

# Memory and Martyrdom: The Transmogrification of Ashli Babbitt

Roseann M. Mandziuk\*

*Martyrdom is a rhetorical creation rendered into public memory to uphold a specific world view or agenda. During the U.S. Capitol insurrection on January 6, 2021, Ashli Babbitt, a previously unremarkable and unknown 35-year-old white woman, was killed by a Capitol officer. This essay explores the rhetorical process of transmogrification that was enacted to anoint Babbitt as a radical right martyr. Her martyrdom developed over three acts, first through its articulation by extremist communities, next followed by the wider merchandization and promotion of her martyrdom via public memorializations, conservative media, and Republican members of Congress, and culminated in her appropriation in service of the right's "New Lost Cause" particularly in the rhetoric of Donald Trump. Babbitt's martyrdom was evoked as a powerful symbol promulgated by the right as it sought to transform the public memory of January 6th into a narrative of good patriotic Americans under siege.*

**Keywords:** Ashli Babbitt, Kenneth Burke, martyr, public memory, radical right, rhetorical transmogrification, white supremacy

Martyrdom essentially is a rhetorical creation that is rendered into public memory to uphold a specific movement, world view, or agenda. After the siege of the U.S Capitol on January 6, 2021, Ashli Babbitt, a 35-year-old white woman who previously was unremarkable and unknown, was dead. However, through the process of public memory “when a community of memory glorifies them and elevates them to the national altar,<sup>1</sup> she soon would become the symbolic martyr for multiple causes. Babbitt had traveled to Washington D.C. after having embraced the MAGA vitriol of Donald Trump and ingesting the “Big Lie” that the election was stolen, and she voluntarily joined the attack on the Capitol that followed the rally held by Trump that morning. The facts regarding her death are documented by multiple videos and news accounts:<sup>2</sup> Babbitt was killed by an African American Capitol Police officer, later identified as Lieutenant Michael Byrd, as she

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\* Roseann M. Mandziuk is a University Distinguished Professor in the Department of Communication Studies at Texas State University. Her research focuses upon images of women, the rhetorical uses of history, and the construction of public memory. She is co-author *Sojourner Truth: Wit, Story, and Song*, has published essays and book chapters examining historical and contemporary rhetoric, and served as editor of *Women's Studies in Communication*. A recipient of two Fulbright Scholar Awards, in India and in Poland, she also is a past President of the Southern States Communication Association and the current President of the National Communication Association. Her contributions have been recognized with regional and national professional association awards including the Michael M. Osborn Teacher-Scholar Award and the Francine Merritt Award for Contributions to Women in Communication.

<sup>1</sup> Jesús Casquete, “Martyr Construction and the Politics of Death in National Socialism,” *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 10, no. 3-4 (2009): 265.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Brandy Zadrozny and Mosheh Gains, “Woman Killed in Capitol Was Trump Supporter Who Embraced Conspiracy Theories,” *NBC News*, January 7, 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/woman-killed-capitol-was-trump-supporter-who-embraced-conspiracy-theories-n1253285>; Tom Driesbach and Eric Westervelt, “Authorities Identify Woman Killed by Police During Capitol Rioting,” *NPR*, January 7, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/sections/insurrection-at-the-capitol/2021/01/07/954446008/authorities-identify-woman-killed-by-police-during-u-s-capitol-rioting>.

attempted to climb through the broken window of a door that, if breached, would have removed one of the last barriers between the rioters and the members of Congress sheltered in the hallway beyond. Although she clearly was complicit in the insurrection, the rhetorical rendering of Babbitt's death into martyrdom was initiated almost immediately afterward.

Babbitt's martyrdom clearly exemplifies the dual political realities at play in the national discourse, as her elevation into public memory specifically was upon the altar venerated by the radical right and Trump loyalists. Babbitt was a willing and enthusiastic participant in the Capitol riot, but in the months following her death she was transformed into a sanctified martyr by far-right extremists and white supremacists, as well as through the rhetoric of multiple MAGA players including Trump, GOP members of Congress, and FOX News personalities. Her death was redefined into an act of sacrifice and patriotism, with narratives of the "slaughter" of this "innocent" woman inspiring rap lyrics, flags, t-shirts, hashtags, and many other narrative texts. Babbitt's transformation into a potent symbol for the extremists, supremacists, and Trumpites required a sustained discursive campaign to promulgate this martyred memorialization, one that began immediately after her death and still continues into the denunciations by these groups of the U. S. House Select Committee's January 6<sup>th</sup> hearings in 2022 and in Trump's public statements. Indeed, the rendering of Babbitt into a martyr has been key to how the right seeks to redefine public memory about January 6<sup>th</sup>.

Babbitt's articulation as a martyr is the product of a rhetorical "transmogrification" process. Martyrs necessarily are created, such that "there are no intrinsically martyrial acts per se, but rather acts that are the product of a certain mnemonic community which, in order to satisfy a need for integration and meaning in the present, retrospectively interprets certain acts as such, ritually institutionalizing and engraving them on a collective memory."<sup>3</sup> Paul Middleton notes that the creation of a martyr forces us to take sides, thereby heightening sectional divides and reinforcing "a group's particular view of the world."<sup>4</sup> Far from simple transformation or alteration, the discursive construction of Babbitt as a symbol of the radical Right's perceived victimage was achieved by fundamentally altering Babbitt from the previously unknown QAnon believer and Trump loyalist into a grotesque, whitewashed figure to be placed at the center of narratives about "New Lost Cause,"<sup>5</sup> a myth that insistently reinforced that the 2020 election had been stolen. In this essay, this rhetorical process of transmogrification and the subsequent memorialization that was enacted to anoint Babbitt as a radical right martyr are explored. First, an analytical framework regarding martyrdom and transmogrification is articulated by examining the extant literature and employing the theoretical insights of Kenneth Burke. Next, this rhetorical process is traced through discursive fragments that defined Babbitt as martyr and appropriated her altered memory in the service of the right's agenda.

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<sup>3</sup> Casquete, "Martyr Construction and the Politics of Death in National Socialism," 265.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Middleton, "What is Martyrdom?" *Mortality* 19, no. 2 (2014): 128. DOI: 10.1080/13576275.2014.894013.

<sup>5</sup> Mychal Denzel Smith, "The Right's New Lost Cause: How January 6 Will Be Remembered by Trump's Supporters," *New York Magazine*, 5 July 2021. See also, Paul Schwartzman and Josh Dawsey, "How Ashli Babbitt Went from Capitol Rioter to Trump-Embraced 'Martyr,'" *Washington Post*, July 30, 2021 for a comparison between the January 6<sup>th</sup> events and the Lost Cause commemorations of the U.S. Civil War.

## Martyrdom and Transmogrification

The concept of martyrdom is rooted in the original meaning of the word as related to the act of being a “witness.”<sup>6</sup> Hence in this traditional religious sense the martyr “suffers enormously and often dies a terrible death because of his [*sic*]absolute faith and total devotion to the transcendental world”<sup>7</sup> which has been revealed. As such, martyrdom “anchors two symbolic aspects: strength and purity.”<sup>8</sup> Martyrs are not born, of course, but only come to be created in the aftermath of circumstances by “martyrologists” who are “neither objective nor ideologically neutral.”<sup>9</sup> Hence, as Jeffry R. Halverson, Scott W. Ruston, and Angela Trethewey observe, “Martyr stories do important ideological work because they provide audience members with a familiar and powerful interpretive frame.”<sup>10</sup> Indeed, as Paul Middleton adroitly observes, “the distinction between a ‘martyr’ and a ‘terrorist’ is the difference between two stories.”<sup>11</sup> Babbitt’s story had to be created through rhetorical means that deemphasized her participation in a violent political riot and instead upheld her patriotic zeal, white femininity, and an account of her violent death as unwarranted.

Babbitt’s martyrdom was articulated after her death, unlike the chosen martyrdom of a religious purist who goes willingly to their death for their beliefs. Previous scholarship emphasizes the significance of the orator, narrator, or eulogist in this rhetorical process of elevating an individual to the status of martyr for a cause, particularly in support of political agendas. For example, in their study of eulogies of Cesar Chavez, Richard J. Jensen, Thomas R. Burkholder, and John C. Hammerback coin the concept of “accidental martyrs” who “through chance and circumstances stumbled upon death” and who “came to be perceived as martyrs not through any desire of their own but rather through the rhetorical efforts of other members of their group or movement.”<sup>12</sup> Melissa Renee Harris and Ashley R. Hall further note that eulogists designate martyrs using both deliberative and epideictic rhetoric, including purification of the character of the individual, identification with the group, and articulation as being worthy of vindication.<sup>13</sup> In his analysis of Wendell Phillips’ eulogy of Elijah Lovejoy, Patrick G. Wheaton underscores this rhetorical move related to values and vindication: “The assumption is that if one is willing to die, or has died, for the sake of the cause, then the enterprise is virtuous or worthy.”<sup>14</sup> Certainly the elevation of Ashli Babbitt as martyr illustrates these rhetorical characteristics. Her death was defined by the right in selective and dramatic ways that collapsed complexities both in her background and regarding the events of January 6<sup>th</sup> to provide a focused rallying point for the radical right and “Big Lie” proponents to exploit.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Eyal J. Naveh, *Crown of Thorns: Political Martyrdom in America From Abraham Lincoln to Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: NYU Press, 1990); Middleton, “What is Martyrdom?” 120.

<sup>7</sup> Naveh, *Crown of Thorns*, 1.

<sup>8</sup> Johanna Sumiala and Lilly Korpiola, “Mediated Muslim Martyrdom: Rethinking Digital Solidarity in the ‘Arab Spring,’” *New Media & Society* 19, no. 1 (2017): 52. DOI: 10.1177/1461444816649918.

<sup>9</sup> Middleton, “What is Martyrdom?” 118.

<sup>10</sup> Jeffry R. Halverson, Scott W. Ruston, and Angela Trethewey, “Mediated Martyrs of the Arab Spring: New Media, Civil Religion, and Narrative in Tunisia and Egypt,” *Journal of Communication* 63 (2013) 327. DOI: 10.1111/jcom.12017

<sup>11</sup> Middleton, “What is Martyrdom?” 128.

<sup>12</sup> Richard J. Jensen, Thomas R. Burkholder, and John C. Hammerback, “Martyrs for a Just Cause: The Eulogies of Cesar Chavez,” *Western Journal of Communication* 67, no. 4, (2003): 337. DOI: 10.1080/10570310309374778.

<sup>13</sup> Melissa Renee Harris and Ashley R. Hall, “‘My Living Shall Not Be in Vain’: The Rhetorical Power of Eulogies in the Face of Civil Unrest,” *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 8, no. 3, (2018): 177-179.

<sup>14</sup> Patrick G. Wheaton, “Abolition, Martyrdom, and Freedom of Expression: Wendell Phillips’ Eulogy of Elijah Lovejoy,” *Free Speech Yearbook* 43 (2006-2009): 129.

In addition to the consideration of the rhetorical creation of political martyrdom through the traditional eulogy form, recent scholarship focuses more specifically on the digital means by which martyrs are promulgated to advance and solidify the bonds of a community. Several studies examine in particular how martyrdom functioned for the 2011 Arab Spring protestors as these narratives and images were circulated via social media by movement advocates, particularly of the Tunisian fruit vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, and the Egyptian computer programmer, Khaled Saeed.<sup>15</sup> In their examination of how the commemorative use of martyred images serves ritual functions, K. Lewis notes that such discourses foster the formation of collective identifications and solidarities in grievance communities, and that “digitally mediated images of victims play a central role in sustaining these connections posthumously,”<sup>16</sup> thereby creating what Halverson, Reston, and Trethewey refer to as “imagined solidarities.”<sup>17</sup> The function of digital images to spatially and temporally bind together a memory community also is noted by Samuel P. Perry and Jeffrey Mark Long in their analysis of how ISIS employs rhetorically constructed martyrdom to “serve important constitutive functions” in order to “grow, maintain, and adapt the constitutive identity of the group online.”<sup>18</sup> Similarly, elevating Babbitt as martyr provides a powerful condensation symbol that can be exploited to unify the right’s memory community.

The employment of martyrs to constitute communal bonds through shared memorialization is a tactic particularly suited to the rhetoric of fascism and the radical right. As Jesús Casquete notes, for National Socialists and the propaganda machine of Goebbels, the exaltation of a fallen martyr demonstrates how it “was infinitely more effective and simple to mobilise [*sic*] the masses by appealing to easily identifiable symbols than to win them over by invoking mythical abstractions.”<sup>19</sup> Casquete describes how the Nazi party elevated Horst Wessel, who actually died at the hands of some renegade Communists during a barroom brawl, into a martyr who had sacrificed his life for their cause. Nazi forces created and sustained Wessel’s martyrdom by holding annual commemorations of his birth, installing busts and statues in his honor, and circulating poems and songs marking his heroism.<sup>20</sup> These simplification and commemoration strategies also serve the radical right in its rhetorical creation of martyrs. In his examination of how the right appropriates memories of the Branch Davidians, Michael Barkun describes how their deaths, which resulted from a fire at the Davidian compound that occurred during a standoff with federal agents, are re-contextualized by the radical right as part of a larger narrative: “For them, the Davidians are martyrs *because* the government killed them.”<sup>21</sup> Significantly, Barkun concludes that “the right has conflated martyrdom with victimization.”<sup>22</sup> Indeed, as Paul Middleton proposes, “martyr stories are often set in a context of war.”<sup>23</sup> In relation to Babbitt’s elevation as a radical right martyr, it is

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<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Halverson, Reston, and Trethewey, “Mediated Martyrs of the Arab Spring”; Sumiala and Korpiola, “Mediated Muslim Martyrdom”; and K. Lewis, “Digitally Mediated Martyrdom: The Role of the Visual in Political Arab Activist Culture,” *Journal of Arab & Muslim Media Research* 12, no. 2 (2019): 169–189, doi: 10.1386/jammr\_00002\_1.

<sup>16</sup> Lewis, “Digitally Mediated Martyrdom,” 172.

<sup>17</sup> Halverson, Reston, and Trethewey, “Mediated Martyrs of the Arab Spring,” 327.

<sup>18</sup> Samuel P. Perry and Jeffrey Mark Long, “‘Why Would Anyone Sell Paradise?’: The Islamic State in Iraq and the Making of a Martyr,” *Southern Communication Journal* 81, no.2 (2016): 6.

<sup>19</sup> Casquete, “Martyr Construction,” 267.

<sup>20</sup> Casquete, “Martyr Construction,” 270.

<sup>21</sup> Michael Barkun, “Appropriated Martyrs: The Branch Davidians and the Radical Right,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 19, no. 1 (2007): 119. DOI: 10.1080.

<sup>22</sup> Barkun, “Appropriated Martyrs,” 121.

<sup>23</sup> Paul Middleton, *Martyrdom: A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2011), 15.

precisely this link to victimage and a larger narrative of American patriots under siege that her narrative serves to verify.

Babbitt's rendering into radical right martyrdom required a rhetorical process of transmogrification, whereby the properties of her background were altered into a different shape and form. Following from the insights of Kenneth Burke about the container and the thing contained, this transformation significantly had to be rooted in the proper scene, such that this scene contained the proper motive. For Burke, "it is a principle of drama that the nature of acts and agents should be consistent with the nature of the scene"<sup>24</sup> and that "there is implicit in the quality of the scene the quality of the action that is to take place within it."<sup>25</sup> For Babbitt's death to be an effective tool of propaganda, her martyrdom had to be construed within a suitable narrative of a war waged against the right, the true upholders of American values. Within this context of war her character then could be defined as pure, and her actions construed as motivated by patriotism of the highest form.

Significantly, the details of Babbitt's background were inconsequential and somewhat problematic in the rhetorical creation of her martyrdom. What mattered much more for the functionality of her as a martyr for the right were the specific circumstances of her death; the rest could be transmogrified by collapsing and whitewashing her image and story to suit various needs. As Burke notes in *A Rhetoric of Motives*, much as narratives have beginnings, "there is also an ultimate of endings whereby the essence of a thing can be derived narratively by its *fulfillment* or *fruition*."<sup>26</sup> For Babbitt to be upheld as a pure and strong martyr for the cause, her dramatic death became a key point of defining her character and motive. Indeed, Burke notes that we "can define the essence of motive narratively or dramatically by showing how that motive *ended*," thereby rendering "the statement of essence in terms of *culminations*."<sup>27</sup> For the radical right and proponents of the "Big Lie", Babbitt's death in the nation's Capitol at the hands of agents of the government therefore exemplified the principle of *entelechy* because her end served as the perfect demonstration of the essence of its claims of victimage, and in turn, rendered her into the perfect martyr. Burke further notes that "the imagery of slaying is a special case of transformation and transformation involves the ideas and imagery of identification"<sup>28</sup> Babbitt's specific martyrdom provided a simple symbol that exemplified the radical right's shared communal values, one that could be promulgated widely and reconfigured to suit.

### Martyrdom in Three Acts

The events of January 6, 2021 have been replayed in the nation's consciousness through dramatic pastiches of raw video footage and partisan commentary, news analysis, and mythical renderings. In order to transmogrify Ashli Babbitt, one of five deaths resulting from the Capitol insurrection, the events of the day had to be depicted in an altered fashion that moved beyond the initial facts to shift the angle of view and causalities in the scene. The first reports to emerge on January 6<sup>th</sup> included a tweet about "shots fired" from Matt Fuller, a reporter for Politico; by 3:30 pm the As-

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<sup>24</sup> Kenneth Burke, "The Container and the Thing Contained," *The Sewanee Review* 53, no. 1 (1945): 58.

<sup>25</sup> Burke, "Container," 62.

<sup>26</sup> Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969, 13.

<sup>27</sup> Burke, *Rhetoric*, 14-15.

<sup>28</sup> Burke, *Rhetoric*, 20.

sociated Press issued a brief statement confirming that one person had been shot, but their condition was unknown,<sup>29</sup> and then by around 4:45 pm notifications circulated confirming that this woman had died.<sup>30</sup> Meanwhile, Larry Brock, an Oath Keepers' member who was among the insurrectionists, also was tweeting about the shooting to his followers on Facebook.<sup>31</sup> Later news accounts identified Babbitt as the victim who was shot by the Capitol officer as she scrambled to go through a broken window in the door that was the last barrier between the rioters and the police protecting the members of Congress who sheltered just beyond it. As the *New York Times* described these events: "At the height of the standoff, a woman named Ashli Babbitt tried to vault through a window. The lieutenant, his weapon already extended, pulled the trigger once, killing her in a confrontation that was captured on video and widely viewed around the world."<sup>32</sup> The extremists and mainstream news media sources recognized that Babbitt's tale was both tragic and dramatic. Although another Trump supporter named Rosanne Boyland also died that day after being trampled by a crowd outside of the Capitol,<sup>33</sup> her narrative did not fit the requirements for a compelling martyr tale that placed innocence and patriotism in the line of fire.

In subsequent days, the details of Babbitt's background as an Air Force veteran emerged, as did accounts of her support for Trump and her swift embrace of conspiracy allegations regarding the stolen election and QAnon's bizarre theories. In her widely reported last tweet from January 5, she echoed the language and imagery of QAnon in expressing her zeal for the Trump rally and its cause: "Nothing will stop us . . . they can try and try and try but the storm is here and it is descending upon DC in less than 24 hours . . . dark to light!"<sup>34</sup> Major news sources quickly reported the details of her life, including her fourteen years of military service, her fledgling swimming pool supply business, and her devotion to Fox News and InfoWars.<sup>35</sup> A *Washington Post* article characterized her personal journey as "one of paranoid devotion and enthusiasm that only increased as Trump's fortunes waned."<sup>36</sup> Babbitt's descent into MAGA delusion hardly seemed extraordinary in such accounts; rather, her personal story provided a cautionary tale about the human toll that the extreme political polarization of the "Big Lie" had wrought.

<sup>29</sup> Heather Morrison, "Woman Shot at US Capitol After Pro-Trump Insurrectionists Storm Building," *MassLive*, January 6, 2021, <https://www.masslive.com/politics/2021/01/person-shot-at-us-capitol-after-pro-trump-protesters-storm-building.html>.

<sup>30</sup> Melissa Hanson, "Woman Shot at U.S. Capitol Has Died, Per Media Reports," *MassLive*, January 6, 2021, <https://www.masslive.com/politics/2021/01/woman-shot-at-us-capitol-has-died-per-media-reports.html>.

<sup>31</sup> Jordan Fischer, Eric Flack, and Stephanie Wilson, "Who Shot Ashli Babbitt? Inside the Effort to Make a January 6 Martyr," *WUSA9*, July 21, 2021, <https://www.wusa9.com/article/news/national/capitol-riots/who-shot-ashli-babbitt-inside-the-effort-to-make-a-january-6-martyr-right-wing-paul-gosar-donald-trump-white-supremacist-anti-semitic-qanon/65-6641f710-99d0-42ba-b657-4c568e132ef1>.

<sup>32</sup> Adam Goldman and Shaila Dewan, "Shouting, Smashed Glass, A Lunge, Then a Gunshot," *New York Times*, January 24, 2021: A1.

<sup>33</sup> Ayman M. Mohyeldin and Preeti Varathan, "Rosanne Boyland Was Outside the U.S. Capitol Last January 6. How—and Why—Did She Die?" *Vanity Fair*, January 5, 2022, <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2022/01/capitol-insurrection-rosanne-boyland-how-and-why-did-she-die>.

<sup>34</sup> Jaclyn Peiser and Justin Jouvenal, "Woman Fatally Shot as Pro-Trump Mob Stormed the Capitol Identified as Air Force Veteran," *Washington Post*, January 6, 2021.

<sup>35</sup> Ellen Barry, Nicholas Bogel-Burroughs, and Dave Phillips, "Woman Killed Storming Capitol Discovered Political Side After Time in Military," *New York Times*, January 8, 2021, A18; Zadrozny and Gains, "Woman Killed in Capitol."

<sup>36</sup> Peter Jamison, Hannah Natanson, John Cox, John Woodrow, and Alex Horton, "The Deadly Path of Ashli Babbitt's Radicalization," *Washington Post*, January 10, 2021, A10.

In contrast, the transmogrification process within the radical right began almost immediately upon the news of Babbitt's death and advanced through three stages of development. Her martyrdom initially was articulated by extremist communities who created tribute images of Babbitt to be shared online and embellished onto material objects like flags and t-shirts. Next, a wider merchandization and promotion of her martyrdom developed through public memorializations, conservative media features, and statements from Republican politicians. The third stage featured her appropriation in service of the New Lost Cause, most particularly in the rhetoric of Donald Trump and his loyalists, as a tactic to refute the House Select Committee hearings regarding the events of January 6th.

### *Act One: Origins*

For Ashli Babbitt to be fully elevated as a martyr for the radical right, the rhetorical transformation of the scene into a fitting container for her death had to be accomplished. As previously noted, how the scene is construed in turn rhetorically defines the things contained within. For radical right extremists, the fitting context was that of revolution, such that those within it can be depicted as acting in concert with the demands defined by a battle against their oppressors. Almost immediately, even before Babbitt's identity had been released, the radical right forces who had fueled the insurrection placed her death within this larger scene of patriots who rose up to reclaim their rights.<sup>37</sup> For example, Larry Brock, the Texas Oath Keepers participant in the insurrection, wrote on Facebook: "Trying to find the name of a woman that was gunned down by Capitol Police today . . . She was unarmed and is the first Patriot Martyr in the Second American Revolution."<sup>38</sup> Brock's designation of the Capitol siege as an "American Revolution" enthymematically defined both the cause and the actions, a characterization that was echoed in a later post on January 6<sup>th</sup> from another Oath Keeper in a private platform called rocket.chat: "We need to find out who the LEO Red Coat was today who murdered Ashli Babbitt [*sic*] and arrest that bum and execute him."<sup>39</sup> By drawing upon the familiar meanings associated with the American Revolution as a defense of liberty, the insurrectionists become noble and admirable citizens rather than rioters.

Within this radical right depiction of a revolutionary scene that provided the motivation for its participants, the subsequent depictions of Babbitt's martyrdom were easily articulated. Particularly for anti-government extremists, "Babbitt became a patriot who was fighting against government tyranny in order to free the American people when she was executed by government agents."<sup>40</sup> By emphasizing how her death was not just a casualty of the scene, but rather a deliberate act of slaying perpetrated by government aggressors, the symbol of Babbitt could be used as rhetorical grounds for identification by extremist groups. Her martyrdom was even more powerful when her image and memory were employed in statements that emphasized her service in the armed forces to evoke additional pathos. For example, in a post made on January 7, insurrectionist Clifford Meeker proclaimed that he had been "right there" and had witnessed "when our honored veteran

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<sup>37</sup> Many of the original social media posts made by extremists in the immediate aftermath of the January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrection unfortunately have since been deleted. This analysis draws upon news sources that reference these original messages.

<sup>38</sup> Larry Brock, quoted in Fischer, Flack, and Wilson, "Who Shot Ashli Babbitt?"

<sup>39</sup> Quoted in Jared Holt, "After the Insurrection" How Domestic Extremists Adapted and Evolved After the January 6 U.S. Capitol Attack," *The Atlantic Council*, January 4, 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/After-the-Insurrection.pdf>

<sup>40</sup> Fischer, Flack, and Wilson, "Who Shot Ashli Babbitt?"

was viciously assassinated.”<sup>41</sup> The fact that Babbitt’s service was not “honored” or otherwise distinctive is a detail that is confounded in such statements in favor of highlighting her ostensible heroism in these extremist accounts. Babbitt’s story was told quite differently in the left-leaning press, which frequently highlighted her fealty to QAnon and her quick descent into the dark hole of conspiracy theories and Trumpism.<sup>42</sup>

To visually illustrate her narrative of sacrifice, only a few days after the insurrection Babbitt’s image appeared on a flag that was widely circulated after it was featured on several extremist sites. The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) noted in a January 15 blog post that “since the creation of the image, some Telegram users have changed their profile to include the flag; the flier for the January 20, 2021 ‘Million Martyr March’ also includes the image.”<sup>43</sup> Two similar flags were circulated, both with black backgrounds upon which a white illustration of a long-haired woman’s head appears in front of the white Capitol dome, with a drop of red blood on her neck. In one, there are four white stars surrounding the dome, which the ADL interprets as representing the four insurrections who died, and this flag’s imagery notably evokes “the imagery of the KKK and the color scheme of fascist symbols.”<sup>44</sup> The other version circulated on the Telegram platform retains the four stars, and also depicts red flames burning behind the Capitol dome which has a Star of David on it, adds a gold circle and highlights around the woman’s image, and places the word “vengeance” in a white gothic font below. Both flags highlight the sacrifice specifically of a female victim of government aggression, while the second flag also connects the January 6<sup>th</sup> actions to antisemitic theories about government control.<sup>45</sup> The notion of “vengeance” powerfully establishes Babbitt’s death as the reason for future actions that would punish the government that slayed her, as expressed by a post on Parler that exclaimed, “Your blood will not be in vain, we will avenge you.”<sup>46</sup> In the first few days following the insurrection, her name also was added to the extremist anti-government Boogaloo movement’s “igloo” flag<sup>47</sup> that denotes martyrs who had been lost, including Vicki and Samuel Weaver, the wife and son of white supremacist Randy Weaver who had been killed at Ruby Ridge, Idaho during the extremists’ confrontation with U.S Marshals and the FBI in 1992.

Indeed, Babbitt’s martyrdom emphatically was promoted by white supremacists who quickly understood that as a white female her death not only provided “a symbol of white resistance”<sup>48</sup> but also, as ADL investigative researcher Alex Friedfeld notes, served as “evidence of a white genocide.”<sup>49</sup> Especially when grouped with Vicki Weaver, the death of white women at the hands of government, especially those still of child-bearing age, provides proof that the white race is under siege by a government collaborating with those seeking to replace it. The white supremacist National Partisan Movement made the link between Babbitt and their cause explicit in a post on the Telegram channel that featured a color photograph of her, resplendent in a red MAGA hat, entitled

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in Matthew A. Loh, “Capitol Rioter Who Pleaded Guilty This Week Compared January 6 to a ‘Modern-day Boston Massacre’ and Said Ashli Babbitt Was ‘Viciously Assassinated,’” *Business Insider*, Jan 17, 2022, <https://news.yahoo.com/capitol-rioter-pleaded-guilty-week-043152350.html>.

<sup>42</sup> See, for example, Vera Bergengruen, “‘Our First Martyr’: How Ashli Babbitt is Being Turned Into a Far Right Recruiting Tool,” *Time*, January 10, 2021, <https://time.com/5928249/ashli-babbitt-capitol-extremism/>.

<sup>43</sup> “Far Right Extremists Memorialize ‘Martyr’ Ashli Babbitt,” *Anti-Defamation League*, January 15, 2021, <https://www.adl.org/resources/blog/far-right-extremists-memorialize-martyr-ashli-babbitt>.

<sup>44</sup> Bergengruen, “‘Our First Martyr.’”

<sup>45</sup> “Far Right Extremists.”

<sup>46</sup> Bergengruen, “‘Our First.’”

<sup>47</sup> “Far Right Extremists.”

<sup>48</sup> “Far Right Extremists.”

<sup>49</sup> Quoted in Fischer, Flack, and Wilson, “‘Who Shot Ashli Babbitt?’”



“Rest in White Power,”<sup>50</sup> exemplifying how white women’s deaths long have been used to stoke racist anger and fear. As Simon Purdue explains: “The narratives of white feminine ‘purity’ and a violent, oppressive society hell-bent on destroying it has been consistently mobilized by propagandists, recruiters, and leaders to radicalize men towards violence, tapping into the deep-seated hero complex that undergirds far-right masculinities.”<sup>51</sup> These purified images of Babbitt that circulated appealed to extremists’ masculine fantasies of white supremacist vengeance.

Many extremist posts following the January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrection also entreated followers to “say her name,” a direct and provocative cooptation of the Black Lives Matter slogan. For example, the National Partisan Movement’s post that paid tribute to Babbitt included this call: “Ashli Babbitt, say her name. Share this post or make your own about this, we will not be silenced.” On January 7, a Wikipedia search for the phrase even yielded the white supremacists’ appropriation: “#SayHerName is a social movement that seeks to raise awareness for Ashli Babbitt victim of police brutality at the capital and anti-trump violence in the United States.”<sup>52</sup> While the coopting of this hashtag was taken up by other far right commentators, and would continue to be used in rallies and memorials for Babbitt into the spring of 2021, this rhetorical move also spurred a counter reaction from critics of Babbitt’s elevation to martyr who created the hashtag “#SheWasATerrorist” to refute these claims. One of the earliest posts directly challenged the redefinition of the scene rendered by the radical right: “Ashley the terrorist Babbitt died how any terrorist would die while trying to storm a government building ... shot dead.”<sup>53</sup> The #SheWasATerrorist oppositional Twitter site about Babbitt intermittently would remain active through June of 2022.

Within a few short weeks following the January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrection, the narrative establishing Ashli Babbitt as a martyr was being shared widely across extremist websites. Her image and story were used as a recruiting tool by a variety of groups who drew upon it to generate identification and perpetuate her memory as a symbol for their causes. Situated within a scenic definition that portrayed the January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrection as its opposite, Babbitt’s actions could be construed as those of a patriot who was executed by oppressive government forces. An image of her death that visually conveyed this martyrdom, rendered in the expressive brushstrokes and bright colors reminiscent of Eugene Delacroix’s 1830 romanticist painting “Liberty Leading the People,” even appeared on The Donald, an online forum for Trump’s radical base.<sup>54</sup> Babbitt is depicted in blue clothing suggestive of a revolutionary war military uniform, falling slightly backward and to the right as her red cap falls from her head, her long hair unfurling loosely at her shoulders. There is a bright red trail of blood at her neck and an American flag at her feet, while to the left side of the frame there is a single disembodied arm pointing a gun at her. This imagery borrowed from Delacroix dramatically conveys Babbitt’s transmogrification from the unknown woman who was a QAnon believer and Trump loyalist into the mythic martyr who was slaughtered by her government. Additionally, for white supremacists Babbitt’s martyrdom provided a particularly useful symbol to

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<sup>50</sup> “Far Right Extremists.”

<sup>51</sup> Simon Purdue, “The Right is Trying to Make Ashli Babbitt Into a Martyr,” *Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right*, May 24, 2021, <https://www.radicalrightanalysis.com/2021/05/24/the-right-is-trying-to-make-ashli-babbitt-a-martyr/>

<sup>52</sup> Screenshot reproduced in Anne Branigin, “MAGA is Trying to Co-Opt #SayHerName. It’s a ‘Slap in the Face,’ Black Women Say,” *The Lily*, January 8, 2021, <https://www.thelily.com/maga-is-trying-to-co-opt-sayhername-its-a-slap-in-the-face-black-women-say/>.

<sup>53</sup> Gerard Butler, Twitter post, #shewasaterrorist, January 7, 2021, <https://mobile.twitter.com/hashtag/shewasaterrorist?src=hash&f=live>

<sup>54</sup> Purdue, “The Right.”

stoke the fires of white masculinity to action. As Seyward Darby notes, “women are the tools that soften the edges of the far right,”<sup>55</sup> even as their deaths are used to generate racist anger and action.

### *Act Two: Merchandising*

Conspicuously absent from this first act in Babbitt’s transmogrification were voices from the conservative news media and Capitol Hill, but both would make strong entrances and become central forces in advancing Babbitt’s martyr narrative in the second act between February and June of 2021. Following its initial articulation in the first few weeks immediately following the January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrection, in successive months her martyrdom narrative and images circulated more widely across different and more accessible forums that reached beyond the exclusivity of the extremist web. A host of new proponents further transmogrified Babbitt by transforming her martyrdom from potent symbol into lucrative commodity. She became the product that could be used to garner audiences for conservative news programs, sell commemorative merchandise, and promote political agendas. In this sense, Act Two of her transmogrification provided the necessary foundation for Act Three, when Donald Trump ultimately could appropriate this widely circulating tale of her martyrdom amidst white supremacist fantasies of vengeance.

Significantly, while the establishment of the scene and the counter acts of slaying and patriotism were important to lend rhetorical power to the initial articulation of Babbitt’s martyrdom, the narrative emphasis in this second act featured her purification and elevated the ideograph<sup>56</sup> of <justice>, as well as reinforced these dimensions through a variety of discursive forms including music, news media, and public memorializations. Though no single causal trigger for this subsequent development in Babbitt’s transmogrification into martyrdom can be identified, three events between February 1 and April 6 were significant contributors, spanning from the release of a rap tribute song and video, to the founding of the #JusticeforAshliBabbitt hashtag, to Fox News anchor Tucker Carlson’s three-month anniversary review of the January 6<sup>th</sup> events. Once the additional themes were circulating, Babbitt’s merchandized martyrdom spread quickly via conservative news outlets, public commemorations, and the soapboxes of the right’s Congressional celebrities.

As extremist groups continued to employ Babbitt as the symbol of their perceived victimage, with sites like the Western Chauvinist Telegram channel (formerly Proud Boys: Uncensored) substantially increasing their memberships between January and March 2021,<sup>57</sup> new discourses promoting her martyrdom emerged that bridged these extremists with a wider audience by utilizing forms and outlets more easily consumable. One of the first was a white rap artist name Forgiato Blow, who released an album called “The Mayor of MAGAville, including a tribute song and video about Ashli Babbitt that premiered on YouTube on February 1.<sup>58</sup> Blow, whose real name is Kurt Jantz, is an artist with roots in the south Florida music scene who often claims to be “Trump’s nephew” to promote his music.<sup>59</sup> His video entitled “Ashli Babbitt,” from its opening images set in a cemetery where a line of shiny black Rolls Royce cars slowly drive past the headstones to its

<sup>55</sup> Bergengruen, “Our First.”

<sup>56</sup> As defined by Michael McGee, “An ideograph is an ordinary-language term found in political discourse. It is a high-order abstraction representing collective commitment to a particular but equivocal and ill-defined normative goal.” Michael McGee, “The ‘Ideograph’: A Link Between Rhetoric and Ideology,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 66, no.1 (1980): 15.

<sup>57</sup> Purdue, “The Right.”

<sup>58</sup> Forgiato Blow, “Ashli Babbitt,” YouTube, February 1, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XomRX0309is>.

<sup>59</sup> Tess Owen, “The ‘Mayor of MAGAville’ Is a White Rapper Named Forgiato Blow,” *Vice News*, April 21, 2022, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/88gp4a/maga-rapper-forgiato-blow>.

ending prayer, provides the outlines for a visual rhetoric that would be used successively to commemorate Babbitt's martyrdom.

In the video, attired in a black t-shirt and jeans, Blow steps out of the lead Rolls Royce, a slow-motion shot followed by a quick cut as the rap begins. The subsequent shot depicts him in front of a small crowd of somber white men, women, and children who hold U.S. flags, candles, and signs displaying Babbitt's image and words like "patriot" and "angel" displayed in red, white, and blue lettering. In the lyrics, Blow raps that he was at the Capitol that day and could "see the hate coming down," but that "they can never take our freedom."<sup>60</sup> Later in the video the camera zooms in on a photo of Babbitt, then cuts to Blow delivering the chorus in a sequence that includes a shot of him with his hands in a prayerful pose: "Ashli Babbitt, yeah you know, we hold you in prayer, Ashli Babbitt, yeah, you know your soul's in the air, Ashli Babbitt, yeah, you know true patriots care, left your blood on the battlegrounds, you know life isn't fair." The song then segues into calls to create a patriot's party and to "get Trump elected again." The video ends with a succession of images, including Blow kneeling to lay a black rose on a gravestone and shots of Babbitt's photos interspersed with those of a sign reading "Ashli Babbitt did nothing wrong" while he speaks over the music, "Ashli Babbitt, RIP, God bless you and your family," and a makes a final call to "stand up."<sup>61</sup>

The images and lyrics in Blow's video demonstrate the formula that would be replicated in the further transmogrification of Babbitt: martyr to angel, patriot to saint, and tragedy to <justice>. Both visual and verbal discourses in this second act purified her by foregrounding femininity and familial connections, elevated her innocence to angelic proportions, and insisted that her slaying at the hands of government agents deserved attention and answers. Above all, proponents of Babbitt's martyrdom framed her memory within demands for <justice> and significantly appropriated the ways that this ideograph had been employed by the Black Lives Matter movement and other progressive groups. Early in the days following her death, some users on Telegram referred to Babbitt as "the white man's George Floyd,"<sup>62</sup> founding a comparison that later would dominate many of the calls for investigation and prosecution of the Capitol police officer who shot her. The extremists' call for <justice> for an "innocent" white woman heightened the use of Babbitt as a dog whistle for the radical right and white supremacists in this second phase of her transmogrification, even though it had not yet been confirmed that the officer was African American.

Two weeks after the release of Forгатio Blow's tribute song, the hashtag #JusticeforAshleyBabbitt appeared on February 13 with a first post that announced a memorial walk for Babbitt to be held in her hometown of San Diego, "celebrating the life of an amazing woman." After this initial message, the postings on the site included additional memorial notices, tributes from individuals, and, as the months passed, an increasing number of retweets from Fox News and Newsmax on-air personalities, Judicial Watch, the conservative group that filed suit against the Department of Justice in attempt to gain access to the 14,000 hours of security video from January 6<sup>th</sup>, and members of Congress including Paul Gosar and Marjorie Taylor Green. As in Blow's video tribute, images of Babbitt dominate these posts, often accompanied by phrases urging remembrance, such as "her name was Ashli Babbitt, her life mattered,"<sup>63</sup> and "American Veteran, Hero

<sup>60</sup> My gratitude to John Saunders, who pointed out that this is the is exactly the same line from the movie Braveheart when William Wallace, also a martyr for the Scottish cause in the late 1200's and early 1300's, said this same thing before the battle at Bannoch Burne. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TME0xubdHQc>.

<sup>61</sup> Forгатio Blow, "Ashli Babbitt."

<sup>62</sup> "Far Right Extremists."

<sup>63</sup> Amy Kremer (@AmyKremer), Twitter, April 14, 2021, <https://twitter.com/forashli?lang=en>.

& Daughter. She is US & we are Her.”<sup>64</sup> Consistent with the constitutive functions served by social media sites for memory communities that previous scholarship describes, this hashtag provided a unified location for the conservative community to employ Babbitt’s martyrdom as grounds for identification across their shared distrust for government, their loyalty to Trump, and their fantasies about being the objects of oppression.

The third significant event that framed this second act of Babbitt’s transmogrification was the Fox News broadcast of anchor Tucker Carlson’s three-month anniversary review and commentary about the January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrection on April 6, 2021. In this program Carlson reiterates the redefinition of the scene as a legitimate, patriotic protest, and thereby provides the grounds for his questions about the death of Babbitt. Early in the broadcast, coinciding with the text at the bottom of the screen that reads “NO ONE BOTHERS TO EXPLAIN WHAT HAPPENED TO BABBITT,” he states, “To that day, that woman is the one verified casualty, the only death we can say definitively was caused by specific events on January 6<sup>th</sup>. We know how she died. The funny thing is you almost never hear that woman’s name.”<sup>65</sup> Carlson’s statements about the lack of investigation and acknowledgement about Babbitt’s death lent his significant ethos within the conservative community to further elevate the claims of her martyrdom. With the entry of Fox News into the Ashli Babbitt cause, the transmogrification now had an enormous megaphone, and not only Carlson would continue to appropriate this commodified martyr in service of stoking his audience, but it opened the path for other media celebrities and conservative members of Congress to do the same.

One week after Carlson’s broadcast, the calls for information about Babbitt’s death widened as her martyrdom became subject of conspiracy theories that circulated frequently on the conservative news channels and in their celebrity anchors’ social media posts. For example, on April 13, Fox personality Laura Ingraham tweeted a comparison between the April 11, 2021 death of Daunte Wright, a 20-year old black man who was fatally shot by white police officer Kimberly Porter, and the lack of information regarding Babbitt: “We knew the name of the officer who shot Daunte Wright within hours ... but why the media yawn about who shot Ashlee [*sic*] Babbitt?”<sup>66</sup> Ingraham’s innuendo that the mainstream news was involved in a conspiracy to mask the facts intensified soon afterward as the U.S. Department of Justice announced on April 14 that it had closed the investigation into Babbitt’s death and would not pursue any charges against the Capitol police officer involved in the shooting. With the foundation that he already had established, Carlson returned to his questions about Babbitt and enhanced the rhetoric to include direct accusations of a conspiracy, involving those in the White House, to hide the facts. In his April 14 program he proclaimed that “We have a right to know who shot Ashli Babbitt and why ... No one will tell us. The Biden administration says the man who killed Babbitt is a Capitol Hill police officer and he did the right thing... If you shoot people without warning because they’re in the wrong place, that’s not allowed. But apparently now it is allowed.”<sup>67</sup> Carlson also reiterated Ingraham’s flawed com-

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<sup>64</sup> GoldPride85 (@Pat McNamara43), “Good Night Patriots,” Twitter, April, 25, 2021, <https://twitter.com/for-ashli?lang=en>

<sup>65</sup> Tucker Carlson, “Tucker Carlson Tonight,” *Fox News*, April 6, 2021, [https://archive.org/details/FOXNEWSW\\_20210407\\_000000\\_Tucker\\_Carlson\\_Tonight](https://archive.org/details/FOXNEWSW_20210407_000000_Tucker_Carlson_Tonight)

<sup>66</sup> Laura Ingraham (@IngrahamAngle), Twitter, April 13, 2021, <https://twitter.com/ingrahamangle/status/1382150543783645184>

<sup>67</sup> Quoted in Aila Sisco, “Tucker Carlson Accuses Media, Feds of Protecting Officer Who Shot Ashli Babbitt,” *Newsweek*, April 14, 2021, <https://www.newsweek.com/tucker-carlson-accuses-media-feds-protecting-officer-who-shot-ashli-babbitt-1583720>.

parison to the Wright case in this program, noting that it was “amazing” that “every news organization in the country” was not seeking to know more about Babbitt’s death.<sup>68</sup> Notably, this false analogy not only provides a means of evoking outrage in the Fox audience that is already primed to distrust other news sources, but it significantly heightens the racist implications of the calls for Babbitt’s shooter to be charged. The Wright case provided a convenient opposition of how quickly a white woman was identified in killing a Black man, but their charge was that the opposite was not true for Babbitt.

In the next few months, these allegations of a conspiracy regarding Babbitt’s death enjoyed an even wider appeal, not only on Fox, but on the Newsmax channel and across the landscape of conservative social media commentators. The conspiracy arguments were underscored by the purification of Babbitt, thereby enhancing the emotional dimensions of these allegations by evoking the image of her as an innocent wife and daughter. The contrast was stark for the radical right community: How could the public not want to garner justice for such a dear and devoted woman, and so, what was the government hiding? In this second act of Babbitt’s transmutation, from late April and into June, Babbitt’s image was further purified as the strands of whiteness, innocence, patriotism, and injustice were integrated to render a compelling product to be exchanged in the conservative marketplace. Hence, it is not surprising that t-shirts proclaiming “Ashli Babbitt, American Patriot” even were marketed through the online sites of Sears and Kmart until a Vox reporter tweeted a screenshot of the shirts on July 6, 2021 and the stores removed them the following day.<sup>69</sup>

Babbitt’s public transformation into the perfected martyr accelerated as her family began to collaborate with the conservative news media, and the conservative political personalities whose appropriation of her martyrdom soon would follow, by making guest appearances on broadcasts and holding commemorative events. On April 29, Babbitt’s husband Aaron appeared with Greg Kelly on Newsmax for his first prime time extended interview. The broadcast was promoted in terms that emphasized both the personal purification dimension of Babbitt’s martyrdom and the <justice> demands in describing how “Aaron Babbitt, the husband of Ashli Babbitt, opens up about how his world changed after Jan 6<sup>th</sup> plus his lawsuit against the Capitol P.D.” and “Ashli Babbitt’s husband gets emotional talking about January 6<sup>th</sup>.”<sup>70</sup> The impact of this integration of pathos with paranoid style as fuel for the conspiracy narrative is reflected in a response to the Newsmax tweet about this program: “I watched that segment last night and seeing the photo shot of the arm holding the gun. Do Capital PD wear white dress shirts and nice cufflinks? After seeing that shot I was very curious. I think they know who did the shooting, what’s up with keeping it secret?”<sup>71</sup> Following this initial prime time interview, Aaron Babbitt made frequent appearances on conservative news shows to promulgate his appeals both for <justice> and for contributions to the GoFundMe and other sites that had been established to fund the lawsuits filed regarding Babbitt’s death.

Babbitt’s martyrdom also was enhanced by the public commemorative events held in her memory during this second act in her transmutation. These included a Mother’s Day march in Sacramento on May 10 that was held by Babbitt’s family, who wore white t-shirts emblazoned

<sup>68</sup> Quoted in Sisco, “Tucker Carlson.”

<sup>69</sup> Kali Coleman, “Sears and Kmart Just Pulled this Controversial Item from their Websites,” *BestLife*, July 7, 2021, <https://bestlifeonline.com/sears-kmart-ashli-babbitt-news/>.

<sup>70</sup> Newsmax (@newsmax), Twitter, April 30, 2021, <https://twitter.com/newsmax/status/1388117180160438272>.

<sup>71</sup> Roses Have Thorns (@BabyBoo92789067), Tweet to @newsmax, April 30, 2021, <https://twitter.com/newsmax/status/1388117180160438272>.

with “Justice for Ashli” in red, white, and blue lettering and MAGA red wristbands denoting her name and “Justice for Ashli Babbitt” in white block letters.<sup>72</sup> Significantly, unlike the first memorial walk to a beach, these later events were staged at the California State Capitol, exemplifying how Babbitt’s merchandization had transitioned into fodder for explicit political agendas. Other commemorative events were held on June 5 to mark the six-month anniversary of her death and on June 20 for Father’s Day. As Casquette argued in his study of the National Socialist party, such ritualized enactments sustain the symbolic currency of the martyr for the community and heighten emotional connections to the martyr narrative.

The second act of Babbitt’s transmogrification reached its climactic sequence of events as these additional themes of purification, <justice>, and conspiracy crossed fully into the political and public realm. On May 12 during the House Committee on Oversight and Reform hearing focused on January 6<sup>th</sup>, several Republican members evoked conspiracy allegations and the racially loaded comparisons regarding Babbitt’s death in their testimony as a strategy to downplay the severity of the insurrection. These included Rep. Paul Gosar (R-Arizona) who asked, “Do you recall the name of the young lady, a veteran wrapped in an American flag, who was killed in the U.S. Capitol? ... As the death certificate says, it was a homicide. Who executed Ashli Babbitt?”<sup>73</sup> Other Republicans recycled the comparison of Babbitt’s death to that of George Floyd, and the protests that followed, as a tactic to deflect attention away from Trump’s role in inciting the riot and toward individual bad actors, as in this statement from Rep. James Comer (R-Kentucky): “What is wrong is when individuals take to crime, violence and mob tactics. This was wrong on January 6, and this was wrong last summer when several cities across the country were attacked by rioters.”<sup>74</sup> However, it was Gosar’s image, albeit erroneous, of Babbitt wrapped in the American flag, as well as his completion of the scenic transformation by characterizing her death as “an execution” rather than a sacrifice, that captured the transmogrification’s apex.

As the six-month anniversary of the insurrection approached, the dominant themes of Babbitt’s martyrdom were recycled and ingrained into the conservative memory community through her appropriation by GOP celebrities to further their own agendas and as a vehicle for fundraising. For example, Gosar hit the news cycle again in late May after posting a Memorial Day weekend message that coopted the lyrics from U2’s song “Pride” about Martin Luther King, Jr. into a tribute for Babbitt, proclaiming “They took her life. They could not take her Pride” above a color photo of her in an Air Force uniform.<sup>75</sup> Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Green also frequently evoked Babbitt’s martyrdom to cast doubt about the violence and criminal behavior on January 6<sup>th</sup>, engaging in “the GOP’s classic whataboutism”<sup>76</sup> by drawing the false equivalence between isolated incidences of violence during Black Lives Matter protests and the riots at the Capitol.

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<sup>72</sup> Justice for Ashli Babbitt (@ForAshli), Twitter, May 10, 2021, <https://twitter.com/ForAshli/status/1391816835885150213>.

<sup>73</sup> Paul Gosar, quoted in Shawna Chen, “GOP Lawmakers Downplay Capitol Riot at House Hearing,” *Axios*, May 12, 2021, <https://www.axios.com/2021/05/12/capitol-riot-gop-house-hearing>.

<sup>74</sup> James Comer, quoted in Lauren Giella, “Paul Gosar Describes Ashli Babbitt’s Death as ‘An Execution’ During Congressional Hearing,” *Newsweek*, May 12, 2021, <https://www.newsweek.com/paul-gosar-describes-ashli-babbitts-death-execution-during-congressional-hearing-1590954>.

<sup>75</sup> Paul Gosar (@Dr.PaulGosar), Twitter, May 27, 2021, [https://twitter.com/DrPaulGosar/status/1398335859166912514?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E13983373449412841473%7Ctwgr%5E3c2506b047118f745e00fb4ecd7af8766c9c60b3%7Ctwcon%5Es3\\_&ref\\_url=https%3A%2F%2Fd-21973027183672368082.ampproject.net%2F2207181727000%2Fframe.html](https://twitter.com/DrPaulGosar/status/1398335859166912514?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E13983373449412841473%7Ctwgr%5E3c2506b047118f745e00fb4ecd7af8766c9c60b3%7Ctwcon%5Es3_&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fd-21973027183672368082.ampproject.net%2F2207181727000%2Fframe.html).

<sup>76</sup> Dean Obeidallah, “Marjorie Taylor Green Doesn’t Think that White People Can be Terrorists,” *MSNBC*, May 20, 2021, <https://www.msnbc.com/opinion/marjorie-taylor-greene-doesn-t-think-white-people-can-be-n1268084>.

By late June 2021, the merchandized Babbitt as martyr was available for whomever needed a convenient means of alleging conspiracy, deflecting criticism, indicting the Biden Administration, or stoking the radical right and white supremacists' anger. Even Russian President Vladimir Putin employed this transmogrified Babbitt during an interview clip that Fox News anchor Tucker Carlson played on his June 16 show. In his remarks, Putin summons Babbitt's memory to simultaneously avert a question about whether he ordered the assassination of Alexei Navalny and criticize the U.S.: "Did you order the assassination of the woman who walked into the Congress and was shot and killed by a policeman?"<sup>77</sup> Not surprisingly, Carlson remarked that "these are fair questions" and continued, "Who did shoot Ashli Babbitt and why don't we know?" In remarks that further appropriated Babbitt's martyrdom in his critique of the Biden administration and confirmation of the conspiracy narrative, Carlson continued, "Are anonymous federal agents now allowed to kill unarmed women who protest the regime? That's OK now? No, it's not OK."<sup>78</sup> Gosar also called upon Ashli Babbitt's martyrdom to stoke conservative voters and Trump loyalists' anger in echoing these implications about Babbitt's death during his questioning of FBI Director Christopher Wray by saying that "The Capitol Police officer that did that shooting appeared to be hiding, lying in wait and then gave no warning before killing her."<sup>79</sup> These inaccurate descriptions of Babbitt's death coincidentally were articulated on the same day that Gosar joined twenty of his Republican Congressional colleagues in voting against awarding Congressional Gold medals to the Capitol Police who stood against the January 6<sup>th</sup> rioters.<sup>80</sup> By this point, the references by political operatives and conservative pundits to Babbitt's martyrdom had little to do her death, but provided a context of public and political promotion of her as a commodity. The stage was set for Act Three, in which the transmogrified Babbitt would circulate even more widely after the ultimate appropriation by Donald Trump.

### *Act Three: Consolidation*

To ensure that her symbolic martyrdom was preserved, the complete transmogrification of Babbitt required a further step beyond commodification that linked her fate to the mythic New Lost Cause of Trumpism. In this third act, Babbitt as martyr was consolidated, in the sense that she represented the unification of many strands of ideology and history in a powerful metonymic condensation. As Kenneth Burke defines this rhetorical process, "The basic strategy of metonymy is this: to convey some incorporeal or intangible state in terms of the tangible."<sup>81</sup> Metonymy is the symbolic process of reduction, the condensation of an abstraction into a simplified form. For the Trump acolytes, radical right extremists, and white supremacists, their vast and somewhat diffuse claims about their perceived victimage at the hands of evil forces, variously defined as the liberal state, Democrats, liberal media, and intellectuals, were reduced into the single vessel of Babbitt's transmogrification.

<sup>77</sup> Sinéad Baker, "Tucker Carlson Said Putin Was 'Asking Fair Questions' About Ashli Babbitt's Killing at the Capitol Riot," *Business Insider*, June 16, 2021, <https://www.businessinsider.com/tucker-carlson-says-putin-fair-question-ashli-babbitt-killing-2021-6>.

<sup>78</sup> Tucker Carlson, quoted in Baker, "Tucker Carlson Said." Carlson's statements illustrate how conspiracy rhetoric mixes fact with fiction to provide credibility to the latter. See Doug Hubley, "A Field Guide to Conspiracy-Theory Rhetoric," <https://www.bates.edu/news/2019/09/26/stephanie-kelly-romano-guide-to-conspiracy-rhetoric/>.

<sup>79</sup> Julian Mark, "Paul Gosar Demands Name of Capitol Officer Who Killed Rioter Ashli Babbitt, Saying She Was 'Executed,'" *Washington Post*, June 16, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2021/06/16/paul-gosar-capitol-riot-babbitt/>.

<sup>80</sup> Mark, "Paul Gosar."

<sup>81</sup> Kenneth Burke, "Four Master Tropes," *Kenyon Review* 3, no. 4 (1941): 424.

A second meaning of consolidation also is provocative to describe Babbitt's solidification into the right's public memory. As used by psychologists, consolidation describes the process of long-term memory formation and stabilization that occurs through repetition.<sup>82</sup> In this third act of Babbitt's martyrdom, its appropriation by Donald Trump accelerated the consolidation of this transmogrification in both of these senses.

Babbitt powerfully represents the reduction of the right's New Lost Cause into corporeal form, thereby serving as a potent condensation for Trump and his supporters to employ. Several commentators in the post-January 6<sup>th</sup> landscape evoked this "Lost Cause" concept to describe the mythology of the right, including especially the belief that the 2020 election had been stolen, but also that good, patriotic Americans were under siege by liberal forces imposing their values upon them. The characterization of the Trump supporters heralding a "new lost cause" relates our current historical era to the Civil War and its aftermath, in which the Confederate rebellion against the Union was elevated to a noble, just, and moral cause, thereby rendering its soldiers as heroic defenders of American values. Historian David Blight describes the New Lost Cause as drawing its power from themes similar to those that fueled this "Lost Cause" to redefine the South and its heroes: "We're drawn back to the Civil War because its great issues—especially the great issues of Reconstruction—are still with us: the nature of federalism; the relationship between the states and the federal government; what government means in people's lives; how centralized government should be; how energetic, how interventionist government should be; and race and racism."<sup>83</sup> A lost cause rhetoric is founded on perceived victimage and focused on vindication, such that these myths "are careful and organized in knowing what they hate. They know what the enemy is or was, and they manufacture these stories that explain almost everything that has happened to a people who are aggrieved."<sup>84</sup> Babbitt serves as a significant and specific metonymic reduction for the grievances and projected enmities of the New Lost Cause, one that was rhetorically transmogrified from domestic terrorist to patriotic saint.

Donald Trump made his first statement regarding Ashli Babbitt on July 1, 2021 via an email to his subscribers, thereby providing the ultimate voice in the conservative chorus that would accelerate the consolidation of her transmogrification. Trump's question, "Who shot Ashli Babbitt?" coincidentally arrived on the same day that Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi announced the members of the January 6<sup>th</sup> Select Committee. Other statements from Trump followed in quick succession, including remarks in Sarasota, Florida on July 3, which was only his second MAGA rally since leaving office, in which he referred to Babbitt's death as a "terrible thing" for which there was no reason. Trump's statements echoed many of the questions about Babbitt's death and significantly signaled the racial implications of the shooter's rumored, but not yet confirmed, identity: "Who shot Ashli Babbitt? We all saw the hand. We saw the gun ... Now they don't want to give the name, but people know the name. People know where he came from."<sup>85</sup> Drawing from the imagery of white supremacist vengeance through lynching, Trump continued, "You know, if that were on the other side, the person that did the shooting would be strung up and hung. Now

<sup>82</sup> "Memory Consolidation," *Science Direct*, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/neuroscience/memory-consolidation>.

<sup>83</sup> David Blight, quoted in Zack Stanton, "How Trumpism is Becoming America's New 'Lost Cause,'" *Politico*, January 21, 2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/01/21/trump-civil-war-reconstruction-biden-lost-cause-461161>.

<sup>84</sup> David Blight, quoted in Stanton, "How Trumpism."

<sup>85</sup> Donald Trump, quoted in Laurie Roberts, "Who Killed Ashli Babbitt? Capitol Rep Gosar Should Know," *Arizona Republic*, July 6, 2021, <https://www.azcentral.com/story/opinion/op-ed/laurieroberts/2021/07/06/who-killed-ashli-babbitt-capitol-rep-gosar-should-know/7878764002/>.



they don't want to give the name."<sup>86</sup> In response to this call, someone in the crowd reportedly shouted out on cue, "Hang him!"<sup>87</sup> Trump continued to amplify the transmogrified Babbitt by appropriating her whenever he sought to deflect attention away from an ongoing investigation, rile up his supporters to raise funds, or counter a development that threatened to undermine his New Lost Cause mythology.

Further illustrative of Trump's rhetorical amplification of Babbitt's martyrdom were two key appearances that garnered national press attention and served as fodder to mobilize his base. First, on July 7 he held a press conference from his private club in Bedminster, New Jersey, to announce that he was filing a lawsuit against social media companies for the bans imposed on him, an event widely promoted in conservative social media as "a defense of the first amendment" which immediately afterward was employed by his Trump Saves America PAC in a fundraising appeal.<sup>88</sup> Although ostensibly about the lawsuit, Trump seized the chance to include a reference to Babbitt, which would become a standard sound bite in his statements and rally speeches throughout 2021 and into 2022. In the July 7 remarks, he again stokes the white supremacist themes and the innuendo about seeking vengeance against the Capitol police officer: "There were no guns in the Capitol except for the gun that shot Ashli Babbitt. And nobody knows—if that were the opposite way, that man would be all over ... But the person that shot her, boom, right through the head, there is no reason for it."<sup>89</sup> Babbitt actually was shot in the left shoulder after a verbal warning, but Trump's version serves to dramatically heighten the emotional and racist reactions elicited from his references to her death.

Trump's subsequent and widely reported appearance in a Fox News interview with anchor Maria Bartiromo on July 11 reiterated these rhetorical tactics of employing the transmogrified Babbitt to stoke MAGA anger by evoking racist innuendo, conspiracy allegations, and building upon pathos related to her femininity. During the Fox News interview, Trump asked, "Who is the person that shot an innocent, wonderful, incredible woman, a military woman, right in the head? And there's no repercussions."<sup>90</sup> As the interview continued, Trump speculated, "I've heard also that it was the head of security for a certain high official, a Democrat,"<sup>91</sup> after which he and Bartiromo speculated about a possible connection to Senator Chuck Schumer's office. As *FiveThirtyEight* reporter Kaleigh Rogers notes in regard to this Fox broadcast, "Trump's comments represent a high-profile crossover of conspiracy theories that have been simmering online for months."<sup>92</sup> Bartiromo added to Trump's sympathetic portrait of Babbitt as well as another erroneous depiction

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<sup>86</sup> Donald Trump, quoted in Roberts, "Who Killed."

<sup>87</sup> Roberts, "Who Killed."

<sup>88</sup> Will Steakin, Katherine Faulders, and John Santucci, "Trump Says He's Filing Class Action Lawsuits Against Facebook, Twitter and Google," *ABC News*, July 7, 2021, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/trump-expected-announce-plans-sue-major-social-media/story?id=78709538>.

<sup>89</sup> "Former President Trump Announces Lawsuit Against Social Media Companies," *CSPAN* [video transcript], July 7, 2021, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?513223-1/president-trump-announces-lawsuit-social-media-companies>.

<sup>90</sup> Donald Trump, quoted in Philip Bump, "What Donald Trump Has Said About the Capitol Rioters," *Washington Post*, July 22, 2021.

<sup>91</sup> Kelsey Vlamis, "Trump Called Ashli Babbitt an 'Innocent, Wonderful, Incredible Woman' and Suggested Without Evidence that a Democratic Official was Connected to Her Death," *Business Insider*, <https://www.businessinsider.com/trump-calls-ashli-babbitt-an-incredible-woman-implicates-democrat-2021-7>.

<sup>92</sup> Kaleigh Rogers, "Where Trump's Conspiracy Theory about Who Shot Ashli Babbitt Came From," *FiveThirtyEight*, July 20, 2021, <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/where-trumps-conspiracy-theory-about-who-shot-ashli-babbitt-came-from/>.

of her actions to enhance her innocence, “I want to talk about that because Ashli Babbitt, a wonderful woman, [was] fatally shot on January 6 as she tried to climb out of a broken window.”<sup>93</sup> The video footage of January 6<sup>th</sup> clearly shows Babbitt attempting to vault forward through the broken window in the door, but this emphasis on Babbitt’s innocence provides further weight to their conspiratorial musings. Employing pathos to humanize Babbitt and heighten her saintly characteristics, as contrast against the oppressive scene, also was employed as a rhetorical tactic around the same time by Marjorie Taylor Green, who on July 8 agreed with Newsmax anchor Greg Kelly during an interview in which she decried the persecution of the January 6<sup>th</sup> patriots that she “was sure” that she and Babbitt would have been friends.<sup>94</sup> The anointing of Babbitt as the sainted martyr became complete when on July 15 Trump is quoted as regretting not having lowered the White House flag to half-staff in honor of Babbitt following her death on January 6<sup>th</sup>.<sup>95</sup> With the trans-mogrification of Babbitt repeatedly and dramatically magnified by Trump, members of Congress, and the conservative news media, the MAGA forces and their extremist allies had a consolidated martyr that could be used to justify their January 6<sup>th</sup> “revolution” and future actions.

Following Trump’s cooptation of Babbitt to stoke conspiracy theories and to signify the New Lost Cause, others quickly seized the opportunity to exploit the symbolic power of her martyrdom to fuel their fantasies, particularly when these myths of MAGA intersected with white supremacists’ exploitation of the racial dimensions of her death. The revelation about the Capitol officer being an African American male had circulated on extremist websites in previous months via posts from members had scrutinized the video footage from January 6th and forwarded allegations that the conspiracy about Babbitt’s death. These groups alleged that the shroud of secrecy was protecting a black officer, as when Proud Boys leader Enrique Tarrio posted photo images on his Telegram channel with the statement, “This black man was waiting to execute someone on january [sic] 6<sup>th</sup>. He chose Ashli Babbitt.”<sup>96</sup> Shortly after Trump’s July statements, conservative commentator Dinesh D’Souza also regaled his 1.7 million twitter followers with conspiratorial allegations about Babbitt’s fate by posting an expose on July 13 in which he revealed the name of the Capitol officer, stating, “Who killed Ashli Babbitt? His name is Lt. Michael Byrd. So the only deliberate killing on January 6 was a black [sic] male police officer who shot a white female Trump supporter through the neck. Are you still puzzled why the media is hiding Byrd’s identity?”<sup>97</sup> When Byrd finally confirms his identity on August 27 in a televised interview with NBC News anchor Lester Holt, the death threats that he already had been facing intensified, especially on the extremist social media platforms such as Telegram, where users used racial slurs and lynching imagery, with one

<sup>93</sup> Maria Bartiromo, *Sunday Morning Futures*, Fox News, July 11, 2021, <https://video.foxnews.com/v/6263268944001#sp=show-clips>

<sup>94</sup> Andrew Solender, “Marjorie Taylor Greene ‘Sure’ She Would Have Been Friends With Slain Capitol Rioter Ashli Babbitt,” *Forbes*, July 8, 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/andrewsolender/2021/07/08/marjorie-taylor-greene-sure-she-would-have-been-friends-with-slain-capitol-rioter-ashli-babbitt/?sh=634bc3b820dc>.

<sup>95</sup> Justin Vallejo, “Trump Regrets Not Lowering Flag to Half-staff to Honour Ashli Babbitt Shot at Capitol Riot, Report Says,” *The Independent*, July 15, 2021, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/trump-capitol-riot-ashli-babbitt-b1884790.html>.

<sup>96</sup> Josh Kovensky, “The Deeply Racist Dimensions to Ashli Babbitt’s Martyrdom.” *Talking Points Memo*, July 14, 2021, <https://talkingpointsmemo.com/muckraker/the-deeply-racist-dimensions-to-ashli-babbitts-martyrdom>.

<sup>97</sup> Dinesh D’Souza (@DineshDSouza), Twitter, July 13, 2021, <https://twitter.com/dineshsouza/status/1414994782946926600>.

poster asking “Why isn’t he hang [*sic*] yet?” and another proclaiming “He should swing for treason.”<sup>98</sup> When the depictions of Babbitt as an innocent young woman are viewed against the legacy of white fears about Black men’s violence, the implications of the right’s evocation as their racist dog whistle come into full view. Seyward Darby notes the significance of this racist history in her commentary about January 6<sup>th</sup>, “A dead or injured white woman—even the illusion of one—has always been a powerful symbol on the far right, a rallying cry for people to stand up and act to preserve their contorted notions of honor, liberty and purity.”<sup>99</sup> In the transmutation of Babbitt, the fact of a Black officer having delivered the fatal shot provided the ultimate sense in which her slaying, as the culminating act defining her martyrdom, provided a consolidated symbol and the means of identification to unify the strands of the New Lost Cause in a constitutive identity as white patriots defending their nation.

### Conclusions: Divisions and Reifications

The transmogrified Babbitt was employed throughout the remainder of 2021 and into 2022, particularly as a rebuttal to the House Select Committee’s hearings about the January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrection. The major players in the three-act drama of her martyrdom continue to be active, most prominently Trump,<sup>100</sup> the conservative news networks, and the far right’s Congressional darlings, in utilizing Babbitt as the counter example to the portrait of rioters gone wild in an assault on democracy. With this consolidated symbol in hand, and Babbitt’s memory imprinted in their audience, the voices on the right and their extremist allies persist in evoking the rhetorical depiction of their martyr who was slain in the fight against a liberal conspiracy that is set on destroying their beloved America. Babbitt indeed serves as the perfect ending to be contained within their imagined scene of revolution.

The potency of Babbitt as martyr exemplifies how the rhetorical creation of such figures by political and social movements has changed dramatically. While instituting a martyr for a memory community remains a significant rhetorical tactic to reinforce shared values, heighten the emotional connection to a cause, and constitute a community bound by specific ideologies, the means for construction and circulation have transformed in a contemporary culture submerged in social media and divided by diffuse sources of information. The cooptation of the tragedy of Babbitt’s death in service of promoting the New Lost Cause of Trumpism, underscored by white supremacy and radical far right extremists, is chilling. Her transmutation demonstrates the layers of intersecting relationships among the strands that contributed to her mythic narrative, as well as the various communicative tactics and outlets that converged to circulate it. From extremists’ propagandist images, to Forgatio Blow’s tribute rap song, to Fox News broadcasts, to the Twitterverse of conservative politicians, to the halls of Congress, and finally, the culmination of this discourse

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<sup>98</sup> Frank Figliuzzi, “Capitol Police Lt. Michael Byrd Targeted by Hypocritical Far-right Backlash,” MSNBC, August 31, 2021, <https://www.msnbc.com/opinion/capitol-police-lt-michael-byrd-targeted-hypocritical-far-right-backlash-n1278070>.

<sup>99</sup> Seyward Darby, “The Far Right Told Us What It Had Planned,” *New York Times*, January 7, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/07/opinion/white-supremacists-capitol-riot.html>.

<sup>100</sup> Trump reinitiated his references to Ashli Babbitt on September 14, 2022, repeating his previous pattern of referencing her death to distract from investigations into his behavior. As widely reported, Trump had called Ashli Babbitt’s mother who was present at the rally. While being relayed via her phone held to a microphone, Trump’s remarks were interrupted by “a protestor wearing a chicken mask waving a sign that read ‘fart noises.’” See Zach Schonfeld, “Trump Called Into Small Rally Held in Support of DC-Jailed Jan. 6 Prisoners,” *The Hill*, <https://thehill.com/policy/national-security/3643001-trump-called-into-small-rally-held-in-support-of-dc-jail-jan-6-prisoners/>.

by Trump, as the ultimate binding among all of these forces, Babbitt's martyrdom is illustrative of how contemporary martyrologists ply their trade across the mediated landscape that constitutes our contemporary political culture.

Moreover, Babbitt's transmogrification reveals the deep divisions that threaten to undermine democratic systems in the U.S., as well as the disturbing ideological structures undergirding the right's New Lost Cause. Historian David Blight's assessment is sobering: "We really have arrived at, it appears, two irreconcilable Americas with their own information systems, their own facts, their own story, their own narrative. And we—whatever 'we' is—on the other side keep wondering: How can this be?"<sup>101</sup> The elevation of Babbitt as their martyr exposed the networks of mutual influence among the MAGA loyalists, conservative political operatives, white supremacists, radical right extremists, notable elected GOP lawmakers, and at their center, a former President who openly touts their dangerous views. The narrative of this white woman who was a patriotic veteran, wife and daughter, and loyal Trump supporter, fulfilled all their needs for a martyr who exemplified the racist, misogynist, and autocratic ideologies that constituted their community, precisely the values that horrify their opponents.

Finally, the use of Babbitt's martyrdom to justify their cause masks the fundamental lie at the heart of the right's campaign to recast the scene of January 6<sup>th</sup> into public memory as a love fest for patriots who were viciously attacked by government forces, not rioters who sacked the Capitol. The rhetorical transformation of the insurrection into a peaceful protest and the cooptation of progressive slogans fuels the right's fantasies of victimage. Extremists, conservative media, and Trump and his loyalists stoke their base through the false and racially loaded analogies between January 6<sup>th</sup> and the incidental property violence that accompanied some of the Black Lives Matter protests the previous year, then point to their innocent victim in their own calls for <justice>. In a commentary on MediaItte, Michael Luciano provides a succinct summary of the right's deception and the difference between their fantasy of patriotism and legitimate protests: "This is a bad faith argument that totally elides one crucial detail: the United States Capitol is not a goddamn Apple store. The people who breached the Capitol on January 6 were not looking to make off with iPads and AirPods. They were there to overturn a presidential election and—if some of them had their way—hang the vice president of the United States while doing who-knows-what-else to any lawmakers they may have encountered."<sup>102</sup> We cannot forget that Ashli Babbitt was right there with them, not a victim of the scene, but an agitator who created it.

Most importantly, the depiction of January 6<sup>th</sup> as a day of authentic protest by true Americans is aggressively articulated by the right as the authentic memory. The sustained campaign to establish Babbitt's martyr role serves to elevate her in the same manner that the right wants all Americans to remember the January 6th events, as a legitimate stand made by good patriots in defense of a just cause. Their fantastical rhetoric about this New Lost Cause is tantalizingly dangled in public memory in hopes that it will transcend political partisanship and come to dominate our recollection of January 6<sup>th</sup>. We need to be vigilant against this threat, particularly as the details of the day fade with the passage of time and the evocation of Babbitt's martyrdom evokes "victim" rather than "terrorist". In the end, this analysis and underscores the importance of remembering *New Republic* reporter Matt Ford's succinct judgment, "If Trump and his allies really want to know

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<sup>101</sup> David Blight, quoted in Stanton, "How Trumpism."

<sup>102</sup> Michael Luciano, "Trump and Conservative Media are Shamefully Trying to Turn Ashli Babbitt Into a Martyr," *Mediaite*, August 11, 2021, <https://www.mediaite.com/opinion/trump-and-conservative-media-are-shamefully-attempting-to-turn-ashli-babbitt-into-a-martyr/>

who is responsible for Babbitt's death and the deaths of others on January 6, they need only look in a mirror."<sup>103</sup> Indeed.

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<sup>103</sup> Matt Ford, "We Already Know Who Killed Ashli Babbitt," *New Republic*, July 12, 2021, <https://newrepublic.com/article/162937/who-killed-ashli-babbitt-january-6>.