

# Republicans' Jan. 6 Responsibility

**The GOP has a duty to condemn the riot and those who refuse to acknowledge it.**



*Rioters storm into the U.S. Capitol in Washington, Jan. 6, 2021.  
Photo: SHANNON STAPLETON/REUTERS*

We're in an acrimonious period of partisan tribalism and have been for some time. Both parties are guilty of overwrought denunciations of their political opponents. My criticisms are often aimed at Democrats; on the anniversary of Jan. 6, I'm addressing squarely those Republicans who for a year have excused the actions of the rioters who stormed the Capitol, disrupted Congress as it received the Electoral College's results, and violently attempted to overturn the election.

These apologists say those who stormed the Capitol were innocent patriots, tourists visiting the seat of the national government to petition their elected representatives peacefully. We're told that these harmless, ordinary Americans are being persecuted as political prisoners.

Let's stipulate that while the thousands who went to the Capitol a year ago were wrong to insist the election was stolen, most weren't violent as they exercised their First Amendment rights to gather peacefully on the Mall—just as I had seen liberals gather to protest both inaugurations of President George W. Bush.

But last year there were several thousand protesters willing to use force to disrupt Congress in its constitutional duty to receive and certify the electoral vote. Some went to Washington with that purpose in mind. Others were swept up in the moment's savagery, led astray by stronger wills with dangerous motives.

---

**Newsletter Sign-up**

**Opinion: Morning Editorial Report**

The leaders of this group were intent on committing violence, some having planned to do so for weeks. Many wore tactical gear. Some came armed with chemical agents, flagpoles, batons and sticks. They broke through barricades and assaulted approximately 140 police officers, in some cases with an officer's own shield or gear. They smashed doors and windows, illegally entered the Capitol, ransacked offices and searched for leaders of Congress, and made dire threats about what would happen if they found them.

More than 725 people have been charged so far, and law enforcement is searching for hundreds more suspects who appear on video or social media, some recorded attacking police officers. At least 163 people have pleaded guilty, and 71 have been sentenced. Only one defendant's charges have been dismissed. Many of the most serious trials have yet to be held, as lawyers prepare defenses or negotiate plea deals.

So, on this anniversary, here's a simple thought experiment: What if the other side had done it? What if in early January 2017, Democrats similarly attired and armed had stormed the Capitol and attempted to keep Congress from receiving the Electoral College results for the 2016 presidential election?

What if Democrats claimed that Donald Trump's razor-thin victories in Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin resulted from extensive voter fraud and should be rejected, despite having failed to establish in a single court that extensive fraud had actually occurred?

What if some of these Democrats breached the Capitol defenses and threatened violence against the Republican speaker, Paul Ryan, and Republican Senate majority leader, Mitch McConnell ?

What if they insisted that in his role as Senate president then-Vice President [Joe Biden](#) had sole authority to seat Hillary Clinton's electors from any contested states and thereby hand her the presidency?

If this happened, would some of my fellow Republicans have accepted it as merely a protest? Would they have called patriots those charged with violent acts against our country, its laws and Constitution? Would they have accepted such extralegal means to change the outcome of a presidential election?

No they would not. I'm certain of that.

If Democrats had done what some Trump supporters did on that violent Jan. 6, Republicans would have criticized them mercilessly and been right to do so. Republicans would have torched any high official who encouraged violence or stood mute while it was waged and been right to do so. Republicans would have demanded an investigation to find who was responsible for the violence and been right to do so.

To move beyond Jan. 6, 2021, we must put country ahead of party. For Democrats, that means resisting their leadership's petty habit of aggravating partisan fault lines by indiscriminately condemning all who came to Washington that day.

We Republicans have a heavier burden. I've been a Republican my entire life, and believe in what the Republican Party, at its best, has represented for decades. There can be no soft-pedaling what happened and no absolution for those who planned, encouraged and aided the attempt to overthrow our democracy. Love of country demands nothing less. That's true patriotism.

*Mr. Rove helped organize the political-action committee American Crossroads and is author of "The Triumph of William McKinley" (Simon & Schuster, 2015).*

---