

Chair Bennie Thompson

Opening statement as prepared for delivery

June 9, 2022

The Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol will be in order.

Without objection, the Chair is authorized to declare the Committee in recess at any point.

Pursuant to House Deposition Authority Regulation 10, the Chair announces the Committee's approval to release the deposition materials presented during tonight's hearing.

Thanks to everyone watching tonight for sharing part of your evening, to learn about the facts and causes of the events leading up to and including the violent attack on January 6th, 2021 ... on our democracy, electoral system, and country.

I am Bennie Thompson, Chairman of the January 6th, 2021 Committee. I was born, raised and still live in Bolton, Mississippi, a town with a population of 521, which is midway between Jackson and Vicksburg, MS, and the Mississippi River.

I am from a part of the country where people justified the actions of slavery, the Ku Klux Klan and lynching. I'm reminded of that dark history as I hear voices today try and justify the actions of the insurrectionists on January 6th, 2021.

Over the next few weeks, hopefully you will get to know the other Members, my colleagues up here, and me. We represent a diversity of communities from all over the United States... rural areas and cities... east coast, west coast, and the heartland.

All of us have one thing in common: **we swore the same oath**. The same oath that all Members of Congress take upon taking office and afterward every two years if they are reelected.

We swore an oath to defend the Constitution, against all enemies: foreign ... *and domestic*.

The words of the current oath taken by all of us—that nearly every United States Government employee takes—have their roots in the Civil War.

Throughout our history, the United States has fought against foreign enemies to preserve our democracy, electoral system, and country. When the United States Capitol was stormed and burned in 1814, foreign enemies were responsible.

Afterward, in 1862, when American citizens had taken up arms against this country, Congress adopted a new oath to help make sure no person who had supported the rebellion could hold a position of public trust. Therefore, congresspersons and U.S. Federal Government employees were required for the first time to swear an oath to defend the Constitution against all enemies—foreign... *and domestic*.

That oath was put to the test on January 6th, 2021.

The police officers who held the line that day honored their oaths. Many came out of that day bloodied and broken. They still bear those wounds, visible and invisible. They did their duty. They repelled the mob and ended the occupation of the Capitol. They defended the Constitution against domestic enemies—so that Congress could return, uphold our own oaths, and count your votes to ensure the transfer of power—just as we've done for hundreds of years.

But unlike in 1814, it was **domestic** enemies of the Constitution who stormed and occupied the Capitol... who sought to thwart the will of the people...to stop the transfer of power.

And they did so at the encouragement of the President of the United States.

The President of the United States. Trying to stop the transfer of power.

A precedent that had stood for 220 years, even as our democracy has faced its most difficult tests.

Thinking back again to the Civil War, in the summer of 1864, the President of the United States was staring down what he believed would be a doomed bid for reelection. He believed his opponent, General George McClellan, would wave the white flag when it came to preserving the Union. But even with that grim fate hanging in the balance, President Lincoln was ready to accept the will of the voters, come what may.

He made a quiet pledge.

He wrote down the words, “This morning, as for some days past, it seems exceedingly probable that this Administration will not be re-elected. Then it will be my duty to so co-operate with the President elect....”

It will be my duty.

Lincoln sealed that memo and asked his cabinet secretaries to sign it, sight unseen. He asked them to make the same commitment he did. To accept defeat if indeed defeat was the will of the people. To uphold the rule of law. To do what every other President who came before him did... and what every President who followed him would do.

Until Donald Trump.

Donald Trump lost the Presidential election in 2020. the American people voted him out of office. It was not because of a rigged system. It was not because of voter fraud.

Don't believe me? Hear what his former Attorney General had to say about it, and I'll warn those watching that this contains strong language.

Bill Barr. On Election Day 2020, he was Attorney General of the United States. The top law enforcement official in the country, telling the President exactly what he thought about claims of a stolen election.

Donald Trump had his days in court to challenge the results. He was within his rights to seek those judgments. In the United States, law-abiding citizens have those tools for pursuing justice. He lost in the courts just as he did at the ballot box. And in this country, that's the end of the line.

But for Donald Trump, that was only the beginning of what became a sprawling, multi-step conspiracy aimed at overturning the Presidential election... aimed at throwing out the votes of millions of Americans—your votes—your voice in our democracy—and replacing the will of the American people with his will to remain in power after his term ended.

Donald Trump was at the center of that conspiracy.

And ultimately, Donald Trump—the President of the United States—spurred a mob of domestic enemies of the Constitution to march down the Capitol and subvert American democracy.

Any legal jargon you hear about “seditious conspiracy” ... “obstruction of an official proceeding” ... “conspiracy to defraud the United States” boils down to this: January 6th was the culmination of an attempted coup. A brazen attempt, as one rioter put it shortly after January 6th, “to overthrow the Government.” The violence was no accident. It represented Trump's last, most desperate chance to halt the transfer of power.

Now, you may hear those words and think, “This is just another political attack on Donald Trump by people who don't like him.” That's not the case. My colleagues and I all wanted an outside, independent commission to investigate January 6th, similar to what we had after 9/11. But after first agreeing to the idea, Donald Trump's allies in Congress put a stop to it. Apparently, they don't want January 6th investigated at all.

And, in the last 17 months, many of those same people have tried to whitewash what happened on January 6th. To rewrite history... call it a tourist visit... label it “legitimate political discourse.” Donald Trump and his followers have adopted the words of the song writer: “Do you believe me or your lying eyes?”

We can't sweep what happened under the rug. The American people deserve answers. So I come before you this evening not as a Democrat, but as an American who swore an oath to defend the Constitution. The Constitution doesn't protect just Democrats or just Republicans. It protects all of us... "We the People." And this scheme was an attempt to undermine the will of the people.

So tonight, and over the next few weeks, we're going to remind you of the reality of what happened that day. But our work must do much more than just look backwards. Because our democracy remains in danger. The conspiracy to thwart the will of the people is not over. There are those in this country who thirst for power but have no love or respect for what makes America great: devotion to the Constitution... allegiance to the rule of law... our shared journey to build a more perfect Union.

January 6th and the lies that led to insurrection have put two and a half centuries of constitutional democracy at risk. The world is watching what we do here. America has long been expected to be a shining city on a hill. A beacon of hope and freedom.

A model for others—when we're at our best. How can we play that role when our own house is in such disorder?

We must confront the truth with candor, resolve, and determination. We need to show that we are worthy of the gifts that are the birthright of every American.

That begins here. And it begins now. With a true accounting of what happened, and what led to the attack on our Constitution and our democracy.

In this moment—when the dangers to our Constitution and our democracy loom large—nothing could be more important.

Working alongside the public servants on this dais has been one of the greatest honors of my time in Congress. It's been a particular privilege to count as a partner in this effort—and to count as a friend—the gentlewoman from Wyoming, Ms. Cheney. She is a patriot... a public servant of profound courage... of devotion to her oath and the Constitution. It's my pleasure to recognize Ms. Cheney for her opening statement.