

'A Betrayal, a Mockery': Police Express Outrage Over Trump's Jan. 6 Pardons

More than 150 officers from the Capitol Police and the D.C. police were injured when a pro-Trump mob stormed the Capitol four years ago.



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Reporting from Washington

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When inmates are released from federal prison, the Justice Department places a call to their victims, notifying them that the defendant who attacked them is now free. On Tuesday, the phones of U.S. Capitol Police and D.C. police officers were buzzing nonstop.

For Aquilino A. Gonell, a former Capitol Police sergeant, the automated calls began on Monday evening and continued into Tuesday morning after President Trump issued a sweeping legal reprieve to all of the nearly 1,600 defendants, including those convicted of violent crimes, in the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the Capitol.

Between 7:03 a.m. and 9:37 a.m., Mr. Gonell received nine calls from the Justice Department about the release of inmates.

Mr. Gonell, who was assaulted during the attack and retired because of the injuries he suffered, was as outraged and distraught as he was shortly after the violence.

“It’s a miscarriage of justice, a betrayal, a mockery, and a desecration of the men and women that risked their lives defending our democracy,” he said of the nearly 1,600 pardons and 14 commutations.

More than 150 police officers from the two agencies were injured during the assault on the Capitol by a pro-Trump mob four years ago. Some were hit in the head with baseball bats, flagpoles and pipes. One lost consciousness after rioters used a metal barrier to push her down as they marched to the building.

Now many of those officers described themselves as struggling and depressed in response to Mr. Trump freeing their attackers.

In the days and weeks after the riot, several police officers at the Capitol on Jan. 6 died, including Officer Brian D. Sicknick of the Capitol Police, who was attacked by the mob, suffered a stroke and died of natural causes on Jan. 7. Officers Jeffrey Smith of Washington's Metropolitan Police Department and Howard S. Liebengood of the Capitol Police died by suicide in the days after the violence.

Craig Sicknick, the older brother of Brian Sicknick, has dedicated an area of his house to his brother, putting up a portrait and displaying the pocket-size military medallions known as challenge coins and other mementos on a table.

"I think about my brother almost every day," Mr. Sicknick said. "He spent his life trying to do the right thing. He did it while he was in the military. He did it as a police officer. He did it in his personal life."

The pardons, Mr. Sicknick said, leave him heartbroken that there will be no accountability for those who stormed the Capitol.

"We almost lost democracy that day," he said of Jan. 6. "Today, I honestly think we did lose democracy."

On Capitol Hill on Tuesday, there were few condemnations of the pardons from Republican senators, even those who have spoken out against the violence. And those who did speak out often used the occasion to condemn pardons issued by both former President Joseph R. Biden Jr. and Mr. Trump.

Senator John Thune, the South Dakota Republican and majority leader, sidestepped questions on Tuesday about whether Mr. Trump acted properly in pardoning the rioters.

“We’re looking at the future, not the past,” said Mr. Thune, who called the pardons “the president’s decision.” He added, “We know the presidential pardon authority was expanded in a massive way by President Biden, and obviously we knew all along President Trump can exercise it like most presidents have, and he did.”

Still, some of the officers who were victims that day are pledging to fight on.

“For anyone who cares about truth and respect for law and law enforcement, his pardons are an unspeakable outrage,” said Patrick A. Malone, a lawyer for seven officers who sued Mr. Trump over the attack.

“The officers I represent will not forget!” Mr. Malone said.

Harry Dunn, one of the most outspoken officers who protected the Capitol on Jan. 6, spent Monday and Tuesday checking in with his former colleagues.

“Everybody’s angry and sad and devastated,” said Mr. Dunn, who has left the Capitol Police.

One officer, Mr. Dunn said, went to bed after a long shift only to be awakened by an automated voice mail from victim services informing him of the release of a Jan. 6 defendant.

“Every officer who testified in court is now getting these automated calls that, ‘Hey this defendant is being released,’” Mr. Dunn said. “The number of calls people are getting, it’s unbelievable.”

Mr. Dunn himself said he is feeling a mix of emotions, including frustration and resignation.

“It’s mind-blowing to me that everybody is now surprised and up in arms about it,” he said, adding that Mr. Trump “said he was going to do it, and what me and the other officers were doing speaking out was getting people to realize what was coming.”

He added: “I get so many messages, ‘Harry, you’re a hero.’ I don’t want to be a hero. I want accountability.”

Carl Hulse contributed reporting.

Luke Broadwater covers Congress with a focus on congressional investigations. More about Luke Broadwater

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