

Capitol Defenders Honored With Congressional Gold Medals

August 6, 2021 **by Dan McCue**



President Joe Biden delivers remarks honoring those who defended the U.S. Capitol during the Jan. 6 Capitol Hill riot. (Photo by Dan McCue)

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden on Thursday signed into law a bill that honors the Capitol Police, Washington’s Metropolitan Police Department and other law enforcement agencies with Congressional Gold Medals for protecting lawmakers from the pro-Trump insurrectionists who stormed the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6.

“Not even during the Civil War did insurrectionists breach the Capitol of the United States of America, the citadel of our democracy — not even then. But on Jan. 6, 2021, they did,” Biden said during a ceremony in the White House Rose Garden.

“A mob of extremists and terrorists launched a violent and deadly assault on the people’s House and the sacred ritual to certify a free and fair election,” he continued solemnly.

“It wasn’t dissent. It wasn’t a debate. It wasn’t democracy,” Biden said. “It was an insurrection. It was a riot and mayhem. It was radical and chaotic. And it was unconstitutional. And maybe most important, it was fundamentally un-American — an existential threat and a test of whether our democracy could survive, whether it could overcome lies and overcome the fury of a few who were seeking to thwart the will of the many.”

Biden said while the attack shocked and saddened the nation, democracy survived precisely “because of the women and men of the U.S. Capitol Police, the Washington D.C. Metropolitan Police Department, and other law enforcement officials whom we honor today.”

A family member of a fallen officer looks on
as President Biden signs the gold medal bill
into law. (Photo by Dan McCue)

“To all of them, on behalf of a grateful nation, thank you, thank you, thank you for protecting our Capitol. Maybe even more importantly, for protecting our Constitution and saving the lives of duly elected members of the Senate and the House and their staffs,” the president said.

Vice President Kamala Harris recalled that, still days away from the inauguration, she was at the Capitol early on the morning of Jan. 6 for a classified meeting on national security with fellow members of the Senate Intelligence Committee.

“Not long after I left, the chaos began,” she said. “My husband, [watching television], was absolutely shocked as our Capitol was under siege, and like the people within it, was afraid for their lives.”

She also recalled how, hours after the attack, as members of Congress reconvened to certify the results of the 2020 election the same law enforcement officers were still on duty, continuing to secure the Capitol.

“Let’s never forget that and let us always remember their courage,” she said.

“These officers are heroes,” Harris added. “And these officers are patriots. And they deserve, today and every day, this honor. Our nation is grateful for your service.”

The gold medals are provided to individuals or institutions as Congress’ “highest expression of national appreciation for

distinguished achievements and contributions,” according to the [website](#) of the House historian.

Four medals will be displayed: one in the Capitol Police headquarters, one in Metropolitan Police Department headquarters, one in the Capitol and one in the Smithsonian Institution. Plaques will be installed in the Smithsonian and the Capitol that list all law enforcement agencies that participated in protecting the Capitol on Jan. 6.

President Biden greets police officers and their families after the bill signing ceremony.

(Photo by Dan McCue)

Past recipients of the honor include George Washington, Rosa Parks and the Navajo Code Talkers of World War II.

The measure passed the House in June, with 21 Republicans voting against bestowing the honor to law enforcement. Earlier this week, the Senate passed that same legislation without any opposition — by unanimous consent.

Several officers endured horrific beatings by pro-Trump rioters during the Capitol attack. The president noted that more than 140 combined Capitol and metropolitan police officers were injured.

Several officers recently told their individual stories to the Jan. 6 select committee that is now investigating the riot and the events that led to it. Most were in attendance in the Rose Garden Thursday afternoon.

Among them, Metropolitan Police Officer Daniel Hodges, who said one rioter told him he was going to “die on [his] knees.”

Another was Capitol Police Officer Harry Dunn, a giant of a man, who told the committee he was called a racial slur by a woman in a pink MAGA shirt, and the crowd around him took up the slur and repeatedly hurled it in his direction.

He told the committee he still goes to therapy and participates in peer support groups.

He wasn't the only one to bear the emotional scars of that day.

To date, four officers have died by suicide since the insurrection: MPD Officers Gunther Hashida, Kyle DeFreytag and Jeffrey Smith and Capitol Police Officer Howard Liebengood.

“For anyone out there facing trauma, for anyone still struggling, please know there is help available,” Biden said.

Since the insurrection, several Republicans have tried to recast the events of Jan. 6., most recently House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy who said last week that the siege was House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's fault.

“On Jan. 6 these brave officers were put into a vulnerable and impossible position because the leadership at the top failed,” he told reporters outside the Capitol.

Other Republican members of Congress have also sought to recast the narrative surrounding the events of Jan. 6.

Rep. Andrew Clyde of Georgia, for instance, one of 21 House Republicans who voted against awarding the gold medals to the officers, has compared the rioters to tourists during a heated argument with Rep. Jamie Raskin, D.Md.

“Watching the TV footage of those who entered the Capitol and walked through Statuary Hall showed people in an orderly fashion, staying between the stanchions and ropes taking videos and pictures. You know, if you didn’t know the TV footage was a video from Jan. 6, you would actually think it was a normal tourist visit,” Clyde said.

Later, he said, “I stand by that exact statement as I said it.”

On Thursday, Biden said, “the tragedy of [Jan. 6] deserves the truth above all else.”

“We cannot allow history to be rewritten. We cannot allow the heroism of these officers to be forgotten,” he said. “We have to understand what happened — the honest and unvarnished truth. We have to face it. That’s what great nations do, and we are a great nation.”

Among those in attendance at the Rose Garden event were the family members of Capitol Police Officer Brian Sicknick, who died shortly after the insurrection, and Capitol Police Officer William “Billy” Evans, who died on April 2 after an assailant slammed a car into him and another Officer, Kenny Shaver.

“We can’t allow the heroism of these officers to be forgotten,” Biden said.

