

New Insights Into Trump's State of Mind on Jan. 6 Chip Away at Doubts

Former President Donald J. Trump has weathered scandals by keeping his intentions under wraps, but recent testimony paints a stark portrait of a man willing to do almost anything to hang onto power.



Donald J. Trump greeting supporters at a rally in June. He has benefited from uncertainty about what he was thinking on the day of the Capitol riot. Credit...Rachel Mummey for The New York Times



By [Peter Baker](#)

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WASHINGTON — He was not speaking metaphorically. It was not an offhand comment. President Donald J. Trump had every intention of joining a mob of supporters he knew to be armed and dangerous as it marched to the Capitol. And there had even been talk of marching into the House chamber himself to disrupt Congress from ratifying his election defeat.

For a year and a half, Mr. Trump has been shielded by obfuscations and mischaracterizations, benefiting from uncertainty about what he was thinking on Jan. 6, 2021. If he truly believed the election had been stolen, if he genuinely expected the gathering at the Capitol would be a peaceful protest, the argument went, then could he be held accountable, much less indicted, for the mayhem that ensued?

But for a man who famously avoids leaving emails or other trails of evidence of his unspoken motives, any doubts about what was really going through Mr. Trump's mind on that day of violence seemed to have been eviscerated by testimony presented in recent weeks by the House committee investigating the Capitol attack — especially the [dramatic appearance last week of a 26-year-old former White House aide](#) who offered a chilling portrait of a president willing to do almost anything to hang onto power.

More than perhaps any insider account that has emerged, the recollections of the aide, [Cassidy Hutchinson](#), demolished the fiction of a president who had nothing to do with what happened. Each revelation was stunning on its own: Mr. Trump knew that weapons were in the crowd as he exhorted supporters to “fight like hell,” and even tried to stop anyone from disarming them. He was so determined to join the mob at the Capitol that he lashed out at his Secret Service detail for refusing to take him. And he was so [nonchalant about the bedlam](#) he had unleashed that he suggested Vice President Mike Pence might deserve to be executed for refusing to overturn the election.

But when added together, the various disclosures have produced the clearest picture yet of an unprecedented attempt to subvert the traditional American democratic process, with a sitting president who had lost at the ballot box planning to march with an armed crowd to the Capitol to block the transfer of power, brushing aside manifold concerns about the potential for violence along the way.

“The innocent explanations for Trump's conduct seem virtually impossible to credit following the testimony we have seen,” said Joshua Matz, who served as

a lawyer for House Democrats during both of Mr. Trump's impeachment trials in the Senate. "At the very least, they powerfully shift the burden to Trump and his defenders to offer evidence that he did not act with a corrupt, criminal state of mind."

And so nearly two and a half centuries after the 13 American colonies declared independence from an unelected king, the nation is left weighing a somber new view of the fragility of its democracy — and the question of what, if anything, could and should be done about it.

To the extent that there may be a turning point in that debate, Ms. Hutchinson's testimony proved decisive for some who had been willing to give Mr. Trump the benefit of the doubt or had been uncertain that the committee had gathered enough evidence about the former president's state of mind.

Solomon L. Wisenberg, a former deputy independent counsel under Ken Starr, [called her account "the smoking gun"](#) making a case "for his criminal culpability on seditious conspiracy charges." Mick Mulvaney, who served as Mr. Trump's third White House chief of staff, said he had been defending him, but learning that Mr. Trump knew some in the crowd were armed and still encouraged it to go to the Capitol "certainly changes my mind," [he told Fox News](#).

David French, a conservative critic of Mr. Trump, had been skeptical the committee would produce sufficient evidence. "But Hutchinson's sworn testimony closes a gap in the criminal case against Trump," [he wrote on The Dispatch](#), a conservative website. Two law professors, Alan Z. Rozenstein of the University of Minnesota and Jed Handelsman Shugerman of Fordham University, likewise opposed prosecution until seeing Ms. Hutchinson, [writing on the Lawfare blog](#) that she changed their minds because she provided "proof of intent."

Key Revelations From the Jan. 6 Hearings

Making a case against Trump. The House committee investigating the Jan. 6 attack is [laying out evidence](#) that could allow prosecutors to indict former President Donald J. Trump, though [the path to a criminal trial is uncertain](#). Here are the main themes that have emerged so far:

An unsettling narrative. During the first hearing, the committee described in vivid detail what it characterized as [an attempted coup orchestrated by the former president](#) that culminated in the assault on the Capitol. At the heart of the [gripping story](#) were three main players: [Mr. Trump, the Proud Boys and a Capitol Police officer](#).

Creating election lies. In its second hearing, the panel showed [how Mr. Trump ignored aides and advisers](#) as he declared victory prematurely and [relentlessly pressed claims of fraud he was told were wrong](#). “He’s become detached from reality if he really believes this stuff,” William P. Barr, the former attorney general, said of Mr. Trump during a videotaped interview.

Pressuring Pence. Mr. Trump continued [pressuring Vice President Mike Pence](#) to go along with a plan to overturn his loss even after he was told it was illegal, according to testimony laid out by the panel during the third hearing. The committee showed how Mr. Trump’s actions led his supporters to storm the Capitol, [sending Mr. Pence fleeing for his life](#).

Fake elector plan. The committee used its fourth hearing to detail how Mr. Trump was personally involved in [a scheme to put forward fake electors](#). The panel also presented fresh details on how the former president leaned on state officials to invalidate his defeat, [opening them up to violent threats when they refused](#).

Strong arming the Justice Department. During the fifth hearing, the panel explored Mr. Trump’s [wide-ranging and relentless scheme to misuse the Justice Department](#) to keep himself in power. The panel also presented evidence that at least half a dozen Republican members of Congress [sought pre-emptive pardons](#).

The surprise hearing. [Cassidy Hutchinson](#), a former White House aide, delivered [explosive testimony](#) during the panel’s sixth session, saying that the president [knew the crowd on Jan. 6 was armed](#), but wanted to loosen security. She also painted Mark Meadows, the White House chief of staff in the Trump administration, as [disengaged and unwilling to act](#) as rioters approached the Capitol.

The hearings, which will continue after Congress returns on July 11 from its holiday recess, have presented only the prosecution’s side of the story. With Mr. Trump’s acquiescence, Representative Kevin McCarthy of California, the House Republican leader, opted against appointing anyone to the select committee after Speaker Nancy Pelosi rejected a couple of his original selections, leaving the panel composed entirely of Democrats and two Republicans deeply critical of the former president.

Neither Ms. Hutchinson nor any of the other witnesses who have testified have been cross-examined. Their testimony has often been presented in short edited clips rather than in their entirety, and no contrary testimony has been offered publicly. In a courtroom, if it ever came to that, the case against Mr. Trump would be tested as it has not been so far.

“The committee’s presentation has been a purely political exercise, deceptively edited,” said Jason Miller, who served as a political adviser to Mr. Trump during and after the election.

Yet even outside the confines of the hearing room, Mr. Miller and others in Mr. Trump’s camp have mainly attacked the committee or tried to chip away at pieces of the testimony rather than produce much of a defense of the former president’s actions or an alternate explanation for his state of mind.

In his social media posts, Mr. Trump denied asking that armed supporters be allowed at his rally. “Who would ever want that?” he wrote. “Not me!” He focused more of his energy on castigating Ms. Hutchinson in scathing personal terms (“whacko,” “total phony”) and concentrated on one small aspect of her testimony, namely [whether he lunged for the wheel of his presidential vehicle](#) when his Secret Service detail refused to take him to the Capitol on Jan. 6.

Throughout his time in politics, Mr. Trump has survived one scandal after another in part because people in authority felt unable to read his mind. Investigators were not sure they could definitively prove that he intended to break the law when he authorized hush money to silence a pornographic film actress or when he provided false valuations of his properties to lenders or when he sought to impede the inquiry into Russia’s election interference. Fact checkers similarly documented tens of thousands of false statements he made while in office, but were reluctant to declare that he knowingly lied.

“He learned from Dad, Norman Vincent Peale and especially Roy Cohn that you can get away with almost anything if you never back down and insist long enough and loud enough that you’re right, and he held onto that right up to the final ride” back to the White House, said Gwenda Blair, his biographer, referring in turn to Fred Trump; the author of “The Power of Positive Thinking”; and Senator Joseph McCarthy’s red-baiting chief counsel, who became a mentor to Mr. Trump. For Mr. Trump, “he was being completely consistent with the way he has acted his entire life.”

Anthony Scaramucci, a longtime associate who served briefly in the White House before breaking with Mr. Trump, has talked in the past about [Mr. Trump’s power to interpret reality in whatever way suited him](#). But Mr. Scaramucci said he had concluded that Mr. Trump understood perfectly well that the election was not stolen and that his actions on Jan. 6 to overturn it were illegitimate.

“I do believe that President Trump knows that the whole thing that he is doing is a ruse,” said Mr. Scaramucci. “On more than one occasion throughout the campaign” in 2016, “he would turn to me and others and say funny things like, ‘Why can’t people realize what you guys realize about me, that I am playacting and full of it at least 50 percent of the time?’ That sort of joking. So he knows that this is all a lie.”

What the hearings have demonstrated with an array of witnesses drawn almost entirely from the president's own allies and advisers is that if Mr. Trump did not know, he certainly had every reason to. One adviser after another, including two successive attorneys general and multiple campaign officials and lawyers, told him there was "no there there," as one put it, when it came to widespread election fraud. Yet he persisted in spinning wild tales of conspiracies.

While Attorney General Merrick B. Garland [must weigh many factors](#) before deciding whether to bring a case, including whether it is in the national interest to charge a former president, Ms. Hutchinson's account of Mr. Trump's actions leading up to and on Jan. 6 provided the building blocks for a possible prosecution by demonstrating that he and his advisers understood they were playing with fire.

While Mark Meadows, the White House chief of staff, claimed in a memoir that Mr. Trump had only been "speaking metaphorically" when he vowed to march to the Capitol, in fact he had discussed it for days. Ms. Hutchinson first learned of the plan on Jan. 2 when Rudolph W. Giuliani, the president's personal attorney, told her Mr. Trump would go to the Capitol and would "look powerful."

Alarmed, she found Mr. Meadows, her boss. "It sounds like we're going to the Capitol," she said. Mr. Meadows did not look up from his phone but made clear he understood the peril. "Things might get real, real bad on Jan. 6," she remembered him telling her.

On the morning of Jan. 6, she listened as Mr. Meadows was warned that some Trump supporters gathering for a rally on the Ellipse had weapons. Pat A. Cipollone, the White House counsel, warned that Mr. Trump should not go to the Capitol. "We're going to get charged with every crime imaginable if we make that movement happen," he said, according to Ms. Hutchinson.

Mr. Trump was undaunted. Waiting in a tent to address the crowd, he brushed off worries about violence. He criticized the Secret Service for screening supporters with magnetometers, standard procedure for a presidential event, and demanded that they be removed. "They're not here to hurt me," he said. "Take the f-ing mags away. Let my people in."

Addressing the crowd, he declared that he would go with them to the Capitol. But when he climbed into his armored vehicle, the Secret Service refused to take him, citing his own security. According to what Ms. Hutchinson said she was later told by [Anthony M. Ornato](#), a deputy White House chief of staff, Mr. Trump erupted in rage and demanded to go there.

They returned to the White House instead, where Mr. Trump stewed about being thwarted. As he watched television images of his supporters rampaging through the Capitol, he agreed with those in the crowd calling for Mr. Pence to be hanged.

Indeed, according to Ms. Hutchinson's testimony, he was on the side of the mob. As she heard Mr. Meadows put it, "He doesn't think they're doing anything wrong."

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