

A disgrace for the history books: Even before the Civil War, better leaders prevented chaos in the Capitol



By **HAROLD HOLZER**

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It has happened before. A highly anticipated — and in some ways dreaded — joint session of Congress to certify the votes of the Electoral College. A sitting vice president who had been defeated by a vote of the people, and now found himself awkwardly responsible for validating his loss. An anticipated outpouring of emotion from citizens — along with some members of the House and Senate — who insisted that the presidential election had been flawed, and the clear winner, illegitimate. A palpable threat of violence.

The date was Feb. 13, 1861 — one day after the 52nd birthday of the beleaguered president-elect: Abraham Lincoln. On this tense day, as events unfolded in Washington, Lincoln had reached Columbus, Ohio, for a reception in his honor, and was scheduled soon to resume his journey to the capital for his inauguration. That is, if his 180 electoral votes, a clear majority, could be counted and confirmed securely.

Several Southern states — and their senators — had objected



Trump supporters gesture to U.S. Capitol Police in the hallway outside of the Senate chamber at the Capitol in Washington, Wednesday, Jan. 6, 2021. (Manuel Balce Ceneta/AP)

to that result, claiming Lincoln had been the first president elected only with the votes of one section of the country (the North), and therefore could not be recognized as chief executive. Indeed, beginning six weeks after Election Day, South Carolina, Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana and Texas, had, in turn, seceded from the Union, formed a separate government, and elected Sen. Jefferson Davis as an alternative president.

Somehow, despite the unheard-of stress to the system, the fraught vote-count on Capitol Hill proceeded, the outcome strikingly different from the mayhem Donald Trump's supporters caused yesterday — at least at first.

How did the divided states of America avoid chaos and preserve the dignified ritual of the vote count in Congress? The answer: with a huge show of force in advance.

Fearing the worst, and determined that the ceremony proceed unimpeded, the Southern-born

general-in-chief of the U.S. Army, Winfield Scott, had proactively deployed federal troops and artillery to Capitol Hill. Scott also announced plans for a military parade on Washington's birthday nine days later, when Lincoln was widely expected to arrive in town.

Scott also sent a blunt message to those rumored to be planning to demonstrate, disrupt or worse. As he colorfully warned, "any man who attempted by force or unparliamentary disorder to obstruct or interfere with the lawful count" would be "lashed to the muzzle of a twelve-pounder" — a huge cannon — "and fired out a window of the Capitol."

John C. Breckinridge — an unsuccessful candidate for the presidency — solemnly announced from the rostrum: "Abraham Lincoln of Illinois, having received a majority of the whole of the electoral votes, is elected President of the United States, for four years, commencing on the 4th of March" — the day then set aside for the inauguration.

"Thanks to Gen. Scott," wrote a relieved observer, "the people feel as tho they were safe from 'invasion' until after the 4th of March" — inauguration day — "at least."

Of course, the chaos many had feared on that ominous ceremoni-

rebellion, more Southern states abandoned the union, and one by one, their senators quit or were expelled and headed home.

We know what followed: Four years of brutal civil war, 750,000 casualties, but at least the cause of all the discord — American slavery — destroyed once and for all.

So the question remains: Can the legitimately elected president of a House divided withstand the anxiety of the electoral vote-counting procedure and lead the country after the kind of assault on democracy the Capitol endured yesterday?

Gen. Scott's firmness should serve as an object lesson. But so should the words Lincoln spoke from the Capitol Building on Inauguration Day.

"We are not enemies, but friends — we must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection." It was time, then as now, to summon "the better angels of our nature."

In 1861, Lincoln's words went unheeded. President-elect Joe Biden quoted Lincoln in denouncing the Capitol riots yesterday.

Knowing what can happen when a presidential transition evokes such discord, the rest is up to us. As Lincoln had originally intended to end his inaugural address that day — words he perhaps wisely deleted: "With you, and not with me, is the solemn question of 'Shall it be peace, or a sword?'"

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(Andrew Harnik/AP)

Rioters breach U.S. Capitol during pro-Trump rally

In response, dissenters melted away, fearing, as one journalist reported, "that they would be ignominiously whipped if they attempted to execute their treason."

That afternoon, with the House galleries devoid of "rowdies and ruffians," outgoing Vice President

al day would erupt soon enough. Within only two months, although Lincoln was safely sworn in (amidst the tightest security ever), Confederate forces bombarded Fort Sumter. When the new president called for 75,000 militia volunteers to put down the