

Party leaders decry Capitol chaos, but differ on key points

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In the space of 30 minutes Wednesday, Montrose County Democratic Party Chairman Kevin Kuns went from shock, to disgust, to anger as he watched a pro-Trump march to the U.S. Capitol building devolve into a riot that disrupted for several hours the certification by both chambers of Congress of President-elect Joe Biden's Electoral College win.

"I'm a huge First Amendment person, but that was not a First Amendment demonstration or rally. That was a coup, a riot, being performed by armed domestic terrorists that were prodded on by a radical right Trump mob. It was horrifying to watch," Kuns said.

President Donald Trump, he said, is "a con, a grifter and reality TV star" who spent the past few weeks telling people to come to Washington, D.C. on Jan. 6.

Montrose County Republican Party Chairman Ray Langston condemned the violence, and said Trump had not incited it. Langston said the president and his backers have legitimate concerns about the integrity of the November election.

"It was extremely disappointing to see what took place. I understand the frustration. I'm as frustrated as anyone with how (the election) turned out, but to have that take place ..." Langston said.

He said he knows people who attended what began as a march, which he also said had begun as a peaceful protest by those with questions about the handling of the election.

Langston pointed to states that had changed rules to allow for mail-in voting because of the pandemic, but which had not implemented those changes through state legislative action as their laws required and so, he said, their results should not have been certified.

“That (having questions) does not excuse violence. We wholeheartedly condemn people storming the Capitol building,” Langston said. He also called on people to reserve judgment about responsibility until the facts came out.

The people who breached the Capitol were “not central to the Republican party,” Langston said.

Footage from Wednesday shows people in Trump gear; with Trump flags, Confederate flags and other banners approaching the Capitol steps.

Some of the people began breaking in through windows and one, identified in published reports by her family as Ashli Babbitt, 35, was shot by police as she came through. She later died, as did three others, from medical emergencies during the time of the melee. On Thursday, Capitol Police Officer Brian Sicknick died from injuries sustained Wednesday.

The Capitol Police chief is said to be resigning in the wake of the Wednesday clashes, the aftermath of which included heavy criticism for a sluggish response to people breaching the Capitol.

Following the riot, Trump has begun shedding key administration members, including Transportation Secretary Elaine Chao, Special Envoy for Northern Ireland/former Trump Chief of Staff Mick Mulvaney and Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos.

Security footage also showed some rioters parading through the building and into offices as Capitol police struggled to control the situation. The vice president, who had been acting in his ceremonial capacity to certify Biden’s win, was evacuated as lawmakers huddled on floors until they, too, were taken to a safer location.

Colorado’s 3rd Congressional District representative, Lauren Boebert, said in a statement that she and her staff were safe and had been taken to an undisclosed location.

“I support peaceful protests and the rule of law, and denounce all acts of violence,” the Rifle Republican said, also thanking the Capitol police.

Boebert’s office did not immediately respond to requests for an additional interview.

According to Colorado Politics, prior to the chaos Wednesday, Boebert spoke against certifying Arizona’s votes for Biden, in floor remarks saying the a court ruling had changed voter registration deadlines there in a manner inconsistent with Arizona law. According to that report, Boebert also referred to constituents then waiting outside of the Capitol and said she had an obligation to object on their behalf.

Prior to the violence, a Twitter account in her name also posted a Tweet reading “Today is 1776.”

Colorado Rep. Doug Lamborn also objected to certifying Biden's votes. Fellow Republican Rep. Ken Buck, however, issued a joint statement with Democratic Gov. Jared Polis.

"In America, we hold free, fair, and secure elections and we honor the outcome. We respect the rule of law and an assault on our democratic republic is an assault on all of us who believe in our Constitution and what makes our country extraordinary. We respect the peaceful transition of power," the men said.

"... We are relieved that Colorado's federal delegation is safe. We all must step up to protect the institutions of our republic, free and fair elections, and the rule of law."

Colorado Attorney General Phil Weiser also characterized the riot an assault on democracy and called for accountability.

"Today's events remind us that our democratic republic is only as strong as our commitment to it. All of us must recommit ourselves to justice, to civility, to decency, and to the sacred values that have guided our nation for more than 240 years," Weiser said in a statement.

Wednesday was "one of the darkest in our history," U.S. Sen. Michael Bennet, D-Colorado said in a statement.

"Reckless incitement by President Trump has ended in a violent, unprecedented breach of the United States Capitol by his supporters. It was an assault on our democracy and our commitments to pluralism, the rule of law, and the peaceful transition of power," Bennet said.

Trump on Wednesday asked supporters to go home, telling them "we love you, you're very special."

On Thursday, national media reported a shift in his tone. "America is and must always be a nation of law and order; the demonstrators who infiltrated the Capitol have defiled the seat of American democracy," the president said. "To those who engaged in acts of violence and destruction, you do not represent our country. And to those who broke the law, you will pay."

Biden on Wednesday called the conduct an "unprecedented assault" on democracy and on the people's representatives, Capitol police and other public servants, as well as an assault on the rule of law.

"The scenes of chaos at the Capitol do not reflect the true America, do not represent who we are. What we are seeing is a small number of extremists dedicated to lawlessness," Biden said.

"This is not dissent. It is disorder. It is chaos. It borders on sedition. And it must end. Now. ... It's not protest. It's insurrection."

People from both parties in Congress have floated the idea of having Vice President Mike Pence invoke the 25th Amendment to remove Trump from office; others, including Speaker Nancy Pelosi, have suggested a second impeachment, although Trump hasn't quite two weeks left in office.

Langston rejected the notion that Trump had incited the violence and said attempting to remove the president at this stage would provoke a civil war.

"He has legitimate concerns. He believes he was robbed of due process during this election. I believe that also," Langston said, criticizing the media for aggressively covering Trump, but not reporting stories about Biden's son, Hunter, and allegations that Joe Biden was being paid by foreign governments. The Bidens have denied the allegations as being part of a disinformation campaign. Hunter Biden in December disclosed that his taxes were being investigated.

"They need to pump the damn brakes on this (talk of removal) right now, or they're going to start a civil war in this country. You attack (Trump) now and things will get out of control," Langston said.

"... I want the violence to end. Trump has already said he will cooperate with a peaceful transition of power. Leave it alone. People are very upset right now and you need to just let things calm down."

Kuns said Trump merits removal from office and that he should also be charged with sedition or treason.

"There's no excuse for what happened in our United States Capitol. Not only should Trump be held accountable, so should Sen. (Ted) Cruz and Sen. (Josh) Hawley ... for inciting sedition and insurrection," Kuns said.

The two senators led Senate efforts to object to certifying Biden's electoral win, initially attracting the support of about 10 others in that body. However, rules require objections to be in writing and, for each state where there is an objection, at least one House and one Senate member's signature. In the end, only the Pennsylvania challenge was debated, as challenges for other states failed to clear the bar for debate.

The two chambers exhausted the two-hour time limit for the debates and, after 2 a.m. Mountain Time Thursday, completed the certification process.

The riot was indefensible, Kuns said.

"To see people supporting this or making excuses, come on," he said.

“If it was Black Lives Matter, they wouldn’t have even gotten close to the U.S. Capitol, but those guys are walking in, smiling, laughing and taking property. In my lifetime, there are only three things I can think of that will live in infamy — the assassination of JFK, Sept. 11, 2001, and Jan. 6, 2021.

“How do we fix this? How are we going to change this country? This was a terrorist attack, armed, domestic terrorist. We’ve now become a third world country under the reign of Trump. Yesterday (Wednesday) it was in full view on every network, radio and TV station in the world. I was embarrassed for our country and sad.”

Langston said he sees hypocrisy on the part of those who defend the Black Lives Matter protests last year, some of which ended in violence and property damage in major cities. Although people have the right to protest, Democratic politicians fanned the flames last year, he said, adding no one has the right to burn, loot, and harm others.

“What about the Democrats inciting those issues?” Langston said, criticizing the media for what he sees as skewed coverage that holds Republican accountable but gives Democrats a pass.

He attributed the turn Wednesday to bad actors among peaceful protesters and reiterated he does not condone attacking the Capitol.

Langston lamented the deaths Wednesday and urged people to calm down and accept results. He also said people should listen when others raise issues with election integrity.

“When people raise legitimate concerns with our voting process, don’t dismiss it,” he said.

Kuns said Black Lives Matter protests do not compare with what happened Wednesday in D.C., although he also said he does not condone violence and crime at any kind of protest.

“This was an orchestrated takeover of our government. That is a far cry from a Black Lives Matter march,” Kuns said. “To me, that (comparison) is just trying to justify what you watched yesterday because your team was the one doing this.”

Kuns also said complaints of widespread fraud and irregularities amount to conspiracy theories, plus multiple rounds of litigation over the election have seen both Republican and Democratic judges reject the suits. Langston spoke of more than 70 million people who voted for Trump and their need to be heard, but Kuns noted more than 80 million other people had voted for Biden.

All had audits and some held recounts when requested; few instances of fraud were uncovered, he said.

Kuns and Langston called for finding a degree of common ground.

Because of persistent, divisive rhetoric, people don't truly listen to others, but resort to labels, Kuns said.

"I don't think the whole country needs to be Democratic. My biggest concern is for Americans right now, because the president has found the best way for him to succeed is to have people blame each other," Kuns said. People need to stop reacting to one another based on preconceived notions, he added.

"We need to find some common ground and everyone needs to be represented," said Langston, who also pointed to three other elections in which Democrats had objected to certifying the Electoral College votes. The rhetoric flying around makes it hard to find unity, he said.

People across the political spectrum need to talk to one another, not just listen, Langston said. Kuns did not disagree, but said if people are not willing to listen, conversations fall on deaf ears.