

# Case Study: Coxey's Army Tests Limits on Protest (1894)

## EXPLORE THE DEBATE

Can the government limit protesters' access to the U.S. Capitol, where their elected representatives conduct business?

## THE CASE

The United States is facing a serious economic depression with 18 percent unemployment and businesses failing. President Grover Cleveland remains firm in his belief that the government should not fund social or economic aid programs.

Jacob Coxey, a wealthy Ohio businessman, disagrees and wants the government to fund projects such as road building to hire the unemployed. He announces a plan for his followers, whom he calls the "Industrial Army," to march to Washington to deliver their proposals directly to Congress.

About 500 men eventually arrive in the District of Columbia – far fewer than the 100,000 Coxey had predicted. The group, which becomes known as Coxey's Army, marches to the U.S. Capitol, where Coxey attempts to deliver a speech from the steps. Before he can finish, police remove him and his followers. Police cite an 1882 law that bans giving speeches or carrying signs on the Capitol grounds in order to preserve the "quiet and dignity of the Capitol of the United States."

Coxey is arrested, and the nation debates the tactics of Coxey's Army. Some congressmen and newspaper editorials express gratitude that the peace and order at the Capitol has been preserved. Others rush to defend Coxey's actions as a valid form of petitioning the government.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- Did this gathering interfere with government business?
- Did this gathering harm the dignity of the U.S. Capitol?
- Could Coxey's Army have used other methods to make their point? Besides assembling at the U.S. Capitol, how else can you effectively petition the government?
- Should there be restrictions on assemblies and speeches on the U.S. Capitol grounds? If yes, what restrictions do you support? If no, why not?

## DEBATE POSITIONS

### 1. Jacob Coxey, businessman and leader of the “Industrial Army”

- **Position:** As Americans, we have a right to assemble and petition our elected leaders where they work, especially in the face of a serious economic crisis that is causing many people to suffer.
- **Statement:** “The Constitution gives us the right to [parade on the Capitol grounds], and Congress has no power to pass laws in violation of the Constitution. There is no legal authority on the party of anybody to prevent my making a speech on the steps of the Capitol, and that I propose to do.” (Comment to a reporter from United Press)

### 2. President Grover Cleveland

- **Position:** Marching at the Capitol will not help fix the economy and will not convince me to change my position. It will create a disruption and interfere with important government business.
- **Statement:** “The Constitutional right of petition does not justify methods dangerous to peace and good order, which threaten the quiet of the National Capitol, which are contrary to law and opposed to the ordinary means of obtaining legislative relief under our system of government.” (Proclamation issued by order of President Cleveland, 1894)

### 3. Police Superintendent William G. Moore

- **Position:** This march could be dangerous and will disrupt the routine at the Capitol. The law clearly states that the Capitol grounds should remain peaceful, and it is my job to enforce the law.
- **Statement:** “This act is very stringent. It will serve to prevent the meeting on the steps of the Capitol and its provisions are ample in allowing the police force to deal with loiterers in the Capitol grounds.” (Public announcement prior to Jacob Coxey’s arrival in Washington)

### 4. Sen. William Pepper (Kansas) and Sen. William Allen (Nebraska)

- **Position:** These men have a right to present their ideas to their elected leaders. As members of Congress seeking a solution to our nation’s problems, we should allow them to bring their message to the Capitol and should listen to what they have to say.
- **Statement:** Jacob Coxey and his followers “have a right to enter upon the Capitol grounds and into the Capitol building itself as fully and to as great an extent as other citizens or persons.” Attempts to block them from doing so “would be a clear violation of their constitutional and inalienable right.” (Resolution to Congress on Coxey’s Army)