

United States: We Underestimate the Far Right at Our Own Peril

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Yesterday's riot of Trump supporters at the US Capitol will likely be a radicalizing event for the far right. We shouldn't underestimate their ability to cause more death and destruction in the aftermath.

What happened yesterday? In one sense, it's easy to say. Trump supporters, many of them armed, stormed the Capitol Building and forced Congress to recess, delaying the certification of Joe Biden's election as president for several hours. It was a startling spectacle, but there was never any real likelihood that they would enable Trump to remain president. It's not clear they even had a plan for keeping Trump in office. C-SPAN footage of the Trump supporters who made their way into the Capitol's Statuary Hall showed them wandering around like tourists, seemingly as surprised to be there as anyone else was to see them there.

The thought seemed to be that their presence would be enough to bring about "the Storm," QAnon's version of the millennium, triggering a secret plan by Trump that would miraculously make things right. By the time the Senate reconvened at 8 PM, many leaders of both parties seemed to want to get back to normal as soon as possible, delivering the same speeches that they'd expected to deliver that afternoon.

But even as the Biden inaugural will go on as scheduled, this day won't go away. The mob of Trump supporters storming the US Capitol building will likely be a radicalizing event for the far right. However symbolic, they were literally able to occupy the halls of power. Now they can imagine doing it again. The photos of extravagantly dressed rioters behind the dais of the Senate or climbing the walls of the Capitol will become iconic, fueling far-right recruiting and mobilizing for years.

Yesterday was always going to be a spectacle, as Senators Ted Cruz and Josh Hawley planned to raise theatrical objections to Biden's electoral votes as a way to woo Trump supporters, while Trump himself rallied them outside the White House. But the spectacle took a turn once Trump directed his supporters to the Capitol, where the Capitol police unevenly resisted their intrusion — shooting a woman who died hours later — before giving way and allowing the mob access to the Capitol. Even as elected officials and reporters huddled in fear and the Capitol's service workers continued to do their jobs as best they could, the police fraternized with the buffoonish invaders, taking selfies and gently guiding them down the steps out of the building once the fun was over.

Cable news anchors and pundits found the spectacle embarrassing and vulgar, describing their presence as a kind of desecration [\[1\]](#) of the sacred space of constitutional democracy. For the radical right, however, it was a spectacle of empowerment, showing that they can throw their weight around with little resistance. They pushed the limits and found they could break the law with impunity as the entire world watched.

While early polling [\[2\]](#) suggests that at least a significant minority and perhaps even a plurality of

Republican voters support the invasion of the Capitol, the tableau of a mob of Trump supporters looting congressional offices may well accelerate the departure of educated, affluent voters from the Republican Party, making it harder for them to win elections. Certainly the Republican leadership is alive to this possibility. Even Trump's former campaign manager, Brad Parscale, tried to defuse the mob, tweeting, "This is not MAGA" [3] Within hours, Fox News and Trumpist Republicans like Matt Gaetz were already blaming antifa for the riot. The claim is ludicrous — Trump had explicitly been calling for this for months — but it is meant to provide permission to voters uncomfortable with reactionary violence to continue supporting Trump and backing further repression of left movements. Meanwhile, far-right figures like Baked Alaska [4] and Nick Fuentes proudly streamed video of themselves in Nancy Pelosi's office.

This kind of dance between the far right and the electoral right is nothing new. Right-wing political parties can deplore right-wing street violence while using the disorder caused by reactionary mobs as another occasion for extending power, justified by the need to restore order. The Capitol police oscillating between swinging batons at the Trump mob and letting them have their way is an apt symbol of this dynamic. (Indigenous scholars like Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz have documented a more vicious historical version of this phenomenon [5], where authorities would alternate between restraining settlers and taking advantage of their genocidal violence to expand their territory.)

While Trump supporters apparently planted pipe bombs at both the Republican National Committee and Democratic National Committee headquarters, the coalition between the radical right and the institutional right will continue. Institutional Republican leaders like Mitch McConnell may deplore yesterday's actions, but it's clear they too would have contested the election results and denied Biden the presidency if the margin was closer. As it stands, two-thirds of House Republicans voted to support rejecting Pennsylvania's electoral votes based on the same conspiracy theories espoused by the rioters who ejected them from their chamber.

And while Trump may be leaving office, he is obviously not leaving the scene. People often suggest Trump is scary because he shows how much damage a more competent authoritarian could do. This misses how singular a figure Trump is. A long-time reality TV star, Trump is adept at spectacle with years of experience telling people what they want to hear and national celebrity that long predates his entry into politics. All this makes him particularly able to reach and motivate marginal and nonvoters — skills that credentialed and "competent" authoritarians like Cruz and Hawley palpably lack. Some local elected officials participated in the riot, but their relatively marginal status suggests that Trumpist energy may not be easily transferred to other national candidates.

That should not be much of a comfort. As yesterday made vivid, voting is very far from the only way of affecting the exercise of state power. We will see much more violence from the radical right in the years to come, even (maybe especially) if yesterday's "insurrection" drives some voters away from the Republican Party. A reactionary right that believes they cannot reliably prevail in electoral politics will readily turn to other forms of action. Having Trump in office inspired multiple mass shooters, and his refusal to recognize the legitimacy of his successor's election could inspire more. Violent confrontations between far-right extremists and the government, like the armed occupation of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in 2016, will proliferate under the Biden administration, and the chances of terrorist attacks like the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing have risen.

The generalized precarity brought on by decades of neoliberalism and intensified by the pandemic also increases the risk from the far right. Yesterday's spectacle coincided with the deadliest day of the pandemic and came after a week that saw around a million people file for unemployment [6]. The far right is both a partner of the institutional right that supports this status quo and feeds off the instability and misery that this status quo creates.

So what should the Left do? For starters, we should recognize the danger of yesterday's riot without painting all unruly direct action against official representatives — particularly nonviolent action — as out of bounds. More concretely, we need to mobilize a broad, antiauthoritarian coalition that can truly grapple with the factors that enabled the far right to stage yesterday's spectacle in the first place.

Fundamentally, the threat of the far right is not taken seriously because white supremacy and American exceptionalism obscure their power. The repeated claims by news anchors that they couldn't believe what they were seeing, that it seemed like something from a "Third World country," is a testament to this effect. So too was the bafflement at the Capitol police's failure to contain the mob after a year of oppressive policing of Black Lives Matter protests.

This shock and disbelief can be an organizing opportunity. Building a movement to fight the far right requires recognizing not only that far-right politics can flourish here, but that they already have — in the United States' long history of racial oppression, genocide, and brutal repression of the Left. Absent that understanding, it is all too easy to write off the far right as kooks and deviations from a liberal democratic consensus rather than as a dangerous force with access to the halls of power.

About the Author

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P.S.

- Jacobin. 01.07.2021:
<https://jacobinmag.com/2021/01/far-right-trump-authoritarianism-capitol-building>
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Footnotes

- [1] <https://twitter.com/brianschatz/status/1347049860776812544>
- [2] <https://today.yougov.com/topics/politics/articles-reports/2021/01/06/US-capitol-trump-poll>
- [3] <https://twitter.com/parscale/status/1346915043695276034>
- [4] https://consent.yahoo.com/v2/collectConsent?sessionId=3_cc-session_1595103c-18f3-4265-9e34-eafb8bc83940
- [5] <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/237686/an-indigenous-peoples-history-of-the-united-states-by-roxanne-dunbar-ortiz/>
- [6] <https://twitter.com/equitablegrowth/status/1347174976751882240>