

# Hartford Courant

POLITICS

## The origin of the violent attack on the U.S. Capitol extends back decades

By MICHAEL HAMAD  
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"We're a fairly violent country when you look across the world and try to compare statistics," said Susan Herbst, professor of political science and president emeritus at UConn. In this picture, a man who was among scores of Trump supporters who ransacked the Capitol last week, stands with a Confederate flag. (Erin Schaff/The New York Times)

As the shock of watching swarms of terrorists ransack the nation's Capitol began to wear off, the questions started coming: Why weren't there enough police on duty? What was Donald Trump's role in inciting the violence? What immediate steps are needed to safeguard the Republic?

Less apparent, perhaps, but no less significant was a deeper question: How did we arrive at a moment where thousands of Americans felt justified in attacking the temple of American democracy?

To fully answer that question, experts say it's necessary to look further back than the false post-election rhetoric of the last few weeks, further back than the anger and hostility Trump has sown over the last four years and further back even than the landmark election of 2016 that brought Trump to power.

They point to Wednesday's events as part of a deep, longstanding distrust of our political system, inflamed and encouraged by Republican politicians who normalized President Trump's erratic behavior and seditious rhetoric. That toxic combination culminated in the attempted coup at the U.S. Capitol building on Wednesday by armed extremists, many of whom were still seething over election results they felt were unfair.

"In many ways it's the manifestation of a lack and loss of confidence in our political system that has been developing for some time now, not just under the Trump era," said Sacred Heart University professor Gary Rose. "So many people today for various reasons — far right and far left — are simply losing confidence in the way we govern ourselves."

The 2020 presidential election was in some ways the exposed tip of an iceberg, towering over a mostly hidden mass of political and social polarization, animosity toward our fellow citizens and a broad suspicion of government institutions — all symptoms of a distressed nation and a democracy that's rapidly drifting away.

For many Americans already angry over salary compression and their inability to get ahead, the lockdown due to the coronavirus pandemic is a waking nightmare. Much of the anger is race-based; some feel their privileged positions are being threatened by immigrants or citizens of color.



Insurgents climb the west wall of the the U.S. Capitol in Washington. Although pro-democracy and human rights activists around the globe were stunned to see a mob storm the Capitol, they say they were heartened and inspired because the system ultimately prevailed. (AP Photo/Jose Luis Magana File) (Jose Luis Magana/AP)

But the root causes go back decades and even centuries, stretching from slavery to birtherism, from historical social divisions based on race and class to the extreme income inequality and partisanship of the Trump era.

“We’re a fairly violent country when you look across the world and try to compare statistics,” said Susan Herbst, professor of political science and president emeritus at UConn and the author of “Rude Democracy: Civility and Incivility in American Politics.”

“There’s no question this is kind of a unique violence of 2020, but it’s been building over the past few decades, not just the last four or five years,” she said.

**Historical precedence, alternative facts**

The Courant spoke to a group of Connecticut lawmakers, scholars, clergy members and community leaders who tried to make sense of how America arrived at a singular moment in its history — an armed insurrection on the grounds of the U.S. Capitol.

Herbst said that while President Trump’s comments undoubtedly incited the violence at the Capitol, the insurrection wasn’t necessarily rooted in public policy or ideological debate. “There’s very few people who get involved at this level of protest who are interested in public policy,” she said.

Rather, the deeper threats of immigration, globalism and the perception of coastal elites pulling the levers — all of which bubbled to the surface long before the Trump era — exploded after the presidential election and onto the grounds of the Capitol.

Herbst compared the current moment to the 1930s, when President Franklin Delano Roosevelt steered the nation through the Great Depression amid widespread criticism by populists like Louisiana Governor Huey Long and antisemitic activist Father Charles Coughlin and alongside the looming threat of fascism, which was already taking over Europe and had won over thousands of sympathizers in the United States.

“People were scared to death that they wouldn’t be able to feed their families and looking for solutions everywhere, and FDR chose the path of unification,” Herbst said. “Our economic situation is not close to that despite the pandemic, but that’s our best place to look besides those years before the Civil War, which are a different kind of context.”

Officials have identified leaders of the Proud Boys and other extremist right-wing groups among the insurrectionists, many of whom were photographed holding Confederate flags and wearing clothing displaying anti-Semitic slogans.

Jeffrey Alexander, a cultural sociologist at Yale, said the incident at the Capitol—and the encouragement of Trump, who is still perceived by many to be a successful businessman and political outsider — allowed participants from working-class and military backgrounds to live out a fantasy of toppling the Washington, D.C. elites.

“It gave them a feeling of self-importance, and that they were accomplishing something of historic importance,” Alexander said, “which is, of course, how the Nazis felt, at least the early Nazis. ... All societies are driven by extreme strains and stresses, and there’s a lot of people who are left out at any given time on the left and on the right.”

Still, Trump’s in-person speech Wednesday was the match that lit the powder keg, Alexander said, leading far-right extremists and alienated citizens up the steps of the Capitol.

“Trump likes to punish people, and that’s how it is in business,” Alexander said. “I look at him as a certain kind of real estate mogul. This is a world of sharks, and he brought that mentality, plus a lot of personality disorders, narcissism, arrogance and wealth, into an office where I don’t think it’s ever been occupied by somebody like that.”

Others said the attempted coup has roots in the degradation of truth and the spread of “alternative facts,” which Facebook and other social media outlets have exacerbated in recent years.

“We actually have raised a generation to question: do you think that’s right? Should it be interpreted a different way?” said Joanne Berger-Sweeney, president and professor of neuroscience at Trinity College in Hartford. “And to some degree, I think we have kind of taken it a bit to the extreme, where people are questioning whether they’re common truths and sets of facts.”

What led to the insurrection, Berger-Sweeney said, is everyday citizens getting their news channeled directly to them rather than reading a variety of news outlets.

“We’re losing a bit the concept of what a fact is and what truth is in some situations,” she said, “such that one group of people believes one set of things and another group of people believes another set of things, and there’s not much overlap in that Venn diagram in the society that we have built and particularly perpetuated in the last half decade.”

## **A double standard**

Bishop John L. Selders Jr., organizing pastor of Amistad United Church of Christ in Hartford, assistant dean of students at Trinity College and co-founder of Moral Monday CT, recalled being arrested inside the U.S. Capitol in 2018 as he prayed and sang in front of then-Sen. Orrin Hatch's office.

“I was cuffed, escorted out of the building and taken to a holding facility where I was given my arrest papers,” Selders said. “It took quite a bit for us to get in the building in the first place. How did these people get in and occupy the building and there wasn't a prepared response?”

After watching a horde of mostly white Trump supporters storm past Capitol police with little resistance, community leaders pointed to the harsh treatment of racial justice protesters, stretching back to the events in Ferguson, Mo., several years ago and culminating with Black Lives Matter protests across the country this summer.

Jay Williams, president of the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving, said the insurrection was partly the result of racial tensions stretching back to slavery that have never been fully reconciled.

“There's still a double standard in this country,” Williams said. “No, we don't have Jim Crow laws on the books and we don't have separate water fountains and separate entrances, but the lingering effects of that structural racism and inequity have only been exacerbated over generations. The wealth that was robbed from communities of color decades ago, generations ago, has only gotten worse.”

Trump, Williams said, would have immediately invoked the Sedition Act of 1798 if the insurrection was led by Black Lives Matter protesters — and he would be justified in doing so.

“It would have happened in a heartbeat,” he said. “There were dozens of arrests, but there would have been *hundreds* of arrests. The bloodshed, as tragic as it was, would have been orders of magnitude greater.”

## **‘Politicians who should have known better’**

Along with instigators on the ground, Democratic lawmakers in Connecticut blamed Trump, Sen. Ted Cruz, Sen. Josh Hawley and other Republican legislators for enabling the attack.

“I lived through yesterday but I almost worry more about my Republican colleagues who, even after their lives were put in danger by President Trump, got right back to business supporting President Trump’s lies and conspiracies,” said U.S. Rep. Jim Himes, a Democrat who represents Connecticut’s 4th District.

On Thursday, Himes called Cruz and Hawley “powerful politicians who should have known better” and said he hopes the inauguration of President-elect Joe Biden will usher in a more stable era in American politics, even as the country reckons with the wreckage of the last four years.

“Our founding fathers built a system that was designed to contain demagogues like Donald Trump,” Himes said. “Yesterday, it survived, but people like me have to do a lot of thinking about how to create a more welcoming, open civic space.”

Sen. Richard Blumenthal placed the blame for the insurrection squarely on Trump’s shoulders, calling it “disgusting and despicable” and characterizing it as the logical conclusion of Trump’s contempt for the rule of law and his incitement of violence.

“Donald Trump is clearly an inept and incompetent wannabe dictator, and he is opening a path to more competent and effective would-be tyrants in the future,” Blumenthal said. “He is normalizing that misconduct that has been enabled over the past four years and which should have been stopped with the impeachment of

the president a year ago.”

Rob Simmons, a former Republican Congressman in the 2nd District who spent 13 years working in the Capitol (seven as a Senate staffer for John Chaffee and Barry Goldwater and another six as a member of the U.S. House), said ill feelings harbored after the Mueller Investigation and other attacks on Trump since 2016 led to this insurrection.

“This presidency has been subject to unprecedented false allegations and attacks for four years,” he said. “You think the supporters of just over 70 million Americans aren’t upset at that behavior? I’ve been around for a long time. ... I have never seen a sitting president treated in this fashion. Never. And that plays out to his supporters, like it or not.”

Simmons also said he believes the pro-Trump rally was infiltrated by Antifa activists. To date, there has been no official confirmation of Antifa or similar activist groups participating in the events at the Capitol.

“These things don’t happen by accident,” he said. “I spent 10 years in the CIA. I think I know a little bit about how to foment insurrection. You can point to the president and he certainly has to accept a certain amount of blame, but it’s not all about him. That’s probably something the Courant won’t publish, but that’s OK. That’s what I believe.”

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