



A searing replay of insurrection, 'The Sixth' should be seen by all

Story by Ty Burr • 1h • 4 min read

At first, you may be wondering why A24, the film distributor known for edgy independent fare, is opting not to release "The Sixth" in theaters and is instead sending it straight to streaming services. Having seen the movie, I think I understand.

This chilling documentary by Andrea Nix Fine and Sean Fine, immersing a viewer in the sounds, sights, sensations and shock of Jan. 6, 2021, is best watched not at a public screening, with a restive and possibly argumentative audience, but at home, attended to with sober concentration and preferably older children or grandchildren by one's side. Civics lessons rarely come this disturbing or this convincing.

The Fines, Oscar-winning documentarians ("Inocente," 2012), have drawn upon an immense trove of news and personal footage to re-create the events of the day-long attempt by Donald Trump supporters to storm the U.S. Capitol building and halt the official tabulation of votes that would certify Joe Biden as the 46th president. Images from news cameras, body cameras, security cameras and cellphones have been cut together by editors Jeff Consiglio and Chrystie Martinez Gouz to create an Argus-eyed mosaic of insurrection. A discreetly ominous score by H. Scott Salinas rumbles beneath the sounds of chaos that build from early morning on the 6th and culminate in the breaching of the police line outside the Capitol by a mob estimated at 10,000 and the invasion of its corridors by 1,200 rioters.

"The Sixth" relies on the stories of six narrators who were there, told directly to the camera and in voice-over. Two officers with the D.C. police, Christina Laury and Daniel Hodges, provide harrowing accounts from the white-hot center of the assault, while their boss, Robert J. Contee III, named acting chief of the D.C. police only four days earlier, gives us the broader vantage point. Rep. Jamie Raskin (D-Md.), who had buried his 25-year-old son, Tommy, the day before, recalls events as he saw them from the House chamber, while Erica Loewe, deputy communications director for then-House Majority Whip James E. Clyburn (D-S.C.), gives us the view from the barricaded congressman's office as the mob pounds on the door. Finally, news photographer Mel D. Cole was in the crowd of Trump supporters as the day progressed from rally to march to riot, and it's through his lens and memories that we come closest to the attackers themselves.

These are the true believers in Trump's Big Lie, and they are terrifying. Mostly male, many of them armed, all of them swollen with self-righteous rage, the rioters are seen as individuals and as a seething, pulsating, unified mass of hate. "It was the crowd that was the weapon," says Officer Hodges, and in the footage of that day, we see that weapon used to crush him and his fellow officers. The police were assaulted with poles, boards, their own batons and bear spray far more harmful than pepper spray. A rioter screams at Hodges to "give me your helmet! I paid for that helmet!" "These people made it clear that they wanted to kill certain members of Congress," the officer tells the filmmakers.

Embedded in the mob, photographer Cole documented D.C. police Officer Michael Fanone being beaten with pipes and attacked with a stun gun; Fanone suffered burns, a heart attack and traumatic brain injury. "I came for war, man," one ebullient rioter tells Cole, who expresses horrified amazement that these were the same people who normally expressed their belief that "blue lives matter." "Not that day," he says.

Questions remain unanswered by the film, and they nag at history. Among them: Why did the Defense Department hold back National Guard troops stationed nearby while the battle raged for four hours and Contee was forced to call in local officers from Virginia, Maryland and New Jersey? With their arrival, the tide of battle turned and, in Cole's words, "It was just weirdly ... over." Loewe recalls being led by police out of the Capitol building and seeing a handcuffed rioter laughing. "It was *funny* to him," she says with disbelief.

By contrast, "The Sixth" documents a singular tragedy in the life of America with an immediacy that makes one grateful for recording technology; it's as though we were privileged to witness the Salem witch trials, the Battle of Gettysburg or the Tulsa race massacre at close secondhand. There should be no sense of celebration in this. "I felt embarrassed for all of us," says Cole, shaking his head. "For all of America." A true patriot watches "The Sixth" with a deep sense of shame that this happened to our country and a deeper determination to never let it happen again.

Unrated. Available May 3 for purchase and May 10 for rent on Apple, Google Play, Prime Video, YouTube and other platforms. Mob violence, language. 111 minutes.

Ty Burr is the author of the movie recommendation newsletter Ty Burr's Watch List at tyburrswatchlist.com.