

After January 6: Setting the Record Straight on the Capitol Insurrection

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Distinguished members, thank you for inviting me to speak about political violence.

To learn from January 6, we must understand both that mis- and disinformation is the primary driver of political violence *and* that political violence is not limited to physical attacks, including killings, but also includes the intimidation, threats, and harassment that squelch civic participation and undermine the functioning of our democratic republic.

In the years leading up to January 6, conspiracy theories emboldened extremists. The Great Replacement Theory—which posits a conspiracy to replace majority white populations with non-white immigrants, was behind the deadly Unite the Right rally as well as multiple mass shootings. Conspiracies about Democrats taking away Americans’ freedoms were behind attacks on statehouse during the pandemic. By Election Day 2020, President Trump’s election-fraud conspiracy was well seeded in the populace, so that by January 6, the thousands of people he had summoned to the Capitol were ready and willing to act when he called for them to “fight like hell.”

The effort to rewrite history is based on more falsehoods: that January 6 was a peaceful protest, that the January 6 defendants were politically persecuted, and that Trump was the victim of a weaponized Department of Justice made up of evil people. Add to this the baseless claims of non-citizen voting and pervasive violent crime by immigrants, and the risk of political violence increases, despite polls showing that most Americans are firmly against it.

Political violence doesn’t have to be physical to cause great damage. Threats against election officials have resulted in the highest recorded rate of turnover in the past quarter century. Elected officials at every level have decided

not to run for reelection after threats to themselves and their families. And [new research](#) shows that roughly 5.5 million Americans may not have voted in 2024 because of fears of violence.

Executive actions in the last year have created a culture of fear and intimidation. The blacklisting of law firms has chilled lawyers from representing people and causes the president opposes. The demands for prosecution of the president's perceived enemies signals that those who challenge him will be punished. The targeting of media organizations risks burying stories about government overreach and failing to fact-check false and misleading statements by government officials. And NSPM-7, the one-sided presidential proclamation directing the federal government to go after those the president characterizes as espousing "anti-Americanism" has impacted the crucial work of non-profits, fearful of being subjected to baseless investigations and audits.

ICE and CBP have physically assaulted individuals suspected to be undocumented, as well as protesters, university students, and clergy members, all to instill fear in immigrant communities and to chill First-Amendment-protected protest. And the federalization and deployment of the National Guard into so-called "blue" cities attempts to normalize the militarization of the country.

We cannot ignore the false narratives that this administration seeks to rely on to suppress voting rights and public protest. Congress must use its authorities to combat disinformation and political violence, whether by private actors or government officials. And Americans must refuse to be silenced or chilled from civic participation.