



OAH STATEMENT ON THE ASSAULT ON DEMOCRACY January 12, 2021

Wednesday, January 6, 2021 will live in infamy as a day when democracy in the United States sustained a direct assault from domestic terrorists. The violent insurrection so many of us witnessed through media coverage of the event was directly incited by the President and by certain Senators and Representatives to overturn the Constitutional processes in place for a peaceful transition of power to a new presidential administration. On Friday, the Organization of American Historians signed on to a [statement by the American Historical Association](#) condemning the actions of those who stormed the United States Capitol which, as we know now, included the intention to kidnap or kill Vice President Pence, Speaker of the House Pelosi, and other elected legislators and their staff. The insurrection and assault on the Capitol did take the lives of five individuals, including a Capitol policeman defending the building and those inside. Those who were involved in and who incited the insurrection must be held to account for their actions and prosecuted.

As historians of the United States, the OAH leadership believes that it is the responsibility of every American to understand and to think critically about the deep histories that helped to make these disturbing events possible. Many OAH members are currently being called upon to utilize their expertise to analyze the events leading up to and including the assault on the Capitol through a historical lens. The [AHA's collection of resources posted on Twitter](#) on January 6, and articles recently published by the [Washington Post's Made by History](#) are helpful starting points. Editorials by OAH members [Karen Cox \(New York Times\)](#) and by [Rhae Lynn Barnes and co-author Keri Leigh Merritt \(CNN.com\)](#)—based on their historical scholarship—draw a direct line from post-Civil War era white supremacist and Lost Cause rhetoric, symbolism, and distortion of the historical record to today. Recent books by OAH members also help us think even more deeply about these events. Kathleen Belew of the University of Chicago, for example, has published *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America* (Harvard, 2018) which helps to place current events in the framework of the growth of white power and neo-Nazi movements since the Vietnam War. In *Democracy in Chains: The Deep History of the Radical Right's Stealth Plan for America* (Penguin, 2017), Duke historian Nancy MacLean puts the assault on democracy from the radical right in a much longer historical timeline, tracing from the New Deal a story that implicates both corporate funders and academic institutions.

As these works and others bear out, what happened on January 6th is not just a result of the Trump presidency; it is the result of a deep and long history. The mob at the Capitol included overt white supremacists who reject the possibility of a multiracial democracy. While the seeds of that possibility can be found in the nation's foundational documents, and were all-too-briefly tested during Reconstruction, the current work toward inclusive democracy was made possible only 56 years ago, through the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Achievement on the part of many peoples of color in pushing forward a truly democratic vision, unsurprisingly, has produced backlash.

This assault on the Capitol took place the same day that the Democratic Party took majority control of the U.S. Senate with the election of Georgia's first African American senator, and its first Jewish senator. The rioters carried with them into the U.S. Capitol the battle flag of the Confederacy and wore t-shirts emblazoned with racist and anti-Semitic slogans. Underpinned by the ongoing demographic shift in the United States in which white nationalists feel their power threatened by the new electorate and the free exercise of political power, the attack on the Capitol shows how the mob and manipulative politicians feed off each other in an attempt to return the United States to a time when only whites held legitimate power and would be the only ones recognized as "American patriots."

These are conversations we will continue at our April 2021 virtual OAH conference—organized around the theme, [“Pathways to Democracy”](#)—which will include panels featuring some of the most perceptive OAH historians who can help illuminate our current moment and place recent events into a broader historical framework.

As the OAH recently asserted in our [statement on the White House Conference on History](#), we must resist a limited vision of the U.S. past. Professional historians and history educators must continue to organize together to tell a full version of U.S. history that is not watered-down and blindly celebratory. To paraphrase Senator Mitt Romney, we demonstrate respect for Americans when, to the very best of our ability, we simply tell the truth. One such truth is that racism has marked the majority of our nation’s past and its experiment with democracy. This is our task as we work to support classroom teachers who are wrestling with the challenges of teaching current events to their students right now and those who will do so in the future.

The Organization of American Historians remains committed to excellence in the scholarship, teaching, and presentation of American history, and thus helping all of us teach and educate in the current moment. Historians will not only play a central role by looking back and analyzing the assault on the Capitol in the future, but are in fact playing that central role now. We do so in order to equip students, colleagues, and public audiences with the tools and knowledge needed to understand how we came to our present moment, why it matters, and what is at stake—and thereby help to ensure a future for American democracy.

Sincerely,



George J. Sánchez
President



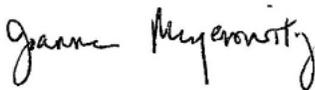
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