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An Expert Explains the US Capitol Hill riot: anatomy of an insurrection

How did the extraordinary situation of an out-of-control mob taking over the United States Capitol come about? Is a delusional President's incendiary speechmaking the only reason? What is the responsibility that the Republican Party must take?

Written by [Amitabh Mattoo](#) |

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Pro-Trump protesters storm the U.S. Capitol to contest the certification of the 2020 US presidential election results by Congress, at the US Capitol Building in Washington, D.C., US January 6, 2021. (Reuters Photo: Ahmed Gaber)

Almost every cliché of political theory has been used to describe **the events of January 6** – carnage, coup, even riot. But while Donald Trump may have incited the mob, the events at the United States Capitol were the unfortunate but logical conclusion of the way in which a dominant section of the Republican Party has articulated its political strategy over the last decade or more.

The swearing-in of Joe Biden as President on January 20 may, therefore, formally end the tenure of Donald Trump, but unless and until the Republican Party transforms itself, January 6 will be one more marker on the route of destructive politics that is dividing the US more strikingly than at any time since the American civil war.

US Capitol violence: Here's how the chaos unfolded



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In many ways, the events of January 6 could have been foretold when Trump and the core of his support base refused to accept that he had lost the presidential election. It was clear that Trump would not, to paraphrase Dylan Thomas, “go gentle into the good night”.

For most of his term, almost everyone who has observed Trump closely – including many who have worked with him – have been convinced that the incumbent in the Oval office is not entirely stable.

Almost a year ago, nearly 350 psychiatrists and other mental professionals petitioned to Congress that the President’s mental health was “rapidly deteriorating”. At least two well-known psychiatrists from Yale and George

Washington University stated that “Trump appeared to be showing signs of delusion by doubling down on falsehoods and conspiracy theories.” They concluded there was “real potential” that Trump could be “ever more dangerous, a threat to the safety of our nation”.

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These delusions have only aggravated since the election, which Trump was convinced was stolen from him by fraud committed by the Democratic Party in collusion with local officials.

The dangerous politics of the Republican Party

However, the deeper cause that goes beyond the delusions of Trump lies within the Republican Party itself. While its core support is derived from an elite who are attracted to it on the basis of free market fundamentalism and what the writer-thinker Ayn Rand described as the virtue of selfishness (Rand’s *The Fountainhead* and its story of the architect Howard Roark is Trump’s favourite novel), it needs a wider base to become electable.

In his review of Jacob S Hacker and Paul Pierson’s *Let Them Eat Tweets: How the Right Rules in an Age of Extreme Inequality*, Franklin Foer wrote in *The New York Times*: “From their 19th-century inception, political parties of the right have faced an electoral disadvantage since, for the most part, they emerged as vessels for the wealthy, a definitionally small coterie. Their growth seemed further constrained by the fact that they could never match their opponents’ enticing promises of government largesse because their wealthy backers steadfastly refused to pay higher taxes...”

In order to become electable, the Republican Party has had to widen its constituency by adding toxic emotional content to its political ideology that has helped it to win the support of sections of the white working class.

It has done so by appealing to faith, patriotism, racial prejudice, and the so-called core American values – and by exploiting the sense of victimhood of the white working class. While pre-Trump, much of the messaging was limited to dog whistling, the President was brazen in representing the Democratic Party as being against God and American values and freedoms (including the right to bear arms),

and responsible for disenfranchising white voters by weakening voting laws and following pro immigration policies. Even the obvious need to wear masks during the Covid-19 pandemic was projected as an attempt by Democrats to undermine fundamental rights of American citizens.

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From the NYT | A mob and the breach of democracy: The violent end of the Trump era

In the period after the election, Trump was publicly elusive, but was using the subterranean web and social media to mobilise his supporters to gather at the Capitol on the day Congress was to certify Joe Biden's election victory. His message was simple and direct: "We will never give up, we will never concede... You don't concede when there's theft involved." The former Mayor of New York and Trump's personal lawyer Rudy Giuliani added: "Let's have trial by combat."

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Smoke fills the walkway outside the Senate Chamber as supporters of President Donald Trump are confronted by US Capitol Police officers inside the Capitol, Wednesday, Jan. 6, 2021 in Washington. (AP Photo: Manuel Balce Ceneta)

What followed at the US Capitol was a reflection of the delusional personality of Trump and the dangerous politics of the Republican Party, particularly aggrieved by losing both Senate seats from Georgia – which was to a large extent due to an unprecedented mobilisation of black voters by Stacey Abrams, who almost single-handedly built a coalition of grassroots support for the Democratic Party in the state.

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Capitol consequences, case for 25th Amendment

The short-term consequences of the events of January 6 are obvious. There is a widespread outrage within most sections of public opinion, akin to a political catharsis. Internationally, US democracy is no longer the “shining city on the hill”.

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But whether the outrage will be a moment of awakening, or “epiphany” as the Speaker of the House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi put it, remains to be seen. Much will depend on whether the Republican Party realises the limits of destructive Trumpism; there is some evidence in the distancing of key figures of the party from Trump and his follies.

As of now, for many, every one of the next 13 days that Trump has remaining in the Oval Office is a day too many; this is true for Americans as well as for the world. Trump is still in charge of the world’s largest nuclear arsenal, weapons that could destroy the planet as we know it several times over.

Therefore, there are serious moves to invoke the **25th Amendment**. The Amendment, ratified in February 1967, deals with presidential disability and succession. While Section 3 of the 25th Amendment allows a President to declare his own inability (and has been invoked in the past during the Reagan and Bush eras), Section 4, which allows the Vice President and Cabinet to declare the President’s inability, has never been invoked before. This is the critical section at issue today.

Under Section 4, if Vice President Mike Pence and the majority of the Trump Cabinet or another body approved by Congress give a written declaration to the President pro tempore of the Senate, Chuck Grassley, and the Speaker of the House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, stating that the President is “unable to discharge the powers and duties of his office”, Vice President Pence would assume power as the Acting President.

Thereafter, President Trump would have the right to challenge the decision through a written declaration stating that “no inability exists”. The Vice President and the majority of the Cabinet (or another body approved by Congress) would then have

another four days to provide a second written declaration of the President's inability.

Within 21 days of this declaration, Congress would need to confirm the President's inability through a two-thirds vote of both Houses. However, this step would be unnecessary in Trump's case, because his term ends on January 20.

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Supporters of President Donald Trump climb the West wall of the the US Capitol on Wednesday, Jan. 6, 2021, in Washington. (AP Photo: Jose Luis Magana)

The American constitutional law scholar, Joel K Goldstein, has argued that while the 25th Amendment does not provide a definition of “inability”, legislative authorities indicate that Sections 3 and 4 of the Amendment refer to “a wide range of physical

and mental inabilities”, which “could be produced by attack, injury, illness...or could result from a degenerative process”.

This definition could clearly encompass a range of possible psychological assessments of Trump. Moreover, as Goldstein points out, Section 4 applies when a Presidential candidate “refuses to recognise an inability, as well as when he is unable to do so”. Thus, Trump’s refusal to accept an assessment of his inability is irrelevant to an invocation of Section 4.

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Going forward, India and post-Trump United States

Will the Trump Administration’s perceived proximity to India cast a shadow on bilateral relations during the Biden-Harris era?

India-US relations have bipartisan support and a majority within the US Congress recognise the importance of India, given particularly the rise of a belligerent China. Nonetheless, it is critical for New Delhi to dispel the impression that it had a special relationship with the Trump Administration – or that it would have been more comfortable with the re-election of a Republican President.

This demands also subtly tempering sections of the India diaspora who were enthusiastic Trump supporters, and reaching out to Democrats beyond key figures within the Biden-Harris administration. A willingness to engage with critics within the Democratic Party, and to be more open on sensitive issues could help to quickly ensure that the transition from Trump to Biden could be seamless at least for bilateral relations.

Also read | **‘Hold the Line’: What went on inside the Capitol as a pro-Trump mob stormed in**

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