

House Select Committee plans open televised hearings on January 6 attack

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In a series of television appearances Sunday, the senior Democrat and Republican on the House Select Committee investigating the January 6, 2021 attack on the Capitol confirmed that open, televised hearings on the attempted coup would be held within “months, if not weeks,” and that there was substantial evidence of the personal involvement of then President Donald Trump in the attack.

Committee Chair Bennie Thompson (D-Mississippi) and Vice Chair Liz Cheney (R-Wyoming) appeared on several Sunday morning television interview programs. These programs focused on the upcoming anniversary of the violent attack by Trump supporters seeking to block congressional certification of Trump’s defeat in the 2020 presidential election and allow him to remain in office as a president-dictator.

The “Meet the Press” program on NBC was entirely devoted to January 6, and began with a lengthy and biting video depiction of the preparation and carrying out of the insurrection and Trump’s central role in it. The narrative by host Chuck Todd was unusually explicit (for the American media) in describing the attack as “a violent effort to overturn a free and fair election,” in support of “unconstitutional legal strategies to declare President Trump re-elected” that were devised by Trump’s own political advisers and aides.

The attack was not merely an explosion of violence among Trump supporters summoned to a rally outside the White House Todd said, but the result of “post-election planning by anti-democratic forces at the highest level—up to and including the then sitting president of the United States—to overturn the election and subvert the will of the American people.”

Todd then retraced the events from the November 3, 2020 election, won handily by Democratic candidate Joe Biden, through January 6, 2021, the date set by law for Congress to certify the result of the Electoral College vote, won by Biden by a margin of 306 to 232.

Representative Thompson discussed Trump’s own conduct on January 6, including “187 minutes” during which he watched his supporters storm the Capitol and rampage through the halls, calling out death threats against Vice President Mike Pence, who had declined to block certification, admitting that he had no authority to do so, and searching for House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and other leading Democrats.

According to Thompson, the committee had received documents and testimony from “individuals who made calls trying to get

some semblance of response out of the White House. But for that 187 minutes, nothing happened … the president was told, ‘You need to say directly to your people to go home. Leave the Capitol.’ And so it took over 187 minutes to make that simple statement. Something’s wrong with that.”

Trump made several video appeals that were not broadcast, before the one made public that grudgingly urged his supporters to leave the Capitol, while declaring his solidarity with them. Thompson said the unused video takes were in the possession of the National Archives and are among the documents that Trump has sought to withhold.

Last week Trump filed an appeal with the Supreme Court, after lower courts turned down his bogus claim of “executive privilege.” President Biden has waived executive privilege for all documents relating to January 6, and Trump, as an ex-president, has no authority to invoke it against that determination by the current president.

Both Thompson and Cheney appeared on ABC’s “This Week” program, hosted by George Stephanopoulos. Asked what his greatest concern was from the evidence collected by the committee, Thompson replied that the January 6 attack “appeared to be a coordinated effort on the part of a number of people to undermine the election of November …” He added, “it could be people in the executive branch. It could be people in the Department of Defense, some state characters, some nonprofits, and some very wealthy individuals who wanted to try to finance this undermining of our democracy.”

Cheney focused on Trump’s failure to call off the attack for three hours, while, according to his own aides, he was glued to the television watching the violence unfold. “We know, as you know well, that the briefing room at the White House is just a mere few steps from the Oval Office,” she said. “The president could have at any moment, walked those very few steps into the briefing room, gone on live television, and told his supporters who were assaulting the Capitol to stop.

“He could have told them to stand down. He could have told them to go home—and he failed to do so. It’s hard to imagine a more significant and more serious dereliction of duty than that.”

When Stephanopoulos asked whether this constituted criminal negligence, Cheney replied that she and Thompson agreed that there were “potential criminal statutes at issue here,” and that Congress might have to legislate to increase the penalties for such negligence.

She continued, “I think it’s also important for the American people to understand how dangerous Donald Trump was. We know as he was sitting there in the dining room next to the Oval Office, members of his staff were pleading with him to go on television, to tell people to stop...

“Any man who would not do so, any man who would provoke a violent assault on the Capitol to stop the counting of electoral votes, any man who would watch television as police officers were being beaten, as his supporters were invading the Capitol of the United States, is clearly unfit for future office, clearly can never be anywhere near the Oval Office ever again.”

Cheney has been far more explicit about the ongoing threat to democracy from a Trump-dominated Republican Party than any figure in the Democratic Party. This includes Biden, most importantly, who constantly appeals for bipartisan cooperation from his “Republican colleagues,” even while they pay homage to the ex-president who denies Biden’s own legitimacy and plots to return to the White House through a 2024 election rigged by state Republican Party attacks on voting rights, if not sooner.

Thompson also appeared on the CNN program “State of the Union,” while Cheney was interviewed on “Face the Nation” on CBS. The two committee leaders thus spoke on four of the five Sunday morning programs, excepting only the pro-Trump Fox News.

Thompson told CNN that Trump was seeking to block the committee from seeing initial tapes of a January 6 video in which he addressed his supporters inside the Capitol. He said he believed the courts would uphold the committee’s right to have access to tapes showing “the president of the United States seeing the Capitol of the United States under siege by people he sent to the Capitol and did nothing during that time.”

While the purpose of the committee was not to conduct a criminal investigation, he continued, if they did uncover evidence “we will make the referral” to the Department of Justice.

Thompson gave more details of the upcoming public hearings, saying, “we will look at some of those state and local election officials who, as you know, are charged with conducting the elections to determine whether or not the elections were fraudulent, whether or not they determined that fraud occurred. We will also talk to some government officials, some who actually said to this administration, we can find nothing wrong with the elections.

“As you know, there were some people in the Department of Justice who said to former President Trump that, if you politicize the Department of Justice, we’re not going to leave, because that’s not who we are. So, we will look at that and we will talk again to individuals who came to Washington under various circumstances. But we will tell the story. We will talk to the National Guard people who, as you note, sat for over three hours ready to come help the Capitol Police and Metropolitan Police defend the Capitol, but they were not authorized to go.”

He said this evidence would show “what happened on that day wasn’t a comedy of errors, but a planned, coordinated effort.”

Cheney, appearing on CBS, reiterated her characterization of Trump as an ongoing threat to democracy. “This is a man who has demonstrated that he’s at war with the rule of law. He’s

demonstrated that he’s willing to blow through every guardrail of democracy. And he can never be anywhere near the Oval Office again. He’s demonstrated a complete lack of fitness for office.”

The remarks of Thompson and Cheney suggest that the public hearings—assuming they actually come to pass—could produce significant revelations about the role of Trump himself and his closest aides, as well as Pentagon officials like then acting Secretary of Defense Christopher Miller in the events of January 6.

But no action will be taken, either by the Democratic-controlled Congress or the Biden administration, to punish these top-level conspirators or block the ongoing threat of further fascist attacks on democracy and constitutional rights.

The Biden White House has already intervened to bar committee access to several hundred documents of the Trump White House, citing national security grounds, and Thompson, Cheney and other members of the committee have accepted this. In his television appearances Sunday, Thompson sought to avoid questions about whether Republican members of Congress had directly assisted the rioters attacking the Capitol and whether those who refused to testify before the committee voluntarily would be subpoenaed.

Neither Thompson, nor Cheney, nor their media interviewers seemed interested in pursuing such issues as the degree of high-level military cooperation with the attack on the Capitol, through the deliberate withholding of National Guard troops who were loaded onto buses and ready to go.

In one suggestive exchange on CNN, Maryland Governor Larry Hogan, a Republican who had offered National Guard troops to defend the Capitol as soon as the violence began, was asked whether he had been asked to provide evidence and information to the January 6 committee.

He replied, “Interestingly, I have not heard from the committee.”

Hogan sent Maryland State Police as soon as he could, but had no authority to send the National Guard across state lines without a request from the Pentagon. Army Secretary Ryan McCarthy did not respond to a request for approval for two and a half hours, during which the rioters were rampaging through the Capitol hunting for members of Congress.



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