

January 6th: Reflections from inside the Capitol



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YALL WEEKLY

January 6th: Reflections from inside the Capitol

Charlotte-area congressional colleagues reflect on what it was like to live through January 6, 2021 at the Capitol and in North Carolina

SAM SPENCER AND GORDON HOLZBERG

JAN 8



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The following piece contains the recollections of two staff members in the U.S. House of Representatives who were working on January 6, 2021. Their opinions do not necessarily reflect the views of their employers, past or present.



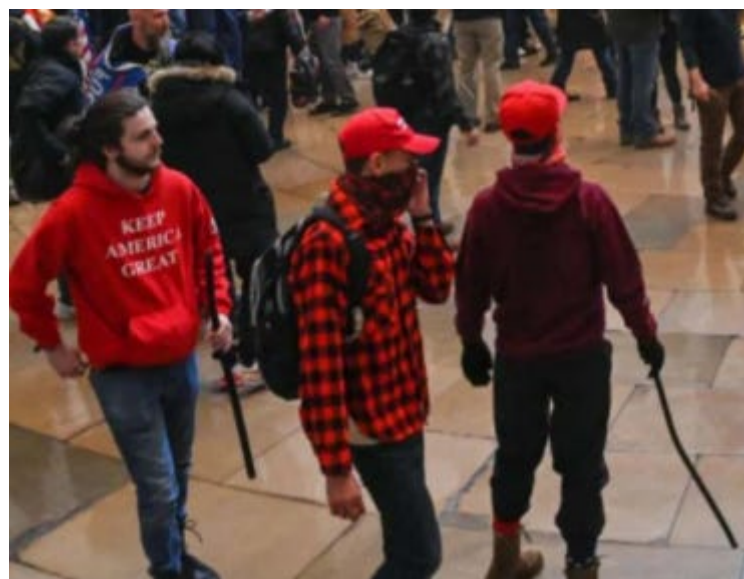
Gordon Holzberg

Memory is a funny thing.

On mundane days, our minds have a wonderful way of preserving small flashes of a broader picture even as the memory itself fades. On special days – say, a wedding – we unconsciously commit every detail to memory.

Our parents and grandparents spent years telling us about December 7, 1941, or where they were when they heard President Kennedy was shot; Millennials, for our part, remember in gruesome, televised detail the morning of September 11, 2001.

Like those days, January 6, 2021 has earned an infamous place in our collective consciousness. Like those days, I remember it in vivid detail.



Capitol trespassers wearing Trump red and holding makeshift weapons on January 6, 2021 ([Courtesy FBI](#))

Sam Spencer

On January 6, 2021, I was in North Carolina. It was a Wednesday, one of the first days back from the holidays, and because it was the middle of the pandemic, I was working from home.

At the time I was also the Communications Director for a Member of Congress, Alma Adams. It started like any other day; we talked on the phone, and I texted her an article about a friend from [QCity Metro](#), a Charlotte news site.

I had thought about going up for the electoral vote count - how many times does one get to see a joint session of Congress? - but ultimately decided against it, leaving three members of our staff - the chief of staff, legislative director, and a legislative assistant, Gordon Holzberg - with Congresswoman Adams.

Gordon would be staffing the Congresswoman most of the day.

We all had a bad feeling leading up to January 6, and knew there would be protests. We had no idea the day was going to take a fatal, inconceivable turn.

Starting around 12:00 Noon, then-President Donald Trump started speaking, turning the crowd against the federal government and changing the course of history.



A Capitol trespasser wearing a Trump red MAGA hat on January 6, 2021 ([Courtesy FBI](#))

Gordon Holzberg

At 2:00 PM, I was accompanying Rep. Adams to the U.S. Capitol Building so she could observe the ongoing debate on the House Floor.

At 2:10 PM, I remember a friendly U.S. Capitol Police (USCP) officer directing us to leave the Capitol Plaza. The building was on lockdown since the nearby protestors were getting rowdier, he said, and a few had even begun to try to scale the building's west terrace. I distinctly remember laughing, and asking if there was another way that had not yet been sealed yet.

Luckily, the Congresswoman decided we should turn around.

No sooner had the Congresswoman and I returned to the House Office Buildings than the emergency alert system activated, alerting us that the U.S. Capitol had been breached, and that we were to seal our offices against external threats. The Congresswoman and I, along with two other staffers present, huddled in her office as we stared in disbelief at CNN's images from one block away.

President Trump's supporters had beat back the USCP officers, had smashed their way into the Capitol, and were flooding through the building in search of Senators and Representatives alike.

The Congresswoman and I shared a look: we were supposed to be there, and it was her intuition that had kept us out of harm's way.



A photo taken in the aftermath of January 6 from inside the Capitol (Courtesy Gordon Holzberg)

Sam Spencer

My wife, Rebekah, and I watched the events unfold together. First the protestors breaching the fences around the Capitol and the scaffolding and stages set up for the coming inauguration; then breaching the building itself. We saw the smoke and chaos.

“This doesn’t happen in the United States,” I naively said to the television.

Due to COVID protocols, leadership was trying to prevent too many members of Congress from being in the chamber for the joint session at the same time, so my boss wasn’t in the chamber for the joint session when Trump made the speech. She was planning on coming later.

As she started the trip to the House chamber, the order came to shelter in place. Alerts went off on all of our phones. We made the decision to close our district office out of an abundance of caution.

The entire time I was fielding calls and texts from reporters who wanted to interview Rep. Adams. Countless constituents and elected officials were texting us to check in. After the rioters started to get bored and the immediate threat had passed, **we tweeted out updates** that the **Congresswoman and the staff were OK.**



Much to my chagrin, some reporters broke protocol and called the Congresswoman directly as she was sheltering in place. While it’s understandable the press would want a scoop, we didn’t know if she would have to evacuate during an interview, or if a live broadcast could give away her location.

One reporter tweeted out Rep. Adams’ exact location in the Capitol complex and I had to politely ask their editor to take down the tweet. We had no idea how many people had breached the Capitol or how many had guns or weapons.

It was chaos, so we took as many precautions as possible. We had every reason to be afraid. Later, we’d learn that **many of the rioters detained on**

January 6 possessed handguns and firearms; that doesn't account for anyone who went home that night, meaning there were either hundreds or thousands of firearms brought onto the Capitol grounds on January 6.



Capitol rioters filming on their camera phones while walking through smoke on January 6, 2021 (Courtesy FBI)

Gordon Holzberg

Over the next few hours, Members of Congress and staff were escorted to a secure location where USCP could more effectively guarantee their safety.

It was a crowded room, and I remember our collective unease at the size of the crowd: although Members of Congress had just received their first COVID-19 vaccinations in the weeks prior, no one had their second dose yet. Many Republican Members of Congress huddled in the southeast corner of the room, unyielding to the numerous requests that they wear masks.

It was no shock when, over the next week, many of those in that room contracted COVID.

Until 8:00 PM, staff and Members traded snacks and phone chargers and news about what was happening. Some found quiet corners to conduct interviews, and some called their families to let them know they were okay – but everyone was waiting with baited breath to see what exactly would happen next.

I distinctly remember Rep. Hakeem Jeffries (D-NY) – one of the senior Democrats present until the return of House Leadership – praising then-Rep. Liz Cheney (R-WY) for how closely and effectively the two had worked together that day. They were counterparts: equally ranked on opposite sides of the aisle, but clearly and faithfully on same side of our democracy.

At last, the complex was declared secure and Speaker Pelosi made her return: the Congress of the United States had business to do, she said, and it would not adjourn until that business was concluded. The USCP was in control of the Capitol, and the debate on the objections to the certification of the electoral college would resume. Members were permitted to return to their offices, and advised that we would have additional vote series that evening.

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Sam Spencer

It was clear early in the afternoon that most of the Members of Congress and their staff thought it was our duty to make sure the electoral vote got certified before we went to bed. Around 8 PM the legislative chambers got back to the business of certifying the election; we put out a short statement from Congresswoman Adams that said,

Today has been the hardest day of my time in Congress, but my resolve hasn't waivered. I am ready to certify the results of the presidential election as soon as we are back in the House chamber.

I call on my colleagues across the aisle, in the interest of national unity, to vote to certify the results of the election without objection. Now is the time - for the sake of our country - to reject those who fan the flames of chaos and destruction.

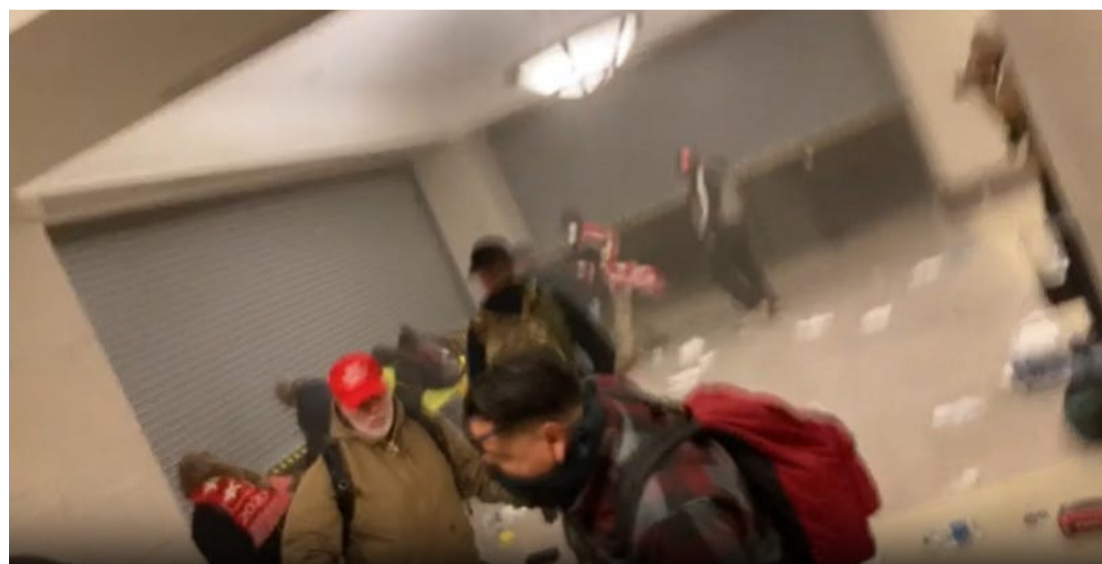
Like many other congressional staff members, I would be up until 4 AM preparing statements, watching the certification, checking up on friends, and making sure my Boss got home OK.

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Gordon Holzberg

Around 10:00 PM, the cafeteria in the Longworth House Office Building reopened: it became an ad hoc mess hall, with the service workers who had been trapped on campus serving hamburgers to exhausted USCP officers, Members of Congress, and staffers alike.

The penultimate vote of the night began at 11:08 PM; the first objection was to the certification of Arizona's electoral votes. The final vote would start four hours later at 3:08 AM.



Screenshot of video posted by a rioter on Parler, a conservative social media site that was used by some protesters and rioters to coordinate on January 6
[\(Courtesy Pro Publica\)](#)

As those last votes began, I remember walking into the Capitol Building, the

marble floors slick with what I assumed was the residue from tear gas. Wooden furniture had been smashed, and glass had been shattered and cracked and strewn across the floor.

I distinctly remember how I felt – and, at the moment, it surprised me: I felt determined. I felt proud.

It wasn't proud of myself or my actions, to be clear. It was my friends that I was proud of: the staff on the House Floor that were back in the chamber, helping administer the debate to vote down the electoral objections. It was my friends and colleagues that had barricaded themselves in Capitol hideaways that were right back in the fray. And more than that, it was the institution of Congress itself that I was proud of: proud that we were still here, still working, still trying to serve, undeterred by the violence of that day.

I finally returned home at 3:37 AM, squeezing by the armored personnel carriers that now choked every intersection leading up to the Capitol. I collapsed into bed, flipped on CNN, and watched as Speaker Pelosi gavelled down the final objection. It was over, and we had seen our business to its conclusion.

In the three years since January 6, we have all been reminded of our democracy's fragility. But, as the memories of that day have remained etched in my mind, so too has my faith in the people who serve our country: from the National Guard who came to secure the Capitol, to the Members of Congress and their staff, to the local boards of election across our country who did their jobs and made sure everyone vote was counted fairly.

There are people who can and will use any means necessary to bend our systems to their desires. But there are so many people – so many *more* people – who labor, day in and day out, to make the world a better place through their service. It's those individuals that I think of on January 6, and those folks whose service that I hope we continue to honor.

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A guest post by

Gordon Holzberg

Tar Heel in DC.

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