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Taylor man who stormed U.S. Capitol spurred by Trump, conservative pundits

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Taylor — Politics was the last thing on Jeramiah Caplinger's mind in the fall of 2019. He was buying his first home after learning he was going to be a dad.

Fifteen months later, he was part of a mob that ransacked the U.S. Capitol.

How does someone, in such a short time, go from being apolitical to joining an insurrection?

During the span, Caplinger turned into a partisan whose increasingly radical beliefs were spurred by former President Donald Trump and conservative political pundits.

He hasn't been arrested or contacted by police in connection with the Washington rampage, he said. The FBI declined to comment.

Caplinger said he doesn't feel like he had done anything wrong, that he had just wandered the halls of Congress.

"I didn't break anything. I didn't hurt anyone," he said. "I was just going to cheer on senators."

But others said he never should have been there in the first place and, even worse, the reason he was there was to interfere with the certification of the presidential election. The incursion interrupted a joint session of Congress as it tallied the Electoral College vote.

Among those on the House floor as fear coursed through the chamber was Caplinger's congresswoman, U.S. Rep. Debbie Dingell, a Dearborn Democrat who smelled tear gas and heard gunshots.

She berated the interlopers but reserved most of her scorn for the person she called their pied piper. Dingell said months of lying about the election by Trump ignited a rebellion.

“The facts are undeniable. He incited a violent mob,” she said. “The cracks (the untruths) caused in our democracy gave domestic terrorists license to invade the Capitol.”

As for Dingell’s constituent and part-time insurgent, Caplinger lives in a Taylor bungalow with his girlfriend, 10-month-old daughter, 11-year-old stepdaughter and three cats, including one named Orangie, who isn’t named after you-know-who.

On the living room wall is an American flag and a banner with the letters SPQR, an acronym of Senatus Populusque Romanus, which is Latin for the Senate and People of Rome.

Some white nationalists favor the emblem, but Caplinger, a history buff, said the Pax Romana is his favorite period.

The TV is blaring “Louder with Crowder,” one of the conservative podcasts he listens to throughout the day as he cooks, cleans and plays video games. He was fired from his job as a maintenance technician last month for refusing to wear a mask.

If Trump is his messiah, right-wing commentators are the apostles.

Caplinger, 25, talks in bursts, quickly and loudly. He becomes flushed as his voice quavers and his eyes glisten.

After one question, he talked so long he ran out of breath and began to pant.

“No other country on this planet will ever live up to the United States,” he said. “No other country on this planet has the Constitution that we have that preserves our rights, that gives us our God-given unalienable rights. And when I see our rights that are supposed to be unalienable being slowly stripped away by a governor, or government, by instituting a mask mandate, or saying you can’t assemble at a church, or saying that you can’t assemble, period, I reject all that.”

His girlfriend, Sam Marcott, 26, said there’s more to Caplinger than his political activism. She described him as a caring partner and father to the two girls.

As for the steady stream of propaganda spewing from the TV, she pays little heed.

“I have no actual interest in any of it,” she said. “I’ll watch what I think is important, but half of it I don’t pay attention to.”

'Rough around edges'

Caplinger's relatives thought he would be dead or in prison by now, he said. He described a Dickensian childhood living in a Romulus trailer park with his parents and younger sister.

His dad was a habitual offender who went to jail for stealing, according to court records. His parents fought a lot before divorcing when Caplinger was 9, he said. He remembered one Christmas where his mom had a black eye and his dad a cold stare.

After the family lost their home for failing to pay the rent, Caplinger jumped from one place to another, his dad's, his mom's, his grandmother's, his other grandmother's, he said. He dropped out of high school because he needed a job.

He described his relationship with his parents as strained.

"I love my parents, but that doesn't mean I have to like them," he said. "I don't like the choices they make. I don't like who they are as individuals."

His parents declined to comment for this story.

Caplinger was a loner with few friends, he said. He got mad easily, sometimes getting into fistfights.

Marcott admitted he has a bit of a temper.

"He's a little rough around the edges," she told a reporter. "You talked to him about his family, right, what it was like while he was growing up?"

Caplinger didn't disagree, describing his temper as volcanic.

His bad attitude followed him to work as he flitted from one job to another. He said his bosses were too demanding, treated him poorly and played favorites.

Drawn to Trump

During the presidential election in 2016, Caplinger was living in his pickup. He had a job but the pay was too low to make a rental deposit.

He didn't follow the election closely but felt drawn to Trump, he said. He liked that the Republican was blunt and belligerent and never apologized for anything. He had never seen a politician like that.

He was upset when social media made fun of Trump for putting ketchup on his steak.

“News flash: When you’re not rich or well off, those are the kind of things you eat,” he said.

“He also eats a lot of McDonald’s. I do as well. He appreciates hard work. So do I.”

He also liked that Trump wasn’t politically correct. In fact, the more uncouth Trump was, the more he liked him.

When Democrats launched an impeachment inquiry against Trump in September 2019, an irritated Caplinger began to follow politics more closely.

“They were trying to remove him for nothing. He didn’t do anything wrong,” he said. “And now they want to overturn the election on some bull----. No, f--- that. If they can do it to him, everyone is fair game.”

Trump was impeached three months later for pressuring Ukraine to investigate Joe Biden, his rival in the 2020 election, and for then obstructing an inquiry into his actions by telling his administration to ignore subpoenas for information.

Social media suspensions

If the impeachment was Caplinger’s political awakening, COVID-19 and the restrictions that followed was his call to arms.

He attended nearly a dozen protests against the lockdown and election last year. He always brought an American and Trump flag, which were attached to a 6-foot tree branch he cut from a tree in his front yard.

In November, during a protest outside the TCF Center in Detroit while absentee ballots were counted inside, he burned a United Nations flag, he said.

He started speaking at the rallies, extolling Trump and the U.S. Constitution, railing against big government and Gov. Gretchen Whitmer.

“Donald J. Trump is the greatest president of my lifetime,” he said. “... You see a real man coming out there, saying real things that real people think. When's the last time any of us heard that? I know I didn't hear that during Bush. I know I definitely didn't hear that during Obama.”

He engaged in online beefs that grew so heated he was suspended from Twitter once and Facebook three times, he said. On Jan. 10, four days after the Washington uprising, he was

suspended from Facebook for a month after posting what the social media site deemed a threatening message, he said.

During an interview, he became most angry when talking about COVID-19 restrictions.

The only time he has ever worn a mask was for the birth of his daughter last year, he said. He's been forced to leave stores for refusing to wear one six to nine times, twice engaging in arguments with workers, he said.

He said people are losing their freedom when they support mask rules.

"Is this how liberty dies? With sheer applause?" he asked. "Is this how it really ends? Not with a shot fired, not with a fight, but with applause for, 'yay, take away our rights because we can no longer defend ourselves. We need the government to defend us.'"

'Peacefully and patriotically'

Caplinger was excited when he learned a rally was going to be held Jan. 6 in Washington to protest the presidential election.

It seemed like all the Trump supporters he knew online were going. The president said he was going. He tweeted it would be "wild!"

"Donald Trump has only asked two things of his voters: Vote for me and Republicans, and come to Washington, D.C., for a wild protest," he said. "That sounded interesting. That sounded fun. I couldn't describe it any more than that."

He took vacation time from work and rented a car because he didn't think his 2005 Chrysler 300 could make such a long trip. It was 550 miles, the farthest he's ever been from home. He brought his flags.

During the rally at the Ellipse, Trump gave a speech that would lead to his second impeachment. He repeated his discredited claims that the election had been stolen and exhorted the crowd to march to the Capitol.

"If you don't fight like hell, you're not going to have a country anymore," he said.

When the crowd walked down Pennsylvania Avenue, Caplinger and others broke off, entered the Capitol grounds and approached the building. A bottleneck formed at a door so he climbed onto a crowded terrace and used a different entrance.

The crowd chanted the president's name and "U.S.A. U.S.A.," according to videos posted online.

Caplinger said he breached the building to "peacefully and patriotically" encourage lawmakers to delay the ongoing certification of the election. He and other intruders have latched onto the phrase, which was used by Trump during the Ellipse speech.

An hour in Capitol

Once Caplinger got inside the Capitol, he wasn't sure what to do, he said. Many of the 800 people milling about seemed to share his sense of confusion, he said.

He joined a group he thought was going to the Senate chambers but ended up in the Rotunda. He began to hear a constant banging so he went to check it out.

As he got closer to the noise, caused by people kicking the doors to the House chamber, he saw broken windows, overturned furniture, blood by a broken door window, he said. He didn't know if that was the spot where a woman was killed by Capitol police as she tried to enter the Speaker's Lobby through a window.

When he spied a phalanx of officers with guns drawn climb a stairway, he followed behind and saw them begin to arrest people. That's when he decided to leave.

Outside the building, people were celebrating, declaring victory, playing music, dancing on the steps of the Capitol, he said. One of the songs was the Beastie Boys' "(You Gotta) Fight for Your Right (to Party)."

"Hearing people say, 'We did it,' it's like, what did you do other than make things possibly worse," he said.

He returned to Michigan soon after, driving throughout the night, as Congress, which reconvened after the insurrection, certified Biden as the president of the United States.

Looking back, he described the experience with a sense of wonder. He talked about the opulence of the Capitol: the marble, the statues and the paintings, especially the one on the Rotunda roof.

He made his hour-long excursion sound like a visit to a museum, albeit one where art was stolen, tear gas deployed and five people connected to the events had died.

'Things have only just begun'

Trump might be gone but his influence remains.

Caplinger continues to make what relatives feel are questionable choices. If anything, Trump's loss may have hardened his resolve.

One month after the Capitol siege, he was fired from his job at PolyFlex Products in Farmington for refusing to wear a mask. He had worked there 14 months.

He's looking for a job but knows his refusal to wear a mask will make it hard to find one.

With a \$700 monthly mortgage, the family budget is tight, he said. Marcott, his girlfriend, is an assembly line worker for a gas tank maker.

"Things will work out," he said. "Some opportunity will present itself when the time is right. I won't kill myself with worry."

He also has decided to run for office but hasn't decided which one. In February, he created a Facebook page: "Caplinger for? State Rep or Taylor Mayor?"

He didn't realize the election for state rep had just been held in November.

He said the biggest problem facing government is the mask requirement. If he's elected, he will get rid of face coverings, and fully open schools and churches.

"The mask mandate is unconstitutional, tyrannical, government overreach, destroying our God-given unalienable rights," he said.

When he first returned from Washington, he didn't publicly discuss his foray into the Capitol. Now, in talking with The Detroit News, he's hoping notoriety about the incident will help draw attention to his quest for office, whichever office it turns out to be.

He said any type of publicity, even bad, could help a candidacy. As proof, he pointed to Trump's victory in 2016.

As for his favorite president, Caplinger said he had waited all day Sunday for TV coverage of Trump's speech at the Conservative Political Action Conference in Orlando, Florida.

When Trump told the ebullient crowd he would probably run again in 2024, it filled Caplinger with hope.

"It shows that nothing is over," he said. "Things have only just begun."

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