

Reclaiming Common Ground: Racism, Kendi & the Capitol Riot

COMMENTARY

By [Peter Berkowitz](#) - RCP Contributor
January 24, 2021

On Jan. 20, right on schedule and without interruption, Chief Justice John Roberts swore in Joe Biden as the 46th president of the United States. Yet all is not well. That 25,000 National Guard members had been summoned to Washington to stand watch over the city's streets and provide security for the inauguration testified to the distrust and anger roiling the nation.

On Jan. 6, peaceful protests in Washington, D.C., against the certification of Joe Biden as the winner of the 2020 presidential election deteriorated into a violent riot, which culminated in the storming of the U.S. Capitol. The short-lived uprising stained Donald Trump's presidency, inflamed the partisan anger raging for years through the nation, and deepened doubts at home and abroad about the stability of democracy in America. A judicious assessment -- of where we stand, how we got here, and of the principles that must guide the renewal of the great American experiment in ordered liberty -- is a paramount priority.

The storming of the Capitol deserves harsh censure. Those who committed crimes should be prosecuted. Yes, it's true, as Trump's defenders maintain, that at the rally preceding the riot the president [said](#), "I know that everyone here will soon be marching over to the Capitol building to peacefully and patriotically make your voices heard." But it's also the case that in much of the speech he revved up the crowd with reckless disregard for the impact of his vehement, rabble-rousing rhetoric. A week later, with no Democrats opposed or abstaining and with the backing of 10 Republicans, the House voted to impeach him.

Even as it is unequivocally condemned, the appalling January lawlessness must be perceived accurately -- neither sweeping its multilayered harms under the rug nor extravagantly casting aspersions and assigning guilt. The same goes for the violent riots of last spring and summer in cities from coast to coast. Also beginning in peaceful protests -- over the killing of George Floyd -- they spawned attacks on government buildings and widespread looting and burning of business districts [resulting in](#) more than a billion dollars of damage. It was the most costly civic unrest in American history.

In the first week of January, many on the left and the right promptly rose to the occasion.

In immediate response to the violence, President-elect Joe Biden [stated](#), "Let me be very clear: The scenes of chaos at the Capitol do not reflect a true America. Do not represent who we are." Other Democrats joined him. "This is not the America I know and love," [declared](#) U.S. Rep. Brenda Lawrence from Michigan. Former President Jimmy Carter [agreed](#): "This is a national tragedy and is not who we are as a nation."

Republicans were by and large in agreement. “This is not who we are,” [tweeted](#) Rep. Nancy Mace from South Carolina, and Nebraska Sen. Ben Sasse [said](#) much the same. “We’re the United States of America. We disagree on a lot of things, and we have a lot of spirited debate ... but we talk it out, and we honor each other -- even in our disagreement,” [proclaimed](#) Sen. James Lankford of Oklahoma. “And while we disagree on things -- and disagree strongly at times -- we do not encourage what happened today. Ever.” Former President George W. Bush [said](#), “This is how election results are disputed in a banana republic -- not our democratic republic.”

In a bipartisan and bicameral statement, Democratic Sens. Joe Manchin, Mark Warner, Jeanne Shaheen, Maggie Hassan, and Dick Durbin joined Republican Sens. Bill Cassidy, Lisa Murkowski, Mitt Romney, and Susan Collins, as well as Collins’ Maine colleague, Independent Angus King, Rep. Josh Gottheimer (a New Jersey Democrat) and Rep. Tom Reed (a Republican from New York), in [affirming](#), “The behavior we witnessed in the U.S. Capitol is entirely un-American.”

Squarely confronting the breakdown of public order and the violation of our nation’s non-negotiable commitment to the peaceful transfer of power, these public officials and former presidents from both major parties summoned Americans to our fundamental principles and finest traditions. Consistent with the appeal from left and right to what is best in America, law enforcement officers on Jan. 6 eventually restored order in the Capitol. Congress, presided over by Vice President Mike Pence, proceeded with its constitutionally assigned responsibility to count the electoral votes and certify Joe Biden’s victory. The rule of law and constitutional government prevailed over mob rule.

In “[Denial Is the Heartbeat of America](#),” which appeared in *The Atlantic* five days after the Capitol Hill riots, Ibram X. Kendi argues that the civil and unifying statements from members of Congress and former presidents reflect the determination, as old as the country, to deny “the history of American tyranny.” For Kendi, director of the Boston University Center for Antiracist Research and best-selling author of “How to Be an Antiracist,” the assault on the Capitol was not a departure from American society and government but a representative instance of the country’s history of “carnage.” The bipartisan condemnations of the riots, according to Kendi, represent a bipartisan effort to conceal the nation’s systemic injustice.

There is no doubting the temptation to deny political reality in order to accumulate power and advance partisan agendas. Indeed, Kendi’s critique succumbs to it.

First, by insisting on a purely literal reading of the swift condemnations of the Capitol riot, Kendi denies the well-understood meaning of the utterances he purports to debunk. Those who said after the riots that “This is not who we are,” he argues, are “in complete denial that the rioters are part of America.” The professor writes as if the members of Congress and former presidents were ignorant of, or sought to suppress, the record in the United States of incitement against, and violence targeting of, government. Kendi’s flamboyant recitation in his article of low points in American history does not prove his point, because the Democrats and Republicans whom he accuses of engaging in denial were not asserting that “antidemocratic politics are not part of American politics.” Rather, they were insisting -- and most who read or heard their words

understood them to be insisting -- that antidemocratic politics violate America's defining dedication to liberty under law.

Second, Kendi denies Americans' readiness to confront their moral flaws as individuals and as a nation. "What's also part of America is denying all of what is part of America," he writes. The most egregious form of denial, he maintains, "is the regular structural denial that racial inequity is caused by racist policy." Contrary to Kendi, however, racism in America -- with a focus on its allegedly systemic character and the supposed implicit bias that sustains it -- may well be the favorite and single-most-discussed subject in the country's universities, media outlets, corporate boardrooms and human resources offices, and federal bureaucracies. One could reasonably wonder whether any country anywhere today -- or for that matter that has ever existed on the planet -- has more energetically engaged in self-examination and self-criticism of, and self-flagellation for, its sins, real and imagined, than has the United States of America.

Third, Kendi denies the significance of America's founding principles. For decades, historians have been documenting and cataloguing -- and teachers have been featuring in the curriculum -- the nation's transgressions, betrayals, and defilements of those principles, beginning with the protection the Constitution gave to slavery. Kendi goes further. "Sexism, racism, homophobia, and anti-Semitism," he argues, should be viewed "as systemic and pervasive." Accordingly, we must recognize that the attack on the U.S. Capitol is "*precisely who we are*" (italics in the original). By insisting that those transgressions, betrayals, and defilements of America's principles are defining features of American institutions and the American spirit, Kendi obscures the primacy of the nation's founding principles in correcting American injustices. A reasonably comparative and historical inquiry, however, would show that America is not distinguished from other peoples and nations by racism and other forms of bigotry -- which abound around the world -- but rather by the remarkable progress our constitutional regime has made in fulfilling for a large and diverse nation the Declaration of Independence's promise to secure the rights inherent in all persons.

Kendi is not wrong to be outraged by racism or to shine the light on injustice in America, but his extravagant accusations undercut the common ground on which Americans of diverse persuasions can join together in defense of individual freedom and human equality.

The judicious assessment that is crucial to national renewal at this difficult moment must counter the interests and forces that fuel polarization. We can do this by [recovering an understanding](#) of the principles of freedom on which America was founded, and of the nation's historic achievements -- and failures and setbacks -- in building a tolerant, prosperous, and pluralistic society.

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