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Trump Officials Attended a Summit of Election Deniers Who Want the President to Take Over the Midterms

di Doug Bock Clark

The meeting's participants included Kurt Olsen, a White House lawyer charged with reinvestigating the 2020 election, and Heather Honey, the Department of Homeland Security official in charge of election integrity.

Several high-ranking federal election officials attended a summit last week at which prominent figures who worked to overturn Donald Trump's loss in the 2020 election pressed the president to declare a national emergency to take over this year's midterms. According to videos, photos and social media posts reviewed by ProPublica, the meeting's participants included Kurt Olsen, a White House lawyer [charged with reinvestigating the 2020 election](#), and Heather Honey, the Department of Homeland Security official in charge of election integrity. The event was convened by Michael Flynn, Trump's [former national security adviser](#), and attended by Cleta Mitchell, who directs the Election Integrity Network, a group that has [spread false claims about election fraud and noncitizen voting](#).

Election experts say that the meeting reflects an [intensifying push](#) to persuade Trump to take unprecedented actions to affect the vote in November. Courts have [largely blocked his efforts](#) to reshape elections through an executive order, and legislation [has stalled](#) in Congress that would mandate strict voter ID requirements across the country. [The Washington Post reported](#) Thursday that activists associated with those at the summit have been circulating a draft of an executive order that would ban mail-in ballots and get rid of voting machines as part of a federal takeover. Peter Ticktin, a lawyer who worked on the executive order and had a client at the summit, told ProPublica these actions were “all part of the same effort.”

The summit followed other meetings and discussions between administration officials and activists — many not previously reported — stretching back to at least last fall, according to emails and recordings obtained by ProPublica. The coordination between those inside and outside the government represents a breakdown of crucial guardrails, experts on U.S. elections said.

“The meeting shows that the same people who tried to overturn the 2020 election have only grown better organized and are now embedded in the machinery of government,” said Brendan Fischer, a director at the Campaign Legal Center, a nonpartisan pro-democracy organization. “This creates substantial risk that the administration is laying the groundwork to improperly reshape elections ahead of the midterms or even go against the will of the voters.”

Five of six federal officials who attended the summit didn’t answer questions about the event from ProPublica.

A White House official, speaking on the condition of anonymity, said federal officials’ attendance at the gathering shouldn’t be construed as support for a national emergency declaration and that it was “common practice” for staffers to communicate with outside advocates who want to share policy ideas. The official pointed to comments Trump made to [PBS News denying](#) he was considering a national emergency or had read the draft executive order. “Any speculation about policies the administration may or may not undertake is just that — speculation,” the official said.

In the past, Trump has [expressed an openness to a federal takeover](#) as a way to stem [projected Republican losses in November](#). This month, he said in an interview with conservative podcaster Dan Bongino that [Republicans need “to take over” elections](#) and “to nationalize the voting.”

Mitchell did not respond to questions from ProPublica about the summit. A spokesperson for Flynn responded to detailed questions from ProPublica by disparaging experts who expressed concerns, texting, “LOL ‘EXPERTS.’”

The [30-person roundtable discussion](#) on Feb. 19, at an office building in downtown Washington, D.C., was sponsored by the Gold Institute for International Strategy, a conservative think tank. Afterward, activists and government officials dined together, photos reviewed by ProPublica showed.

Flynn, the institute's chair, told a social media personality why he'd arranged the event.

"I wanted to bring this group together physically, because most of us have met online" while "fighting battles" in swing states from Arizona to Georgia, Flynn said to [Tommy Robinson](#) on the gathering's sidelines. Robinson [posted videos](#) of these [interactions online](#). "The overall theme of this event was to make sure that all of us aren't operating in our own little bubbles."

Flynn has repeatedly [advocated](#) for Trump to declare a national emergency and [posted on social media](#) after the event addressing Trump, "We The People want fair elections and we know there is only one office in the land that can make that happen given the current political environment in the United States."

Get Involved

Do you have information you can share about conservative activists engaging with federal officials about elections or any of the individuals named in this article? Contact reporter Doug Bock Clark at doug.clark@propublica.org or on Signal at 678-243-0784. If you're concerned about confidentiality, [check out our advice on the most secure ways to share tips](#).

In addition to Olsen and Honey, four other federal officials from agencies that will shape the upcoming elections attended the event. At least four of the six attended the dinner.

One is Clay Parikh, a special government employee at the Office of the Director of National Intelligence [who's helping Olsen with the 2020 inquiry](#). A spokesperson at ODNI said Parikh had attended the summit "in his personal capacity."

Another, Mac Warner, handled [election litigation](#) at [the Justice Department](#). A department spokesperson said that Warner had resigned the day after the event and had not received the required approval from agency ethics officials to participate.

The department "remains committed to upholding the integrity of our electoral system and will continue to prioritize efforts to ensure all elections remain free, fair, and transparent," the spokesperson said in an email.

A third administration official who attended the summit, Marci McCarthy, directs communications for the nation's cyber defense agency, which oversees the security of elections infrastructure like voting machines.

Kari Lake, whom [Trump appointed](#) as senior adviser to the U.S. Agency for Global Media, was a featured speaker. Lake [worked with Olsen and Parikh](#) in her unsuccessful bid to overturn her loss in the 2022 Arizona gubernatorial election.

Lake said in an email that she “showed up to the event, spoke for about 20 minutes about the overall importance of election integrity, a non-partisan issue that matters to all citizens — both in the United States and abroad. I left without listening to any other speeches.”

“Elections should be free from fraud or any other malfeasance that subverts the will of the people,” she added.

At the meeting, activists presented on ways to transform American elections that would help conservatives, according to social media posts and interviews they gave on conservative media, such as LindellTV, a streaming platform created by the pillow mogul Mike Lindell. They said the group broke down into two camps: those who wanted to pursue a more incremental legal and legislative strategy and those who wanted Trump to declare a national emergency.

Multiple activists left the meeting convinced Trump should do the latter, a step they believe would allow the president to get around the Constitution's directive that elections should be run by states.

Former Overstock.com CEO Patrick Byrne, a prominent funder of efforts to overturn the 2020 election, [told LindellTV](#) that Trump has “played nice” so far in not seizing control of American elections. “But at some point,” Byrne said, “he's got to do something, the muscular thing: declare a national emergency.”

Byrne responded to questions from ProPublica by sending a screenshot of a poll that he said suggested “2/3 of Americans correctly do not trust” voting machines, which the proposed national emergency declaration aims to do away with.

Will Huff, who has advocated for doing away with voting machines, [told a conservative vlogger](#) that Olsen, the White House lawyer, and other administration representatives would take the “consensus” from the gathering back to Trump. “It's

got to be a national emergency,” said Huff, the [campaign manager for a Republican candidate](#) for Arkansas secretary of state.

In response to questions from ProPublica, Huff said in an email that Olsen and Trump would use their judgment to decide whether to declare a national emergency.

“The President has been briefed on findings of shortcomings in election infrastructure,” Huff wrote. “I believe there are steady hands around the President wanting to ensure that any action taken is, first, constitutional and legal, but also backed by evidence.”

McCarthy, the cybersecurity official, expressed more general solidarity with fellow attendees in a post on [social media about the summit](#). “Grateful for friendships forged through years of standing shoulder-to-shoulder, united by purpose and conviction,” she wrote. “The mission continues... and so does the fellowship.”



Marci McCarthy, second from left, Heather Honey, fourth from right, and Cleta Mitchell, third from right, were among the conservative activists and officials who attended the summit. McCarthy posted about the event on LinkedIn. Screenshot by ProPublica. Redactions by ProPublica.

Last week’s gathering was the latest in a string of private interactions between conservative election activists and administration officials, according to emails, documents and recordings obtained by ProPublica. Many [have involved](#) Mitchell’s [Election Integrity Network](#). Before taking her government post,

Honey was a leader in the Election Integrity Network, [ProPublica has reported](#), as [was McCarthy](#).

Previously unreported [emails obtained by ProPublica](#) show that just weeks after Honey started at the Department of Homeland Security, she briefed election activists, a Republican secretary of state and another federal official on a conference call arranged [by her former boss](#), Mitchell.

“We are excited to welcome her on our call this morning to hear about her work for election integrity inside DHS,” Mitchell wrote in an email introducing presenters on the call.

Honey didn’t respond to questions from ProPublica about the call. Experts said Honey’s briefing gave her former employer access that likely would have violated ethics rules in place under previous administrations, including the first Trump administration — though not this one.

The prior “ethics guardrails would have prevented some of the revolving door issues we’re seeing between the election denial movement and the government officials,” said Fischer, the Campaign Legal Center director. Those prior rules “were supposed to prevent former employers and clients from receiving privileged access.”