

**TITLE: Former Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta on Jan. 6: “the worst thing I've seen in my over 50 years of public life”**

Former Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta called the January 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol the “worst thing” he has seen in more than 50 years of public life in a press conference covering threats to democracy on Tuesday.

On January 6, 2021, a mob of supporters of former President Donald Trump attacked the U.S. Capitol Building. The violence disrupted the joint session of Congress convened to certify the results of the presidential election, which Trump claimed was [stolen](#). The event resulted in the [deaths](#) of several police officers and members of the crowd.

Panetta called the day of violence a “wake-up call,” and said that American democracy remains “very fragile.”

If the mob had killed then-Vice President Mike Pence that day, or stopped the electoral votes from being counted, “our democracy would have come to an end,” he said.

Panetta also commented on Trump’s role in the violence. He said Trump refused to follow the law, and “basically inspired the mob” to attack the Capitol.

In 2024, Trump’s current claims that his recent New York trial was “rigged” are also undermining American democracy, Panetta said.

On May 31, the day after being found guilty of 34 felony counts of falsifying business records, Trump delivered [remarks](#) at Trump Tower stating that he was innocent, and that the trial was “done by Biden and his people.”

While individuals have the right to disagree with decisions made by institutions like the Supreme Court or the President, Panetta said, attacking the credibility of institutions like the courts, is attacking democracy.

“And when someone attacks those institutions, and tries to destroy their credibility in many ways,” Panetta said, “what they're doing is undermining the very elements of our democracy that are essential to making sure that we are protected for the future.”

Panetta also noted challenges to democracy abroad, listing conflicts involving Russia and Ukraine, China and Taiwan and Israel and Hamas.

“It’s a dangerous world we live in,” he said. “There are more flashpoints in the world today than we think since World War II.”

Still, Panetta said he sees the potential for a “democracy in renaissance” in the 21st century, noting his excitement about technological developments by young people in Silicon Valley. “I’ve

never seen the amount of creativity and genius that's here and developing new technology for the future," he said.

Panetta founded The Panetta Institute for Public Policy alongside his wife Sylvia Panetta to inspire young people's interest in public service. He said he believes in the potential for governing across party lines.

"I really believe that Republicans and Democrats can learn to work together in order to govern this democracy of ours," he said.

But if bipartisan efforts fail, Panetta said he fears a "democracy in decline."

"If we allow our division and our hate and our fears to basically control the future, we will go the way past empires," he said.