

A Tale of Two Coups



Forty years ago, I was living in Madrid working on a grant from the Thomas J. Watson Foundation to learn how Spanish theater had changed since Francisco Franco's death. While there I was detained twice—once by the national Civil Guard and a second time by the Madrid police. I hadn't done anything wrong. I was simply singled out, once in a park, once walking the streets of Madrid, and put in a van for questioning.

When on February 23, 1981, the Civil Guard stormed the Parliament in Madrid with their machine guns, I wasn't all that surprised. The rumblings of an impending coup attempt that had been floating for months, combined with my own experience with Spanish law enforcement—baseless detentions—were ominous signs. At 4:23 in the afternoon, during a meeting of the Spanish Parliament to elect a new prime minister, armed members of the Civil Guard burst through the doors of the Congress of Deputies. The leader of the insurrection, Lieutenant-Colonel Antonio Tejero, stormed to the podium, fired bullets into the ceiling, and ordered everyone to the floor. Adolfo Suárez, the former Prime Minister, refused to obey. Calmly, he crossed his arms and remained seated. It is the greatest single act of courage I have ever known. He was not harmed.

By evening, there were tanks in the streets of Valencia. King Juan Carlos announced that he would address the nation at midnight. I assumed his intention was to urge calm, but some of the young men living in my boarding house said otherwise. Juan Carlos was somewhat of a protégé of Franco, they said. Franco had been dead for only a little over five years. Juan Carlos could just as easily side with the Fascist insurgents as the democratically-elected parliament.

My friends were wrong. When the King appeared on TV in full

military regalia, he told the nation, "The Crown, symbol of the nation's permanence and unity, will not tolerate, in any way whatsoever, the actions or behavior of anyone attempting, through use of force, to interrupt the democratic process of the Constitution." Without Juan Carlos' support, the insurgents had no choice but to back down. Although history has suggested that Juan Carlos might not have arrived at his decision by absolute moral clarity, what he said that night stopped a country from returning to a dictatorship from which it had only recently extricated itself.

I thought I had experienced the only coup attempt in my lifetime, but the recent attack on the Capitol Building proved me wrong. The similarities between the two coup attempts are striking: both took place in a divided country with record-high unemployment, both took place during what was supposed to be a peaceful transfer of power, and, sadly, neither was surprising. Unlike what happened in Spain, our national leader did not go on television to save democracy. Instead, he urged his followers on, until they were standing at the podium, ransacking the people's house in an attempt to overturn the people's will.

It would be easy to look at what happened in Spain as a *real* coup attempt. After all, it was the military that tried to usurp power. That's what we're used to seeing in other countries. This would never, we've heard over and over, happen in the United States. Yet if a coup is a sudden action to illegally seize power from a government, I'm hard pressed to see the difference. I'm certainly hard pressed to distinguish between the fear and heartbreak I felt on February 23, 1981 and January 6, 2021.

If you enter the Congress of Deputies today and look at the ceiling, you'll see the bullet holes from the machine guns of the coup attempt. When deciding to repair the building, the Spanish government left that damage intact, always visible to lawmakers, a reminder of how fragile democracy really is. They

are scars that will forever hover over that body. As the United States slowly returns to some sense of normality, I hope we choose not to gloss over the damage Trump and his supporters have caused. Like the Spaniards, we need to be reminded of what happened here. We must always see the scars.