

White Mob Violence and the Capitol Insurrection

Written by *History Design Lab*



Image Source: NPR Staff, "The Jan. 6 Capitol Riot," NPR, first published 9 Jan. 2021 (last updated 15 Apr. 2021), <http://www.npr.org/2021/02/09/965472049/the-capitol-siege-the-arrested-and-their-stories>. REUTERS/Leah Millis/File Photo. Accessed 16 Apr. 2021.

By Meredith Warden

On January 6th, a mob of thousands of people—consisting of white supremacists, Trump supporters, neo-Nazis, neo-Confederates, and many more people with similar views—violently invaded the U.S. Capitol building. Undoubtedly a historic moment, it was the first time since the War of 1812 that the Capitol building had been breached.[1] At the same time, however, white mob violence is not new—as many before me have pointed out, the storming of the Capitol building continues a long historical arc of white violence in the U.S. in response to perceived threats against white supremacy. Tulsa, Oklahoma; Rosewood, Florida; East. St. Louis Illinois; Little Rock, Arkansas; countrywide sites of over 4,000 lynchings; 46, 300 plantations—all of these sites (among many others) were places where whites terrorized Black people in an effort to maintain the social, political, and ideological system of white supremacy.[2] In its own way, the Capitol insurrection continued this white American tradition of mob violence.

Throughout history, the white mob has, in the words of Victor Luckerson, viewed “itself as an extension of the law, not a repudiation of it.”[3] For example, Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction lynching mobs and spectators saw themselves as upholding the law and white

supremacy by extrajudicially murdering a Black man or woman who had supposedly committed a crime. These mobs often posed gleefully for cameras, as the hundreds if not thousands of spectacle lynching photos show. They did not hide because they saw themselves as upholding justice, upholding the law; “members of white mobs do not have to mask their faces” because “being part of a white mob has rarely been a crime” even if lynching someone—or breaking into the U.S. Capitol—was technically illegal.[4] As Ida B. Wells wrote about one lynching, the white mob “met with no resistance [during the lynching]... The grand jury refused to indict the lynchers though the names of over twenty persons who were leaders in the mob were well known” and, ultimately, “not one of the dozens of men prominent in that murder have suffered a whit more inconvenience for the butchery of that man, than they would have suffered for shooting a dog.”[5]

The Capitol attack was saturated with similar claims that the mostly white crowd was ‘upholding the law.’ Spurred on by Trump’s claims of fraudulent election results, thousands of people converged on the Capitol building convinced (or just claiming) that they were fighting to correct an illegal election result. They referred to themselves as “patriots,” chanted “U.S.A! U.S.A!,” and repeatedly compared themselves to American Revolutionaries (“1776-it’s now or never”; “Our Founding Fathers would get in the streets, and they would take this country back by force if necessary. And that is what we must be prepared to do.”)[6] Just as white lynch mobs justified their murders by claiming that they were achieving justice, the Capitol insurrectionists believed that “this was [their] country” and that they were righting a wrong. They were and are white in America; they knew they would likely not face consequences for their riotous and violent actions.

And this concept hits at the core of the Capitol insurrection and the history it echoes: beneath the facade of American white mobs ‘upholding justice’ is white supremacy. The ‘fear of being replaced’—which, put plainly, is the white fear of becoming a racial minority and being treated like whites have treated non-white people throughout history—has been embedded in arguably every instance of white mob violence in this country. The 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre, in which white mobs looted and destroyed Greenwood District, was a thinly veiled reaction to Black economic success in a district that was known as “Black Wall Street.”[7] Likewise, lynchings increased after the end of the Civil War, when whites felt threatened by the mere beginnings of Black freedom and pushes for equality; many white people “felt that the freed blacks were getting away with too much freedom and felt they needed to be controlled.”[8]

The ideology on display before and during January 6, 2021 was strikingly similar. In November 2020, a well-known far right figure, Nicholas Fuentes, warned of the “Great Replacement,” the white supremacist belief that “Europe and the United States are under siege from nonwhites and non-Christians” and that the “ultimate outcome of the Great Replacement will be ‘white genocide.’” This fear of ‘being replaced’ played a role not only in older historical examples of white violence but also more recent examples, such as Charlottesville, when white supremacist and antisemitics chanted “Jews will not replace us,” and the Christchurch, New Zealand mosque massacre, when the white perpetrator cited the ‘Great Replacement’ in his manifesto.[9] The Great Replacement theory is a radical and overtly white supremacist idea, but it speaks to more widespread white fears that were present at the Capitol. One of the core tenets of white supremacy is fear. Whether that fear is of “losing status, wealth and most importantly, political power, in the face of mass Black voter turnout,” people of color immigrating from other

countries (often for reasons that the U.S. brought about), the general increasing racial diversity of the U.S., or something else, white fear has “always been part of what animated racial violence in this country, from riots to lynchings to police brutality.”[10] So—like many historical and everyday examples too numerous to list here—the white mob that invaded the U.S. Capitol did so to push down this fear and to instead provoke fear in Black, Indigenous, Asian, Hispanic, Latine, other people of color, Jewish people, people part of the LGBTQIA+ community, and many more.

To put it simply, the mob entered the Capitol to reassert white supremacy and try to prove to other people and themselves that they still had power. They carried and displayed symbols of white supremacy—Confederate flags, abhorrent references to the Holocaust and the Auschwitz, a noose, the ‘O.K.’ hand gesture to mean ‘white power,’ references to QAnon.[11] Like other examples of white mob violence throughout history, they smiled gleefully for cameras.[12] They repeatedly hurled slurs at Black police officers, and numerous Congresspeople of color and Black staffers stated that they feared for their lives and were “terrorized” by the Capitol invasion.[13] As a reporter among the crowd writes, “for right-wing protesters, the occupation of restricted government sanctums was an affirmation of dominance so emotionally satisfying that it was an end in itself—proof to elected officials, to Biden voters, and also to themselves that they were still in charge.”[14] In this way, the Capitol invasion and insurrection was both a product and display of white supremacy—it was, after all, because of their white identity that this mob was able to invade the Capitol building at all. As many immediately pointed out, the differences between the government and police response to the Capitol riot versus Black Lives Matter protests is stark. Whereas police often commit “widespread and systemic violence toward civilian protesters, journalists, medics, and legal observers” at Black Lives Matter marches that protest this very type of racialized police brutality, the white mob on January 6th was met not only with little preparation from the Capitol police but often police actively condoning their violence, whether by saying “Appreciate you being peaceful” to members of the mob or participating in the insurrection itself.[15] Similarly, “DC police arrested more than five times as many people at the height of the Black Lives Matter protests last summer than they did during the day of insurrection at the Capitol,” and as of mid-April 2021, only 400 people out of the thousands involved in the insurrection have been charged.[16] In short, the Capitol insurrection is steeped in white supremacy, from the fact that it happened in the first place to its ultimate goal of displaying and reinforcing the power of white supremacy and power in America.

What happened on January 6th, 2021 is certainly historic, but it is not new. The Capitol insurrection is only another example of the white mob violence that is embedded in—indeed, forms the very core of—America since its white supremacist beginnings. The footage and photos of the Capitol insurrection echo the archive of white mob violence throughout history, because these events, although in different contexts with different details, are all manifestations of the same white supremacy. When I saw the footage and photos of the white mob at the Capitol, I saw at the same time the violent images of white mobs in lynching postcards, in photos of school integration during the Civil Rights Movement, in the images of destroyed Black Wall Street, in the primary sources detailing the genocide of Indigenous nations and the system of chattel slavery, in the seemingly infinite historical archive of white mob violence throughout America’s history. This is not new. As historians begin collecting artifacts from the Capitol insurrection and the public in general continues to grapple with the events of January 6th, we must remember and

emphasize the Capitol insurrection's place in the ongoing historical legacy of white supremacy and white mob violence in America.[17]

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