GUEST ESSAY

How Jan. 6 Might Look in 2086

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This article is part of a collection on the events of Jan. 6, one year later. Read more in a note from Times Opinion's politics editor Ezekiel Kweku in our Opinion Today newsletter.

The year is 2086. At an unveiling ceremony in the United States Capitol's Statuary Hall, visitors listen to august speeches about a dark day, long ago, when patriots fought to defend democracy. The crowd breaks into applause as the cloth covering the new statue falls away. Marble megaphone aloft, headdress and horns gleaming, the QAnon shaman of Jan. 6, 2021, takes his place among the heroes of American history.

If it seems far-fetched that a notorious insurgent could be given such a place of honor, the past begs to differ. When the Confederate president, Jefferson Davis, was imprisoned after the Civil War (rumored to be dressed at the time of his arrest in his own outlandish costume), he was more reviled and mocked than any Capitol rioter, and his crimes far more serious. His statue joined George Washington's in the Capitol 65 years later.

As curators at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, we are regularly confronted by hard physical evidence of just how slippery the past can be. Materials brought in by curators long ago take on unanticipated meanings. Objects that we've collected, which seem almost to speak for themselves when we catalog them, may find totally different use behind glass decades from now.

It is chilling, but not impossible, to envision the signs screaming "Stop the steal!" picked up on the garbage-strewn National Mall on Jan. 7, 2021, treated one day as patriotic treasures, displayed alongside the writing desk Thomas Jefferson used to draft the Declaration of Independence or the inkwell Abraham Lincoln dipped into to compose the Emancipation Proclamation.

When the mob first breached the halls of Congress, the bewilderment on their faces indicated that many had not planned to storm into history. And yet, as their allies have worked over the past year to minimize the assault, many of us have looked toward the future, hoping for some clarity on our chaotic era. When all is finally known, we tell ourselves, there will be no disputing who was responsible for this singular attack on the workings of our democracy. Their names will live in infamy. History, we want to believe, will judge them harshly.

History, however, may have other plans. Contrary to the mantra, it has no right or wrong side. A generation after secession, the renowned historian James Ford Rhodes declared "the judgment of posterity is made up: It was an unrighteous cause which the South defended by arms," at the very moment that statues of Confederate generals were being placed on pedestals throughout the nation. Rhodes was wrong not in his reading of the Confederacy but in his faith in "the judgment of posterity."

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Judging, it turns out, isn't history's strong suit. Notions of justice change radically over time, and they are not the reason we collect, preserve or display objects from the past. To curators and historians, the evolving meaning of our objects is far more fascinating than whom they label as unrighteous. The collections of the Smithsonian contain, for instance, pikes from John Brown's failed slave rebellion in the South in 1859. At different moments since then, his pikes have symbolized a demented terrorist's scheme for mass murder, a religious fanatic's fiery crusade and a hero's lonely struggle for justice.

President Andrew Jackson's dueling pistols — once proof of the aggressive populism of a fighter honored in Democratic banquets and the names of generations of boys — now could not be displayed without mention of the ethnic cleansing of Native Americans for which he often fought.

Moments that outwardly resemble Jan. 6, involving both violent mobs and their powerful enablers, have proved particularly ripe for revision, following a familiar pattern of normalization and valorization. When gangs of anti-Catholic bigots rampaged through a convent in Charlestown, Mass., before burning it to the ground in 1834, it was among the

most explosive flare-ups of the 19th century's rampant nativism. Yet in the wake of the attack, no less a figure than the telegraph developer (and vocal immigration opponent) Samuel Morse sounded eerily like recent apologists defending the so-called political prisoners of Jan. 6. "I know of no one who justifies the illegal violence," he opined, "but I unhesitatingly say, that the feeling of indignation which animated the populace, was a just and proper feeling."

Nothing in our past, no matter how blatant it may seem to us today, is guaranteed eternal condemnation. Even bloody antidemocratic coups can find their monuments. In the aftermath of the 1872 Louisiana governor's election, won by a multiracial Republican coalition 56 to 43 percent, the losing white supremacist Democrats launched two uprisings, murdered policemen, warred with federal troops in the streets of New Orleans and even captured the former Confederate Gen. James Longstreet (then fighting against the coup). An obelisk commemorating the second of those insurrections went up in New Orleans 18 years after the shooting stopped and came down only in 2017.

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Of course, our immediate future may shape the distant memory of Jan. 6. The elections in 2022 and 2024 will help determine whether the big lie becomes the official truth. Already a significant segment of the population has embraced fictions about the Capitol attack. In a national poll recently released by the University of Massachusetts, more than 30 percent of respondents said they do not accept the legitimacy of President Biden's 2020 victory, and 25 percent opposed investigating those who sought to overturn the election.

Our recent reckoning with American history has shown the indelible impact of staid forms of institutional power, like dedicating monuments, inscribing plaques and holding hearings. Enshrining rioters as heroes could be done fairly quietly. Those living in a bubble of fake news have shown their willingness to also fake history. After the 1776 Commission and state-level bans on teaching about America's racist past, we should be ready to see the whitewashing of Jan. 6 as well.

History also shows that unknowable politics of the distant future will color the memory of Jan. 6. Like latter-day rebels who have embraced the Confederate flag as a hazy symbol of Southern heritage, white supremacy and general misanthropy, Jan. 6 could be honored by people who share little more than the desire to offend. Or a national reconciliation, after our age of division is finally over, might lead Americans to both-sides this history into meaninglessness, displaying riot shields from far-right terrorists and liberal counterprotesters side by side in museums as moral equivalents.

And no matter who wins the history wars of the future, the horrific attack on the Capitol will likely bore schoolkids one day, quizzed on Bunker Hill, the Compromise of 1850, the Battle of the Bulge and Jan. 6, whatever that was. Our trauma will be their homework.

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There's no controlling what the future will say about us. Generations just keep coming, re-evaluating old heroes and asking new questions. Children present at the unveiling of the Capitol's shaman statue in 2086 (should that or other mind-boggling commemorations come to pass) could grow up to challenge their parents' narratives about Jan. 6. Maybe

the Smithsonian's objects from the day — the dusty suit of a congressman who helped clean up the Capitol after the attack, the badges worn by National Guard members who protected Washington in the aftermath, the signs with religious and political slogans rioters used to justify violence — will help guide those young people to a reading of the past that is based on evidence.

We cannot know; we have no ownership over what is to come. The best we can do is map our moment scrupulously, to preserve the signposts that will lead to a place we'll never see.

As curators, as historians, as citizens, we are frequently reminded that the past is a foreign country. But so is the future.

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