this is in their history, is that they're opening the franchise of who's a law enforcement to more and more armed white men.

**Jessica Pishko:** So sort of like everybody is a vigilante and if they open up the space of who can be law enforcement, the more people they can police. One scholar calls them like super citizens. They can claim to be like better citizens than the rest of us.

**CLOEE:** They are the establishment that *almost* represents the anti-establishment. No rules. No oversight. But also, in counties in the West where sheriffs have declining budgets, it becomes at their discretion who to deputize as their citizen militias, their posses.

**CLOEE:** The Claremont Institute continued their fellowship and in 2023 selected Sheriff Dan Coverley of Douglas county. Yes, you've heard his name before. This is the same sheriff who stood by while militia and people in the town of Minden violently ran Black Lives Matter protesters out of town in 2020. The story we highlighted in episode 1.

**CLOEE:** And, just to give you a window into the kinds of sheriffs the Claremont fellowship recruited, there's also the Yavapai County [Sheriff David Rhodes of Arizona](#). He had become well known for meeting with a local Oath Keepers group. Who later claimed that the sheriff had given them permission to assemble small militias to monitor ballot drop boxes during the 2022 midterm elections.

**CLOEE:** It might not be a surprise then that in 2024, The Claremont Institute partnered in a plan you may have heard of at this point in the lead up to the election...

**CLIP** "And let's talk about PROJECT 2025..."

**CLOEE:** Project 2025, the Heritage Foundation plan that has been backed by dozens of right wing organizations – was also backed by the Claremont Institute. The plan explicitly seeks to centralize power in the executive branch, gut the public sector, and advance a plan many call a blueprint for authoritarianism.



**CLOEE:** There was a throughline here.

**Devin Burghardt:** Their focus so far has been on voter irregularities, voter fraud, undocumented immigrants voting in elections, those types of things.

**CLOEE:** Devin Burghardt, the executive director at the Institute for Research and Education on Human Rights has been researching far-right groups for over 20 years. And he recently came across CSPOA's latest plan to sow doubt in the upcoming elections... with a specific case being built in Florida.

**Devin Burghardt:** All of the right wing, conservative conspiracies going on about elections right now are all things that they're going to use as justifications to argue that an election isn't free and fair and therefore take action on them.

**CLOEE:** Just this past summer, Devin published a brief [report](#) on CSPOA's plan to intimidate elections in Florida. By creating citizen militias to pressure election clerks, supervisors, and elected officials at the county level.

**Devin Burghardt:** In this case, in the case of Florida now. The first stage is building out the base or building out local posses. In the second phase, they discussed building out their spheres of influence.

**CLOEE:** Their actual goal?

**Devin Burghardt:** To try to build out a county by county, uh, takeover of the, of the system down there, which they can then use as a kind of national rollout.

**CLOEE:** An insurgency.

**Devin Burghardt:** Those are all things I think that would be in and of themselves worrying.

**CLOEE:** The plan highlights strategies of some of the most far right leaders -- who openly advocate for political violence.

**Devin Burghardt:** The third stage for them is what they call the big event, an attempt to bring in names like Richard Mack and, um, Alex Newman of the John Birch Society... then it's go time, then it's building out these structures and really taking over, uh, county by county.

**Devin Burghardt:** Once they move into that action phase, they say that they're going to put county officials, uh, particularly, uh, Uh, county commissioners and supervisors of election, they're going to put them on notice. So if you're a county commissioner in a local county and you don't agree with the posse you have, there



is the potential that this group could use the force of arms, come in and threaten you to do their bidding and or face one of these potential hearings.

**CLOEE:** By hearings, he is talking about sovereign citizen style tribunals, with armed militias and sheriffs, against election clerks and others involved in certifying the election results. *This is their plan.*

**Devin Burghardt:** You know, if we have a close election, the ability for them to intervene in elections is something, that could be really problematic.

**CLOEE:** If they're successful, Devin told me, their goal is to use this model to roll it out into other states.

**CLOEE:** We have yet to see what they are actually able to put into motion. The plan seeks to organize not only sheriffs who have aligned with CSPOA, but those that have passed local resolutions. To make their county a sanctuary for guns -- sign a local agreement with ICE -- or refuse to enforce lockdown and mask mandates.

**CLOEE:** All in Florida, the same state where the Republican governor has set up [an election-police squad meant to ensure so-called "voting integrity"](#).

**CLOEE:** CSPOA's plans in Florida to organize pressure against election officials at the county level dovetails with other election denial right-wing strategies.

**CLOEE:** In Georgia, for example, right wing groups pushing voter fraud have successfully tipped the election board to a MAGA majority. They ruled that *county level* elected officials have the power to issue an inquiry into the election. One county level elected official could cast doubt and actually throw a wrench into the state's certification process. Which could throw a wrench into the *federal* certification process. If the CSPOA plan were active in Georgia, you could imagine what this could look like.

**CLOEE:** The CSPOA claims to uphold the Constitution, a document that many civil rights activists have also championed. But, what does this word really mean to them when they use it?

**Devin Burghardt:** And what's important is when they talk about the constitution, quote unquote, they talk about the original constitution and the Bill of Rights, what others have called the so-called organic constitution. So in that situation, what's missing? There's a lot in terms of what's missing. It is a more exclusive kind of nationalism that excludes People of color, for instance, you don't have the 13th, 14th and 15th amendments, post civil war, amendments that remove slavery and provide due process.

**Devin Burghardt:** It doesn't include things like the 17th Amendment, which provides for the direct election of US senators and the expansion of democracy. Doesn't include the 19th Amendment, which gives women the right to vote. It



doesn't include the memo, which lowers the voting age to 18. It is a backwards looking, narrowing of who is an American. And that kind of definitional fight is really at the core of what groups like CSPOA are all about trying to redefine America to look more like something back in 1791 than it does in 2024.

**CLOEE:** It seemed like Devin had summed it up.

**CLOEE:** J6 was an insurrection. The outside agitators coming into the nation's Capitol. But it was only one expression of what is some kind of larger insurgence. One that is organized through the halls of government, and law enforcement. Disrupting it all from the inside out.

**CLOEE:** Sadly, it may not need to take an act of insurrection if the right people are in the right places.

**CLOEE:** Groups like the CSPOA continue to lay the groundwork for a return to a society that looks more like the country before the Native American Voting Rights act, the Civil Rights, suffrage, and the abolition of slavery.

**CLOEE:** It's important to make something abundantly clear. Not *every* sheriff is part of the CSPOA. But what they have demonstrated is that *any* sheriff that wants to create a posse, or undermine state law, at least up until now, can do it. They can... if they want to. And *this...* is what worries me.

**CLOEE:** It must be known in 2024 our society allowed this all to happen. A far right network of sheriffs, mobilizing to unravel civil rights and access to the democratic process in order to defend a white Christian republic.

**CLOEE:** We must keep in mind, this *was* and *is* in fact, not happening in places far away from us. And it has been *happening* under our *very* noses. It's actively happening and it has *been* for a long time...

**CLOEE:** In sundown towns, with sheriffs standing by as armed militias kick people out of town.

**CLOEE:** In land takeovers, where ranchers that idolize sheriffs are killed, while access to land remains limited.

**CLOEE:** In immigration raids, with sheriffs enforcing who *they think* belongs and who *they say* deserves to live on the land.

**CLOEE:** In county jails, where unspeakable conditions persist, while sheriffs cannot be held accountable.



**CLOEE:** And all over the country, with lies spread by people crying wolf, fanning false claims of voter fraud.

**CLOEE:** Since 2012, this particular network of sheriffs has spread its influence to new corners of the country. At times creating fissures among those that enforce the law. In ways that could contribute to further conflict. Something like a new confederacy.

**CLOEE:** The CSPOA sheriffs, with their five star badges, and their cowboy hats, are fighting to protect and defend a certain type of society that preserves the rights and sanctity of some.

**CLOEE:** We all deserve better.

## **CREDITS**

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