

At the US Capitol, pro-Trump extremists laid siege to democracy

Democracy is fragile. But the things that make it fragile are the same things that give it power.

From the Editors

January 7, 2021



Supporters of President Donald Trump climb the West wall of the the US Capitol on January 6, in Washington. (AP Photo/Jose Luis Magana)

“The framers built the Senate to stop short-term passions from boiling over and melting the foundations of our republic,” said Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, just minutes before a mob of insurrectionists stormed into the Capitol building yesterday to prevent Congress from certifying the results of the November presidential election. It looked as though some of the republic’s foundations were melting away as rioters assaulted police officers, vandalized government property, destroyed journalists’ equipment, and displayed the Confederate flag inside the Capitol. Four people died, and 14 law enforcement officials were injured.

But the passions that fueled this violence were not short term, nor were they new. White supremacy—overtly flaunted by many of the rioters and noted by many observers in the police’s mild initial response—has been baked into our nation since its founding. The right’s longstanding distrust of the news media has been weaponized by President Trump, who has spent years demonizing journalists and undermining their work with lies and conspiracy theories. The integrity of our electoral process—symbolized by those boxes of electoral votes that Senate staff members hid from the mob—has been weakened for decades by voter suppression and gerrymandering.

Yesterday was the Feast of the Epiphany, and for many Americans the insurrection at the Capitol was an epiphany: an unveiling of the sins that brew underneath our institutions and within our hearts. But it was more than that. It was a deliberate attempt, incited by a sitting president, to defy the Constitution by subverting the will of the electorate. The fact that it happened so easily—as the natural culmination of a presidency driven by self-interest, fed by anger, and enabled by moral weakness—shows how fragile democracy is.

The elements of democracy that make it fragile are the same ones that give it its power. Democracy is built upon its participants’ willingness to build a shared commitment to the common good, to tell the truth even when doing so incurs some personal or professional cost, to admit defeat and move on, and to give each citizen’s voice equal weight. Without a basically functional democracy there can be no possibility of racial justice in America, no freedom of the press, no integrity of elections, no guarantee of the people’s safety. At the same time, when these values are threatened, democracy itself cannot flourish.

The insurrectionists didn’t succeed in changing the election results. But they did deep damage to the institutions and people they attacked, and they aren’t likely to suddenly abandon the passions that stirred them to violence—the fervent grievances, the belief in falsehoods, the hatred of those who don’t look like them or share their values. In the coming weeks, Americans will continue to grapple with a reality that’s now undeniable: democracy can be destroyed from within. Preserving its integrity is a responsibility we all share.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Democracy under siege.”