

Timeline of the coup: How Trump tried to weaponize the Justice Department to overturn the 2020 election

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A full year after the 2020 presidential election, new details are still emerging about former President Donald Trump's unprecedented effort to overturn the results.

Many of Trump's actions were done in public view, including dozens of ill-fated lawsuits and tweets that undermined the electoral process. But congressional inquiries and news reports have shed new light on what happened behind the scenes as Trump tried to cling to power.

Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of Trump's attempted coup was how he relentlessly tried to weaponize the Justice Department to nullify President Joe Biden's victory. The Democratic-run Senate Judiciary Committee investigated Trump's conduct and concluded in a recent report that he "grossly abused the power of the presidency." "Big-picture summary of the coup attempt

Four days after Election Day, CNN and other news outlets projected that Biden had won. Instead of conceding, Trump immediately started pressuring local, state and federal officials to overturn the results. Many of these officials rebuffed his demands, concluding they were unethical, illegal or unconstitutional. But some officials and advisers joined the charge and tried to help.

Within weeks, Trump met with and spoke to officials from Michigan and Pennsylvania who were involved in the election process, hoping they'd block Biden's victory. He fired a senior cybersecurity official at the Department of Homeland Security who publicly debunked his lies about voter fraud. And he cranked up the pressure on the Justice Department, even after Attorney General Bill Barr ordered prosecutors to investigate voter fraud allegations.

He tried -- but failed -- to stop certification in key states in late November and December. After that, Trump and his allies filed meritless lawsuits across the country seeking to nullify the results.

Trump called Pennsylvania lawmakers, urging them to ignore the fact that Biden won their state and appoint GOP electors instead. He called Georgia's governor and pushed him to convince state lawmakers there to do the same. These efforts also fell flat, and members of the Electoral College met on December 14, 2020, to officially affirm Biden's victory.

Running out of time before the transfer of power, Trump became increasingly desperate and even entertained a suggestion to declare martial law. In a now-infamous call on January 2, 2021, Trump pleaded with Georgia's top election official to "find" enough Republican votes to overtake Biden's margin. (This phone call is now at the center of a criminal investigation by state prosecutors in Atlanta.)

Trump and his allies repeatedly urged top Justice Department officials to help them overturn the results -- and Trump nearly fired the acting attorney general who refused to do his bidding.

Trump also mounted a private and public effort to pressure Vice President Mike Pence into unconstitutionally nullifying Biden's win while presiding over the Electoral College process.

The coup attempt reached a horrifying crescendo on January 6, 2021, when Trump held a massive rally near the White House and incited thousands of supporters to attack the Capitol while lawmakers were certifying the Electoral College results. The insurrection was quelled, but it led to five deaths and 140 police officers were injured. Biden was inaugurated two weeks later. CNN and other news networks project that Biden will win the 2020 presidential election.

November 9

- Breaking from long-standing Justice Department policy, Barr issues a directive giving federal prosecutors more leeway to ramp up voter fraud investigations. The move is controversial because -- for decades -- the Justice Department would wait until elections were certified before taking overt investigative steps, to avoid the appearance of trying to influence the results. The top election crimes prosecutor resigns in protest, and other prosecutors denounce Barr's order.

November 19

- Trump attorneys Rudy Giuliani and Sidney Powell hold a bizarre news conference filled with lies about fraud and unhinged talk of a worldwide conspiracy to rig the election. Powell says, "A full-scale criminal investigation needs to be undertaken immediately by the Department of Justice."

Rudy Giuliani, attorney for President Donald Trump, conducts a news conference at the Republican National Committee on lawsuits regarding the outcome of the 2020 presidential election on Thursday, November 19, 2020.

November 29

- In an interview with Fox News, Trump says it's "inconceivable" that the Justice Department and FBI aren't doing more to investigate his voter fraud allegations. "Where are they?" he asks.

December 1

- Barr tells The Associated Press in a bombshell interview that the Justice Department didn't find widespread fraud. After the story is published, Trump confronts Barr in the White House. According to a book by Washington Post reporters Carol Leonnig and Philip Rucker, an "explosive and crazed" Trump berates Barr for publicly admitting that there wasn't widespread fraud. Barr tells Trump his campaign lawyers are a "clown show" and that his fraud claims are "complete nonsense."

December 10

- Trump retweets a post from a Republican congressman who said Trump should order Barr to appoint a special prosecutor to "investigate irregularities in the 2020 election."

December 14

- Trump's assistant sends Deputy Attorney General Jeff Rosen a document about alleged irregularities in Michigan and says it's "from POTUS," according to emails released by the Senate Judiciary Committee. Later that day, while the Electoral College meets in state capitals, Trump announces that Barr will resign and Rosen will soon replace him in an acting capacity. CNN reported that Trump seriously considered firing Barr, but Barr decided to quit.

Jeffrey Rosen, deputy attorney general, speaks during a news conference at the Department of Justice (DOJ) in Washington, D.C.

December 15

- Trump summons Rosen to the Oval Office and pressures him to take action regarding supposed irregularities in Pennsylvania, Michigan and Georgia, according to Rosen's testimony to the Senate. Trump also urges Rosen to file legal briefs supporting GOP-backed election lawsuits and to appoint a special counsel to hunt for fraud, according to The New York Times. Rosen refuses to do Trump's bidding.

December 18

- After failing to persuade Rosen, Trump turns to some of the most extreme members of his coterie, including Powell and retired Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn. (Powell represented Flynn in his criminal case for lying to the FBI about his Russian contacts. That case ended when Trump pardoned Flynn a few weeks before the White House meeting.) CNN reported that Flynn and Powell push Trump to consider declaring martial law or signing executive orders to seize voting equipment. Trump also thought about circumventing the Justice Department and naming Powell as a special counsel within the White House to investigate bizarre vote-rigging conspiracies.

December 21

- Trump falsely claims -- yet again -- that he won "in a landslide" and says "we need backing from the Justice Department" to uncover the supposed fraud and keep him in power.

December 23

- Barr officially resigns, and Rosen becomes acting attorney general.

Shortly before December 24

- Trump meets with Jeffrey Clark, the acting assistant attorney general for the Civil Division, who later will play a key role in the effort to use the Justice Department to keep Trump in power.

December 24

- In a phone call, Trump tells Rosen to "make sure the (Justice) Department is really looking into" voter fraud claims in Pennsylvania and Arizona, according to Rosen's testimony to the Senate.

December 26

- In a series of tweets, Trump bashes the Justice Department and the FBI for having "done nothing" about supposed voter fraud. He says "history will remember" their inaction and promotes his upcoming rally in DC on January 6, when Congress will affirm the Electoral College results.

December 27

- Trump continues pleading with Rosen to intervene in the election. In a phone call, Trump tells Rosen and his deputy Richard Donoghue that they should "just say that the election was corrupt" and "leave the rest to me and the (GOP) congressmen," according to Donoghue's contemporaneous notes, which he later provided to the House Oversight Committee. Rosen informs Trump that the voter fraud allegations are unfounded and that the Justice Department "can't, and won't, just flip a switch and change the election." After that, Trump mentions that he's thinking about getting rid of Rosen and putting Clark in charge of the Justice Department.
- At Trump's request, GOP Rep. Scott Perry of Pennsylvania later calls Donoghue and says the Justice Department isn't doing enough about the election, according to the Senate report. Perry was one of the most vocal promoters of the "big lie" that the 2020 election was stolen.

Richard Donoghue served as acting Deputy Attorney General for the critical transition period between the Trump and Biden administrations. He witnessed some of Trump's efforts to pressure the Justice Department to help him stay in power.

December 28

- Trump calls Donoghue for a brief follow-up about his voter fraud claims, per the Senate report.
- Clark circulates a draft letter among Justice Department leadership that he wants to send to officials in Georgia. The letter would've done exactly what Trump wanted: It says prosecutors found "significant concerns" with the election results and urges the Republican governor to "immediately call a special session" of the state legislature to appoint pro-Trump electors. Clark calls this a "proof of concept" that could be replicated in other states Trump lost.
- Rosen and Donoghue refuse to sign the letter and it is never sent. In an email, Donoghue bluntly tells Clark that "there is no chance that I would sign this letter or anything remotely like this."
- The Senate Judiciary Committee report concluded that "Clark's proposal to wield DOJ's power to override the already-certified popular vote reflected a stunning distortion of DOJ's authority."
- Separately, Trump meets with a supportive attorney, Kurt Olsen. Trump directs Olsen to get in touch with top Justice Department officials about filing a lawsuit that would nullify the results from several key states that Biden won, according to emails released by the Senate Judiciary Committee. Olsen later has a phone call with Rosen's chief of staff about the potential suit.
- According to internal emails made public in the Senate report, Clark starts promoting pro-Trump conspiracy theories within the Justice Department, including the absurd claim that Chinese spies used thermometers to tamper with US voting machines.

December 29

- Trump's assistant sends a draft lawsuit to Rosen, saying Trump wants him to review it, according to emails released by the Senate Judiciary Committee. The lawsuit, which was peddled by Olsen,

isn't ever filed. But the draft envisions that the Justice Department would ask the Supreme Court to nullify the results from several battleground states that Biden won.

- White House chief of staff Mark Meadows emails Rosen for the first time about a farfetched and baseless conspiracy theory alleging that Biden supporters at the CIA used Italian satellites to remotely switch votes from Trump to Biden.

December 30

- Meadows emails Rosen and asks him to "have your team look into" several pro-Trump voter fraud theories in Georgia, according to documents released by the Senate Judiciary Committee. Separately, Trump retweets a post about fraud claims in Georgia, and adds, "where is the FBI?"
- Olsen, the pro-Trump attorney, calls Rosen and says Trump wants the Justice Department to "file this brief by noon today," referring to the potential Supreme Court lawsuit. Trump later speaks with Rosen, who tells him that the Justice Department has no legal basis to file the suit.

December 31

- Rosen and Donoghue go to the White House for another meeting with Trump, according to the Senate report. Rosen later testified to the Senate that Trump "seemed unhappy" that the Justice Department still had not "found the fraud." Donoghue later testified that Trump mentioned he was considering firing Rosen and installing Clark as the leader of the Justice Department.

January 1

- In a series of emails over a few days, Meadows encourages Rosen to investigate several voter fraud theories, according to documents released by the Senate Judiciary Committee. Meadows brings up alleged irregularities in Atlanta, and even in New Mexico, which Biden won by 11 points. Rosen takes no action, and Donoghue brushes off Meadows' latest fraud theories as "pure insanity."

January 3

- Rosen and Clark go to the Oval Office for an "Apprentice"-style showdown, according to testimony from top officials. Trump considers firing Rosen and installing Clark as acting attorney general, because Clark is willing to send the letters to Georgia and other battleground states telling them there were "irregularities" with their elections. Trump opens the three-hour meeting by saying, "One thing we know is you, Rosen, aren't going to do anything to overturn the election." CNN previously reported that about a half-dozen senior department officials are prepared to resign in protest if Rosen is deposed, but Rosen survives the meeting.
- Later that night, after the meeting, Trump calls Donoghue to tell him about new fraud claims.

January 4

- The US attorney in Atlanta, Byung Jin "BJay" Pak, abruptly resigns, citing "unforeseen circumstances." According to Pak's testimony to the Senate, Donoghue told him he needed to

quit because Trump was going to fire him. Trump said during the Oval Office showdown a day earlier that he believed Pak was a "never Trumper" and that Pak wasn't doing enough to find fraud. Trump then changes the line of succession to replace Pak with a US attorney who he believes will "do something" about the election, according to the Senate report.

- Separately, Trump meets with Pence in the Oval Office. Also in attendance is right-wing lawyer John Eastman, who pitches Pence on a legally dubious scheme to declare Trump the winner while Pence presides over the counting of the electoral votes, according to a bombshell book from Washington Post journalists Bob Woodward and Robert Costa. (Eastman later told CNN that he sought only to delay certification, not to throw the election to Trump.)

January 6

- Tens of thousands of Trump supporters descend on Washington for a rally. Trump delivers a militant speech and urges his followers to march to the Capitol and "fight like hell" to stop lawmakers, and Pence, from certifying the election results. Thousands of rioters attack the Capitol, breaching the Senate floor. Five people die in the chaos and 140 police officers are hurt. The insurrection is quashed after several hours. Lawmakers certify Biden's victory, Pence ignores Eastman's scheme and follows the Constitution, and Biden becomes President-elect.



Never forget this picture. It represents what Trump will try to do again in 2024.

January 20

- Biden is sworn in as the 46th President on the same stage that rioters had ransacked a few weeks earlier. In his inaugural address, Biden says, "We have learned again that democracy is precious. Democracy is fragile. And at this hour, my friends, democracy has prevailed."