

The racial contradictions of Trump's 'law and order' mantra

Police treatment of the Capitol rioters “says a lot about who is an enemy combatant and who is not.”



Rioters interact with Capitol Police inside the U.S. Capitol Building Jan. 6, 2021 Washington, D.C.

By Sabrina Rodriguez, Maya King And Nolan D. Mccaskill
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Last summer, peaceful Black Lives Matter protesters were met with rubber bullets and tear gas outside the White House to clear the way for President Donald Trump's photo-op with military leaders and a Bible at a nearby church.

But on Wednesday, law enforcement officials allowed a mob of pro-Trump extremists to storm into a locked-down Capitol. One Trump fan even made his way inside House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's office, getting comfortable enough to prop his feet up on her desk.

The chaos on Capitol Hill — and the radically different responses from law enforcement — showcased a reality many activists, journalists and Trump opponents have long argued exists: Trump never really stood for law and order, even if he repeatedly used the phrase in his campaign last year while diverting attention from the escalating pandemic. And the chaos demonstrated another reality laid bare last summer by the death of George Floyd: law enforcement is applied very differently based on race.

Journalists inside the Capitol captured rioters breaking windows and attempting to replace an American flag outside the building with a Trump flag. They recorded Trump supporters roaming the halls of the building. And how Capitol Police handled it — or didn't — did not go unnoticed across social media, where reporters, historians and activists spoke out against what they see as hypocrisy: An overwhelmingly white crowd acting violently was handled gently compared to peaceful protesters in Washington and across the country during the protests over Floyd's killing by a Minneapolis police officer.

Rep. Cori Bush (D-Missouri), a veteran of Black Lives Matters protests in Ferguson, Missouri, appeared on MSNBC Wednesday night and criticized the disparate treatment.

"It was almost like there was this call [for the police] to not use force," Bush said. "There are pictures and videos of police officers just walking away. Had it been people who looked like me. Had it been the same amount of people but had they been Black and brown. We wouldn't have made it up those steps. We wouldn't have made it to get into the door and bust windows and go put our feet up on desks of Congress members. We wouldn't have made it that far. We would've been shot. We would've been tear gassed. We need to call it what it is. It's white supremacy."

Politicians, former officials, activists and others on social media vented their fury, tweeting "#ThisisAmerica" posting pictures and videos that highlighted the different ways Black and Brown protesters were treated by police compared to the Capitol insurrectionists.

Police treatment of the rioters "says a lot about who is an enemy combatant and who is not — and how the Capitol Hill police were not ready for this," said Rashad Robinson, president of Color of Change, the country's largest online racial justice organization.

"It's an example of all of the ways in which these folks who have at every turn advanced some of the ugliest, most hateful and most violent interactions — that they were still given the benefit of the doubt when they showed up to Washington," he added.

Robinson said the extremists who stormed the Capitol should not be regarded as protesters. "It was domestic terrorism," he said.

On Wednesday, Rep. Tim Ryan (D-Ohio), who is charged with funding the Capitol Police as the House Appropriations Legislative Branch subcommittee chair, promised to investigate the law enforcement response to the rioters who seized the Capitol building. Ryan said that officers made "strategic mistakes" and promised there would "be a number of people who are going to be without employment very, very soon."

President-elect Joe Biden addressed the law enforcement response to Wednesday's insurrection during a speech Thursday afternoon, calling it a "clear failure to carry out equal justice."

"No one can tell me that if that had been a group of Black Lives Matter protesters, they wouldn't have been treated very, very differently," Biden said.

Videos of the chaos inside the Capitol showed extremists sitting in House and Senate chambers, walking throughout the building — and one particular instance that was widely shared online showed a man sitting with his feet on Pelosi's desk, leaving a note that read, "We will not back down."

That man, later identified by a New York Times reporter as Richard "Bigo" Barnett from Gravette, Ark., was outside the Capitol later on recounting his time in Pelosi's office. At the time of his exit from the Capitol, he was not in police custody. Reports have not confirmed whether he was among the rioters who were arrested Wednesday evening.

During a Thursday afternoon press call, Michael Sherwin, Acting Attorney General for the District of Columbia, said 55 arrests were made in connection to Wednesday's occupation of the Capitol. Of those arrested, 15 face federal charges. When asked for details about the level of prosecution those taken into custody could face, Sherwin said "all options are on the table."

Another clip on Twitter showed a rioter taking a selfie with a law enforcement officer inside the Capitol.

"It's a dark day in America when a UNITED STATES Capitol police officer decides to take a selfie with a TERRORIST! And they wonder why WE don't feel safe!" the NAACP posted on Twitter with the video.

Trump, for his part, waited for roughly an hour after his supporters started creating chaos outside the Capitol to send out a tweet, asking them to "stay peaceful." After hours of scenes of chaos playing out on live television, he eventually tweeted a video falsely claiming the presidential election was stolen from him and urging his supporters to go home.

"We can't play into the hands of these people," Trump said in a video that Twitter later deleted from his account, which has been locked until 7 a.m. Thursday. "We have to have peace. So go home. We love you. You're very special."

In one tweet, he said: "Remember, WE are the Party of Law & Order" — a message he repeatedly said on the campaign trail as he depicted Democrats as violent protesters.

In contrast, the day after his photo-op last summer, Trump celebrated the "many arrests" and boasted that "Washington, D.C., was the safest place on earth last night!"

As of Wednesday evening, 13 people had been arrested in relation to the riots, Metropolitan Police Department Chief Robert Contee said at a press conference. Contee said that several officers had been injured. One woman was also shot in the Capitol and later pronounced dead.

More than 14,000 arrests were made during the George Floyd protests across the country last year, according to Public Citizen, a progressive advocacy group that monitors corporate influence on policy.

Rep. Karen Bass (D-Calif.) excoriated Trump supporters — who were widely critical of the Black Lives Matter protests — for attacking law enforcement officers.

“The people breaking into the Capitol are the same people that scream about law and order when there are Black Lives Matter protests,” she posted on Twitter. “The people that are attacking Capitol Police officers right now are the same people that say they stand with the police.”

Democrats and activists on Wednesday afternoon were quick to point out that Capitol Police’s response to the protesters was markedly different from even their daily enforcement measures. When asked on CNN whether Black Lives Matter protesters would have been treated the same way as the rioters had they stormed the Capitol building, D.C. Mayor Muriel Bowser didn’t answer.

#AmeriKKKa was trending on Twitter on Wednesday evening, with thousands of posts pointing out the difference in law enforcement’s response to the Black Lives Matter protests and the extremists storming the Capitol.