



CAPITOL, SYMBOL OF DEMOCRACY, OFF-LIMITS ON INDEPENDENCE DAY

Posted on July 4, 2021 by Lisa Mascaro | AP Congressional Correspondent



As it has been for nearly 16 months, longer than any time in the nation's history, the U.S. Capitol is closed to most public visitors.

The one-two punch of the coronavirus pandemic that shuttered the Capitol's doors in the spring of 2020 and the deadly insurrection by then-President Donald Trump's supporters on Jan. 6 has left the icon of American democracy unopen to all but a select few.

As the rest of the nation emerges this July Fourth holiday from the pandemic for cookouts and fireworks that President Joe Biden is encouraging from the White House, the people's house faces new threats of violence, virus variants and a more difficult moment.

"What is heartbreaking about it is that the Capitol has been forever our symbol of democracy — enduring through the Civil War, through world wars, through strife of all kinds," said Jane L. Campbell, president and CEO of the United States Capitol Historical Society.

Congressional leaders are working intensely to try to resume public tours at the Capitol in some form, but any reopening probably will come with new protocols for health and safety for the millions of annual visitors, 535 lawmakers and thousands of staff and crew that work under the dome and its surrounding campus.

In the House, lawmakers have been operating under a proxy voting system that has allowed them to avoid travel to Washington, though most now vote in person. The smaller Senate is mostly back to in-person business. Both chambers conduct some committee operations remotely.

The security fencing surrounding the Capitol is about to come down, a gesture toward normalcy. A \$1.9 billion emergency spending package to bolster security for the complex was approved by the House, but the Senate is objecting to the increased money.

The conversations in public and private over how to safely reopen are shifting as dangerous coronavirus strains emerge and federal law enforcement officials issue new warnings about about the potential for violence from right-wing extremist groups and those who believe in conspiracies.

White nationalists and other far-right groups loyal to Trump stormed the Capitol on Jan. 6, and were among those trying to overturn Biden's victory. Authorities have been tracking chatter online about groups of people potentially returning to Washington as part of an unfounded and baseless conspiracy theory that Trump would be reinstated in August, according to two officials familiar with the matter who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive law enforcement information.

"I want people to feel proud that they can come to the Capitol, and they can talk about its rich history," said Rep. Bennie Thompson, D-

Miss., chairman of the Homeland Security Committee and now chairman of a new select panel that will investigate the riot.

"We shouldn't ever think about visiting the Capitol and wondering if it's safe," he said.



Lawmakers have struggled over the past year with their own mixed emotions over the shuttered doors, wary of returning to the Capitol when a segment of their colleagues, mainly Republicans, refuse to be vaccinated against the coronavirus. Two elected officials have died of COVID-19 complications.

While many lawmakers say they are saddened by the black-metal security fencing, and all it represents, some also view it as a necessary deterrent after having fled to safety from the pro-Trump rioters.

But the quieted hallways now create their own unease, representing all that is being lost. A lawmaker's children played in the empty Rotunda one recent evening, a reminder of the absence of school groups, tourists and other visitors who typically crowd the summer season to see democracy in action or petition their government.

Congress provides the most direct link between Americans, and their federal government, the representative democracy the founders envisioned. Some 2.5 million people used to visit the Capitol each year and 12 million to the surrounding grounds, according to a House aide. Public tours of the White House tours also remain closed.

"I miss the visitors," said Rep. Jan Schakowsky, D-Ill., who said she had escorted some people to the House gallery last week only to find that it closed to onlookers who used to be able to watch some of the day's legislative session.

"I always find it inspiring that so many people want to come here," she said.

The Capitol has endured crises before. The public galleries were shut down for about a month during the 1918 pandemic. The grounds were closed for a few months after the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. The public was also unable to visit in 1968 during unrest after the assassination of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. Security was reconsidered at different points, including after shootings on lawmakers and bombings at the building.

But not since the end of the War of 1812, when the British invaded in 1814, has the seat of American democracy seen an attack like the one this year.

Trump's supporters fought the police, broke through barricades and stormed the halls, threatening to harm former then-Vice President Mike Pence and other leaders and lawmakers as the mob tried to stop Congress from certifying the states' election results for Biden.

All told, five people died stemming from the events, including a Trump supporter shot by police, three people who suffered medical emergencies and a police officer who died later. Two police officers later took their own lives. Hundreds of people have been arrested.

Illinois Rep. Rodney Davis, the top Republican on the House Administration Committee, sent House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., a letter signed by some 135 other Republican lawmakers calling for a plan to fully reopen.

"There is no reason for the Capitol to be closed," Davis said in an interview.

He said those involved in the siege should be prosecuted, but it's time for the House to end proxy voting and resume regular operations. "We've got to get back to doing what the people sent us here to do," he said.

A senior Democratic aide, who was not authorized to discuss the matter publicly and spoke on condition of anonymity, said tours have not resumed for both pandemic and security reasons. The House and Senate Sergeants-at-Arms are continually reviewing the situation in consultation with Office of Attending Physician, the aide said.

The Capitol complex is open to official business visitors with limits on the numbers allowed. Most are asked to sign in and provide background information.



"The Capitol has now being closed for the longest stretch in its 228 years history," said Campbell of the historical society.

"What I would say to all of us is that it's important for Congress to come together around safety," she said. "People ought to be able to work together around that."

Associated Press writer Michael Balsamo contributed to this report.