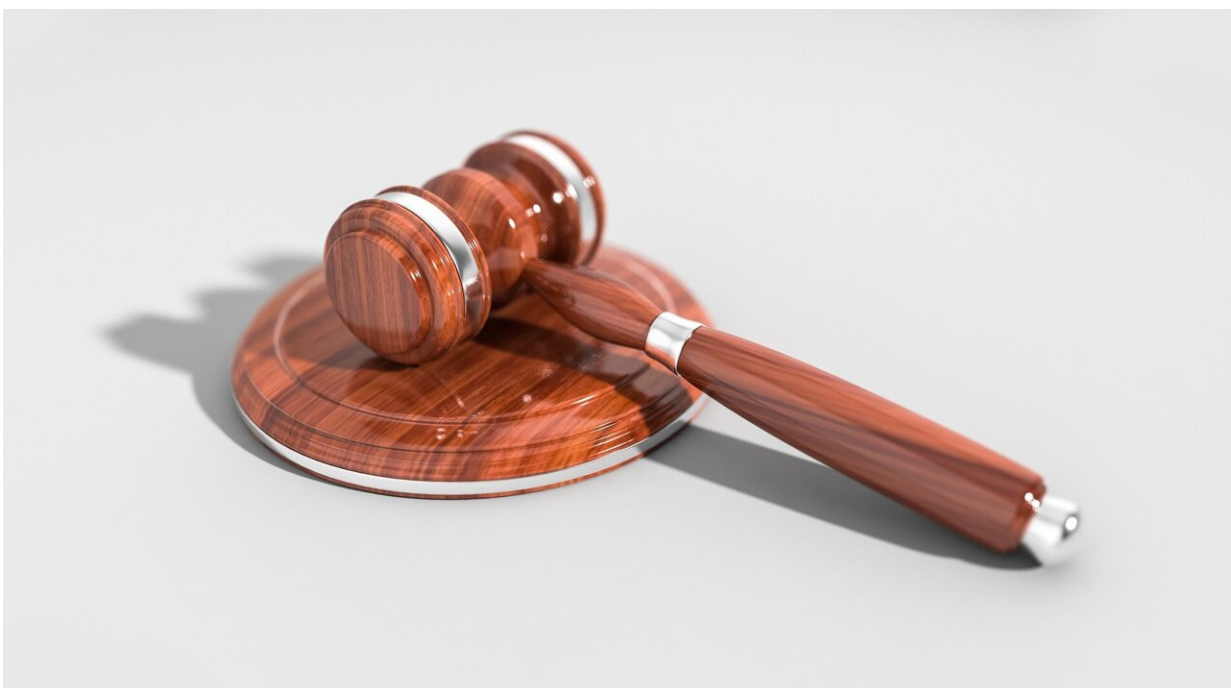


Proud Boys on trial: Does remorse in court signal a change for this far right group? A psychologist reviews the research

September 15 2023, by Geoff Beattie



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When I watched the members of the US far-right group [the Proud Boys](#) from afar before and during the Capitol riots of [January 6 2021](#), I thought their name was quite apt. They always seemed proud—arrogant, even—and entitled.

For observers, the watershed moment in the development of their "pride" came in September 2020, in that now infamous line from then US president Donald Trump, delivered live on television: "Proud Boys, stand [back and stand by](#)." [Some commentators](#) felt that the Proud Boys seemed to view themselves as the "president's army."

But with members of the Proud Boys now facing court cases, verdicts and sentencing, we have different images of them to grapple with—less proud, less arrogant, less entitled. According to NPR, [1,143 people](#) have now been charged in connection to the insurrection and sentenced to a total of 600 years in prison—not including the big players. Enrique Tarrío was sentenced [to 22 years](#) and [Joseph Biggs](#) to 17 years.

These defendants pleaded to the judge for mercy. [According to CNN](#), Biggs sobbed and said, "Please give me the chance, I beg you, to take my daughter to school and pick her up." He argued, "My curiosity got the best of me. I'm not a terrorist ... I'm one of the nicest people [in the world](#)."

An emotional Tarrío [said in court](#), "What happened on January 6 was a national embarrassment. I do not think what happened that day was acceptable," and "I will have to live with that shame for the rest of my life."

So will the Proud Boys just fade away now that their leaders have expressed [remorse](#)? Even Trump seems to have temporarily [abandoned them](#) (but he's got his own problems). Or will they come back stronger and more determined?

Judging remorse

This might well depend on how their behavior in court is interpreted. Was it genuine or just some strategic and covert action?

Research shows [that remorse](#) is a powerful human emotion, capable of overwhelming us with intense feelings of guilt, regret and sorrow.

When we experience remorse, we are confronted with the realization that our actions have caused harm, both to ourselves and others. It is an [emotional response](#) that arises from our deep seated need for social connection and our sense of moral responsibility.

Remorse can drive us to question our values and ethics, forcing us to grapple with the consequences. We may replay the events in our minds over and over again, scrutinizing our actions and analyzing alternative paths.

However, remorse can also serve as a catalyst for change. It forces us to confront our feelings of guilt and regret, compelling us to take responsibility for our actions and seek redemption. It can lead us to question our motivations and beliefs that led to our remorse in the first place.

If the expression of remorse in those courtrooms was genuine, then it could have a profound effect on the rest of the Proud Boys. But remorse, unfortunately, can be [faked](#). Even if the tears were genuine in court, the expressions of remorse might not have been quite so genuine.

Signs of faked remorse

There are certain features that [psychologists](#) look out for in discriminating genuine remorse from faked remorse. Genuine remorse involves understanding and acknowledging the impact of one's actions on others.

A truly remorseful person takes full responsibility for their actions without making excuses or trying to shift the blame. They demonstrate

accountability for their behavior and don't deflect or downplay their role.

Genuine remorse also includes a sincere apology, where the person expresses regret for their actions and the pain caused. A person displaying genuine remorse will also actively seek ways to repair the damage caused.

With these particular defendants, significantly, there was a tendency to downplay what they actually did with respect to the events, rather than to take full responsibility for their actions and the hurt they caused.

[Comments from some of them on social media](#) away from the courtroom suggest that their behavior is not on the cusp of change.

One defendant, Dominic Pezzola, said in court that his actions on January 6 were the "worst and most regrettable of his life," but shouted "Trump won," moments after [he was sentenced](#).

Although these criteria may be useful, any judgment of genuine versus faked remorse is subjective. So much depends on how the defendants come across in court and this is not just highly subjective but prone to a whole series of cognitive biases, including whether you agree with their politics or point of view.

Legal scholar [Susan Bandes](#) from De Paul University argues that judgments of remorse are an important factor in sentencing. Judgments of remorse are often based on [facial expressions](#) and the body language of the defendants and yet, she says, we know little about how accurate this process is.

[Colleen Berryessa](#), who researches [criminal justice](#) and psychology at Rutgers University, investigated a sample of US probation officers and showed that certain [implicit biases](#) (for example, implicit racial bias but also political divergences) can influence judgments of expressions of

remorse.

Ultimately, there are no easily read, definitive signs of faked remorse. There might be a slight change in [the ordering of](#) facial micro-expressions but these are difficult to identify without [considerable training](#).

Supporters of the Proud Boys might not [want to accept](#) that they'd been duped. They might say that the defendants were faking remorse because they, like themselves, are still committed, still fighting the good fight, still trying to take control through any means.

And staunch critics of the Proud Boys might agree that the remorse was faked but for a different reason—they might say that's just the kind of people they are, trying to save their own skin, in line with Berryassa's research.

I'm sure that some people will assume that those emotional displays in court signal the end of the Proud Boys as a group. But for now, like with Trump, it's best not to underestimate their ability to bounce back.

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