

Ransacking Democracy: AHA Statement on the Events of January 6

Approved by AHA Council, January 8, 2021

The American Historical Association condemns the actions of those who, on January 6, stormed the United States Capitol, the seat of the nation’s legislature, the heart of its democratic form of governance. This assault on the very principle of representative democracy received recent explicit and indirect support from the White House and from certain senators and representatives themselves. Not since 1814, when the British looted and burned the Capitol, has the United States witnessed such a blatant attack on the “People’s House.”

Everything has a history. What happened at the Capitol is part of a historical process. Over the past few years, cynical politicians have nurtured and manipulated for their own bigoted and self-interested purposes the sensibilities of the rioters. We deplore the inflammatory rhetoric of all the political leaders who have refused to accept the legitimacy of the results of the 2020 election and thereby incited the mob—and this on the day when the nation reported 3,865 [COVID-19 deaths](#), the highest number reported in a single day since the pandemic began.

We note with dismay the iconography of the banners carried by the mob—the flag with the visage of the president emblazoned on it, as if loyalty were due an individual and not the rule of law, and the flag of the Confederacy, signaling violence and sedition. Not by coincidence, those people who attacked the Capitol have been described by the current president and his advisers as “great patriots” and “American patriots.” The rioters were neither.

A day that began with two significant “firsts”—the election of Georgia’s first African American senator and that state’s first Jewish senator—ended with Congress performing its duties according to the Constitution. Yet during the day we witnessed the unprecedented spectacle of a group of Americans desecrating the sacred space of the nation’s Capitol, and terrorizing everyone in it.

As historians, we call upon our fellow citizens and elected representatives to abide by the law and tell the truth. Our democracy demands nothing less of ourselves and of our leaders.

The American Historical Association is a nonprofit membership organization founded in 1884 and incorporated by Congress in 1889 for the promotion of historical studies.