

The Washington Post

If we are to save our democracy, there must be a reckoning for the Jan. 6 attack

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January 3, 2022

One year ago, ours was a nation on the brink. We must never forget.

The first week of 2021 brought an unprecedented rupture in the democratic process that Americans have taken for granted since the election of John Adams in 1796. A sitting president, Donald Trump, was trying desperately to remain in office despite his defeat in a free and fair election. He summoned a mob to Washington as an intimidating show of force, and that violent mob — whipped into a frenzy by Trump and his cronies — stormed the Capitol to prevent Congress from certifying Trump's loss.

Much has happened since, both domestically and in foreign affairs. Now, as then, the biggest factor in most Americans' day-to-day lives is the disruption caused by the coronavirus pandemic. And the leadership of the Republican Party dearly wants us to forget that the Jan. 6 insurrection ever took place.

But the nation cannot just “move on” from such an attack on our constitutional order. Not since 1814, when British soldiers marched into Washington, had the Capitol been overrun and pillaged. Not even during the Civil War was the orderly transfer of presidential power disrupted. Never had a defeated presidential candidate — much less a defeated incumbent who had sworn to defend the Constitution — refused to accept the result of an election.

We need to know everything that is knowable about these events. And those who inspired, organized and committed the insurrection need to be brought to justice.

President Biden and Vice President Harris intend to deliver remarks Thursday to mark the anniversary of the failed putsch. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) has planned a series of events, beginning with prayer and a moment of silence in the House chamber, where so many of her colleagues sheltered in terror on Jan. 6 as a crush of thugs and zealots tried to smash their way inside.

And because Democrats are in charge of the White House and Congress, most Republicans will do their best to pretend that the commemoration is more about politics than nationhood. Trump is also expected to speak Thursday, and he will surely repeat his lies and gibberish about the election somehow being “stolen” from him and his supporters. He and the GOP — *his* GOP, make no mistake — have been trying to make the insurrection into a partisan issue. Don’t let them.

The mob threatened to “hang” Trump’s vice president, Mike Pence, after Pence announced that he would do his constitutional duty and certify Biden’s electoral victory. The senators, House members, staff aides and other Capitol workers forced to flee for their lives or shelter in terror belonged to both parties. And if you surveyed the political beliefs of the scores of police officers who were clubbed, beaten, doused with bear spray and abused with racist slurs by the mob, I wager you’d find as many conservatives as progressives.

What happened last Jan. 6 was much bigger and more important than politics. And holding accountable the perpetrators of this attack on our democracy must take precedence over any political concerns. This is bigger than who wins the midterm elections or who runs for president in 2024. This project of reckoning is about the continuation of the American experiment.

Actually, there are three simultaneous accountability projects whose success the American people must demand.

The House select committee investigating the attack (appointed by Pelosi only after Republicans refused to form a proper blue-ribbon commission) appears to be doing an admirable job of collecting new information, including about Trump’s actions that day. The committee must not let stonewalling by Trump and his inner circle cause delay — a full year has already passed. It is good that the committee plans to issue an interim report this summer but, in the meantime, it should hold public hearings and release as much information as possible. Their work is not just important but also urgent.

Simultaneously, Congress as a whole must shore up the weaknesses in our transfer-of-power process exposed by the insurrection. The mob’s aim was to halt the official counting of electoral votes — and the mob succeeded, at least for several hours. Even the libertarian Cato Institute agrees that the 1876 Electoral Count Act is “a mess of ambiguities and contradictions” and needs to be reformed. Legislation to do so should begin making its way toward Biden’s desk.

Meanwhile, the Justice Department must continue to press criminal charges against the insurrectionists. It is not enough to prosecute and sentence those who participated bodily in the assault. The puppet masters who assembled the crowd and sent it off to sack the Capitol must be held to account as well.

And no one, including Trump, can be considered above the law.