

Outgoing Capitol Police chief: House, Senate security officials hamstrung efforts to call in National Guard

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Two days before Congress was set to formalize President-elect Joe Biden's victory, Capitol Police Chief Steven Sund was growing increasingly worried about the size of the pro-Trump crowds expected to stream into Washington in protest.

To be on the safe side, Sund asked House and Senate security officials for permission to request that the D.C. National Guard be placed on standby in case he needed quick backup.

But, Sund said Sunday, they turned him down.

In his first interview since pro-Trump rioters stormed the U.S. Capitol last week, Sund, who has since resigned his post, said his supervisors were reluctant to take formal steps to put the Guard on call even as police intelligence suggested that the crowd President Trump had invited to Washington to protest his defeat probably would be much larger than earlier demonstrations.

House Sergeant at Arms Paul Irving said he wasn't comfortable with the "optics" of formally declaring an emergency ahead of the demonstration, Sund said. Meanwhile, Senate Sergeant at Arms Michael Stenger suggested that Sund should informally seek out his Guard contacts, asking them to "lean forward" and be on alert in case Capitol Police needed their help.

Irving could not be reached for comment. A cellphone number listed in his name has not accepted messages since Wednesday. Messages left at a residence he owns in Nevada were not immediately returned, and there was no answer Sunday evening at a Watergate apartment listed in his name. A neighbor said he had recently moved out.

Stenger declined Sunday to comment when a reporter visited his Virginia home. "I really don't want to talk about it," he said.

It was the first of six times Sund's request for help was rejected or delayed, he said. Two days later on Wednesday afternoon, his forces already in the midst of crisis, Sund said he pleaded for help five more times as a scene far more dire than he had ever imagined unfolded on the historic Capitol grounds.

An army of 8,000 pro-Trump demonstrators streamed down Pennsylvania Avenue after hearing Trump speak near the White House. Sund's outer perimeter on the Capitol's west side was breached within 15 minutes. With 1,400 Capitol Police officers on duty, his forces were quickly overrun.

"If we would have had the National Guard we could have held them at bay longer, until more officers from our partner

agencies could arrive,” he said.

Just before 2 p.m., the pro-Trump mob entered the Capitol, sending lawmakers and staff scrambling for safety. D.C. police had quickly dispatched hundreds of officers to the scene. But it wasn't enough. At 2:26 p.m., Sund said, he joined a conference call to the Pentagon to plead for additional backup.

“I am making an urgent, urgent immediate request for National Guard assistance,” Sund recalled saying. “I have got to get boots on the ground.”

On the call were several officials from the D.C. government, as well as officials from the Pentagon, including Lt. Gen. Walter E. Piatt, director of the Army Staff. The D.C. contingent was flabbergasted to hear Piatt say that he could not recommend that his boss, Army Secretary Ryan McCarthy, approve the request.

“I don't like the visual of the National Guard standing a police line with the Capitol in the background,” Piatt said, according to Sund and others on the call.

Again and again, Sund said, “The situation is dire,” recalled John Falcicchio, the chief of staff for D.C. Mayor Muriel E. Bowser. “Literally, this guy is on the phone, I mean, crying out for help. It's burned in my memories.”

Pentagon officials have emphasized that the Capitol Police did not ask for D.C. Guard backup ahead of the event or request to put a riot contingency plan in place with guardsmen at the ready, and then made an urgent request as rioters were about to breach the building, even though the Guard isn't set up to be a quick-reaction force like the police.

“We rely on Capitol Police and federal law enforcement to provide an assessment of the situation,” Pentagon spokesman Jonathan Hoffman said during a news conference last week. “And based on that assessment that they had, they believed they had sufficient personnel and did not make a request.”

Despite Sund's pleas, the first National Guard personnel didn't arrive at the Capitol until 5:40 p.m. — after four people had died and the worst was long over.

Sund, 55, offered his resignation the next day, telling friends he felt he had let his officers down. Many lawmakers, infuriated by the breach and angry that they had been unable to reach Sund at the height of the crisis, were only too happy to accept it.

Under pressure from lawmakers, Stenger and Irving also resigned.

In a wide-ranging interview, Sund sought to defend his officers, who, he said, had fought valiantly. And with threats of violence looming ahead of Biden's Jan. 20 inauguration, he said he remains worried.

“My concern is if they don't get their act together with physical security, it's going to happen again,” he said.

As he prepared for last week's demonstrations, Sund drew on decades of experience. Hired as chief in 2019, two years after joining the Capitol Police, he worked for 23 years on the D.C. police force, leaving as commander of the Special Operations Division. Widely respected in the District and among leaders of U.S. Secret Service and Park Police, he had helped to run 12 national security events, including Barack Obama's 2013 inauguration. He also served as incident commander during the 2013 Navy Yard shooting.

Last Monday, Sund said, he began to worry about the Jan. 6 demonstration.

“We knew it would be bigger,” Sund said. “We looked at the intelligence. We knew we would have large crowds, the potential for some violent altercations. I had nothing indicating we would have a large mob seize the Capitol.”

Sure, there were claims that alt-right instigators had discussed storming the building and targeting lawmakers. But Sund said such threats had surfaced in the past.

“You might see rhetoric on social media. We had seen that many times before,” he said. “People say a lot of things online.”

Still, he decided to call Irving and Stenger to ask for permission to request that the National Guard be put on emergency standby. Irving didn’t like the idea, Sund said; he said it would look bad because it would communicate that they presumed an emergency. He said he’d have to ask House leaders.

On the way home that evening, Sund did as Stenger suggested, calling Maj. Gen. William J. Walker, the head of the 1,000-member D.C. National Guard, to tell him that he might call on him for help. “If we can get you leaning forward,” Sund said, “how long do you think it would take to get us assistance?”

Walker said he thought he could send 125 personnel fairly quickly. Over the weekend, Sund had also conferred with D.C. Police Chief Robert J. Contee III, who also had offered to lend a hand if trouble arose.

On Tuesday, Sund said he briefed Irving and Stenger, who said that backup seemed sufficient.

Just before noon Wednesday, Sund was monitoring Trump’s speech to the crowd on the Ellipse when he was called away. There were reports of two pipe bombs near the Capitol grounds. So Sund didn’t hear the president call on protesters to “fight” against lawmakers preparing to confirm Biden’s victory. Nor did he hear Trump’s personal attorney, Rudolph W. Giuliani, urging the crowd to engage in “trial by combat,” an eerie reference to battles to the death in the series, “Game of Thrones.” Sund said he now suspects that the pipe bombs were an intentional effort to draw officers away from the Capitol perimeter.

The first wave of protesters arrived at the Capitol about 12:40 p.m.

“As soon as they hit the fence line, the fight was on,” Sund said. “Violent confrontations from the start. They came with riot helmets, gas masks, shields, pepper spray, fireworks, climbing gear — climbing gear! — explosives, metal pipes, baseball bats. I have never seen anything like it in 30 years of events in Washington.”

Using video footage from the Capitol and radio transmissions from his incident commanders, Sund could see his officers trying to hold the line. But the rioters immediately yanked the barricade fence out of the way and threw it at his officers’ heads.

“I realized at 1 p.m., things aren’t going well,” he said. “I’m watching my people getting slammed.”

Sund immediately called Contee, who sent 100 officers to the scene, with some arriving within 10 minutes. But at 1:09 p.m., Sund said he called Irving and Stenger, telling them it was time to call in the Guard. He wanted an emergency declaration. Both men said they would “run it up the chain” and get back to him, he said.

Minutes later, aides to the top congressional leaders were called to Stenger’s office for an update on the situation — and were infuriated to learn that the sergeants at arms had not yet called in the National Guard or any other reinforcements, as was their responsibility to do without seeking approval from leaders.

“What do you mean that there’s no National Guard, that there’s no reinforcements coming?” aides demanded to know. “Why haven’t you ordered them, why aren’t they already here?”

Sund said he called Irving twice more and Stenger once to check on their progress. At 1:50 p.m. — nine minutes before the Capitol was breached — Sund said he was losing patience. He called Walker to tell him to get ready to bring the Guard. Irving called back with formal approval at 2:10 p.m. By then, plainclothes Capitol Police agents were barricading the door to the Speaker’s Lobby just off the House chamber to keep the marauders from charging in.

Sund finally had approval to call the National Guard. But that would prove to be just the beginning of a bureaucratic nightmare to get soldiers on the scene.

At 2:26 p.m., Sund joined a conference call organized by D.C.’s homeland security director, Chris Rodriguez. Among those on the screen were the District’s police chief, mayor and Walker.

Unlike anywhere else in the country, the D.C. Guard does not report to a governor, but to the president, so Walker patched in the office of the Secretary of the Army, noting that he would need authorization from the Pentagon to order soldiers to the Capitol.

Piatt noted the Pentagon still needed authorization from Capitol Police to step foot on Capitol grounds. Sund ticked through details on the severity of the breach, but the call got noisy with crosstalk as officials asked more questions.

Contee sought to quiet the din. “Wait, wait,” he said, and then directed attention to Sund. “Steve, are you requesting National Guard assistance at the Capitol?”

Sund said he replied: “I am making urgent, urgent, immediate request for National Guard assistance.”

But Piatt, dialed in from across the river at the Pentagon, pushed back, according to Sund, saying he would prefer to have Guard soldiers take up posts around Washington, relieving D.C. police, so that they could respond to the Capitol instead of guardsmen. Sund’s account is supported by four D.C. officials on the call, including Bowser.

Bowser told The Washington Post that Sund had “made it perfectly clear that they needed extraordinary help, including the National Guard. There was some concern from the Army of what it would look like to have armed military personnel on the grounds of the Capitol.”

Falcicchio said that once Contee confirmed that Sund wanted the National Guard, D.C. officials echoed his request.

“Contee was definitely — I hate to use this term, but there’s no other term for it. He was pleading,” Falcicchio said. “He was pleading with them to fulfill the request that Capitol Police was making.”

But the entire discussion was in vain. Only McCarthy, the secretary, could order the Guard deployed — and only with the approval of the Pentagon chief. McCarthy has since said that, at the time of the call, he was busy taking the requests to activate more Guard to acting defense secretary Christopher C. Miller.

At one point, according to a defense official, Contee said, “Let me be clear, are you denying this?” To which Piatt responded that he wasn’t denying the request; he simply didn’t have the authority to approve it.

“It was clear that it was a dire situation,” the defense official said. “He didn’t want to commit to anything without getting approval.”

At 3:45 p.m., Stenger told Sund that he would ask his boss, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.), for help getting the National Guard authorized more quickly. Sund never learned the result. More of Contee’s officers had arrived and were helping remove rioters from the grounds. Capitol Police worked with other federal authorities, including the Secret Service, the Park Police and the FBI, to secure lawmakers, eject rioters and sweep the building so lawmakers could return to finish counting the electoral college votes that would allow them to formally recognize Biden’s victory later that night.

According to a [timeline](#) the Defense Department published Friday, Miller verbally authorized the activation of the entire D.C. Guard at 3:04 p.m. It would take two more hours for most of the citizen soldiers to leave their jobs and homes, and pick up gear from the D.C. Armory.

Sund, who was officially replaced as chief Friday, said he is left feeling that America’s bastions of democracy need far more security. He said the violent crowd that mobbed the Capitol was unlike anything he has ever seen.

“They were extremely dangerous and they were extremely prepared. I have a hard time calling this a demonstration,” he said.

“I’m a firm supporter of First Amendment. This was none of that,” he added. “This was criminal riotous activity.”

Sund blamed Trump for putting his officers at risk, saying “the crowd left that rally and had been incited by some of the words the president said.” Sund said he fears what may come next.

On Sunday, the Capitol’s rolling green lawn was ringed by high black fencing and patrolled by personnel in green camouflage keeping the public at bay.

“This is the people’s house. Congress members have always prided themselves on having an open campus,” Sund said. But now, “I’m not sure that will continue to be defensible.”

Paul Sonne, Julie Zauzmer, Allison Klein, Paul Kane, Alice Crites and Julie Tate contributed to this report.

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