



Antoine Tolbert jury to consider activist's rights, citizen's arrests

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Austreeia Everson (on left in red jacket), Antoine Tolbert (middle) and Rameer Askew (right) listen in during jury selection on July 8, 2025.

The trial of two Black men and a Black woman in an activist organization for poor Cleveland communities will go far beyond a simple examination of evidence in the next two weeks.

Jurors will be asked to decide the intimidating effects of rifles carried by defendants Antoine Tolbert, Austreeia Everson and Rameer Askew, whether activists have the right to demand changes from small business owners in their communities and if Cleveland

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“vendetta” as alleged by defense attorneys. Another potential issue is whether only police officers are allowed to enforce laws in neighborhoods in Cleveland.

“We anticipate that you will hear their purpose essentially is to take over the role of the police,” said Cuyahoga County Assistant Prosecuting Attorney Mary Grace Tokmenko during her opening statement. She said the group New Era Cleveland is actually “a self-appointed vigilante group that imposes its will and runs the neighborhood the way it thinks it should be run.”

New Era began conducting safety patrols while openly carrying guns in Cleveland's Buckeye neighborhood, but eventually spread to other parts of the city.

Tolbert and Everson face felony charges, including extortion and intimidating a crime victim or witness. Tolbert and Askew face aggravated robbery and kidnapping charges.

Tolbert is alleged to have extorted gas station owners on the east side of Cleveland for protection money and, after the owners refused, launched protests and boycotts outside the stations.

Everson is alleged to have met with those gas station owners the day after Tolbert's arrest on Aug. 14, 2024, to renew the demand for payment and threat of a boycott.

In a second indictment added after Tolbert was arrested, Tolbert and Askew are charged with kidnapping and robbing an accused drug dealer, during what they portrayed as a citizen's arrest.

“The evidence will show that nothing was robbed, no one was kidnapped and nothing was extorted,” said their attorney, Peter Pattakos, during opening statements. “Conflict is not abuse. Conflict is not a crime. Conflict is how change happens. And these people wanted change.”

Over more than three days of jury selection, there was extensive questioning of jurors on politicized topics like gun ownership, police misconduct and Black activism. One juror shared a history with one of the prosecution's witnesses, leading to further questioning.

Juror 32 (jurors are anonymous during trial and identified only by a number) said she

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According to Juror 32, her stepdaughter, while living in Arizona, had a baby claimed by Swift.

"She was very vague and she was, like, that Rubin had come to town and signed the birth certificate and he brought the baby back to Cleveland and he's not the real father and it was just like too much information," said Juror 32.

That trip was covered in [a news report by the program Inside Edition](#). The baby was too young to board an airplane and Swift was forced to stay in Arizona for three days with strangers.

It's unclear what happened with the child or whether the incident was ever investigated by police. After a brief discussion in the courtroom, Juror 32 was brought to the judge's chambers for further questioning and was not seated on the jury.

Swift has been a source of suspicion for Tolbert and the defense since long before trial. He was a witness who called police during [Tolbert's 2022 open carry arrest](#). That case was eventually dropped.

Two years later, [Swift appeared in a Fox 8 news report](#) about an incident at one of the gas stations in Cleveland.

Swift identifies himself as an owner of the station and describes Tolbert and other New Era Cleveland members arriving armed at the station as, "like Ukraine here, like Russia was taking over on Lee and Harvard."

A week later, Tolbert was arrested on his way to a protest outside the station.

"You will hear a lot about Rubin Swift during this trial," Pattakos told jurors. "Rubin Swift has a very mysterious and dubious relationship with these gas station owners."

The defense also said it plans to target the lead detective in the case, Timothy Hannon.

"You will see Hannon make statement after statement demonstrating his hatred for Antoine Tolbert," Pattakos said.

The prosecution plans to rely on witness testimony. Attorneys asked prospective jurors

testimony, was excused, but the decision was made at a side bar in court. It's unclear which side asked for the removal of the juror.

The case will also rely on alleged victims' feelings about Tolbert and other members of New Era Cleveland showing up armed, some wearing masks, late at night.

"Tolbert and Askew and their followers went back to this gas station, always armed, always with almost like militia gear," Tokmenko said. "You will hear how intimidated all those gas stations employees were."

Askew has not been charged for his alleged involvement in any of the incidents at the gas stations.

The trial is expected to last at least two weeks. Pattakos told the jury all three defendants plan on testifying.

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