
Inside a Deadly Siege: How a String of Failures Led to a Dark Day at the Capitol

Poor planning among a constellation of government agencies and a restive crowd encouraged by President Trump set the stage for the unthinkable.

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WASHINGTON — Huddled in a command center on Wednesday afternoon, Mayor Muriel Bowser of Washington and her aides saw a photograph of blood stains on the temporary grandstands at the Capitol, a makeshift structure built for the inauguration of a new president in two weeks.

The enormity of the deadly failure sank in.

Rioters had broken through the thin police line on the Capitol steps and were descending on hundreds of lawmakers conducting the ceremonial, quadrennial act of certifying the presidential vote — and the mayor and her aides were not able to stop the attack.

Ms. Bowser and her police chief called the Pentagon, asking for additional D.C. National Guard troops to be mobilized to support what officials were realizing was inadequate protection at the Capitol. But they were told that the request would first have to come from the Capitol Police.

In a call to Chief Steven Sund of the Capitol Police, they learned that his force was under siege, lawmakers were being rushed to safety, and rioters were overrunning anyone in authority. He kept repeating the same phrase: “The situation is dire.”

Cutting through the cross talk, one person on the call posed a blunt question: “Chief Sund, are you requesting National Guard troops on the grounds of the Capitol?”

There was a pause.

“Yes,” Chief Sund replied, “I am.”

Yet the Capitol Police and the city's Metropolitan Police had rebuffed offers days before for more help from the National Guard beyond a relatively modest contingent to provide traffic control, so no additional troops had been placed on standby. It took just over four hours for them to arrive.

It was just one failure in a dizzying list that day — and during the weeks leading up to it — that resulted in the first occupation of the United States Capitol since British troops set the building ablaze during the War of 1812. But the death and destruction this time was caused by Americans, rallying behind the [inflammatory language of an American president](#), who refused to accept the will of more than 81 million other Americans who had voted him out of office.

[President Trump's call at a rally](#) that day for the crowd to march on the nearby Capitol was surely a spark that helped ignite the deadly riots that left five dead — including a [policeman](#) and a [woman who stormed the building](#) — injured dozens of others and damaged the country's reputation for carrying out peaceful transfers of power. But the tinder for the blaze had been gathering for months, with every tweet that the election had been stolen, every refusal by Republican lawmakers to recognize Joseph R. Biden Jr. as the next president, every dog-whistle call that emboldened white supremacist groups to violently strike.

A full reckoning will take months or even years, and many lawmakers have called for a formal commission to investigate.

But an initial anatomy of the siege by The New York Times revealed numerous failures. The chaos showed that government agencies have no coordinated plan to defend against an attack on the Capitol — especially one specifically aimed at powerful elected officials — though law enforcement agencies have for years raised alarms about the growing threat of domestic terrorism. QAnon, an online conspiracy group that was well represented among the crowd, has been labeled a domestic terrorist threat by the F.B.I.

Federal agencies and the Capitol Police appeared to issue no serious warnings in the days leading up to the riots that the gathering could turn violent, despite [countless posts](#) on right-wing social media sites pledging confrontation and even bloodshed.

The Department of Homeland Security invited local law enforcement agencies to its situation room — held online during the pandemic — only the day before the riots, which some security experts said was far too late.

Poor planning and communication among a constellation of federal, state and local law enforcement agencies hamstrung the response to the rioting. Once the Capitol building was breached, a patchwork group of reinforcements was forced to try to navigate a labyrinthine complex of unfamiliar passages and byways that would prove dangerous.

Above all, the fiasco demonstrated that government agencies were not prepared for a threat that, until recently, seemed unimaginable: when the person inciting the violence is the president of the United States.

The Capitol Police and the Metropolitan Police Department did not respond to requests for comment. Ms. Bowser's chief of staff, John Falcicchio, said that defense officials determined the number of personnel deployed. But Pentagon officials said they made those decisions based on the specific requests they received.

The recriminations began almost immediately, and the violence also carried a sobering reality: The country got lucky. Hundreds of rioters carrying weapons breached the seat of American power — some with the clear intent of injuring, holding hostage or even killing federal officials to stop them from certifying the vote. In the end, all of the lawmakers were spirited away to safety.

"It was such an embarrassingly bad failure and immediately became an infamous moment in American history," said R.P. Eddy, a former American counterterrorism official and diplomat who now runs a private intelligence firm. "But it could have been so much worse."

Missed Warnings

"The Capitol is our goal. Everything else is a distraction," announced [one post](#) on far-right social media a day before the uprising. "Every corrupt member of Congress locked in one room and surrounded by real Americans is an opportunity that will never present itself again."

That was just one example of how extremists were organizing on social media. In private Facebook groups, activists planning to make the trip to the capital discussed not only logistics like hotels and rideshares, but also sleeping in cars and pitching tents should they need to "occupy" the city. Many comments included photographs of guns and ammunition that they planned to bring.

On smaller social media platforms such as [Parler](#) and [Gab](#) that became rallying places for the far right, calls for violence were more overt. Dozens of posts in the days leading up to Wednesday listed assault rifles and other weapons that people claimed they were bringing to Washington. People discussed which types of ammunition were best and whether medics would be in place for those potentially injured.

Law enforcement and other officials were aware of the chatter and [took some steps to try to reduce the chances of violence](#). Homeland security officials put tactical agents on standby in downtown Washington. The F.B.I. questioned neo-Nazis who were under investigation and planning to attend the demonstrations, prompting some of them to change their plans and skip the trip, officials said.

And on Monday, the Metropolitan Police Department [arrested Enrique Tarrio](#), the leader of the Proud Boys, a far-right group. The police also announced before the rally that anyone who planned to show up to the demonstrations armed, in violation of local firearms laws, would be arrested.

But missed opportunities abounded. Despite the ominous social media posts, officials leading intelligence-sharing centers throughout the United States received no warnings from the federal government about the potential threat to the Capitol.

“We did not see any federal products related to this,” said Mike Sena, the president of the National Fusion Center Association. Such centers were formed after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks to improve communication and planning among federal and local agencies.

One senior federal prosecutor in the Midwest said he did not even speak with the top F.B.I. agent in his city about local residents possibly traveling to Washington. What the F.B.I. had been observing online, officials would later say, amounted to First Amendment-protected activity, despite the incendiary language in social media posts.

Intelligence experts denounced the inability — or refusal — of government analysts to provide proper warning about impending violence.

“The evidence is starkly clear that the momentum of violence has shifted to the right in this country. We’ve seen this in city after city,” Mr. Eddy said.

“There was a failure among law enforcement to imagine that people who ‘look like me’ would do this.”

Chase Jennings, a spokesman for the Homeland Security Department, said in the days leading up the breach at the Capitol, the agency “had open channels with partners and shared information on those channels.”

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