

Public Safety

Four alleged members of hate group charged in 2017 'Unite the Right' rally in Charlottesville

By [Paul Duggan](#)

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Four California men, all alleged members of an organized hate group, were arrested Tuesday and charged with violating a federal rioting law in connection with last year's white-supremacist rally in Charlottesville that erupted in deadly mayhem.

Authorities described the suspects as members of a militant, racist and anti-Semitic group known as the Rise Above Movement, based in Southern California. The four were arrested by FBI agents and charged with one count each of violating a federal rioting statute and conspiring to violate it. Each offense is punishable by up to five years in prison.

Calling the men "serial rioters," Thomas T. Cullen, the U.S. attorney for the Western District of Virginia, said the Rise Above group "organizes, trains and deploys to various political rallies not only to espouse" hateful ideology "but also to engage in acts of violence against folks who are taking a contrary point of view."

Cullen called the suspects "righteous targets for federal prosecution," adding that "this wasn't, in our view, the lawful exercise of First Amendment rights." Referring to the Aug. 12, 2017, rally, he said the men "came to Charlottesville in order to commit violent acts."

The four were identified as Benjamin D. Daley, 25, and Thomas W. Gillen, 34, both of Redondo Beach, Calif.; Michael P. Miselis, 29, of Lawndale, Calif.; and Cole E. White, 34, of Clayton, Calif. A criminal complaint alleges they carried out multiple assaults against counterprotesters during the Charlottesville demonstration.

It was unclear Tuesday whether they are being represented yet by lawyers.

The rally, dubbed "Unite the Right" by organizers, descended into a day-long scene of violent clashes involving hundreds of white supremacists and counterprotesters. The mayhem riveted the nation's attention on the recently emboldened subculture of ethno-nationalists in the United States.

The demonstration was nominally focused on Charlottesville's public statue of Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee, which the city wants to remove. A lawsuit filed by Confederate-heritage enthusiasts months

before the rally has prevented the city from getting rid of the sculpture. A trial in the civil case is set for January.

Amid the violence that day, a self-professed neo-Nazi allegedly rammed his car into another vehicle on a crowded street, killing a counterprotester, Heather Heyer, 32, and injuring 35 other people.

James Alex Fields Jr., now 21, is awaiting trial in a Virginia court on numerous charges, including first-degree murder, and has been charged by federal authorities with multiple hate crimes, one of which carries a possible death sentence. Investigators said Fields had traveled to Charlottesville from his Ohio home.

In announcing Tuesday's arrests, Cullen, whose office is prosecuting Fields, said federal authorities are not done probing the Unite the Right violence.

"We're going to continue these investigations until we reach a point where we're satisfied that our federal interest has been vindicated," he said. Anyone who "incited or committed acts of violence" at the rally is "potentially a subject of a federal criminal investigation and federal charges."

The complaint unsealed Tuesday said the Rise Above Movement "promotes 'clean living,' physical fitness and mixed martial arts street fighting techniques." It said the group "regularly meets in public parks in the Southern California area and trains in physical fitness, boxing and other fighting techniques," then employs those techniques at public demonstrations to further its hateful ideology.

FBI Agent Dino P. Cappuzzo wrote in the complaint that the group "regularly posts photos of themselves posing shirtless and wearing skull masks," with the group's initials, R.A.M., superimposed on the photos.

Members of the group "openly identify themselves on various social media platforms as 'alt-right' and 'nationalist,'" Cappuzzo wrote, "and frequently post videos and photographs of its adherents engaged in vigorous physical training . . . to prepare to engage in fighting and violence at political rallies."

The complaint said that videos and photos from the day of the rally, reviewed by investigators, show Daley, Gillen, Miselis and White committing several acts of violence in Charlottesville.

White-nationalist figures Richard Spencer and Jason Kessler, both University of Virginia graduates, organized the weekend events just over a year ago, including a Friday-night tiki-torch march before the Saturday demonstration.

The parade was marked by racist and homophobic slurs and chants such as "Jews will not replace us!" and "Our blood, our soil!"

The demonstrators on that Saturday, many armed with guns, clubs and bats, met opposition from community members and anti-fascist protesters. Clashes soon erupted across the city. Law enforcement

did not act immediately to break up altercations and stood by while groups battled in front of them.

As the marchers and counterprotesters dispersed, there were isolated incidents of violence.

The impact of the weekend's events was magnified when President Trump asserted that the white supremacists and those who protested against them both deserved blame.

Dozens of the white supremacists taking part in the rally wore red Make America Great Again hats and were vocal in their support of Trump. At an afternoon news conference on the day of the rioting, Trump condemned "this egregious display of hatred, bigotry and violence on many sides. On many sides."

David Duke, a former Ku Klux Klan leader and a Trump supporter who was in Charlottesville for the Unite the Right rally, replied to the president, writing, "I would recommend you take a good look in the mirror & remember it was White Americans who put you in the presidency, not radical leftists."

Later that week, Trump further angered critics when he said that there were "some very fine people" among those who took part in the torchlight procession through the U-Va. campus and the rally.

Rachel Weiner contributed to this report.

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Paul Duggan



Paul Duggan has been a staff writer for The Washington Post since 1987. He specializes in crime and justice issues but also has written extensively about housing problems in Washington, particularly the impact of gentrification. He is a former general assignment reporter, assignment editor and national correspondent for The Post. Follow [🐦](#)

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