

Denial and conspiracy theories: how rightwing media reacted to Trump's mob

Some outlets refused to acknowledge the president or the rioters did anything wrong, while others depicted it as an opportunity for Pence to overturn the election



The 'Stop the Steal' rally before the riot. Photograph: Spencer Platt/Getty Images

Many institutions were brought to a crisis point by Wednesday's pro-Trump riot in Washington. One of them was conservative media.

If the bond between Donald Trump and his supporters has been a shared, paranoid hostility towards governing institutions, as well as the media and the left, this mindset has been promoted and nurtured by conservative media over decades.

As long as Trump was riding high, conservative media¹ were often happy to excuse the violence, too. But with Trump on his way out, seemingly² cut loose³ by Republican elites and his own staff, would his one-time media allies excuse the insurrectionary mob that trashed the Capitol in the president's name?

The last 24 hours has seen various responses - few honest, fewer honorable – to this dilemma.

Some outlets simply refused to acknowledge that Trump or the rioters have done anything wrong, even at the cost of self-contradiction. In *Gateway Pundit* – one of the more florid purveyors of ride-or-die Trumpism – Cassandra Fairbanks initially described⁴ the Capitol Hill rioters as “patriots”. When the optics took a turn for the worse, and even Trump himself urged adherence to the law, their writer Christine Lalla pivoted to a conspiracy theory⁵ evoking a reliable rightwing folk devil: busloads of anti-fa.

¹ <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/chris-wallace-calls-out-fox-news-hosts-justifying-vigilante-justice-1050837/http://>

² <https://www.cotton.senate.gov/news/press-releases/cotton-statement-on-violence-at-capitol>

³ <https://www.mediaite.com/politics/mitch-mccconnell-brutally-rejects-trumps-conspiracies-democracy-would-enter-death-spiral-if-this-election-were-overturned/>

⁴ <https://web.archive.org/web/20210107143129/https://www.thegatewaypundit.com/2021/01/breaking-patriots-made-way-inside-capitol-pence-evacuated-lawmakers-sheltering-place/>

⁵ <https://web.archive.org/web/20210107114721/https://www.thegatewaypundit.com/2021/01/breaking-report-former-fbi-agent-ground-us-capitol-says-least-one-bus-load-antifa-thugs-infiltrated-trump-demonstration/>

On Twitter, Christina Bobb, an anchor on pro-Trump cable news channel OANN⁶, depicted⁷ the riot as presenting an opportunity for Mike Pence, the vice-president, to overturn the election. OANN and other networks have followed Trump's lead in promoting the false idea that Pence, as Senate president, can selectively reject votes from the electoral college. Notwithstanding that Pence's role is, in fact, ceremonial, Cassandra Fairbanks again joined Bobb and others in the delusion that Pence had failed in his duty, and was in fact a traitor.



<https://youtu.be/LYzsukyYgC4>

Pro-Trump rioters storm US Capitol during vote on Biden election victory – video report

Things are trickier for those not content to go down with the Trumpist ship, and who must tack into shifting political winds. With Trump gone, but his supporters still a significant and lucrative component of the conservative media audience, many outlets relied on flattering Trump's supporters, even as they continued their slow, careful abandonment of Trump himself.

On *Fox News*, Tucker Carlson opened his *Wednesday night show* with a monologue that empathized with rioters even as he blamed their actions on others. Carlson did offer a very general condemnation of political violence and, apropos of nothing, discouraged the idea of a Balkanization of the country into like-minded communities. But he then attributed the mob's actions to those who would not give their conspiracy theories about election theft a proper hearing.

Carlson pointed to the dangers that might arise

“if people come to believe that their democracy is fraudulent”.

Without discussing conservative media's central role in promoting post-election conspiracy narratives, he argued that

“millions of Americans sincerely believe that the last election was fake. You can dismiss them as crazy. You can call them conspiracy theorists. You can kick them off Twitter. But that won't change their minds.”

Others tried the same trick in print. Filing from the scene, the *Federalist's* Emily Jashinsky admitted the riot was a “disgraceful sight”⁸ and dismissed the conspiracy-minded idea that anti-fa provocateurs were responsible. She laid blame on Trump for inciting them, writing:

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/nov/16/oann-what-is-tv-network-trump-is-pushing>

⁷ https://twitter.com/christina_bobb/status/1346907547949801473

⁸ <https://thefederalist.com/2021/01/07/the-capitol-riot-will-hurt-the-people-who-were-already-hurting-most/>

"He told them a 'landslide' win was being stolen. That would be a crisis. They acted as such. What did he expect?"

But she then moved to coddle his coalition, arguing that the riot "will hurt the people who were already hurting most", mentioning the "decent" Americans who

"have been lied to by the media for years ... smeared as racists by elites and peers alike".

There was no mention – in her article or in any of the other lachrymose evocations of Trump's forgotten people – that political scientists have⁹ repeatedly shown¹⁰ that racial resentment and hostile sexism¹¹ are the strongest motivations for supporting Trump.

Further out on far-right media, there was an effort to transform Ashli Babbitt¹², a woman who was shot dead by Capitol police, into a political martyr.

On Alex Jones' *Infowars* website, Babbitt was described as a "patriot" and her death as an "execution". Along with other extremist sites, *Infowars* offered graphic footage and images of Babbitt's death. The political line that many on the far right took into the events of the Capitol has only been bolstered by Babbitt's death. *Infowars* and its conspiracy theorist proprietor can look forward to presenting themselves as the principal resistance to the Biden administration, while wielding Babbitt as a symbol of defiance.

Elsewhere, there were signs of despair in the wake of the events at the Capitol, and the congressional confirmation of the election result. On rightwing Catholic site Church Militant, David Gordon asked¹³

"Why did God allow Biden-Harris to prevail?", averring that "the specter of an impending Joe Biden presidency is haunting America's Christian faithful".

For a small minority of commentators, the events elicited self-reflection. On that score, it would be difficult to better Kevin D Williamson's summary of conservative media's crooked, craven path through the Trump era in a Thursday article¹⁴ on *National Review Online*. He writes:

"The Trump presidency began in shame and dishonesty. It ends in shame, dishonesty, cowardice and rebellion against the constitution. For the past few weeks, the rightwing media, including the big talk-radio shows, has been coyly calling for a revolution. Of course they never thought they'd actually get one: that kind of talk is good for business – keep the rubes riled up and they won't change the channel when the commercials come around on the half-hour."

⁹ <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0002716218811309>

¹⁰ http://acme.highpoint.edu/~msetzler/Why_Did_Women_Vote_for_Donald_.pdf

¹¹ <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2053168017737411>

¹² <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/jan/07/ashli-babbitt-woman-shot-and-killed-in-storming-of-us-capitol-named>

¹³ <https://www.churchmilitant.com/news/article/why-did-god-allow-biden-to-prevail>

¹⁴ <https://www.nationalreview.com/2021/01/the-trump-presidency-inevitable-wretched-end/http://>

We can expect this kind of insight to remain atypical in conservative media over the coming years: those who are not girding their loins for a pitched battle with America's incoming government are warily hedging their bets.

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