Capitol attack reflects U.S. extremist evolution

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Manuel Balce Ceneta/AP Photo, File

Capitol Police on Jan. 6, 2021, confront supporters of President Donald Trump, including Jacob Chansley, center with fur hat, outside the Senate Chamber inside the Capitol in Washington. Right-wing extremism previously mostly played out in isolated pockets of America or in smaller cities. In contrast, the deadly attack by rioters on the U.S. Capitol targeted the very heart of government. It brought together members of disparate groups, creating the opportunity for extremists to establish links with each other.

WASHINGTON — The takeover in 2016 by right-wing extremists of a federal bird sanctuary in Oregon. A standoff in 1992 between white separatists and federal agents in Ruby Ridge, Idaho. The 1995 bombing of a federal building in Oklahoma City that killed 168 people.

Right-wing extremism has previously played out for the most part in isolated pockets of America and in its smaller cities. The deadly assault by rioters on the U.S. Capitol, in contrast, targeted the very heart of government.

And it brought together, in large numbers, members of disparate groups, creating an opportunity for extremists to establish links with each other.

That, an expert says, potentially sets the stage for more violent actions.

"The events themselves, and participation in them, has a radicalizing effect. And they also have an inspirational effect. The battle of Capitol Hill is now part of the mythology," said Brian Michael Jenkins, a terrorism expert and senior adviser to the president of the RAND Corporation think tank.

Mary McCord, a former acting U.S. assistant attorney general for national security, said the climate for the insurrection had been building throughout the Trump presidency.

She cited the 2017 "Unite the Right" white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia that killed one person, aggressive demonstrations at statehouses by armed protesters railing against COVID-19 public health safety orders and mass shootings by people motivated by hate.

"All have led to this moment," McCord, now a visiting law professor at Georgetown University Law Center, said in an email.

The Southern Poverty Law Center, which monitors U.S. extremists, has recorded a 55% increase in the number of white nationalist hate groups since 2017.

Among those who participated in the Jan. 6 assault on the U.S. Capitol were members of the Oath Keepers, which often recruits current and former military, police or other first responders; the Proud Boys neo-fascist group; followers of QAnon, which spreads bizarre conspiracy theories; racists and anti-Semites; and others with nearly blind devotion to then-President Donald Trump.

"January 6th was kind of a Woodstock of the angry right," Jenkins said in an interview. "The mere fact those groups were coming together, mingling, sharing this anger, displaying this passion — it is going to have effects."

But what happens next? Will Jan. 6 be a high-water mark for right-wing extremists, or lead to other attacks on America's democracy?

Right now, the movement seems to be on pause.

Supposedly planned armed protests at all 50 state capitals and Washington this past week that the FBI issued a nationwide warning about drew virtually no one. That could indicate the groups are demoralized, at least temporarily.

Donald Trump is no longer president and his social media reach has been severely curtailed, with Twitter banning him. The extremists had come together in Washington on Jan. 6 because of their fervent belief in Trump's lies that the presidential election had been stolen, and in response to Trump's tweeted declaration that the protest in Washington "will be wild."

But now, some are clearly angry that Trump disassociated himself with the very insurrection that he stoked. They're upset that he failed to come to the rescue of rioters who were arrested while he was still president and are still being detained and charged.

Online, some people associated with the Proud Boys, which adored Trump, appear to have dumped him.

"No pardons for middle class whites who risked their livelihoods by going to 'war' for Trump," a Telegram channel associated with the group said after Trump issued many pardons, but none for the insurrectionists.

Another posting on the channel said: "I cannot wait to watch the GOP completely collapse. Out of the ashes, a true nationalist movement will arise."

Believers in QAnon are also reeling after Trump left office without fulfilling their baseless belief that he would vanquish a supposed cabal of Satan-worshipping cannibals, including top Democrats, operating a child sex trafficking ring.

Among them was Ron Watkins, who helps run an online messaging board about QAnon conspiracy theories.

"We gave it our all. Now we need to keep our chins up and go back to our lives as best we are able," Watkins wrote on Telegram after President Joe Biden was sworn in and Trump flew off to Florida.

Jenkins said the next phase for the extremist groups and people who saw Trump as a savior could transform into a broader national movement in which factions coordinate and combine their assets.

Washington, Oregon report cases of new strain of coronavirus

Associated Press

SEATTLE — Washington and Oregon are now confirming additional cases of the more contagious variant of COVID-19 in the Pacific Northwest.

The B.1.1.7 variant, which first emerged in the United Kingdom last September, has been confirmed by DNA sequencing in two cases in Snohomish County, the Washington Department of Health announced Saturday.

The Oregon Health Authority on Saturday confirmed a second case, in someone from Yamhill County, a week after the first case in the state was detected in Multnomah County.

Authorities in Washington, Oregon and Idaho have been assuming that the B.1.1.7 variant is spreading in the Northwest.

Data collected by University of Washington Medicine's Virology Lab indicate that so far, the presence of the variant is low in Washington. The lab screened 1,035 samples taken between Dec. 25 and Jan. 20; the two cases it found are the first in the state.

According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, there is no conclusive evidence that it's more severe than other strains of the virus. And public health officials say prevention and containment protocols for the variant are no different from other cases of COVID-19: Wear a mask, wash your hands, and avoid gathering with other people, especially indoors or in poorly ventilated areas.

"We knew it was only a matter of time before we found evidence of it here in Washington," Washington Secretary of Health Dr. Umair A. Shah said in a news release. "Now that this variant has been found, it underscores the absolute importance of doubling down on all the prevention measures to protect Washingtonians against COVID-19."

The B.1.1.7 variant is expected to become the most prevalent strain of the novel coronavirus in the U.S. within a few months.

Trump gives permit to ranchers whose case led to occupation

Associated Press

PORTLAND — The U.S. Bureau of Land Management in the final days of the Trump administration issued a grazing permit to Oregon ranchers whose imprisonment sparked the 2016 armed takeover of a federal wildlife refuge by right-wing extremists.

Interior Secretary David Bernhardt's restored Dwight and Steven Hammond's grazing permit east week, which lasts for 10 years, Oregon Public Broadcasting reported.

The father and son had their permit revoked after a jury convicted them in 2012 of arson on public lands a decade earlier. The men went to prison, served time and were released, but the U.S. Department of Justice later ordered them back to prison to finish the five-year sentence.

That kicked off the 41-day armed occupation of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge. The Oregon State Police fatally shot one occupier, saying he reached for a pistol at a roadblock.

The leaders of the takeover, Ammon and Ryan Bundy, and five others were later acquitted of conspiring to impede federal workers from their jobs at the refuge.

In 2018, Trump pardoned the Hammonds, allowing them to be freed from federal prison.

In a proposal to grant the Hammonds grazing rights on Dec. 31, the land agency said Hammond Ranches should be allowed to graze their cattle on about 26,000 acres in the high desert of Eastern Oregon.

The federal agency cited the Hammonds' "extensive historic use of these allotments, past proper use of rangeland resources, a high level of general need, and advantages conferred by topography."

In 2014, the agency denied Hammond Ranches a renewal of its grazing permit, saying the business "does not have a satisfactory record of performance" and cited numerous incidents of arson.

At the father and son's trial, witnesses testified that a 2001 arson fire occurred after Steven Hammond and his hunting party illegally slaughtered deer on federal property. One said Steven handed out matches with instructions to "light up the whole country."