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Alaska Man Who Claimed Loyalty to ISIS and Threatened Attack on Lafayette College Campus Pleads Guilty

PHILADELPHIA, PA – United States Attorney William M. McSwain announced today that Gavin Lee Casdorff, 21, of Anchorage, Alaska, pleaded guilty to one count of willfully making false threats in violation of 18 U.S.C. § 844(e). United States District Judge Edward G. Smith presided over the guilty plea hearing in Easton via video teleconference. Casdorff was charged in January 2019 with making false threats after claiming that he planned to detonate several bombs across the Lafayette College campus.

On May 5, 2018, while posing as a radicalized Lafayette College student and using the handle “BdanJafarSaleem,” Casdorff posted on Twitter that he planned to bomb multiple locations on campus. He attached a letter to his tweets, falsely claiming that his grandfather had died, his girlfriend had broken up with him, and that he had found faith and healing in Allah. The posts also pledged allegiance to ISIS and included an image of the ISIS flag and a photograph of several firearms, with the caption: “Allah has graced us with these weapons of destruction to carry out his needs.”

Casdorff also sent a mass email to members of the College’s admissions staff containing similar disturbing threats and imagery. The email’s subject line was “ISIS Will Prevail: Allah Is the True God.” In the email, Casdorff claimed that his name was “Brendan,” that he was enrolled in Economics at Lafayette, and that he was retaliating for being mocked for his religious beliefs. He warned that when word spread of his plan and students attempted to evacuate, “they’ll be playing right into my plan. I have set up several pipe bombs, pressure cookers and nail bombs around the campus and I plan to inflict the most damage possible.”

Though law enforcement quickly determined that the bomb threats were a hoax, the incident caused a tremendous amount of anxiety on campus, even causing the College to move its graduation ceremony as a precaution. The FBI thereafter conducted an extensive investigation that spanned three states and two continents and led them to Anchorage, Alaska, where the FBI arrested Casdorff in December 2018. During interviews with law enforcement, Casdorff admitted his role in the threats against Lafayette College.

Casdorff hatched his plan to announce the bomb threat on Twitter after an argument he had had with an online gamer whom he met over the Internet. Casdorff then employed the anonymous web browser TOR to set up the phony “BdanJafarSaleem” Twitter account. He further obscured his identity by providing Twitter with a phone number he had purchased from a Florida company that sells numbers to individuals who want to set up social media accounts without providing their real contact information.

“Gavin Casdorff is a dangerous man whose Internet threats have real-life consequences,” said U.S. Attorney McSwain. “He thought he could cover his tracks by using phony information to register his Twitter account and an anonymous web browser. He was wrong. The local and federal law enforcement agencies tirelessly working this case did not stop until the trail of evidence led them to Casdorff’s door. This case goes to show that if you make threats like those involved here, no matter

who you are or where you are – even as far as Alaska – we will hunt you down and hold you accountable.”

“Making false threats online isn’t some harmless goof. It’s selfish, short-sighted—and a crime,” said Michael J. Driscoll, Special Agent in Charge of the FBI's Philadelphia Division. “The FBI takes all threats to life seriously, and so should anyone sitting behind a keyboard or staring into their phone, contemplating posting one. Consider whether you really want to end up where Gavin Casdorff is now, waiting to hear just how many years you’re going to be spending behind bars.”

“On behalf of everyone affiliated with Lafayette, I want to express our immense gratitude to the Department of Justice and federal law enforcement agencies, as well as all of the state and local agencies who assisted in the investigation, including our own Department of Public Safety, for their diligence in identifying the perpetrator,” said Alison R. Byerly, President of Lafayette College. “While the threats made against the campus in 2018 were determined to be a hoax, their impact on our students, faculty and staff were very real. The conclusion of this matter provides our community with much-needed closure.”

This case was investigated by the Lafayette College Department of Public Safety, Easton Police Department, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Philadelphia Division and Anchorage Division. It is being prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorney Joseph LaBar. Additional assistance was provided by the U.S. Attorney’s Office for the District of Alaska.