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New Era Cleveland leaders acquitted in extortion trial



Sam Allard



Illustration: Maura Losch/Axios

The big picture: The resounding not guilty verdict closes out a lengthy trial that sparked citywide debate over race, activism, and the right to self-police.

Catch up quick: The case centered on an August 2024 protest outside a Lee-Harvard gas station, which county prosecutors alleged was an armed attempt to extort and intimidate the owners.

- The defense claimed Tolbert and New Era members were staging a constitutionally protected boycott as part of broader community-based safety work.

Zoom out: The armed nature of New Era's activities — including safety patrols and citizen arrests — led the prosecution to characterize the organization as a [vigilante militia](#).

Yes, but: The organization argues this work is vital in neighborhoods where traditional policing has fallen short, and that the charges against Tolbert, Austreeia Everson and Rameer Askew were a form of targeted legal retaliation.

State of play: Throughout the trial, the defense managed to discredit the prosecution's key witnesses and expose negligent police work.

- One of the more [cinematic developments](#) concerned a gunshot that rang out during the 2024 gas station incident, which prosecutors had pinned on New Era.
- But witness testimony and police bodycam footage suggested it was one of the gas station owners — not a New Era activist — who fired the shot.

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What they're saying: Defense attorney Peter Pattakos called the trial "one of the most farcical and unconstitutional prosecutions in American history" [in a Facebook post](#).

- "As regrettable as it is when police and prosecutors fail to fulfill their most basic duties, it's a genuinely glorious sight when 12 citizens pulled off the street apply basic common sense to deliver swift justice to remedy these failures."

The other side: "We respect the jury's decision," Lexi Bauer, spokesperson for the Cuyahoga County prosecutor's office, tells Axios.



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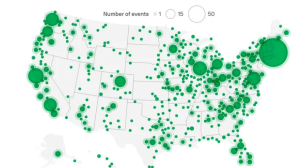
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