EJOURNAL OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Book Review: Operation Chaos: The Trump Coup Attempt and the Campaign to Erode Democracy, by Kevin James Shay

Angelina Clapp
James Madison University

Author Note

Angelina Clapp, MPA Program and Center for Civic Engagement, James Madison University.

Correspondence concerning this book review should be addressed to Angelina Clapp, MPA Student and Graduate Assistant, Center for Civic Engagement, James Madison University, 820 Madison Drive, MSC 7808, Harrisonburg, VA 22807. Email: clappae@dukes.jmu.edu

Discussed in this review:

Operation Chaos: The Trump Coup Attempt and the Campaign to Erode Democracy. By Kevin James Shay. Random Publishers. December 2021. ISBN 978-1881365587. 296 pages. Paperback, $14.95.

On January 6, 2021, a feat that could not be accomplished by Confederate soldiers during the Civil War was pulled off by an insurrectionist. That day, a man marched through the Capitol building carrying the Confederate battle flag over his shoulder. In an utterly disappointing moment for American history, his photo was captured as he stood in front of two paintings of men who held very different beliefs: Charles Sumner, the abolitionist senator from Massachusetts, and John C. Calhoun, the former vice president who fought for the preservation of the institution of slavery. The hopes, dreams, and ideals of the confederacy stormed the Capitol that day, all because of a U.S. president who could not understand one of the most sacred traditions of American democracy: the peaceful transfer of power. It is difficult to understand how some individuals choose to dismiss this attack on democracy and to ignore or misunderstand election administration processes and election results. *Operation Chaos: The Trump Coup Attempt and the Campaign to Erode Democracy* by Kevin James Shay takes on the question of why some individuals would go so far as to breach the U.S. Capitol in support of a president who seemingly had very little regard for democratic norms, practices, and institutions.

Shay has worked as a journalist for more than four decades, and *Operation Chaos* was one of the first investigative books to examine the January 6, 2021, insurrection. Shay's in-depth analysis includes numerous law enforcement documents, news articles, reports, social media posts, videos, and witness interviews. The author guides readers down a long dark road, showing them how we, as a nation, got to this place, drawing comparisons to other historical events, and he concludes with recommendations about what can be done to restore the guardrails of democracy.

Operation Chaos challenges readers to reframe their thinking about the events of January 6, 2021. Shay argues that while there remains a generally held belief that Trump supporters were the main culprits and should therefore bear most of the blame, the people at the top—President Trump, his aides, and other members of the Republican Party—were the true perpetrators of the insurrection. Shay points out that Trump's ploy to stay in power can be traced as far back as before the 2016 election, when Trump questioned the legitimacy of the election if he were to lose. Through scheming, dirty tricks, coded social media messages, and even overt calls for violence, Donald Trump orchestrated one of the most violent attacks on the American government in centuries.

The book opens on January 6, 2021, when Trump supporters gathered at a rally where they heeded cries from their leader and then marched down Pennsylvania Avenue toward the Capitol, soon transforming from citizens to insurrectionists. How did they get there, and who told them to go? Who told them to fight? These are some of the questions that Shay explores throughout *Operation Chaos*.

Shay places January 6, 2021, in context by describing other coup attempts in American history, though none quite compares. The most notable lesson from past moments of injustice against the government—such as incidents during the Civil War, assassination attempts against presidents, and Richard Nixon's abuse of power—most of the perpetrators were White men who

were not held accountable for their actions. Pardons, immunity, and commuted sentences have been undeservedly gifted to those in power, and these practices continued throughout the Trump era.

Shay lays out the numerous ways Trump and his cronies attempted to sway the 2020 election in their favor, painting a clear picture for readers as the tensions ratcheted up until they boiled over. The normalization of violent rallies, attacks on political opponents, crooked political schemes, and coded social media messages were all tactics used to legitimize the feelings and actions of Trump's supporters while instilling fear. Schemes such as blackmailing Ukraine into releasing information to negatively impact his main political opponent, using Rush Limbaugh's "Operation Chaos" ploy to encourage Republicans to vote in Democratic primaries for the weaker political candidate, and making bogus voter-fraud claims to increase voter suppression during the COVID-19 pandemic. When these tactics proved insufficient, Trump knew he had to do something big. Through the spread of disinformation and blatant lies, he sowed doubt about the outcome of the 2020 U.S. election. As it turned out, that was just enough to make things boil over.

Despite continued doubt surrounding the election, Election Day itself went smoothly, with the real chaos beginning after the polls closed. Shay makes clear that when one tactic for staying in power failed, Trump simply moved on to the next one—and his next move was to work tirelessly, both in the court system and on Twitter, to have the results of the free and fair election thrown out. Failed lawsuits, failed phone calls to state offices, and failed intimidation of Vice President Mike Pence were just some of the tactics Trump will be remembered for during the last months of his presidency. When all else failed, the only option left was his cryptic messaging on Twitter which continued to embolden his supporters in the lead-up to the Stop the Steal Rally.

The plans for the January 6, 2021, rally had been in the works for months prior. On the day Congress would carry out its constitutional duty of certifying the election results, some people believed they could stop that democratic process in its tracks—and even attempt to reverse it to allow Trump to hold onto power. Many of the Trump supporters who showed up that day had a strategic plan in mind. Encouraged and emboldened by their leader for months before, they knew what he expected of them. Shay explains how "Trump had truly made them believe that their election had been stolen and that it was their patriotic duty to fight to steal it back" (p. 167). Some people wore normal street clothes with MAGA hats; others with military-grade vests and gear were more clearly prepared for violent conflict. Once they began marching toward the Capitol building—upon their leader's instructions—Trump and his team retreated, with some even leaving DC altogether, to watch the chaos unfold from a distance. This was the most crucial part of the plan. Acting as his foot soldiers, the insurrectionists stormed the Capitol, beating Capitol police officers bloody in the process. Once in the building, they searched the hallways for members of Congress, many of them shouting to kill anyone they saw and to find Mike Pence and hang him. As Shay notes,

> The decentralized, leaderless system worked to keep most leaders from being prosecuted by law enforcement. They were free to pursue their power-mad goals that were often hidden in patriotic rhetoric. The foot-soldiers, even the most loyal sergeants, were replaceable cogs. The leaders, not so much. (p. 180)

The next step is justice and accountability, Shay notes. Many Americans have moved on with their lives; they have forgotten about Trump, and they have forgotten about one of the most violent attacks on democracy in U.S. history. Shay argues that though foot soldiers should be brought to justice, the ones at the top should be, too. They were the ones who incited the violence, released cryptic messages, and had put this plan in place from the start. He recommends that the legal definition of *incitement* should include cryptic and coded messages, like the ones issued by Trump months before. The January 6th Committee is a good first step toward accountability, but the main outcomes should center on prosecuting planners of the attack.

Shay also includes statements from prominent political figures outlining their recommendations for preventing similar attacks on democracy in the future. Most notable among these solutions are introducing bills that protect voting rights and that would prevent future presidential corruption, creating the January 6th Committee, and even abolishing the Electoral College. These recommendations could have a positive impact on American democracy in general. Some suggestions in the book, like the passage of the For the People Act and the formation of the January 6th Committee, did advance; however, the For the People Act, which would have introduced sweeping election reform, was killed by the Senate. Most of the recommendations in the book would help decrease corruption and make the American political system fairer. For instance, the abolition of the Electoral College would allow for direct elections and eliminate the antiquated tradition—rooted in racism—that has too often awarded the presidency to the candidate with fewer votes.

In *Operation Chaos*, Shay presents readers with the story of January 6th in a way that people most likely have not seen before. He does not just take readers through what occurred that day; he offers a complete timeline of events throughout the Trump presidency, demonstrating how January 6th was allowed to happen. Readers need to see the insurrection as part of a larger plot by a president to completely disrupt American democracy. This was not planned in a day; it was the culmination of more than 4 years of the normalization of corruption, collusion, and plotting. Shay draws comparisons with other moments in American history—moments that most believed would never happen again—and forces readers to see that these events are occurring again, and that true justice and accountability must be enforced to prevent it. Instead of creating another chronological list of events, Shay clearly and convincingly presents the January 6th insurrection in the context of American history and forces readers to grapple with the idea that it is no shock that this happened—could happen again.

Author

Angelina Clapp is the Graduate Assistant for JMU Civic. She is currently pursuing a Master's in Public Administration at JMU and received her bachelor's degree in Political Science from JMU in 2020. She spent the past three years working with the Center and is passionate about civic engagement, education, and electoral administration.