

the Big Read US politics & policy

'A coup d'état attempted by Trump': America's failed insurrection

The riot at the Capitol followed years of escalating rightwing violence and an obsession with overturning the election result

Joshua Chaffin in New York and Courtney Weaver and James Politi in Washington

January 8 2021

At the dais in the chamber of the Senate where Daniel Webster used a two-day speech to win the argument for a tightly-bound United States, where Jefferson Davis bid farewell to the union and future presidents such as Barack Obama honed their oratory, a shirtless man wearing a fur hat and Viking horns that seemed more in keeping with Mardi Gras presided on Wednesday afternoon.

He was later identified as Jake Angeli, a devout adherent of the QAnon conspiracy theory, which posits that the US government is run by a cabal of devil-worshipping paedophiles engaged in a secret war against the heroic President Donald Trump.

As a spear-carrying Mr Angeli paraded around one of the most hallowed spaces in American democracy like a drunk at a Christmas party, a fellow marauder, Richard "Bigo" Barnett, propped his boots on the desk of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and reclined in her chair. Mr Barnett had previously claimed on social media that he was ready to spill blood to overturn a US election he believed had been stolen from Mr Trump. On Wednesday, he scribbled a note to Ms Pelosi reading: "Nancy, Bigo was here, you bitch."

Outside, among thousands of rioters besieging the Capitol, a woman identifying herself as "Elizabeth from Knoxville" wiped what she claimed was pepper spray from her eyes as she explained to a reporter the objective: "We're storming the Capitol. It's a revolution!"

Wednesday's insurrection marked the worst breach of the Capitol since the war of 1812 — in that case by a foreign military, the UK's — and is already regarded as a day of infamy in America's democracy.

Richard 'Bigo' Barnett, who raided Nancy Pelosi's office, and Jake Angeli, A QAnon devotee who dresses in fur and horns

Richard 'Bigo' Barnett, who raided Nancy Pelosi's office, and Jake Angeli, the QAnon devotee dressed in fur and horns in Wednesday's riot © Getty Images

The insurrectionists succeeded in interrupting a congressional certification of election results that should have been a ceremonial way station in a peaceful transfer of power to Joe Biden, who won the popular vote in November by more than 7m ballots.

As allies looked on in astonishment from foreign capitals, eminent scholars were left gasping and emotional as they searched for some sort of precedent in American history. They could not find one.

"This is a coup d'état attempted by the president of the United States," said Michael Beschloss, the normally sober presidential historian, invoking a term Americans have associated with distant, unstable lands. Another historian, Jeffrey Engel from Southern Methodist University, pronounced the mob and the president who incited them as "batshit crazy".

The button-down widget makers at the National Association of Manufacturers business lobby deemed the event "sedition" and issued an extraordinary statement urging that the 25th amendment be used to remove the president from office to protect the nation. By Thursday evening, cabinet members, including the secretaries of transportation and education, Elaine Chao and Betsy DeVos, were jumping ship.

While shocking to many, the insurrection marked the culmination of four years of escalating rightwing violence in the Trump era — from the torch-bearing marchers in Charlottesville in 2017, chanting against blacks and Jews, to the armed militia members seeking to "liberate" the Michigan state house last year, later plotting to kidnap their governor.

Betsy DeVos, the secretary of education, and Elaine Chao, the secretary of transportation, resigned after the events on Wednesday

Betsy DeVos, the secretary of education, and Elaine Chao, the secretary of transportation, resigned after the events on Wednesday © Getty Images

Yet hours before the Trumpian mob stormed the Capitol came a shining reminder in Georgia of the nation's unique possibilities. In a run-off for both the state's Senate seats, the Democrats unseated their Republican rivals, with the significance going well beyond immediate partisan politics. One of the candidates, Raphael Warnock, became the first African-American to represent Georgia and only the second black senator from the south since Reconstruction (the other is Republican Tim Scott from South Carolina).

Mr Warnock, a minister at Martin Luther King's former church in Atlanta, paid a moving tribute to his mother, saying: "The 82-year-old hands that used to pick somebody else's cotton went to the polls and picked her youngest son to be a United States senator."

All this posed the question of whether America was in the throes this week of a hopeful and historic reinvention or careening toward civil violence? Or perhaps both, simultaneously?

"Is this a moment that historians will look back on and say this is when Americans woke up and realised the danger to their democracy — or just one more step towards America losing the hallmarks of democracy that we have come to accept over the past 200 years," asks Nicole Hemmer, a presidential historian at Columbia University. She does not know the answer.

In the meantime, many Americans are sick. For Wednesday was also a day in which the wealthiest nation on Earth recorded a record number of Covid deaths and new infections. The figures for Thursday were even worse.

Rather than devoting his last days in office to leading the nation's fight against a once-in-a-century pandemic, Mr Trump has instead been nurturing a destructive obsession about erasing his electoral defeat.

What the US Capitol riot means for both Republicans and Democrats

His desperation was palpable in the telephone call he made on Saturday to the Georgia secretary of state, Brad Raffensperger, who is responsible for overseeing the state's elections. In the roughly hour-long call — a recording of which was obtained by The Washington Post — Mr Trump summoned all the flattery, bullying and arm-twisting he mastered as a highly-litigious and domineering New York property developer as he pleaded for Mr Raffensperger's help.

There were echoes of the infamous call that Mr Trump made to his Ukrainian counterpart in July 2019, asking him to open an investigation into Mr Biden's son, Hunter — a call that later prompted his impeachment.

“So, tell me, Brad. What are we going to do? We won the election and it's not fair to take it away from us like this. And it's going to be very costly in many ways,” Mr Trump warned. At another point, the president demanded: “I just want to find 11,780 votes, which is one more than we have, because we won the state.”

The president touted debunked conspiracy theories about shredded ballots, dead voters and rigged Dominion voting machines being secretly carted away.

His chief of staff, Mark Meadows, resorted to the language of the country lawyer, suggesting: “Is there some way that we can, we can find some kind of agreement to look at this a little bit more fully?”

Again and again, they ran into the immovable Mr Raffensperger, a civil engineer by training with a stubborn allegiance to facts. “Um, we don't agree that you have won,” he corrected Mr Trump, later adding: “Well, Mr President, the challenge that you have is, the data you have is wrong.”

Donald Trump refused to repudiate far-right demonstrators at Charlottesville in 2017. Militias have protested at state capitols during the pandemic and this week, including in Michigan

Donald Trump refused to repudiate far-right demonstrators at Charlottesville in 2017. Militias have protested at state capitols during the pandemic and this week, including in Michigan © Reuters; AP

While many expressed outrage at such extraordinary — and possibly criminal — behaviour to overturn an election, Mr Trump's allies largely dismissed them.

Unchastened, the president flew to Georgia on Monday where he repeated his claims at rallies for the Republican candidates Kelly Loeffler and David Perdue on the eve of a run-off election that would ultimately tip the balance of power in the US Senate. Georgia Republican officials would later blame Mr Trump and his antics for their historic defeat.

Come Wednesday, when Congress lawmakers were to gather to certify Mr Biden's victory, formalising his standing as “president-elect”, an ill-tempered Mr Trump was still on the rampage.

“We will never give up, we will never concede,” he told thousands of supporters at a rally outside the White House. Then he suggested supporters should “walk down to the Capitol”, observing: “You will never take back our country with weakness.”

The president also took the opportunity to turn the screws on his vice-president, Mike Pence, who had already informed him he would not obey his commands to block Mr Biden’s certification — a power that most analysts say he does not even possess.

“I hope Mike is going to do the right thing,” Mr Trump told the crowd. “If Mike Pence does the right thing, we win the election.”

Congressman Vicente González of Texas was among the politicians who hid from protesters. Mitt Romney looks on as his fellow senator Josh Hawley delivers a speech, Sen Hawley is closely allied with Donald Trump

Congressman Vicente González of Texas was among the politicians who hid from protesters. Mitt Romney looks on as his fellow senator Josh Hawley delivers a speech, Sen Hawley is closely allied with Donald Trump © Getty Images

On Capitol Hill, even some Trump loyalists were becoming outraged. “He [Pence] has stuck with them through every single thing that he’s done bad and good, of course,” says one Republican congressional aide. “And the president hung him out to dry.”

Scant resistance

By late afternoon, Mr Angeli, Bigo, Elizabeth from Knoxville and the rest of the mob was surging towards the Capitol like an invading army. Some waved Confederate flags. They easily overwhelmed a strangely flaccid police force.

Vicente González, a Democratic Congressman from south Texas, heard them before he could see them. “I was in chambers and around 3 o’clock I heard some screams outside. A couple of minutes later, they removed [Nancy] Pelosi and a couple of the leadership members and locked us in,” Mr González told the FT. “We heard some pops outside. We had to get down, look for cover.”

Authorities employed protocols designed for a September 11-style terror attack to evacuate and protect members. Mr González, fearing for his life, and other members were handed gas masks and whisked to a secure location where Democrats and Republicans prayed together.

“Nothing during the anti-Vietnam war protests in Washington resembled this,” says Fredrik Logevall, a Harvard historian. “The scenes we are seeing today are of a wholly different order.”

Recommended

FT News Briefing podcast 10 min listen

Trump concedes election, stock markets ignore political chaos, Boeing's 737 Max settlement

Mr Trump, according to reports, watched the events unfold on television. He later praised the mob in an online video: “This was a fraudulent election, but we can't play into the hands of these people. We have to have peace. So go home, we love you, you're very special.”

Later that night, when the crowd had at last been cleared from the Capitol and the tear gas dissipated, one Trump supporter had died after being shot. The following day, a police officer died from injuries suffered in the rampage. Among the wreckage, there was also a cleavage in the Republican party that even members are not sure can be healed.

Democrats Raphael Warnock and Jon Ossoff won the Senate seats in Georgia on Tuesday. Donald Trump had pressured Georgia's Republican secretary of state, Brad Raffensperger, to 'find' the votes that would flip the state to the Republicans

Democrats Raphael Warnock and Jon Ossoff won the Senate seats in Georgia on Tuesday. Donald Trump had pressured Georgia's Republican secretary of state, Brad Raffensperger, to 'find' the votes that would flip the state to the Republicans © Getty Images

It was visible when Josh Hawley, the 41-year-old senator and Trump acolyte from Missouri, addressed the reassembled chamber. More than anyone, Mr Hawley made political capital by echoing the president's bogus election claims. He was the first senator to publicly oppose Mr Biden's certification, prompting a rush of ambitious Republican copycats to join what has now come to be known by critics as the Sedition Caucus.

After the usual pro forma remarks about opposing violence, Mr Hawley — perhaps seeing no alternative — held fast to his bogus claims. “We do need an investigation into irregularities, fraud,” he insisted. Back home, the editorial board at the Kansas City Star newspaper accused him of having “blood on his hands”.

Seated behind him as he spoke was a stony-faced Mitt Romney, the Utah senator who was the party's presidential candidate in 2012 but now seems like a relic from an earlier era when business executives and moderates reigned supreme.

Recommended

Bruce Bartlett

The Republican party must break Donald Trump's stranglehold

"We gather here due to a selfish man's injured pride and the outrage of supporters he has deliberately misled for the past two months," an emotional Mr Romney declared when it was his turn to speak. In a direct rebuttal to Mr Hawley, he warned that those who continued to abet Mr Trump's lies "will forever be seen as being complicit in an unprecedented attack against our democracy".

As talk of impeachment or his immediate removal from office swirled through the US capital on Thursday, Mr Trump, at last, acknowledged his defeat — more than two months after the election — and conceded that he would be leaving office on January 20. He also denounced the attack.

The days ahead will determine which Republican will prevail and whether the party will descend into open war between nativists and traditional conservatives; whether Mr Trump will face the ignominy of being removed from office before President-elect Biden's inauguration on January 20, and whether his mob will be shamed or encouraged by the ease with which they over-ran the Capitol.

In the longer term, this week has left more profound questions for the country that likes to see itself as the world's leading democracy. Among them is whether America has the capacity to bind its divisions before they deepen, and whether its formidable energies will be stirred by paranoia, conspiracy theories and QAnon cults that were hallmarks of the Trump era, or facts and truth and political programmes based on reality?

"This is a day of reckoning," says Mr González. "It's a day to look at ourselves as a country in the mirror and decide what kind of country we want to be."

Copyright The Financial Times Limited 2021. All rights reserved.