

College Democrats and Republicans respond to riots on Capitol Hill, Prof. Ribeiro offers historical perspective

Sami Mirza, Features Editor | January 15, 2021



As Congress gathered in the early afternoon of Jan 6 to count the Electoral votes from the 2020 presidential election, a large crowd of demonstrators gathered in front of the White House to hear President Donald Trump promote his inaccurate theory that his loss to President-elect Joe Biden was due to widespread voter fraud. After the President's speech, the demonstrators marched to Capitol Hill, where they stormed the Capitol building in a riot that killed 5 people and left more than a hundred police officers injured. Many in the Allegheny community have rejected the motivation and methods of the rioters.



Democrats were swift to respond, impeaching the president for the second time on the evening of Jan. 13. The effort, led by Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, echoes the results of a Reuters/Ipsos Poll, which found that 57 percent of Americans wanted President Trump removed "immediately."

Even members of the President's own party staunchly condemned the attack. Representative Liz Cheney, R-Wyo., Chair of the House Republican Conference, said, "There has never been a greater betrayal by a President of the United States of his office and his oath to the Constitution."

Cheney, along with nine other Republicans, broke party lines and voted to impeach Trump in the most bipartisan impeachment in U.S. history.

In a four-paragraph email to students late on Jan. 6, President Link and the Allegheny Executive Council wrote that, "Allegheny College unequivocally condemns the violence and stands united with members of Congress and their staff who loyally serve this country."

The email also called the events at the Capitol, “deplorable, a deliberate assault on our nation’s institutions and a threat to our democracy.”

In a statement to *The Campus*, Christopher Reyes, '23, president of the College Republicans, said, “President Trump is responsible for raising the temperature to the point where domestic terrorists committed acts of violence.”

Reyes also blamed the president for the promulgation of conspiracy theories alleging that there was widespread voter fraud.

“These accusations of voter fraud, they have been time and time again debunked,” Reyes said. “He always brings up hearsay instead of facts. He doesn’t show facts and statistics of voter fraud. This is turning off a lot of people, turning off a lot of Republicans.”

Alyssa Ribeiro, assistant professor of History and Black Studies at Allegheny College, expected that Congress would face backlash when they voted to confirm Biden’s victory.

“I saw it more or less in real time, and I was not surprised that something like that happened,” Ribeiro said. “I was shocked at the extent to which it was allowed to progress, and the seeming ease with which people could overtake such a hallowed institution and symbol in the United States.”

Quinn Broussard, '22, Internal Vice President of the Allegheny College Democrats, was not as shocked by the success of the rioters.

“I didn’t think they were going to get as far as they did, but the fact that they tried was no surprise to me,” Broussard said. “What did surprise me was how inept and how unprepared security was for that, when it had been so public and so publicly talked about.”

Ribeiro, who teaches a junior seminar on the history of policing in America, thinks that the lack of preparation was due to racial bias on the part of public safety officials.

“I think all of us have a hard time imagining things happening the way they did if these protestors had had darker skin,” Ribeiro said. “All we need to do is look back at the deployment for racial justice protests in the summer to see a really stark difference, and I think that at the end of the day this is going to be one more confirmation of the extent to which white privilege protects some Americans and does not protect others”

Like Reyes, Ribeiro blamed theories of widespread voter fraud as a key reason for the riot and also noted that congressional leaders were responsible for bolstering Trump’s claims. She said some of them seemed to be focused not on flipping the election, but on building inroads for potential presidential runs in 2024.

“The continuation of narratives of fraud in the election or a stolen election are pretty irresponsible on behalf of some of our elected officials,” Ribeiro said. “I do think that their maintenance of that narrative for their own personal gain is damaging in terms of how it causes their supporters to react.”

Savannah Plaskon, '22, secretary of the College Democrats, thinks that the causes lie much

deeper. She contended that moderate Republican lawmakers have turned a blind eye to Trump's misdeeds, emboldening him and paving the way for his coup.

"It is horrifying, but this has been something that (was) under way for many years now," Plaskon said. "This was a buildup of tensions that had been stewing, and we should have been able to predict it more."

In their email to the campus community, President Link and the AEC noted that it is difficult to judge political events as they unfold.

"It is almost impossible to write coherently about the history of events that are happening and not yet resolved," they wrote. "Historians depend on the passage of time between the present and the events they study to gather the record and make sense of what happened, why it happened, and what it means. We don't have the luxury of that historical vantage point as we view the events unfolding in Washington, D.C."

Ribeiro agreed that the historical impact of the riot — and the vocabulary we use to discuss it — will change as investigations into the attack develop and the nuances of the plot emerge.

"My guess is that this will not be seen as as severe as 9/11 for instance, but it will definitely be in textbooks," Ribeiro said. "Our conception of the proper term may evolve as we learn more details about exactly what happened. So, for instance, if we find out that some members of law enforcement were complicit in allowing protestors into the capitol itself that looks very different than just a plain kind of breakdown of preparedness. So I would hesitate to put a label on it at the moment."

Reyes thought that there will always be multiple acceptable ways of referring to the siege.

"I don't think there is one right answer to how you label what happened on January 6," Reyes said. "I do believe it was a form of domestic terrorism because they had a political agenda that they wanted to be upheld and they failed to overturn this election."

Broussard sees the events as far more severe, and the question of how we should refer to the events as simply answered.

"I don't think that there's really any point that I would define this as a protest or a demonstration, especially with how premeditated it clearly was," Broussard said. "I think the correct language to describe it is an attempted coup, especially when you look at the lack of response from the Trump administration."

As proof, Broussard cited the administration's failure to mobilize a response to the attack and its failure to allow troops from Maryland to assist Capitol and D.C. Metro Police in securing Capitol Hill.

One major question that has emerged after the riot is whether the attack on one of the most recognizable symbols of American democracy will unify the country after the divisive political environment of the past four years.

"I think it's hard to be confident that it's going to unify Americans going forward because we're living in such a fragmented media environment," Ribeiro said. "I think already in the coverage

of what happened (last week), there are very divergent narratives emerging. What will remain to be seen is how much Americans continue to exist in their separate bubbles rather than occupying this same space in terms of the information that they acknowledge and consume.”

Reyes is hopeful that Biden will use his presidency to merge such narratives, instead of punishing President Trump and the Republicans who pushed theories of election fraud.

“He has served in politics for 50 years, longer than my parents have been alive,” Reyes said. “I think he knows enough to be a mature adult and to be a mature man about this.”

And, according to Reyes, this maturity isn’t limited to President-Elect Biden. It is something he has personally witnessed in his time at Allegheny in members of the Meadville community.

“(Last year) I lived at Allegheny Commons and the people across from us were just regular Meadville townspeople, there was one (house) with a Trump flag and one house with a Biden flag and, you know, they’re neighbors,” Reyes said. “That just shows that people in Meadville have the capability to be civil and to put their differences aside and respect each other.”

Plaskon is more pessimistic regarding the near future. She noted that much of Allegheny’s student body, in addition leaning liberal, also tends to come from larger metropolitan areas like Erie, Buffalo and Pittsburgh.

“That, contrasted with the small, rural town that is Meadville, (is) a very stark contrast and there’s always been tensions,” Plaskon said. “I don’t predict that they’ll be going away and that they’ll be some moment of cooperation and compromise in the near future. “

Last November, following Biden’s victory in the presidential election, a report was filed with Public Safety that an armed man in an SUV flying Trump flags was waving a gun around, though there were no further incidents and nobody was injured or directly threatened. The event highlighted the divide between Meadville and the college, particularly with regards to student perceptions of the local community.

President-Elect Biden is still set to be sworn-in on Jan. 20, in a limited ceremony conducted on the steps of the Capitol. Due to the pandemic, much of his inaugural festivities are expected to be delayed or held virtually. The FBI and other federal officials have warned about potential violence before and on Inauguration Day, both in D.C. and at state capitols across the country. The number of National Guard troops stationed in D.C. has more than tripled to 20,000 troops, with contributions coming from all 55 states and territories.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell has said that the earliest he will begin an impeachment trial is Jan. 19., though reports have surfaced that McConnell believes Trump has committed impeachable offenses. Trump can still be impeached and barred from ever holding office again should the Senate vote to convict him, even after Biden is sworn in later this month.

There will be an Allegheny College Community Discussion on the Capitol Hill riots on Tuesday, Jan. 19 at 7 p.m. EST, co-sponsored by the Office of Institutional Diversity and the Center for Political Participation. The discussion will be held over Zoom and can be accessed [here](#). A form for submitting questions to the panelists is available [here](#).

About the Writer



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Sami Mirza is a freshman from South Bend, IN. He intends to major in Communication Arts and double minor in Spanish and Arabic. Though this is his first...

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