

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/what-the-capitol-riots-mean-for-the-future-of-our-democracy>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Last week, the nation watched a right-wing mob fly the Confederate flag in the U.S. Capitol on the day after the first Black U.S. Senator was elected in Georgia. We also saw a group of primarily white men who were violently attempting to subvert a presidential election receive a lighter response from law enforcement than did George Floyd, who was murdered after being suspected of passing a counterfeit \$20 bill.

Watching these rioters rampaging through the Capitol Rotunda with impunity, flaunting symbols of slavery and white supremacy, enraged those of us who have encountered police while trying to peacefully exercise freedom of expression on behalf of the oppressed. As an immigrant rights activist, I have personally participated in many actions at the Capitol. If we so much as chanted in the halls, Capitol police were quick to surround us with threats of arrest. Last summer, Black Lives Matter protesters on the streets of Washington, DC, were tear gassed, shot with rubber bullets, and swept into unmarked vans. It is inconceivable that any activists of color would have been allowed to vandalize the Capitol and shut down Congress.

This attack was no secret. It was organized and openly promoted on social media and elevated by the press in the weeks and days leading up to January 6. Our nation's commitment to law and order is such that the [United States spends \\$115 billion](#) on policing each year. Despite all of this, the Capitol was largely undefended. We are left to conclude that stopping this mob was not a priority to those in power.

Videos of law enforcement officers holding the door open for rioters as they exited the Capitol, leaving behind destroyed property, bombs, and a mortally injured police officer, only add to nearly unlimited evidence of what we already know: there are very different criminal legal systems for white people and people of color in this country, and militarized police force is selectively applied.

In the aftermath of this right-wing insurrection, we have seen how fragile our democracy can be, and the need for our nation's institutions, leaders, and communities to be increasingly vigilant to protect it.

Although President Trump will no longer be in office soon, he has emboldened those who venerate the Confederate flag and the odious racial hierarchy it represents. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, white nationalist hate groups [grew by 55 percent](#) in just the first three years of the Trump presidency, and their members and sympathizers have been egged on by a president whose final public act was to tell protesters who had erected a noose outside the Capitol, We love you. You are very special.

But it is not enough for the United States to have elected a president who is unlikely to praise white supremacists or incite a violent mob to storm the Capitol. We cannot be satisfied by simply restoring what we have lost.

The Black Lives Matter movement was born under the Obama/Biden administration, which made little progress fixing a criminal legal system that is fundamentally brutal to Black and brown people at every stage, from policing to sentencing. Yet the Trump administration despite its near-constant demonization of immigrants and gratuitously cruel immigration policies never managed to surpass its predecessors' record high of annual deportations.

Black voters and people of color were key in handing Joe Biden the presidency. Black voters have also changed the makeup of the U.S. Senate and the direction of this country by electing two Democrats: a Black man and a Jewish man, both with identities victimized by white nationalist groups in Georgia. While President-Elect Biden has acknowledged his debt to this constituency, it will take more than just the usual group of committed activists to ensure that it is paid. We must collectively hold the incoming administration accountable, push for a complete overhaul of the criminal legal and immigration systems, and demand the creation of a federally led strategy to ensure racial justice and the restoration of a full democracy.

As the Trump era recedes into history, there is reason for hope. Although the Confederate flag flew for a few hours in the Capitol last week, dozens of Confederate monuments were permanently removed last year. Some were toppled by protesters; others were taken down by elected officials who finally saw that it is long past time to stop honoring men who fought to keep Black people enslaved. Millions and millions of people marched on behalf of Black Lives Matter in cities in all 50 states and even around the world. Millions more protested against the cruel and racist immigration policies that ripped apart families and separated parents from their children. These examples signal that Americans are ready to build a country that finally erases the stain of white supremacy under which it was founded: one that delivers opportunity and justice for all.

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