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Right-Wing Terrorism in America through the Lens of the Capitol Riot

Nathan Lucas

On the morning of January 6th, 2021 a mob of supporters of outgoing President Donald Trump stormed the Capitol building during the process of congressional certification of the results of the 2020 presidential election. While the incident failed to halt the certification for anything more than a few hours, it still represents a seismic shift in American politics. For the majority of American history, the threat of a politically charged mob enticed by an outgoing president storming Congress was unthinkable, something that happened in other countries. However, the rise and normalization of extreme far right-wing views and associated acts of terror have altered the political calculus in America, and represent an existential threat to our democracy.

The saga of the Capitol Riots began in the weeks and months prior to January 6th. In the leadup to the 2020 presidential election, Donald Trump as well as other right-wing pundits and elected officials worked to spread unfounded concerns regarding the integrity of the election, in particular, the widespread expansion of mail-in and early voting carried out by many states in response to the covid-19 pandemic. Despite facing defeat in the election, former President Trump as well as many supporters refused to concede the loss claiming, counter to the assertions of many experts both before and after the election, that the election had been “stolen” by Democratic candidate Joe Biden. Despite multiple lawsuits contesting the validity of the results as well as attempts to overturn the results through the state legislatures the results of the election would be certified in the individual states and electors appointed (Whittington). This would not, however, stop the attempts of the Trump campaign to subvert the election, leading to several

lawsuits ultimately dismissed by the Supreme Court, most notably Kelly, Mike, et al. vs Pennsylvania et al. Texas vs Pennsylvania et al, dismissed December 8th and December 11th respectively (Cummings et al.).

The events of January 6th began with a politically charged crowd of Trump supporters converging near the White House. The situation was already politically volatile, not only due to the scheduled confirmation of the presidential election results but due to the recently confirmed results of the Georgia senate runoffs, handing control of the Senate to the democratic party. It is into this politically hypercharged environment that President Trump delivered a long-winded speech, largely composed of repeatedly disproven rhetoric regarding the validity of the election. By one in the afternoon a crowd of protestors had begun to gather at the capitol building, joined shortly thereafter by those leaving Trump's speech at the White House, driven on by the outgoing President's demands for the protestors to "Take back our country" (Trump). As the crowd swelled it overwhelmed the Capitol Police and entered the Capitol Building (Shelly Tan et al.).

In response to the breach of the Capitol, both houses of Congress adjourned and the certification of the election was temporarily halted. Throughout the ordeal, President Trump continued to tweet various falsehoods regarding the integrity of the election. It is from this time that the most haunting pictures of the riot were taken. The images of rioters draped in three kinds of flags: American, Confederate, and Trump; storming the halls of American democracy served to evoke comparisons with the fall of Rome. The violence and demonstrations were not limited to the Capitol, with protests in Austin, Denver, Minneapolis, and most notably the Michigan Capitol building, as well as threats against Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger (Shelly Tan et al.). Pipe bombs were discovered at both the RNC and DNC offices, now known to be

planted the night before (Shortell). As violence continued and the Capitol Police continued to struggle to contain the mob, leading to calls to deploy the national guard, it was only on the orders of Vice President Mike Pence, not Donald Trump, that the national guard was finally deployed and the situation contained, allowing Congress to resume their work (Cooper et al.).

While it is easy and perhaps comforting to view the events of January 6th as an isolated event, a coda to the troubled Trump presidency, it is instead the culmination of years of political change. Throughout most of the latter half of the 20th century in America, the majority of domestic terrorism originated from leftist groups, according to the FBI this would shift during the 1980s, with law enforcement finding great success in dismantling these organizations (Watson). In the following decades, right-wing terrorism became more prevalent in the United States, emerging into the public conscience in 1995 with the Oklahoma City bombing carried out by Timothy McVeigh, a man involved with several overtly racist groups (Blee 270). The right-wing in American politics can broadly be divided into two groups, the “conservative” movement, and a more traditional right-wing. The conservative movement in America is largely focused on socially conservative causes, for instance, opposition to abortion and same-sex marriage, as well as broadly right-wing economic causes, particularly tax policies. In the 1970s a subset of the conservative movement known as the New Right (NR) emerged, representing a coalition of various right-wing groups, including free-market enthusiasts, libertarians, and social conservatives (Blee 272). The NR movement would consist largely of grassroots action, as opposed to more centrally managed movements. In contrast, American right-wing groups are predominately overtly white supremacist and often anti-semitic, these movements include historic groups such as the KKK and neo-nazi groups, as well as more modern groups (Blee 272).

An examination of contemporary right-wing terror organizations finds a broad collection of white supremacist and anti-semitic organizations. One of the most well-known of these groups, especially in the aftermath of the Capitol riot, is the Proud Boys. The Proud Boys were founded in 2016 by Gavin McInnes, co-founder of VICE media. The group describes themselves as “Western Chauvinists” and deny any connection to the alt-right or other racist movements. Despite this denial of white supremacy, the group has been involved in many overtly racist events, including the 2017 “Unite the Right” movement in Charlottesville, organized by Jason Kessler, a member of the Proud Boys (“Proud Boys”). The Proud Boys were also involved in the Capitol riot, with multiple high-ranking members facing conspiracy charges (Feuer and Robles). The denial of white-supremacist views by the Proud Boys falls apart when we examine statements made by members up to and including a statement made by Brian Brathovd claiming that “if that Proud Boys were pressed on the issue, I guarantee you that like 90% of them would tell you something along the lines of ‘Hitler was right. Gas the Jews’” (“Proud Boys”).

Another modern right-wing group of note are the Oath Keepers. The Oath Keepers are substantially older than the Proud Boys, being founded in 2009. The group claims its purpose is to defend the constitution, with members of the group claiming to uphold their oaths sworn upon joining the military or law enforcement organizations, where the Oath Keepers conduct most of their recruitment. The group traffics in traditional anti-government conspiracy theories, including theories of a “New World Order” and martial law (Oath Keepers). The group has also been involved in multiple instances of criminal activity, including possession of explosives, possession of illegal firearms (including grenade launchers), and an attempt to arrest officials who had refused to bring charges against then-President Obama (The Oath Keepers).

While the use of retired law enforcement officers and veterans as a recruitment base for the Oath Keepers, Proud Boys, and other groups are cause for concern, more disturbing is the infiltration of law enforcement with active members of these groups. Police organizations in America have a long history of racial issues, issues brought to prominence through the Black Lives Matter movement. Recent statements by Michael German, a former FBI special agent, have brought to light the infiltration of law enforcement organizations by white supremacist groups. A report published by German details the widespread links between police and white supremacist groups, including cooperation between the Sacramento Police Department and neo-nazi groups against anti-racist advocates, police officers in Chicago seen wearing far-right symbols, and police in Philadelphia seen allowing right-wing groups to attack protestors (Levin). German states further in his report that the FBI warned agents assigned to domestic terrorism cases that “the white supremacist and anti-government militia groups they investigate often have ‘active links’ to law enforcement officials”, and that these links threaten the bureau’s ability to gather information about these movements (German).

The increasingly brazen right-wing terrorist groups in America found a friend in 2016 in President Donald Trump. Despite repeated claims by Trump denying any racist views, he was a quick favorite for people associated with white supremacist groups. In February of 2016 David Duke, a former high ranking member of the KKK, endorsed Donald Trump stating “voting against Donald Trump at this point is really treason to your heritage”, a clear talking point of far-right groups, particularly from the mouth of a former klansman (Hafner). In August of 2017 Trump supporters were prevalent among those chanting “Jews will not replace us” at the earlier mentioned “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville Virginia (Levin and Guenther). In response to this rally as well as the murder of a counter-protestor President Trump uttered the now

infamous line “There were very fine people on both sides”, drawing outrage and condemnation (Holan). The Proud Boys received major national attention after the first presidential debate of the 2020 election, during which President Trump, when asked to denounce white supremacist groups and the Proud Boys specifically issued a tepid request that they “stand back and stand by”, a remark cheered on by members, including the group’s leader, Enrique Tarrio, who took it as a message to continue what they were doing, an ominous warning of the future riots (Murphy).

By examining the evidence it is clear that the events of January 6th, 2021 were far more than an over-enthusiastic crowd or an out-of-control protest. The events constitute a riot, perhaps even an attempted coup, tacitly endorsed and encouraged by former President Trump and led by a loose group of overtly white supremacist groups. This movement has spread its toxic roots throughout our country, seeping into law enforcement, the military, and state legislatures throughout the country. The events of January 6th failed to halt the certification of the electoral results, however, they demonstrated to the country and to the world that a sitting president could use the power of the office to organize their supporters to subvert democracy. This is a lesson that will not soon be forgotten by far-right groups, and must not be forgotten by the rest of the country, lest the American democracy we cherish be allowed to perish from the earth.

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