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# Storming of U.S. Capitol was 'surreal' and 'all too real'

By Steve Horton

A reporter who was at the U.S. Capitol this past Wednesday afternoon, covering the certification of electoral votes by a joint session of Congress and the expected objections by a handful of Republican lawmakers, described what transpired as “surreal.”

If we define surreal as “fantastic, dreamlike, and hard to believe,” then that seems as good a characterization of what occurred as any.

He made that observation two days later during a news roundup on National Public Radio. What transpired, as pretty much everyone now knows, was the storming of the building by Trump supporters who had arrived in Washington, D.C. to protest the presidential election results that showed Joe Biden winning the Electoral College count with 306 votes to the President’s total of 240. Biden and his running mate, Kamala Harris, the Democratic standard-bearers, had also topped Trump and Vice President Mike Pence in the popular count by over seven million votes.

The attack came after the President addressed thousands of his supporters at an outdoors rally near the White House, repeating that he had won the election. The language used was martial in tone and of righting a wrong. “We will never give up and never concede. We will stop the

steal.” He exhorted those present to march down Pennsylvania Avenue, to the Capitol building, and show Congress their displeasure.

Which many of them did.

But once there, the vanguard pushed through the protective fencing, broke windows to gain entry, overwhelmed the police force as they streamed into the building, and forced Congress and staff to flee to safe locations. A protestor was shot, with the woman later dying from her wounds. A police officer also died after being struck in the head with a fire extinguisher, and three others died from what were described as medical situations related to the demonstration. Other officers suffered injuries during the confrontation, some serious.

In the aftermath, Trump has been accused of inciting the violence with his rhetoric, both with that speech but also in similar remarks made since the November vote. The charge was made by Democrats, several Republicans, and even Betsy DeVos of Michigan, his Secretary of Education who used those words in her resignation letter submitted the following day.

Evidence discovered in the form of high-powered weapons and explosives, enhanced photos showing several protestors carrying guns and handcuffs, along with the use of chemical irritants on police, indicate a number of those who took part didn’t need much incitement.

While many of those attending the ‘Save America March’ may have gotten caught up in the excitement and passion of the moment, unexpectedly finding themselves inside the Capitol, there was a hard-eyed contingent who apparently had a harsher plan in mind—one that included occupying the Capitol and taking a few lawmakers hostage. From there, who knows what tragedy might have unfolded.

They realized the first part of the plan when the police failed to keep the surging crowd at bay. Thank God, the officers were able to whisk members of Congress to secure places and give others in the building enough warning to find hiding places or barricade themselves inside office rooms. Otherwise, the violent intent of these would-be insurrectionists might have been realized.

I, like countless others across the nation and around the world, witnessed the drama on television. The live newscasts of the scene, interspersed with pictures taken by photographers and footage from video cameras, gave a glimpse of what had occurred earlier or was then taking place. The coverage—to say the least—was riveting.

Two things struck me as I watched this evolving event.

First was the footage of the protestors taking pictures with their phones as they entered the Capitol's Rotunda or Congressional offices, including selfies. Many of these photos, along with videos that people shot, were posted on their social media sites. It appears we can't do anything, even when disrupting the counting of electoral votes or attempting to overthrow the government, without putting it on social media.

However, as several have discovered, this also provides evidence for law enforcement. Authorities can also track their whereabouts thanks to settings on the smart phones. In this case, 'smart' might not be the right word for their predicament.

One fellow, in what became an iconic photo, is shown sitting in House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's office chair, a foot nonchalantly resting on top of her desk. After being identified, he was arrested. Others are suffering a similar fate thanks to posing for photo or posting what they were doing on the internet.

The other arresting image occurred in the early evening as more and more police officers began arriving on the scene, donned in full riot gear including helmets, shields, and clubs. As these officers formed lines, a few of the 'hot bloods' pleaded with them to cross over or screamed "traitors" at them and flipped 'the bird' in their faces. However, a lot of the protestors could be seen walking hurriedly away from the Capitol grounds. For them, the lark was over. "The whiff of grapeshot," as Napoleon said of using cannon shots to disperse rioting crowds, had a sobering effect.

Terms like "a dark day" and "a stain on our democracy" were used by TV anchors and the guests they interviewed. A couple of people on my Facebook page expressed similar dismay. For many Americans, the initial shock of what they were seeing and what it might portend, caused both sadness and disbelief, fear and trepidation.

But I also know that our wonderful human trait of being able to rationalize, equivocate, explain away, or cast blame elsewhere is always there to counter what, at first glance, seems to be a horrific crime or damning piece of evidence.

It's called 'damage control' or 'spin' and, as I suspected, it didn't take very long to begin.

Later in the evening I watched the coverage of Congress returning to their chambers to resume the process of certifying the electoral votes. They enjoyed plenty of police protection.

"The thugs," several said, "would not stop them or intimidate them."

The opening remarks of Vice President Pence, who had earlier incurred the wrath of Trump and his supporters for refusing to interfere with the certification process and circumvent the Constitution, followed by those of Mitch McConnell, the Republican Senate Majority Leader--both of them standing up for democracy and the rule of law and, in doing so, affirming that Biden had won—were heartening testimonies.

The attempted insurrection had delayed the count, but not stopped the outcome. Trump and his allies concerted effort to overturn the presidential election by ignoring the electoral votes and the ballots of millions of Americans had failed. As a result, at least on this "surreal" day, our traditions of self-government stood firm and the prescribed transfer of power prevailed.

But even though it seemed "fantastic, dreamlike, and hard to believe," it happened. The event transpired, and the danger was there. What seemed surreal was 'all too real.'

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