

# Capitol, United States: Was it a coup?

Saturday 9 January 2021, by [CHRETIEN Todd](#) (Date first published: 7 January 2021).

At noon on January 6, Donald Trump rallied some 10,000 or 20,000 supporters, telling them to “walk down to the Capitol. And we are going to cheer on our brave senators and congressmen and women.” Trump’s lawyer Rudy Giuliani incited the crowd to settle the election through a “trial by combat” and Donald Trump, Jr., the president’s son, gave them their orders, “We’re coming for you.” After they spoke, thousands marched from the White House to the Capitol Building, the seat of the House of Representatives and the Senate.

The mob broke into the Capitol, assaulted police, smashed windows, set off smoke canisters, and took selfies of themselves sitting in Nancy Pelosi’s office (the Democratic Speaker of the House of Representative) and in the Senate chambers. Senators and Representatives donned gas masks and escaped through security tunnels, stopping the process of confirming Biden’s electoral votes. All of this was broadcast live on television across the country. Millions feared a coup attempt was underway. And they were right to worry. Capitol police felt sufficiently threatened to shoot and kill one protester, who will undoubtedly become a far-right martyr.

What was the mob’s purpose? Their goal was to “stop the steal,” that is, to prevent the House and Senate from confirming the results (a constitutionally legal requirement) of the November 3 election, which Joe Biden won with 81 million votes to Trump’s 74 million (and by 306 to 232 in the antiquated electoral college, state-by-state voting system). Prior to the riot, at least 13 Republican Senators (out of a total 53) and more than 100 Representatives (more than half of the total 197) planned to object to election results from several states [1]. By way of comparison, in 2000, when Bush lost the popular vote to Al Gore, but won a narrow electoral college victory (decided by the Supreme Court), not a single Democratic Senator protested the results [2]. Thus, the number of Republicans trying to overturn the election is a sign of just how radical the Republican party has become.

But was it a coup? Here is my view.

Trump knew the election would be close (closer than most analysts expected) because of the electoral college. When the votes were counted, out of a total of 151 million votes, Trump lost in the four states that decided the electoral college by a total of less than 200,000 votes (Georgia, Pennsylvania, Nevada, Arizona). In the run up to the election, Trump did his best to suppress the vote by threatening lawsuits and calling on supporters to “monitor” voting locations. He even called on supporters to vote twice!

I expected the Trump mob that we saw storm the capital today would have tried to close down polling locations in Black neighborhoods and create enough chaos on election day so Trump’s lawyers could (as Bush’s lawyers did in 2000) “stop the count.” This would have been a kind of “electoral coup.” However, because each state has its own voting system, the pandemic made it very difficult for Trump to target the right places to suppress. And, on election night, he was ahead in some states and behind in others states, so his “stop the vote” strategy collapsed.

And although Trump continued to demand that Republican governors overturn the results, enough of the Republican establishment calculated that there was no way to win (even the Supreme Court

threw out Trump's bogus law suits). Thus, Republican governors have not supported Trump's increasingly desperate efforts, including the leaked phone call with the Republican governor of Georgia in which he demanded the governor commit a felony by "finding" votes.

Trump's mob missed the moment when they could have done maximum damage. There was never any question of a Chilean-type coup. The Pentagon was not interested. And Trump's far-right supporters were never well-enough organized to provoke a military split in the state (or fight effectively under their own flag). Instead, the danger was that Trump could use his mob to create chaos and doubt so that a few well-picked judges could pass law suits up the chain of command to the U.S. Supreme Court where Trump's newly-christened 6-3 majority could find a legal rationale (as they had done in 2000) for handing power back to Trump (despite losing the popular election by 7 million votes). There were never going to be "tanks in the streets" but that doesn't mean that Trump's willingness to subvert U.S. democracy (as exclusionary as it is) is without consequences.

To paraphrase one critic of fascism, economic crisis, imperial decline, and America's racist history has raised a new far right to their feet and Trump has given them a banner. However, if today was a bungled dress rehearsal, or perhaps just a casting call, the danger will clearly grow in the coming years. Mussolini marched on Rome with 30,000 armed fascists in disciplined ranks. Pinochet mobilized the reactionary clergy, the sons of the rich, and the entire military to take power. And in his early days, Hitler led 600 stormtroopers in Munich in his failed Beer Hall Putsch. By comparison, Trump's minions remain weak (some more than others). However, the specific danger that Trump (or his successor) presents will not look like Germany or Italy or Chile.

The American ruling class has millions of police and security forces at its disposal. It is possible to imagine a scenario in which these forces will move in a Golden Dawn direction (but even in Greece we see the challenges open fascist para-military forces face). Far more likely is an ugly mix of reactionary legal decisions by the Republican-dominated courts that restrict people's right to vote "from above" - the Democratic victories in Georgia's U.S. Senate races today will drive the Republicans to new heights of voter suppression and gerrymandering - combined with local militias, far-right and racist bands, and police intimidation "from below." It may continue to "look" like what has passed for bourgeois democracy, but there will be a pressure from the right to drag the U.S. backwards. Mass incarceration and immigrant bashing has already created a New Jim Crow, as Michelle Alexander has so aptly labelled it, but it can get a lot worse.

The immediate impact of today will be a period of revulsion from Trump. Even his loyal pet vice president Mike Pence split with him over attempting to "stop the steal" in the Senate and many leading Republicans are today condemning him for his embrace of the rioters. Republican Senate strongman Mitch McConnell attacked Trump today, claiming his methods "would damage our republic forever." [3] Of course, there is a large dose of "rats jumping from a sinking ship" to this along with other displays of Republican flag waving. But they are being careful not to jump too far from the ship because Trump is more popular with their supporters than they are. Many of them want him to disappear, but if he comes back, they want to be on his good side. But most of all they want to hang on to power and the best way to do that is to block any meaningful legislation from the in-coming Biden administration so they can campaign against a "do-nothing" president. It's the same recipe that elected Trump and gave birth to Trumpism.

If he lives long enough, Trump may make another bid for power in 2024. His message today to the mob certainly positioned him for a return, "We love you, you're very special. We've seen what happens, you see the way others are treated that are so bad and so evil. I know you how feel. But go home, and go home in peace."

But defeating Trump at the polls, and today's fiasco, has given us some breathing space. We must

use it well. The results today in Georgia, Black Lives Matter, teachers and nurses' strikes, MeToo, and the rise of the Democratic Socialists of America all indicate the direction we must take.

## **Todd Chretien**

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## **P.S.**

- No Borders on January 7, 2021  
<https://nobordersnews.org/2021/01/07/todd-chretien-was-it-a-coup/>
  - This is the English version of an article first published by Viento Sur, Semear o Futuro and EsquerdaOnLine.
  - Todd Chretien is the editor of No Borders News.
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## **Footnotes**

[1] No Borders on January 7, 2021

[2] <https://choice.npr.org/index.html?origin=https://www.npr.org/2021/01/05/952883116/objectin-g-to-electoral-votes-in-congress-recalls-bitter-moments-in-history>

[3] <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/01/06/politics/mitch-mcconnell-trump-electoral-vote/index.html>