

One Trump Fan's Descent Into the U.S. Capitol Mob; Doug Sweet joined rioters who breached the Capitol, where he was eventually arrested.

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GWYNN'S ISLAND, Va.—On Doug Sweet's first trip to the U.S. Capitol, as a 13-year-old in 1975, he tilted his head back, gazed up at the glistening white dome and thought it was the most awesome thing he had ever seen.

On his second trip to the Capitol, he joined a mob of Trump supporters who smashed their way into the seat of the U.S. Congress, and finished his visit handcuffed facedown on the floor.

The 45-year journey between those two visits was marked by bright idealism and belief in dark conspiracies, by a solitary existence and a newfound fraternity with those convinced there is no way Joe Biden beat Donald Trump in the 2020 presidential election.

It didn't matter that no evidence of widespread election fraud emerged, or that more than 50 legal claims filed by the Trump campaign have been dismissed by courts.

Mr. Sweet put his faith in Mr. Trump and his allies, who for weeks had implored followers to rise up against the outcome of a national election they said was rigged.

"He said, 'Hey, I need my digital soldiers to show up on January 6,'" Mr. Sweet says of the president. "And we all did."

The mob that stormed the Capitol last Wednesday was a combustible stew of QAnon conspiracy theorists, armed rampagers and extremist personalities, as well as more ordinary Trump loyalists determined to fulfill the president's desire to persuade—or intimidate—lawmakers into undoing his election loss. Among those who have been arrested are a leader of the far-right Proud Boys for his alleged role in the siege, and an online provocateur and white nationalist—who before the attack warned of rioting if the results weren't overturned—who live-streamed from inside House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's office.

A Capitol Police officer was killed and four others died amid the violence.

The Wall Street Journal interviewed Mr. Sweet at his home after police included him on a list of those arrested.

Mr. Sweet is a man who dipped his toe in the pool of wild and false conspiracies during the Barack Obama administration and is now up to his neck in it, wallowing in resentment and anger that others can't see how the elites are scheming to destroy America the way he can. He has become intractably fixated on beliefs so extreme—but widespread—that he is estranged from his elder daughter.

He came to Washington ready to act on them.

Mr. Sweet and a friend, Cindy Fitchett of Mathews, Va., first visited the Ellipse, where President Donald Trump told his supporters that the election had been stolen and that he planned to walk with them along Pennsylvania Avenue to take their anger to the Capitol.

"We fight like hell," the president said. "And if you don't fight like hell, you're not going to have a country anymore."

Mr. Sweet says he took his marching orders from the president and walked east. The Capitol was a battlefield when he arrived in early afternoon.

People waving Trump flags and wearing MAGA hats were swarming the bleachers erected for Mr. Biden's inauguration. They were scrambling up the walls. Rioters had overrun Capitol Police and forced their way into the building. Mr. Sweet could hear the thuds and see the smoke from flash-bang grenades going off inside.

He says he and Ms. Fitchett walked up stairs on the Mall side of the Capitol, where he found the doors open.

He says he hesitated. He says he felt the need to go inside to share his views with Congress but wanted to consult God first. He prayed aloud: "Lord, is this the right thing to do? Is this what I need to do?" He says he felt God's hand on his back, pushing him forward.

"I checked with the Lord," he says. "I checked with Him three times. I never heard a 'No.'"

They walked in and, he says, found themselves in a whirlwind of broken glass and debris. He says he was shocked; the event on the Ellipse had been all picnic blankets and puppy dogs. This was an orgy of destruction.

Mr. Sweet, 58, lives alone in a worn, wood-heated house on a lot crowded with tractors and old boats on Gwynn's Island, a short walk from the Chesapeake Bay.

He's usually up at 5 a.m. and in bed by 9 p.m. A lot of days his only conversation during the hours in between is with Jenkins, his aging Labrador.

For 40 years he has pieced together a living, a far cry from the path taken by his father, an aeronautical engineer who developed satellites for NASA during the Cold War space race and died when Mr. Sweet was in high school.

After graduating from Mathews High School in 1980, he operated a crane and forklift for a decade in the Newport News shipyards. He tried his hand at landscaping and did a stint on a tugboat and another fishing for oysters on the Rappahannock River.

A divorce left him with custody of his two daughters, so in 1996 he took up odd jobs welding and doing carpentry to remain on dry land. A garage-building business collapsed in the crash of 2008.

These days he earns a thin living mowing grass in the summer and selling oak firewood in the winter, filling his larder with deer he shoots and striped bass he catches. He is on Medicaid, the government program for the poor or disabled, but says he doesn't use it.

There were a couple of run-ins with the law along the way—a fistfight with his brother, who dropped the charges, and a six-month suspended sentence after he hit his older daughter, Robyn Sweet, then 14. It was an act he describes as a spanking and that she prefers not to discuss. "I think he did his best, but it was very dysfunctional," Ms. Sweet, who responded to questions through Facebook Messenger, says of her childhood.

Mr. Sweet still remembers his thoughts when he first entered the Capitol building as a teenager: "You feel like you own it. I have a right to be here. This is America's building. My voice counts as good as anyone else's here."



Mr. Sweet outside his home in Virginia. "Some people can't accept losing," he says.
PHOTO: Michael M. Phillips/The Wall Street Journal

A Richard Nixon fan, Bill Clinton's presidency deepened his dislike of Democrats. Friends from Arkansas told him Mr. Clinton was "one of the biggest cocaine smugglers in the U.S," a partner in crime with Colombian kingpin Pablo Escobar. Mr. Sweet found the false allegations plausible.

In 2008 he voted for GOP candidate John McCain, the senator from Arizona. He preferred the Republican vice presidential pick, Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin, whose beliefs and attitude reflected his own self-image as a "Tea Party Patriot."

Nonetheless, he says he was "kind of excited" that the country got its first Black president, Barack Obama. He soon concluded, however, that Mr. Obama was actively "trying to destroy the country," citing infrastructure spending and the cash-for-clunkers program. In 2016, Donald Trump caught his eye. Here was a businessman who told it like it was, he thought, not a politician. "He's not a perfect man, but we haven't seen a perfect man since Christ," Mr. Sweet says.

One thing he liked was Mr. Trump's defense of Confederate war memorials.

In 2017, Mr. Sweet went to Charlottesville for the Unite the Right rally, a protest against the removal of a statue of rebel Gen. Robert E. Lee. The event devolved into violence, with neo-Nazis shouting anti-Semitic slogans and a white nationalist plowing his car through a crowd and killing a counter-protester, Heather Heyer. Mr. Sweet thinks Democrats staged the clashes to make anyone "pro-Confederate" seem like a Ku Klux Klan racist. No evidence has backed up that theory.

Afterwards, Mr. Trump defended the statue. "So this week it's Robert E. Lee," he told reporters at the time. "I noticed that Stonewall Jackson is coming down. I wonder, is it George Washington next week? And is it Thomas Jefferson the week after? You know, you really do have to ask yourself, where does it stop?"

That resonated with Mr. Sweet, who felt Mr. Trump was trying to "preserve America."

Two years ago, Mr. Sweet helped found an activist group called the East Coast Hiwaymen. He saw the fledgling organization's mission as defending Confederate war memorials in Southern cities and towns, while also undertaking charity drives.

Initially the East Coast Hiwaymen had some 30 members, he says. During the summer of 2019, they spent many weekends forming a protective shield around the 27-foot statue of a Confederate soldier in front of the courthouse in Pittsboro, N.C.

Members grew demoralized after spending heavily on gas and restaurant meals only to see the statue come down amid the backlash to Charlottesville. Now the East Coast Hiwaymen number just eight.

"Some people can't accept losing," Mr. Sweet says.

This summer, the remaining East Coast Hiwaymen loyalists spent their nights guarding the memorial to "Our Confederate Soldiers" in Mathews, Va., just down the road from Gwynn's Island. Mr. Sweet considered it a victory that the county Board of Supervisors decided to put the monument's fate up to a referendum later this year.

Mr. Sweet says it's a question of remembering Southern history, not honoring the Confederacy's armed defense of slavery.

Mr. Sweet says he gets his news from the internet and the pro-Trump news stations, Newsmax and One America News. He says controversial radio host Alex Jones, the InfoWars founder, was an early favorite.

He professes a series of beliefs about the powerful manipulating the world in ways visible only to those able to see through the deception. He knows he is one of them.

"There are so many people walking around half asleep," he says. "They don't know what's going on."

In Mr. Sweet's world of false conspiracies, financier George Soros is both a Nazi and a Communist who pays leftist activists to burn and loot American cities. QAnon, a conspiracy-theory group that believes Mr. Trump is under assault by devil worshipers, speaks the truth. A Washington pizza parlor serves pies made of children's blood to Satanists who know to order off-menu. The U.S. military invaded Afghanistan to seize control of the heroin trade. Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and House Speaker Pelosi drink children's blood in a quest for eternal youth.

"I'm not going to go open a court case saying [Ms. Clinton] eats children," Mr. Sweet says. "But I can believe that she might eat children."

Robyn Sweet, now 35 and the operator of a group home for disabled adults, says she has been saddened and puzzled to see her father's views grow more extreme. She says she loves him and still sees his good qualities, calling him "charismatic, lovable and funny outside of all this." Yet she says he has become someone she doesn't quite recognize.

"I don't know this person anymore," she says. "It's almost like a lot of these middle-aged white men are afraid, I'm not really quite sure of what, but it's like they're paranoid...It's mass hysteria."

She says their relationship has become increasingly strained "because it just seems so crazy some of the stuff he would talk about."

Ms. Sweet marched in support of Black Lives Matter in June after the killing of George Floyd in police custody, and started a Facebook page to highlight bigotry. She says her father supported her exercise of her constitutional right to free speech, but some people "in his

camp" began accusing her of "being antifa," a loose collection of sometimes-violent left-wing activists.

"She's caught up in the idea that BLM goes into cities and helps Black children," Mr. Sweet says with a wheezy laugh. "I wish they did. I would get behind that," he says.

"She's really hard to the left," Mr. Sweet says of his daughter. "I'm really hard to the right. We're polar opposites. But I love her."

This summer, Mr. Sweet became more active at Gwynn's Island Baptist Church, where, due to pandemic concerns, congregants listened to services from their cars and honked their horns to say amen.

In July, Mr. Sweet demonstrated his growing faith with a baptismal dip in the Chesapeake Bay.

"His priorities changed, and he got very committed to church," says Pastor Ed Jordan. He describes Mr. Sweet as a passionate "patriot" who talked about being "concerned for our country."

Mr. Sweet's distrust of those in power colors the way he sees the 2020 election results. "We always knew there was something funny going on with elections," he says.

Former Vice President Biden couldn't possibly have gotten 80 million votes "by sitting in his basement," he says. After all, almost everyone he knows voted for Mr. Trump.

And in the news sites Mr. Sweet consults, everyone felt as he did. Mr. Sweet followed online reports about the "Stop the Steal" rallies, and he took the word of Mr. Trump and his high-level supporters who insisted that the election was rigged.

"Big protest in D.C. on January 6th," Mr. Trump wrote on [Twitter](#) on Dec. 19. "Be there, will be wild!" He and his allies used battle terms, repeatedly calling for "patriots" to fight for Mr. Trump and take back their country.

The invitation seemed to speak directly to Mr. Sweet, who describes himself as someone who is trying to save America from dark forces. In his view, Mr. Trump had summoned his "digital soldiers" and he meant Mr. Sweet. He thought of his granddaughter and imagined her "looking me in the eye and saying, 'Paw Paw, how come you didn't do anything?'"

"I'm sitting here watching my country go in the cesspool," he says. "I can't just sit here and watch it happen."

At 4:15 a.m. on Jan. 6, Mr. Sweet left home, picked up Ms. Fitchett and another like-minded woman at the YMCA parking lot in Hudgins, and a guy in Saluda. They met four others and caravanned to Washington to attend Mr. Trump's "Save America" rally on the Ellipse, a grassy expanse between the White House and the National Mall.

"We didn't know exactly why he wanted us there—just a show of force or a show of numbers," Mr. Sweet says. "Whatever it was, it was fine with me."

He says he didn't travel to Washington planning to go to the Capitol. Or to do anything illegal.

Mr. Sweet says he wanted to enter the building so he could share his views with lawmakers. "There is no other way I can engage Congress other than walking in unannounced and taking the floor," he says.

Once inside, he says, he was alarmed by the violence and tried to stop the rioters. "This is our house," he says he told them.

Mr. Sweet and Ms. Fitchett wandered over several floors of the building, turning at one point to find themselves facing a wall of more than a dozen Capitol Police officers. He says he saw fear in their faces and assured them that he presented no threat.

"We want to get to the Senate and talk to the senators," he recalls telling them.

The police saw it from a different perspective. Mr. Sweet, Ms. Fitchett and four others were at the front of the mob when the officers, "in a loud and clear voice," ordered them to leave the building, according to a police report. "The six individuals, like others in the larger crowd, willfully refused the order to leave."

Several police officers wrestled Mr. Sweet to the ground, held him facedown on the floor and cuffed his hands behind his back, Mr. Sweet says. The officers soon let Mr. Sweet sit up and gave him water. One loosened his cuffs to give him more room to move his shoulders.

Mr. Sweet estimates he was held in the Capitol for more than four hours, as police tried to find a safe way to get the group out of the building, which was besieged by the pro-Trump masses.

Along the way, Mr. Sweet noticed a blood trail on the floor.

Passing through the Capitol crypt, one officer played tour guide and pointed out the white stone compass star on the floor, which marks the meeting point of Washington D.C.'s four geographic quadrants. In the Hall of Columns, the officer gripped Mr. Sweet's arm in front of a marble statue of Francis Blair, an anti-slavery lawmaker and major general in the Union Army. Mr. Sweet says he offered the policeman ibuprofen for his injured knee.

The officers marched the group along one of the underground subway tunnels that lead to nearby congressional office buildings. The scent of tear gas hung in the air, Mr. Sweet says.

The police finally found a clear exit to the street, loaded Mr. Sweet and the others into a police van and deposited them at the station house a few blocks away.

He was one of four in his cell, sharing a stainless steel bench and a stainless steel toilet.

Around 11 p.m., he was released on his own recognizance. The police kept his phone, which contained photos he took inside the Capitol, and gave him a sheet of paper saying he had been arrested for unlawful entry and that prosecutors would determine whether to file formal charges before a June hearing date in D.C. Superior Court. He says he's not sure if he'll show up for it, but if he does, he says he'll plead guilty.

"I'm a realist," he says. "I was inside a building I wasn't supposed to be inside."

He wondered aloud if Mr. Trump would rescue loyal supporters who heeded his call and now face criminal charges. "I am seriously contemplating getting in touch with Donald Trump and asking him to pardon all of us who were in our group," he says. (The president can pardon people for federal crimes, but not local or state offenses.)

On Friday, the Justice Department announced Mr. Sweet and Ms. Fitchett would also face federal charges of unlawful entry, with intent to impede government business, and violent entry and disorderly conduct on Capitol grounds. Usually, a federal case supplants any local charges.

Ms. Fitchett's husband, Ronald Fitchett, says his wife won't comment. But, in an interview Saturday, he said she went to Washington to convince Congress to "look at how the election was done" and didn't intend to enter the building.

She is slight, he says, and was carried into the building by the crowd.

Mr. Sweet and Ms. Fitchett were among some 55 people facing federal or local charges as of Saturday, according to the Justice Department. FBI Director Christopher Wray and other law-enforcement officials promised further investigations and suggested more arrests were likely.

A friend drove Mr. Sweet back to Virginia, where he returned to splitting wood and pondering the conspiracies around him. He says that on reflection, he's quite sure that it was antifa, the radical left, who broke into the Capitol and started the violence to make Trump supporters look bad.

Law-enforcement officials have found no indication of such a left-wing provocation, a federal prosecutor said Friday.

Mr. Sweet remains unconvinced. "They weren't acting like characteristic American patriots in there," he says.

Ms. Sweet, his daughter, learned her father had been arrested Thursday after seeing his name in the news. She told him in a call that he had put the family in a bad light and that she was worried about him.

"I really feel sad that he's involved in all of this," she says. "I don't think there's anything I can do to change it."

Sitting in his yard the day after he returned home, the court citation folded up in his Jeep Cherokee, he remained confident that someone will stop Joe Biden from becoming president on Jan. 20. He isn't sure who. He isn't sure how. But he is sure.

"There's something getting ready to happen before the 20th," he said.

Jim Oberman contributed to this article.

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