

The Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol: A guide to what we now know

“The insurrection took place on November 3, Election Day. January 6 was the Protest!”

— Former president Donald Trump, in a statement, Oct. 21

“The events of January 6, 2021, marked the most significant assault on the Capitol since the War of 1812.”

— Judge Patricia Millett, U.S. Court of Appeals, in [an opinion](#) issued Dec. 9

These quotes signify the vast gulf of understanding about the events of Jan. 6, 2021.

From the perspective of the former president, the attack on the Capitol was the result of an election that he falsely says was stolen. Trump claims the attackers were mere protesters, falsely maligned by the media and his opponents.

The reality, backed by law enforcement officials and the judiciary, is that Jan. 6 was the culmination of a sustained effort by a sitting president to overturn the election results. “That attack, that siege was criminal behavior, plain and simple,” [said](#) FBI Director Christopher A. Wray, who was appointed by Trump. “And it’s behavior that we, the FBI, view as domestic terrorism.”

One year later, here’s a reader’s guide to what is now known about the assault, though investigations and prosecutions are not complete.

Trump inspired the attack

Before the election, Trump seeded the ground for doubts about the election with baseless claims that the only way he could lose reelection was through fraud perpetrated by Democrats. Trump narrowly lost some key states — just as he had narrowly won some in 2016 — and subsequently decisively lost in the electoral college. As was his prerogative, he pursued legal challenges in many states but they were rejected by state officials and the courts.

Nevertheless, Trump continued to make elaborate and baseless claims about election fraud, even after the electoral college confirmed Joe Biden’s victory on Dec. 14. Five days later, he tweeted: “Big protest in D.C. on January 6th. Be there, will be wild!” He then tweeted seven more times calling attention to the event, including one on Jan. 1 that included the phrase “StopTheSteal!”

Signal Labs, a media insights company, later reported that more than 90,000 mentions of “Storm the Capitol” appeared on social media platforms in the 30 days before the attack. (“The Storm” is an expression that many self-identified Trump and QAnon supporters have used to refer to the day when Trump would unmask an alleged pedophile cabal run by Democrats.)

When Trump [spoke to a crowd gathered on the mall](#), he denounced the election results as “the most brazen and outrageous election theft” and declared “We will stop the steal.” He asserted that Vice President Mike Pence had “the absolute right” to reject the electoral college count and “send it back to the states to re-certify and we become president.” (Pence that morning had already indicated to Trump he did not agree.) He complained about the “explosions of bulls---” in the election count, promptly the crowd to chant the phrase. He then urged the crowd to march on the Capitol: “You have to show strength and you have to be strong.”

The size of the crowd listening to Trump remains unclear, though it’s smaller than the 250,000 he claimed during the rally. Organizers for the rally obtained a permit for 30,000. William M. Arkin, writing in Newsweek, [reported](#) about “25,000 participants were screened by Secret Service Uniformed Division officers to get into the restricted area” where he spoke. But another 15,000 positioned themselves outside the restricted area, between the Ellipse and the National Mall, Arkin said, citing classified records. There were also permits for two other pro-Trump rallies nearby, for 30,000 and 15,000 people.

[At least 2,000 people are believed](#) to have breached the Capitol. Some of those charged, in their defense, [have said](#) they were motivated to breach the Capitol by the commander in chief. Trump in July [called](#) the attackers “peaceful people” and “patriots.”

Trump aides and supporters actively sought to overturn the election

The Washington Post [reported](#) that, before the attack, some of Trump’s most loyal lieutenants — such as his personal lawyer Rudolph W. Giuliani and former chief White House strategist Stephen K. Bannon — worked to overturn the election from a set of rooms and suites in the Willard Hotel, a block from the White House.

The effort was guided by a memo written by John Eastman, a Federalist Society member, law professor and former clerk for Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas. Eastman, who also spoke at Trump’s rally, had outlined scenarios for denying Biden the presidency in an Oval Office meeting on Jan. 4 with Trump and Pence. The key part of the strategy was for enough states to decertify their results so Biden could not have a majority in the electoral college, forcing the election to be placed in the hands of the House of Representatives.

Under Eastman’s scenario, each state would get one vote, based on which party holds the majority of U.S. House districts in the state — and Republicans controlled a slim majority of state delegations (26 to 24) to ensure a victory for Trump. The flaw in this theory was that House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) could have immediately halted the joint session of Congress before such a vote. If the impasse had not been resolved by Jan. 20, constitution procedures [would have made Pelosi acting president](#).

Moreover, even if the results had been sent back to some states for additional scrutiny, Trump would have had trouble securing victory. Republicans and Trump supporters in 2021 demanded detailed audits and reviews of the results in [Arizona](#), [Georgia](#), [Michigan](#), [Wisconsin](#) and [Texas](#) — and uncovered no problems that would have overturned Biden’s victory.

At a rally on Oct. 9 in Des Moines, former president Donald Trump continued to unleash a litany of false and unproven claims of voter fraud in 2020. (Adriana Usero/The Washington Post)

The attack was violent

Trump as recently as December has [asserted](#) the attack on the Capitol was a “completely unarmed protest” but as more video footage and testimony emerged, the violence that day has come in sharper relief. Of the [727 people arrested and charged with crimes](#), more than [75 have been charged](#) with entering a restricted area with a dangerous or deadly weapon, including assaulting police officers with deadly or dangerous weapons. Video evidence indicates that nearly 140 police officers collectively weathered 1,000 assaults, according to prosecutors.

Some of the weapons confiscated as being used in the Capitol, [according to a CNN review of court records](#), include a baseball bat, a fire extinguisher, a wooden club, a spear, crutches, a flagpole, bear spray, mace, chemical irritants, stolen police shields, a wooden beam, a hockey stick, a stun gun and knives. Only a handful of people have been charged with carrying a gun inside.

“A baseball bat, a hockey stick, a rebar, a flagpole, including the American flag, pepper spray, bear spray. So you name it. You had all these items and things that were thrown at us and used to attack us. Those are weapons,” U.S. Capitol Police Sgt. Aquilino Gonell [told House members in July](#). “The way they were using these items, it was to hurt officers.”

Contrary to speculation in right-wing social media, no evidence has emerged that the violence was spurred on by left-wing antifa supporters or law enforcement officers in a “false-flag” operation. (The New York Times [revealed](#) one FBI informant was a member of the Proud Boys, a far-right group with a history of violence, who entered the Capitol.) A Washington Post review of court filings and public records last year found that the vast majority of those charged federally were [not known to be part of far-right groups or premeditated conspiracies to attack the Capitol](#).

Five people died during the attack or in the immediate aftermath, but whether they can all be attributed to the attack is in dispute. One clearly related death was Ashli Babbitt, an Air Force veteran with what the Associated Press called [“a history of erratic and sometimes threatening behavior.”](#) She was fatally shot by a U.S. Capitol police officer as she tried to climb through a broken window that led to the Speaker’s Lobby. “Nothing will stop us,” Babbitt [tweeted Jan. 5](#). “They can try and try and try but the storm is here and it is descending upon DC in less than 24 hours....dark to light!” Babbitt has been hailed as a martyr by Trump. The officer who shot her was cleared of any wrongdoing by the [Justice Department](#) and the [U.S. Capitol Police](#).

Three other Trump supporters also [died during the attack](#), two of heart attacks and third from amphetamine intoxication.

Brian D. Sicknick, a Capitol Hill officer, collapsed at his desk after the attack and died a day later. The District medical examiner [concluded](#) Sicknick had suffered two strokes nearly eight hours after being sprayed with a chemical irritant. Sandra Garza, Sicknick's partner, [said](#) this week she holds Trump "100% responsible" for Jan. 6 and "he needs to be in prison."

Four other police officers died by suicide in the days and months after the attack, with family members [saying](#) the deaths are related to experiencing the trauma of the attack.

Ten U.S. Capitol Police and Metropolitan police officers [have filed suit against Trump](#), seeking damages for physical and emotional injuries.

Trump took inadequate steps to calm the attackers

[Reporting in The Post](#) and elsewhere has revealed that during the 187 minutes of the attack, Trump avidly watched it unfold on television but took few steps to calm the situation. His first tweet, about 10 minutes after Pence had been removed by his Secret Service detail to protect him from the mob, reiterated the lie that the election was stolen: "Mike Pence didn't have the courage to do what should have been done to protect our Country and our Constitution, giving States a chance to certify a corrected set of facts, not the fraudulent or inaccurate ones which they were asked to previously certify. USA demands the truth."

Trump's other tweets that afternoon also fell short of telling the rioters to leave the Capitol. At 2:38 p.m., he tweeted: "Please support our Capitol Police and Law Enforcement. They are truly on the side of our Country. Stay peaceful!" Then Trump tweeted at 3:13 p.m.: "I am asking for everyone at the U.S. Capitol to remain peaceful." Finally, after President-elect Biden had already addressed the nation, Trump posted a video at 4:17 p.m. urging people to go home — but telling them they were "special" and again claiming the election outcome was illegitimate.

"We had an election that was stolen from us. It was a landslide election and everyone knows it, especially the other side, but you have to go home now," Trump said in the video, adding: "You're very special. You've seen what happens. You see the way others are treated that are so bad and so evil. I know how you feel. But go home and go home in peace."

Many Republicans and Trump supporters, at least briefly, were appalled

The select congressional committee investigating the attack has released texts sent to then-White House chief of staff Mark Meadows that show that, behind the scenes, Trump supporters urged the president to take more forceful action to end the violence. "He's got to condemn this ... ASAP. The Capitol Police tweet is not enough," Donald Trump Jr., the president's son, wrote. "We need an Oval address. He has to lead now. It has gone too far and gotten out of hand."

Fox News host Laura Ingraham texted Meadows: "Hey Mark, the president needs to tell people in the Capitol to go home. This is hurting all of us. He is destroying his legacy."

Publicly, GOP congressional leaders also condemned the attack and Trump's role in it. "The president bears responsibility for Wednesday's attack on Congress by mob rioters," [said House](#)

[Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy on Jan. 13](#). “He should have immediately denounced the mob when he saw what was unfolding.”

Since the Jan. 6 Capitol insurrection, Republicans have tried to reckon with their relationship with Trump. The following illustrates the tonal shift. (Adriana Usero/The Washington Post)

But after House Democrats impeached Trump — and he was acquitted by the Senate — the tone among Republicans shifted. Many began to rally around Trump and minimize his role. Instead, they falsely sought to pin the blame on Pelosi for not ensuring enough National Guard troops — even though that’s not under her control. Moreover, after claiming antifa was to blame, and with others saying it was an FBI plot, now many are on board with the idea that the rioters were patriots. In [a Washington Post-University of Maryland poll conducted Dec. 17-19](#), 72 percent of Republicans and 83 percent of Trump voters said he bears “just some” responsibility for Jan. 6 or “none at all.”

Capitol Hill security was deficient in part because of concerns about Trump

A year later, there continues to be confusion about why it took so long to deploy the National Guard after the Capitol was breached. Army Secretary Ryan McCarthy withheld authority from William J. Walker, at the time the commanding general of the D.C. National Guard, to activate a quick reaction force, a requirement that Walker in [congressional testimony](#) said was “unusual.” Other officials have testified that key Army officials were concerned about the “optics” of troops at the Capitol.

Trump has [falsely claimed](#) he requested 10,000 troops, but that was a number he raised, in casual conversation on an unrelated subject, based on an inflated expectation he would attract a crowd of 1 million supporters.

[Reporting](#) in the [past year](#) suggests [one reason](#) for the inadequate National Guard presence on Jan. 6 is that senior military officials were concerned Trump would seek to invoke the Insurrection Act. Gen. Mark A. Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told associates that he feared Jan. 6 was Trump’s “Reichstag moment,” referring to Adolf Hitler’s manufactured crisis in 1933 to secure his grip on power.