

Chapter Title: INSURRECTION

Book Title: Preparing for War

Book Subtitle: The Extremist History of White Christian Nationalism--and What Comes Next

Book Author(s): BRADLEY ONISHI

Published by: Augsburg Fortress, Broadleaf Books. (2023)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv2phpsfh.12>

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Chapter 9

INSURRECTION

THE BATTLE OF JERICHO is one of those Bible stories you come back to often as a youth pastor because it pretty much teaches itself. So many passages of the Bible seem impossible to relate to modern life, especially when your audience is a hundred middle schoolers who have yet to figure out deodorant or shaving. What are you going to tell eighth graders about prohibitions against eating shellfish in Leviticus or pages-long genealogies in Genesis? The dirty secret of being a youth pastor is that you skip those parts of scripture in order to get to the stories that you can use to inspire a young generation to commit their lives to the Lord.

During my seven years in ministry, I must have expounded on the tale of Daniel in the lion's den a hundred times. The same goes for the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, the three comrades who emerged unscathed after King Nebuchadnezzar threw them into a furnace. The easiest one was David versus Goliath. Anyone should be able to use that story to teach a kid some lessons about standing up for your community, not letting bullies get their way, or the under-rated deadliness of slingshots.

The battle of Jericho is in this category of easily teachable Bible tales. According to Joshua 6, the Israelites were descending on the land of Canaan, which God had promised to their forebears. After forty years in the desert and four hundred years in Egyptian captivity, they were ready to take what God had granted them—a whole territory of land occupied by another people group. After some initial skirmishes with the Canaanites, the Hebrew people had their first major conflict: the battle for Jericho. As instructed by God, the Israelites marched around the city walls seven times, shouting the name of their deity and blowing horns as they repeated the circle. After the seventh time, the walls miraculously fell down, allowing the Israelites to enter and besiege Jericho, leaving little trace of the people who called it home.

When I taught this story, the easiest pedagogical strategy was to spiritualize it. The lessons were about obeying God even when the world thought doing so was crazy or trusting in God's commands more than secular logic. I encouraged the students to think about what "walls" in our lives God wanted us to allow him to knock down—pride, envy, lust, or anger. What sins were holding us back? Did we have the radical faith to obey him even when it appeared foolish to unbelievers?

We rarely spent time on the gory details of what happened once the Israelites entered Jericho: "When the trumpets sounded, the army shouted, and at the sound of the trumpet, when the men gave a loud shout, the wall collapsed; so everyone charged straight in, and they took the city. They devoted the city to the Lord and destroyed with the sword every living thing in it—men and women, young and old, cattle, sheep and donkeys" (Joshua 6:20–21). And even though I shied away from deliberating over what some have called an attempted genocide, there was always a kid or two who wanted to know why God would allow such a brutal destruction of life.

"Did the kids need to be killed?" they would ask. The first time it happened I looked at the kid blankly. Simultaneously impressed

with the question and having no clue how to answer it, I stumbled around and probably tried to evade the implications of the question. Eventually, I turned to biblical commentators to help me make sense of it.

Here is how Andy Patton frames it at the Bible Project, a ministry resource guide that has over two million subscribers and more than 100 million views on its various video channels: “The conquest was more about ending the Canaanites’ religious and cultural practices than ending their lives. The problem wasn’t the people, but idolatry. . . . It could be compared to what the Allies set out to do during World War II. They were on a mission to end the Nazi regime, but that didn’t mean they had to kill every German. . . . They were a part of God’s plan to cleanse the land of evil practices and push back the dark spiritual powers that had enslaved the people of Canaan.”

I am familiar with this type of exegetical gymnastics. I learned—and employed—such tactics as a pastor many times. For me, as for most evangelical leaders, the overriding goal was to make scripture relevant to everyday life. What’s clear to me now, though, is just how blithe this type of explanation is when it comes to confronting the violence in the story of Jericho.

If God and the Israelites didn’t want to kill all the Canaanites, why did they? If it wasn’t about ending lives but abolishing idols, why did all the lives have to be ended? If the Hebrew people wanted to push back the spiritual powers enslaving the people, did they have to kill all the people in the process?

Ultimately, I doubt all of the inquisitive kids in my youth group found any of my attempts at answering their valid questions to be satisfactory. A literal reading of the Bible is less intellectually taxing than a coherent one. A few decades after I led those Bible studies, the story of the felling of the walls of Jericho would become a basis for Christian nationalist performance of grievance in ways that made the plain reading of the text—as the story of a God-ordained holy war against infidels—explode into national view.

FROM JOSHUA 6 TO JANUARY 6

On December 12, 2020, nearly a month before the January 6 insurrection, the first “Jericho Marches” took place across the country. Though there were events at numerous state capitols, the main march took place in Washington, DC. With pageantry and scripture and prayer, Christian nationalists reenacted portions of the story of Joshua and his troops as they marched around a pagan city.

The founders of the Jericho March represent the powerful Christian nationalist alliance between White evangelicals and White Catholics that has formed over the last half century. Cofounder Robert Weaver is an evangelical who identifies as a Pentecostal. The Oklahoma insurance salesman was nominated by Trump to lead the Indian Health Service in 2018 but withdrew his candidacy due to revelations about his misrepresentation of his supposed Native American heritage. He got the idea for the Jericho March in a vision from God, in which the Almighty told him that the election “is not over” and that he wants to “let the church roar!”

His cofounder, Arina Grossu, is a conservative Catholic who had a similar vision. A former contract communications adviser at the Department of Health and Human Services, Grossu had a vision of “people praying in the streets,” beseeching God for election integrity, truth, and a restoration of American values. The daughter of Romanian immigrants, Grossu says part of her motivation for organizing the march was to avoid the communist oppression her family endured before emigrating to the United States.

In their press release for the December 12 event, Weaver and Grossu drew on classic Christian nationalist tropes to encourage “patriots and people of faith” to “march around the U.S. Capitol, Supreme Court, and Department of Justice seven times praying for the walls of corruption and election fraud to fall down, just as Joshua and the Israelites walked around the walls of corrupt Jericho.” According to Weaver and Grossu, “America is a gift entrusted to us by our creator and a republic secured by our Founding Fathers and

those who sacrificed to keep us free.” In their vision, MAGA Nation plays the role of Israel in the reenactment of the Jericho story. Washington, DC, and the institutions it houses are cast as the corrupt city inhabited by infidels who must be removed.

Thousands of people gathered in DC for the main event. Just as the organizers hoped, they marched around the holy places of the American republic—the Supreme Court, the Capitol, and the Department of Justice. Eric Metaxas, author and radio host turned MAGA superstar, served as the emcee of the main rally at the National Mall. During the five hours or so of programming, one of the most popular (and infamous) speakers was General Michael Flynn, the man who was convicted of lying to the FBI and then pardoned by former president Trump. “Courts aren’t going to decide who the next president is going to be,” Flynn proclaimed ominously. “We the people decide.”

At one point, Marine One flew over the rally (there’s no verification that Trump was actually in the helicopter) and then came a series of presentations by religious leaders, who bathed the crowd in Christian nationalist rhetoric. Father Greg Gramovich, a specialist in exorcism, gave a prayer meant to exorcise the spirits of corruption from Washington, DC. “You realize we are in a spiritual battle. This cannot be solved by human needs,” he told the crowd just before encouraging them to put on the full “armor of God” in order to prepare for the days ahead. Later, Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò married Christian nationalism with themes from QAnon. “We are the silent army of the children of light,” he said, on the large screen overlooking the rally. “The walls of the deep state, behind which evil is barricaded, will come crashing down.”

Soon the provocateurs took the stage. Alex Jones, the disgraced host of *Info Wars*, gave one of his notorious screaming rants. He didn’t so much speak as send bundles of non sequiturs to the audience in order to activate their anger and grievance. “God is on our side. . . . The state has no jurisdiction over any of us,” he belted. When it came to President-Elect Joe Biden, Jones was clear that “we will

never recognize him.” He then gave a dire warning: “Joe Biden will be removed one way or another.” In order to coat this rhetoric in religious authority, Jones finished with a call for the MAGA faithful to keep their attention on the Lord: “We need to keep our eyes on Christ and never back down and never surrender.”

A few minutes later Ali Alexander, the organizer of “Stop the Steal”—the campaign that would help mobilize the lie that Trump won the election—sent a message to all Republicans in Congress who wouldn’t help Pence overturn the election: “I don’t have a speech as much as I have a warning to the establishment. We will shut this country down.” Drawing on the Joshua-Jericho theme of the rally, Alexander prophesied that “We will occupy D.C.,” because, “We can do all things through Christ who strengthens us,” a direct citation of Philippians 4:13—a popular Bible passage among conservative Christians.

When the “prayer” rally ended, the Proud Boys and other groups spread throughout downtown DC, wreaking havoc and instigating violence. They vandalized numerous historic Black churches, tearing down Black Lives Matter flags and causing other damage. According to reports, four people were stabbed and thirty-three were arrested. In the spirit of the Israelites who violently seized Jericho after their prayer walk, MAGA Nation descended on DC the night of December 12. The violence of that night, of course, turned out to be only a preview of what was ahead.

After the success of the first Jericho March on December 12, a second round of marches was planned for January 5, 2021, to take place in DC and in the swing states where there was supposed election fraud. This was, of course, the day before the certification of the electoral votes—a formality in the presidential election process with no bearing on the election result or power to change its outcome. Before the event kicked off, the Jericho March organizers released a statement outlining what they hoped would happen on January 6: “Vice President Pence has the ability to elect the President himself

and Jericho March calls on him to exercise his rightful power in the face of the blatant election fraud and corruption.”

What is striking about this call—even if you were to support the theory behind it—is that it doesn’t say that Vice President Pence has the ability to throw out fraudulent electors who misrepresent the will of the people in their states. It says he has the power “to elect the President himself”—as if the goal is not a democratic outcome but the installation of the man they want regardless of the process or the cost.

On Tuesday, January 5, thousands of “Joshuas” once again gathered to pray that God would “stop the steal” and restore Trump to the presidency. This time the prayer for the walls to come down was the direct precursor to the actual invasion of America’s Jericho.

JANUARY 6, 2021

Leandra Blades is a blond woman in her forties with a high-pitched voice and a straightforward demeanor. She speaks plainly but assertively. Leandra attends Friends Church in Yorba Linda, the sister church of Rose Drive where I once served in ministry—and the church where Dr. Marshburn threw the American flag out of the sanctuary a century ago. A former youth soccer coach and classroom helper, Leandra was elected to the Placentia-Yorba Linda Unified School District’s board in 2020. This is the school district I attended from kindergarten through high school. Some of my friends now teach in the district. Dozens of people I went to school with now have their kids enrolled in one of the district’s elementary, middle, or high schools. It’s an institution dear to my heart, and one that continues to play an integral part in my loved ones’ lives.

Leandra flew to Washington, DC, on January 4, 2021, with two friends for what she described later as a “girls’ trip.” As a supporter of Donald Trump, she planned to visit DC at this moment so that she and her friends could attend the rally on January 6. Though she had visited a few summers prior, neither of her friends had ever been

to DC. They landed on Monday and had a full day of sightseeing on Tuesday. She described the trip as akin to a teenage slumber party with friends but with wine. Leandra was surprised to meet so many other Orange Countians in their hotel and marveled at making so many new acquaintances on such a short vacation.

Southern Californians aren't used to any weather below fifty degrees, so the balmy Washington morning was probably a shock to their systems. Though there was no snow or sleet on Wednesday, January 6, the air was frigid. It was also extremely windy. The three women woke in their comfy hotel room in the "District," as locals refer to DC. Unaccustomed to dealing with cold temperatures, they bundled up and left their hotel to fulfill a dream of joining MAGA Nation for the Save America rally.

As the rally waned, the thousands of people gathered for the event began marching toward the Capitol at Trump's behest. Leandra and her friends were caught up in the crowd and marched with them to the Capitol. Soon they sensed tear gas in the air and commotion ringing through the throngs of people. No matter what she would later claim, Leandra was no longer on a "girls' trip." She was part of the crowd marching on her own country's Capitol to stop the certification of the 2020 presidential election.

January 6, 2021, is a day of infamy, a day that marks a Before and an After in American history, similar to the bombing of Pearl Harbor or 9/11. The difference with J6 is that the attack was by a mob of Americans incited by the sitting president rather than a foreign enemy.

After months of listening to Trump and his political cronies repeat the falsehood that the election was stolen, tens of thousands of Trump supporters like Leandra and her friends gathered in DC to express their outrage while Congress and the vice president certified the election results. By this time, Trump's dozens of legal attempts to have votes thrown out in Pennsylvania, Arizona, and other states had failed in the courts. His illegal pressuring of Georgia's attorney

general and other state officials had also failed. Unable to overthrow the election by way of the courts or state legislators, he turned to the mob as one of the last weapons in his arsenal.

On the morning of January 6, Leandra and thousands of others gathered to hear Trump and other MAGA superstars speak at the Save America rally at the Ellipse, an open space near the National Mall. Before the former president took the stage, his spiritual adviser Paula White gave the opening prayer. "I declare that you would give us a holy boldness in this hour," she exclaimed. "Today let justice be done." Rudy Giuliani used his time on stage to foment violence. "Let's have a trial by combat," the disgraced former mayor of New York City said.

After MAGA celebrities such as Representative Mo Brooks and Donald Trump Jr. did their part to rile the crowd into a frenzy, former President Trump encouraged everyone in attendance to walk the short distance to the Capitol. "Anyone you want, but I think right here, we're going to walk down to the Capitol, and we're going to cheer on our brave senators and congressmen and women, and we're probably not going to be cheering so much for some of them," Trump said. "Because you'll never take back our country with weakness. You have to show strength and you have to be strong. We have come to demand that Congress do the right thing and only count the electors who have been lawfully slated, lawfully slated."

After arriving at the Capitol, the mob quickly turned violent. Waving MAGA flags and donning MAGA apparel, members of the mob began assaulting Capitol Police with pieces of broken barricades and other makeshift weapons. They pushed past the police line, broke windows in order to enter the Capitol, and once inside began searching for the politicians they considered to be enemies of the republic—Vice President Mike Pence, Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, and others. Millions of Americans turned on their televisions to see Trump flags waving from the Capitol and MAGA-ites storming the building's

every nook and cranny. Meanwhile members of Congress donned gas masks, huddled down between seats while Capitol Police barricaded the doors and literally prayed for safety before running for cover. Vice President Pence, the man on whom Trump and MAGA Nation was counting to overturn the election, was moved quickly to a secure—and secret—location. Congressional staffers, some in their mid-twenties, hid under desks in locked offices, contemplating whether or not to text their parents goodbye for the last time.

The country watched in horror as the rioters breached every part of the Capitol—defecating in the halls, stealing documents, putting their feet up on the desk of the Speaker of the House, and shouting in victory after having stopped, albeit briefly, the certification of the election. Outside, in one of the most chilling scenes, insurrectionists erected gallows in order to hang Mike Pence for not overturning the election for Trump. In another, a man marches with the Confederate flag on his shoulder—a symbol of the White supremacy that was at the heart of the attempted coup.

Capitol Police officer Brian Sicknick died in his office after responding to the riot. Later, four additional Capitol Police officers would die by suicide. The Capitol Police Union reports that 140 officers were injured as a result of the mob violence. Capitol Police officer Harry Dunn, an African American, testified before Congress that while he had never been called the n-word while in uniform, that changed on January 6. He heard similar stories from his Black colleagues. “One officer told me he had never in his entire 40 years life been called a n—— to his face and that streak ended on January 6. Yet another Black officer later told me he had been confronted by insurrectionists in the Capitol who told him, ‘Put your gun down, and we’ll show you what kind of n—— you really are.’” Officer Dunn’s testimony confirms that the mob who attacked the Capitol was not only Christian nationalist but also overtly White supremacist.

It was nearly midnight when Andy Kim, a Democratic representative from New Jersey, made it back to the Capitol rotunda on

January 6. When the siege happened, he was in a separate building, so he didn't see the wreckage until the waning moments of the day. "I was just overwhelmed with emotion," Kim said. "It's a room that I love so much—it's the heart of the Capitol, literally the heart of this country. It pained me so much to see it in this kind of condition."

For the next couple of hours Kim worked on his hands and knees to clean up the debris left by the rioters. There is now a famous picture of Representative Kim on all fours, scooping up a pile of trash in the Capitol rotunda. He worked in stunned silence, overcome by the damage to the building—and to American democracy—done in only a few hours. Outside the streets were largely quiet. DC was a city under curfew after Trump's White Christian nationalist mob laid siege to the Capitol. An eerie quiet, similar to Kim's mood, had overtaken the District. The city and the nation were in shock. Inside the building, Kim, the son of Korean immigrants and only the second Korean American to serve in Congress, was cleaning up their mess before joining his congressional colleagues to certify the 2020 presidential election.

When I turn my attention from Representative Andy Kim back to Leandra Blades, the story of January 6 hits home. Leandra looks my mom—and countless other Orange County moms I knew growing up. She reminds me of my mom when she was that age in other ways too: someone who may appear unassuming by appearance but who is formidable and forthright when it comes to her beliefs—and certainly when it comes to standing up for her family. Leandra is a former police officer who decided to run for school board as a way to serve her community. Her kids attend the public schools in the district my brothers and I attended. On Sundays, she sits in the pews at Yorba Linda Friends Church. In many ways, her story maps onto mine. When I reflect on whether I would have been at the rally on January 6, I think of Leandra: an active and dedicated member of the suburban community in which I grew up—someone who saw, and still sees, nothing wrong with supporting the president she voted for by attending a rally where he called on his supporters to overthrow

the American government and the outcome of a free and fair election. When asked about her presence there, Leandra claimed that it was an unfortunate coincidence that she and her friends chose this rally, on this day, at this moment in history, that just so happened to boil over into an attempted coup d'état. In her telling, attending a rally framed as an attempt to stop the certification of a presidential election was just part of a normal tourist visit.

It's not the maliciousness or cunning of Leandra Blades that plagues me. It's the banality of her actions and rationale. It's the ordinariness of her thought patterns. She is not exceptional. She is not a super villain who wakes up every morning with the hopes of tearing apart the country piece by piece. She's a suburban parent in her forties who did what she thought was right seemingly without considering how it might hurt others or how it might contribute to the destruction of our republic. In terms of the region where I grew up, she's pretty average. And that scares the hell out of me.

#CAPITOLSIEGERELIGION

As soon as video and images of the insurrection became available, scholars of religion began archiving the religious artifacts present at the riot. Writer and Smithsonian curator Peter Manseau started #capitolsiegereligion in order to archive them under one hashtag.

Examining these artifacts, you can't help but notice the pervasiveness of Christian imagery, symbols, rituals at the insurrection. The video and photographs show that Trump flags of various kinds waving throughout the mob, but mixed into the crowd are various religious banners. One of the most popular was "Jesus Is My Savior, Trump Is My President." Other images show people waving "Jesus Saves" and "God, Guts, Guns" flags throughout the crowd. In one landscape photo showing a facade of the Capitol overrun by rioters, the Christian flag flies amid a sea of Confederate flags, Gadsden flags (a rattlesnake and the inscription "Don't Tread on Me" on a yellow background), and Trump flags.

At least one rioter carried the *Deus Vult* flag—a red medieval cross on a white background. As the scholar of religion Matthew Gabriele observes it, “The red cross on a white field was supposedly the uniform of the medieval Christian crusaders, exemplified perhaps best in the military religious order of the Knights Templar—a group founded in the early 12th century as a kind of permanent warrior class to defend the frontiers of Christendom against its perceived enemies.” At the insurrection, it underscored the way in which the White Christians in attendance saw themselves as warriors, protecting the nation.

Flags weren’t the only religious artifacts manifest at the insurrection. Some of the most violent perpetrators wore vest patches with a portion of Psalm 144 that read “Blessed be God, My Rock Who Trains My Hands for Battle, My Fingers for War.” One man wore a biker-style leather jacket that read “God, Guns, and Trump.” Some rioters went the extra backbreaking mile to cart around statues of Mary and Jesus as they paraded in and around the Capitol. At least one person improvised by attaching a large crucifix to a Trump flag. Others carried paintings. There was one of a White Nordic-looking Christ with the inscription “Jesus I Trust in You.” One rioter put all their cards on the table by carrying around a large poster of a European-looking Jesus wearing a MAGA hat.

And those gallows? Close-up images show the inscriptions that rioters left on the frame: “God Bless America” and “In God We Trust.” Next to these inscriptions someone else wrote “Amen,” agreeing with the sentiments written on an instrument meant to assassinate the vice president of the United States.

“By building the gallows, they signaled that they were done with democracy,” writes the scholar of evangelicalism Anthea Butler. “Murder was the only way they could put Trump back into office. Rather than prayer, rather than engaging in a democratic process in the next election, murder was the choice they made.”

In contrast to the murderous spirit in the air, the insurrection was marked by impromptu praise and prayer sessions. It wasn’t that

rioters chose one or the other. Rather, the insurrectionists used prayer and other rituals to justify murderous intention. Every time the mob crossed a new boundary—past another police barricade or through another doorway or up a flight of steps—certain rioters stopped to pray and thank God. One video clip shows a dozen or so people gathered on the Capitol lawn, near the police barrier, singing along with Kari Jobe’s “Revelation Song,” a popular praise and worship song in White evangelical congregations. In the frame, a woman wears a Trump flag as a cape while she sings, her hands raised over her head. Once rioters advanced past security and to the boundary of the building, they stopped to pray again. Couy Griffin, a county commissioner from Otero County, New Mexico, and founder of “Cowboys for Trump,” led a throng of rioters in prayer, claiming the sacred space of American democracy in the name of patriots and their God. After he breached Capitol security barriers, Otero used his bullhorn to pray and proclaim January 6 “a great day for America.”

In the Senate Chamber, the infamous QAnon Shaman, Jacob Angeli—shirtless, wearing horns on his head, adorned with blue face paint, and carrying an American flag on a spear—led the rioters in prayer: “Let’s all say a prayer in this sacred space,” he said, as he gathered them on and around the Senate dais. “Thank you, Heavenly Father, for this opportunity to stand up for our God-given inalienable rights,” he prayed. “To all the tyrants, the communists, the globalists: this is our nation, not theirs. We will not allow the American way to go down. Thank you for filling this chamber with patriots that love you.” After praying, Angeli left a note for then vice president Pence that read, “It’s only a matter of time, justice is coming.”

One of the most visible religious symbols throughout the riot was the shofar, an ancient instrument made from the horn of an animal such as a ram and used in Jewish religious rituals. In recent decades Pentecostal Christians like the event organizer Robert Weaver, as well as My Pillow CEO Mike Lindell and Trump’s spiritual adviser Paula White have adopted the shofar in worship, appropriating it

from Jewish rituals as a weapon of spiritual warfare meant to ward off God's enemies. The scholar of religion Leah Payne notes the significance of the numerous shofars on display at the January 6 insurrection: "Shofarists draped in American flags and dancing to the Contemporary Christian culture war anthem 'God's Not Dead' on January 6th, 2021, confounded many outside observers," writes Payne. "But those familiar with the Pentecostal and charismatic communities who tie the United States to Israel to the apocalypse recognized the ritual's logic: blowing the shofar is an ancient Jewish act of war on behalf of Donald J. Trump."

Such ritual acts are no accident. Even amid the chaos of the riot, many in the crowd felt the need to stop to pray as they crossed into the inner depths of the congressional chamber. They recognized their entering the Capitol as a crossing-over—a breach of protocol, an occupation. The rituals of chanting, singing, and praying enabled them to collectively and psychologically transform the Capitol space into their own. As the theorist of religion Thomas Tweed maintains, religion "maps social space. It draws boundaries around us and them; it constructs collective identity and, concomitantly, imagines degrees of social distance."

Thus, when the QAnon Shaman thanked God for filling the Senate chamber with patriots who defend the American way and listed the globalists, communists, and tyrants as enemies of God, he drew boundaries around who is a true citizen and who is not. He provided a story that placed the rioters in the role of God-ordained citizens, turning them all into something like "Joshuas" defending the country from invaders and enemies. The Senate chamber became theirs to inhabit because they were on the side of the Almighty. Scholar Russell McCutcheon describes this kind of prayer as the act of granting an extraordinary reason for an otherwise ordinary thing.

In his writing on the January 6 insurrection, Peter Manseau argues that the rioters had a "permission structure" that provided the psychological mechanism needed to justify killing police officers

and erecting gallows for the vice president. “Even for those without strong Christian convictions, the pervasive religious imagery provided both a permission structure and a psychological safety net that allowed self-declared patriots to rampage through a space they supposedly held sacred,” Manseau writes. “If any had second thoughts as they charged up the Capitol steps, they perhaps needed only to see a Bible thrust in the air above the crowd to be put at ease. How could a righteous mob be wrong?”

The Christian flags, symbols, rituals, and Bible verses gave the rioters’ actions a sense of divine permission, reassuring them that the desacralization of the Capitol was actually a sanctification of the American way. Through rituals of their White Christian nationalist faith, many insurrectionists rendered the profane act of desecrating the Capitol into a sacred act of reclamation on behalf of real Americans.

“WE ARE JOSHUAS”

The story of Joshua leading the Israelites in their siege of Jericho is a story of conquest and desolation. It’s also a story about eradicating the other: the foreign interloper who has taken your place, the people group who has no right to your land.

It’s so familiar to me—and I suspect many of the people who took part in the Jericho Marches and the insurrection itself—that it’s easy to unconsciously glaze over its brutality and xenophobia. In the text, Joshua leads a group of people into a territory already occupied by the Canaanites. He and his followers believe that God has granted them rights to the territory. In a vision, Joshua is told to march around the corrupt city of Jericho in order that its walls might come tumbling down.

This is where most Christians either stop reading the text and start spiritualizing it. They see a bold act of faith. They are inspired by the willingness to abandon ordinary logic in order to witness extraordinary events. Some pastors and Bible teachers weasel out of

confronting this passage by claiming that God wanted to root out corruption and idolatry rather than violence and the destruction of human life.

Yet when the Israelites overtook through Jericho, they destroyed everything. Men. Women. Children. Animals. Every living thing was annihilated. They were willing to ravage the city and ferociously exterminate all its Canaanite inhabitants in order to fulfill the mission and promise that had been granted to them by the Most High. There is no mercy or grace in Joshua 6, no patience or kindness or forgiveness. The central lesson from the text is that if God commands you to take what he has given to you and to no one else, then the proper response is to eradicate anyone and anything that stands in your way. Once the gates fall, your mission is to ransack the city—not only to make it yours, but to make sure no one dares challenge your proper place as the God-given rulers of the territory: “They devoted the city to the Lord and destroyed with the sword every living thing in it—men and women, young and old, cattle, sheep and donkeys” (Joshua 6:21). Some Christians have reclaimed the story for liberatory purposes, using it as inspiration to overcome enslavement or oppression. Some have attributed the annihilation of the Canaanites to the Israelites’ xenophobia rather than to God’s command. Despite these readings, when Joshua 6 is employed by a dominant group trying to justify its violent rampage against others, it is hard to escape its viciousness.

Any honest accounting of the January 6 insurrection—one that takes seriously the religious symbols and language of the rioters—must reckon with the very real sense in which many of the rioters, perhaps including Leandra Blades, were reenacting key parts of the Jericho narrative. By locating themselves in the position of Joshua and the Israelites, the MAGA faithful rewrote the story. In this version, Jericho, the occupied city, is transformed into the United States of America. Instead of attacking a city filled with foreign gods, the assailants are entering the corrupted sacred spaces of the American

republic in order to root out the idols that stand in the way of another Trump presidency.

Even those who didn't see themselves as modern-day Joshuas used religious rituals and symbols at the insurrection to draw boundaries and create divisions between "us" and "them." The stories, prayers, chants, and Bible verses enabled them to play the part of righteous crusaders retaking a country that has been occupied by their enemies: "communists," "socialists," "globalists," "antifa," "Black Lives Matter," "baby killers," "feminists," "tyrants," and the politicians who support them. In this narrative, they were not laying waste to a city, as barbarians at the gate; they were reconquering what has been promised to them. Their violent actions were not random acts of brutality; they were holy acts of war against God's and America's (and by default, Trump's) enemies.

The bloodthirsty aura that pervaded January 6 is reminiscent of Joshua 6. When I reflect on that day, I ask the same questions that the irksome kid in Sunday school used to bring up when we finished a lesson on the walls of Jericho of falling down. If the patriots trying to save the country didn't want to do anything except root out corruption, why did they act so violently? If the storming of the Capitol wasn't about punishing enemies but ensuring God's will would be done in the election, why did they erect gallows for Mike Pence and attempt to hunt down Nancy Pelosi, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, and Mitt Romney? If they wanted to push back the spiritual powers, why did they think they had to desecrate the holy sanctuary of American democracy?

Because the goal was domination, not simply rooting out corruption. One doesn't erect gallows and express the desire to kill the Speaker of the House for anything less than vengeance. In Joshua 6 and on January 6, the walls falling down is only the cover of the story. The spiritual lesson is a way to glaze over the real meaning of the narrative: When God gives you a mission, you have the right—no, the directive—to vanquish your enemies.

The video footage from January 6 is breathtaking in its scope and horror. This was not a group of patriots patiently trying to make their way into the Capitol. This was not a sit-in or a silent, peaceful act of resistance or a nonviolent expression of the freedom of assembly and freedom of speech. It was a mob released from inhibition and fear, ready to overtake anyone or anything that stood in the way of them taking back their country.

In essence, the January 6 insurrection was a religious ritual carried out by the Americans who believe they have a God-given right to rule the country. For them, a siege of the most important space in United States government was a crusade against the enemies of the United States. The framework that guided them was Christian nationalism. And the story of Jericho provides a window into the spiritual mechanics of the most traitorous attack on the country in modern history.

“We are Joshuas. And we need the sound of praise to bring down the walls of the Swamp,” said Julia Bithorn, from Knoxville, Tennessee, at the first Jericho March on December 12, 2020. As she spoke, Julia and her sister were marching around the Supreme Court with thousands of other rallygoers, surrounded by raised Christian and Trump flags and the echoes of shofars. “This is not gloom and doom. This is the glory of God being revealed,” she explained. “We’ve come here to bind the enemy in the name of Jesus.”

