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Chapter 10

MAGA MYTHS

“WE ALL LIVE ACCORDING to myths. It’s just a matter of which ones.” I say something like this every semester in my introduction to religion courses. Some of my students are nonreligious science majors, and when I say this, they look at me like I’m insane. In their minds, they are rational people who live according to data and evidence and history.

“If you don’t want to live by myths, I have a solution,” I goad them. They look at me expectantly. “Thanksgiving is next week. We have three days off. Many of you are going home to see family for the first time since the summer. But we all know that the Thanksgiving holiday is based on a set of events that included the murder and betrayal of Native American peoples *and* that the history is hardly what we make it out to be. The holiday is built off a fragment of historical truth—a myth, we could call it—and one that is in many ways tragic.”

At this point the room is a mix of disappointment and realization. Many of them understand that they are implicated. “So, if y’all want to stand up and quit living by this myth, let’s stage a sit-in,” I continue. “All of us in this room could demand that our school no longer

recognize the holiday. Everyone get their phones out right now. Call your moms. Tell them you aren't coming home."

Nervous laughter fills the room. They can't tell if I'm serious.

"Come on, y'all! Let's do this."

No one bites. They want the time off. The myth allows them to see their loved ones at a hard point in the semester. The food they'll eat at Thanksgiving is comforting. Many of them have traditions of cooking with their grandma or playing football with friends before Thanksgiving dinner. Even if they know the myth isn't historically accurate, it's too much to give it all up.

As opposed to conspiracy theories, myths are often based in history, rooted in fact, but marked by elaboration and imagination that turns them into something else. A myth, above all, is a story that organizes our lives. "We all tell stories about who we are, where we came from, and how we should live," I tell the class. "Humans live through narratives that are often made up of facts—and more."

Myths inform the present by teaching lessons that help individuals and communities form their identities, cultivate virtues, and give an account of who they are that stretches from the generations before them to the ones they anticipate will follow. In essence, myths are a narrative version of some past set of events—like the Israelites marching around the city of Jericho—that motivates the present and helps cast a vision for the future. From Adam and Eve, to the tale of the first American Thanksgiving, to Paul Revere riding through the night to warn that "the British are coming!," myths are powerful because they open space for us to participate in something bigger than ourselves and to locate our feelings and passions in a collective memory. Myths give us room to perform who we are—or who we want to be—and in turn to create the world as we think it should be. In this sense, myths are a bridge between the world as we encounter it and the world we think should exist.

And for all these reasons, myths can be wondrous and life-affirming. Myths can give our identities texture and richness. In the

evolutionary perspective, myths enabled humans to work together to accomplish tasks that transcended the individual—to work together to accomplish tasks greater than ourselves. When Martin Luther King Jr. said that “the arc of the universe bends toward justice,” he espoused a myth that inspires Americans of different backgrounds to play a part in that story—to be characters in the narrative of universal justice. The story provides not only an ideal to work toward but a community—what King called the “beloved community”—in which to participate.

But myths can also be dangerous. The world humans often want to create is brutal and vicious, and the stories we live by sometimes make us the worst version of ourselves. The martyrs, relics, and stories that have grown out of the January 6 insurrection are more powerful than many outsiders to White Christian nationalism realize, and they are shaping a dangerous future.

THE POST-J6 WORLD WE COULD HAVE HAD

Let’s imagine a world in which the January 6 insurrection had been taken seriously. What if a consensus about the event had developed among a wide swath of leaders? What if our leaders had dealt with January 6 as a coup attempt by an aggrieved former president unwilling to cede power? If they had done that, we would have seen the second impeachment lead to conviction. Trump and his cronies could have been prosecuted for conspiracy or treason, and up to a dozen members of Congress could have been expelled and possibly prosecuted. All members of both the Senate and the House would have condemned the lie that Trump actually won the election, and we would have seen Republican leaders—from Congress to state legislatures to city councils and school boards across the country—disavow Trump and his movement.

Imagine if we had heard that White Catholic priests and evangelical ministers—including Franklin Graham, Robert Jeffress, and Paula White—had joined the multifaith coalition of religious

leaders, such as Bishop William Barber, Imam Omar Suleiman, and Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg, who condemned both the insurrection and the Big Lie. What if we had witnessed them asking their followers to accept the election results as lawful and legitimate, to pray for the new president, and to ask God to heal the United States as it recovers from the treachery of the Capitol riot and other violence?

Finally, we the people could have denounced it wholeheartedly. What if Americans of all backgrounds had held gatherings to mourn the deaths of the police officers? What if there had been nonviolent rallies calling on citizens to show their support of American democracy and the peaceful transfer of power? We could have had a moment of national unity—something so rare in the Trump era and over the last two decades. Like millions of Americans of all backgrounds did in the aftermath of 9/11, we could have chosen to come together as a national body, in the wake of January 6, in the face of a threat to our way of life.

But that is not what happened.

The Big Lie has grown more expansive and powerful since January 6, 2021, because local and national politicians, religious leaders, and media figures have used it to foment the resentment and rage of MAGA Nation. They realized early on that the mob wasn't ready to let go of their grievance and hatred, and so they kept giving those emotions space to grow by telling the story of the stolen election and the country taken from "real Americans." All but a few of the Republican members of Congress who initially condemned Trump and the insurrection have changed course. They are back to supporting the former president and hoping for his support in return; some are offering revisionist histories of J6, calling it a "normal tourist visit" or blaming the violence on antifa and other groups. Fox News host Tucker Carlson produced a documentary on January 6 that frames the coup attempt as a false flag operation—an act made to look like it was planned by one's opponents in order to place blame on them. Some megachurch pastors and spiritual leaders continue to fuel the

fires of the Big Lie in sermons and at rallies. For many Americans, even those who didn't riot on J6 and who think that such violence is wrong, the myth of the stolen election has become the bridge to building back their nation.

As a result, we now face a stark question: What if January 6 was not the end of an era but the beginning of one? What if it was not the last gasp of a movement devoted to a leader on his way out but the start of a more extreme iteration of MAGA terrorism? What if January 6 is not history we are now viewing safely via the rearview mirror but the basis for a new civil war?

Trump may have lost the presidency, and the January 6 insurrection may not have prevented the certification of the 2020 election. But these setbacks, like the Goldwater defeat in 1964, do not spell the end of White Christian nationalism. They do not represent the finale of MAGA Nation. Instead, these temporary defeats may be exactly what the movement needs to overcome America as we know it.

TRUMPISM IS A LOST CAUSE

Americans went to the polls on November 3, 2021. But due to close races in Pennsylvania, Arizona, Georgia, and Wisconsin, Joe Biden wasn't declared president until November 7. By then, Trump's Big Lie was already gaining steam. He tweeted that Democrats had stolen votes "where it matters," and by contrast to theirs, all the votes for him were "legal." He called the election a fraud and urged supporters not to accept the results.

Even in those early postelection days, it wasn't hard to see how the myth of a stolen election would gain traction among his base. As political theorist Hannah Arendt says in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, "In an ever-changing, incomprehensible world the masses had reached the point where they would, at the same time, believe everything and nothing, think that everything was possible and that nothing was true. . . . Mass propaganda discovered that its audience

was ready at all times to believe the worst, no matter how absurd, and did not particularly object to being deceived because it held every statement to be a lie anyhow.”

According to analysis from the *Washington Post*, Trump told approximately thirty thousand lies or falsehoods during his presidency. He claimed COVID was under control, that Representative Ilhan Omar supports Al-Qaeda, that millions of people voted illegally in California for the 2016 election, that windmills cause cancer, and that the crowds at his inauguration were the largest in history. He even claimed that his tweet of “covfefe” had a secret meaning rather than just admitting it was a typo. His loyal base never wavered as over and over again, he shaped reality to his own liking. Instead, they found in the web of untruths a world they wanted to exist—and thus ones they pursued.

What we have witnessed since the 2020 election, and certainly since January 6, 2021, is *mythmaking in real time*. National myths often develop slowly, over several generations, so that by the time they wield power over any of us as individuals, we are fuzzy on the details of the origin story. But in the space of a few short months, we watched the formation of a story in which MAGA Nation is playing the role of aggrieved citizens who had their country stolen from them.

The Big Lie is one narrative piece of a larger myth, and the United States has suffered the consequences of this larger myth before. After the Civil War, the Confederate myth of the Lost Cause—which has startling resonances with Trump’s Big Lie—took root in the South and then spread throughout the country, with disastrous results.

The period known as Reconstruction (1865–1877) saw the passage of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments, which abolished slavery and granted equal citizenship to Black Americans. In the years after the war, the nation witnessed Black Americans’ integration into southern political life. Local chapters of the Union League and other organizations mobilized Black voters and fostered Black candidates for local and state elections. In 1868, South

Carolina had a Black-majority state legislature, and in 1870, Hiram Revels of Mississippi became the first Black American to serve in the United States Senate. For a short while, it seemed that liberty and justice for all was an attainable legal goal.

In the late 1860s and early 1870s, however, White southerners developed the notion of the Confederacy as the Lost Cause to combat the “radical” changes taking root in Dixie. According to proponents of the Lost Cause, the South was the victim of an invasion by “Yankee vandals,” as Caroline Janney, a University of Virginia historian, phrases it. In response, they framed themselves as occupying the moral high ground in the conflict—a class of honorable and loyal families who defended their soil and way of life in the face of undue northern aggression. To make their case, they argued that slavery was not the real issue of the war but rather a pretext for a political and economic power grab by the North.

Like the myth of the stolen election, these claims are historically untenable. But the historical realities were less important to the power of the myth among its adherents than the stories, rituals, and symbols that developed in conjunction with the Lost Cause. As Charles Reagan Wilson, a southern historian, has shown, Lost Cause mythology was enacted through the rituals of Confederate civil religion: the funerals of Confederate soldiers, the celebration of Confederate Memorial Day, the pilgrimages made to the hundreds of Confederate monuments that had been erected by the dawn of World War I. The rituals and symbols instilled in the younger generation a sense of the nobility of the Confederacy and the moral vacancy of its enemies. Together, they supported a myth that was deeply religious in nature and that, for many southerners, supplanted the historical record. The men who died in battle became its martyrs. The generals became its patron saints.

The civil components of the Lost Cause were combined with Christian mythology. The South played the part of Christ in the Christian drama—crucified, yet unrisen. The heroes of the Confederacy—most notably Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson—were saints in

this Lost Cause theology. Scholar of southern religion Paul Harvey put it this way: “Key to this mythology was the exalting of southern war heroes as Christian evangelical gentlemen. Evangelists of the New South era immortalized the Christian heroism of the Confederate leaders and soldiers and dovetailed them into revivals of the era.” Regardless of denominational affiliation, the Lost Cause offered a story and a set of high holy days every White southerner could celebrate.

The Lost Cause exerted immense influence over American law, foreign policy, and culture for a century after its inception. In *How the South Won the Civil War*, historian Heather Cox Richardson argues persuasively that even though the Union defeated the Confederacy on the battlefield, the South actually won the war. By using the Lost Cause myth, southern Whites were able to cultivate the reemergence of the Ku Klux Klan and create the context for Jim Crow laws. The myth then spread west to provide fuel for the Chinese Exclusion Act and acts of violence against Native Americans—all on the basis of resentment, ritual, and symbol rather than facts or historical truth. The Lost Cause didn’t whimper and die in the face of historical criticism. It persisted, and it grew. Generation after generation of White people used it to justify a world of prejudice and injustice—an America where White Christians remained at the top of America’s political and cultural hierarchies, from sea to shining sea.

The Lost Cause is an example of how myth works. Even if myths draw on a measure of reality, they aren’t primarily about historical accuracy. Myths are preoccupied with the past and based on a desire to mobilize a vision for the present and create a prospect for the future. A myth shapes reality through ritual, which dramatizes its story and brings its adherents into collective participation.

When Trump supporters took hold of the Capitol, temporarily halting the counting of the electoral college votes, they brought the fiction down on the levers of government through temporary mob rule. But the enactment of the myth of the Big Lie did not stop

when dusk fell on January 6. In fact, January 6, and the way it is being remembered, has given the myth of the stolen election the martyrs, the sacred objects, and the rituals that any good myth needs to survive. January 6 made space for MAGA Nation to create a new American reality.

MAGA MARTYRS

Ashli Babbitt was killed during the siege on the Capitol. A US military veteran, Babbitt had for months said on her social media feeds that the 2020 election was stolen from Trump. She arrived at the Capitol on January 5 to participate in the Stop the Steal rally the next day. On January 6, Babbitt was the first to climb through a broken window leading into the Speakers' Lobby, near to where members of Congress were hiding, and was shot by a Capitol Police officer. If one considers the January 6 riot as an attempted coup inspired by the former president, it's natural to view Babbitt as someone who lost her life in the midst of a traitorous attack on American democracy. When John Hinckley Jr. tried to assassinate Ronald Reagan, no one, including Reagan's political opponents, tried to make him out to be a misunderstood hero or a sympathetic figure. He was seen as a threat to national security.

Yet in MAGA circles, Babbitt has become a martyr in the quest to retake the stolen country. "Who was the person who shot an innocent, wonderful, incredible woman?" Trump asked Fox pundit Maria Bartiromo. "I will tell you, they know who shot Ashley [sic] Babbitt. They're protecting that person. I've heard also that it was the head of security for a certain high official—a Democrat."

This is mythmaking in real time. Trump turns Babbitt into an innocent female victim, despite the fact that she was attempting to enter the chambers where the Speaker and other members of Congress were sheltering from a violent mob. Next, the story becomes that the person who shot her is MAGA Nation's enemy—a security

officer for a Democrat. Trump offers no evidence, but it doesn't matter. Everyone listening got the idea in just a short paragraph: Ashli Babbitt was an innocent woman who died at the hand of a nefarious political opponent who stands against Trump and the real Americans trying to reinstate him to the presidency.

"We all saw the hand, we saw the gun," Trump said. "You know, if that were on the other side, the person that did the shooting would be strung up and hung. OK? Now they don't want to give the name. . . . It's a terrible thing, right? Shot. Boom. And it's a terrible thing."

Fox News host Tucker Carlson expanded on Trump's martyr myth. "Who *did* shoot Ashli Babbitt and why don't we know?" Carlson asked on his show, which averages four million viewers. "Are anonymous federal agents now allowed to kill unarmed women who protest the regime? That's OK now? No, it's not OK." Again, Carlson's crafted narrative provides the foundation for turning Babbitt into a martyr for the MAGA cause. The words "unarmed" and "regime" frame Babbitt as a righteous protester standing up to an unjust government rather than a violent perpetrator taking part in the worst attack on the American Capitol since it almost burned down during the War of 1812.

Trump and Carlson weren't the only ones memorializing Babbitt. "Trying to find the name of a woman that was gunned down by Capitol Police today," wrote Larry Brock, who identifies as a 3 Percenter and an Oathkeeper, which are both violent far-right militia groups, on Facebook on the night of January 6: "She was unarmed and is the first Patriot Martyr in the Second American Revolution."

Since then, the image of the "first Patriot Martyr" has been used as a totem for MAGA Nation's remembrance of January 6 as well as by right-wing groups propagating antigovernment and White supremacist messages. Her face appears on the flag used as the symbol for the proposed "Million Martyr March" on January 20, 2021, a rally at the Capitol meant to remember and celebrate those jailed and "persecuted" as a result of the insurrection. US representative Paul

Gosar from Arizona tweeted a picture of Babbitt in May 2021 with the words: “They took her life. They could not take her pride.” The Anti-Defamation League reports that “posts across platforms have specifically noted Babbitt’s race, one such post referring to her as ‘a brave white woman’ and the white supremacist National Partisan Movement Telegram channel posted a memorial image with the text ‘Rest in White Power.’”

Babbitt is not MAGA Nation’s only January 6 martyr. Since the insurrection, more than seven hundred alleged rioters have been arrested. Some were still imprisoned as of 2022 on felony charges of conspiracy. In the eyes of many Trump supporters, the jailed insurrectionists have become political prisoners.

“Our hearts and minds are with the people being persecuted so unfairly,” former president Trump said in a statement in September 2021. According to Trump, they are being unfairly treated for their participation in a “protest concerning the Rigged Presidential Election.” In the summer of 2021, Representatives Paul Gosar, Marjorie Taylor Greene, Louie Gohmert, and Matt Gaetz made headlines when they tried to visit the jailed rioters to check up on the conditions of their confinement and ensure their safety. “We have concerns about reports of the conditions of the prison where these detainees are being held and whether, in fact, there have been instances of abuse inflicted by other prisoners or guards,” Gaetz, Greene, Gosar, and Gohmert said in a joint statement. Madison Cawthorn, the twenty-five-year-old freshman congressperson from North Carolina, said he would like to “try and bust them out” of prison. On November 5, 2021, QAnon supporter and Georgia representative Marjorie Taylor Greene visited the rioters in jail—the “Patriot Wing,” as she called it. According to Greene, the prisoners are receiving “virtually no medical care, very poor food quality, and being put through re-education which most of them are rejecting.” In perhaps the most startling declaration, the Republican Party labeled the actions of rioters on January 6 as “legitimate political discourse.”

There have been rallies around the country, including in New York and Washington DC, for the jailed rioters. Organizers compared their conditions to those of prisoners at Guantanamo Bay. In a letter from prison, one insurrectionist explained that he and his fellow insurrectionists “are just regular freedom-loving Americans, with a tendency towards humorous shenanigans.”

Making martyrs out of the jailed rioters is strategic. Martyrs are the exemplars of myth. They are the figures who embody the virtues that the community must emulate in order to create their ideal world. As the scholar of right-wing movements Daniel Koehler says, dying for the cause is “usually connected to a heroic fight to the death against ideological enemies, who in the end are responsible for the martyr’s death or ideological steadfastness.” Ashli Babbitt is now valorized as the first “Patriot Martyr” of the MAGA Lost Cause. She exemplifies the sacrifice necessary to take back the country. The jailed rioters are its political heroes, celebrated for their suffering at the hands of a fraudulent government.

MAGA RELICS

On October 13, 2021, supporters of Virginia gubernatorial candidate Glenn Youngkin held a rally in Richmond, Virginia. While Youngkin didn’t attend, a number of MAGA heavyweights led the rally. Former president Trump addressed the crowd via a recorded message, and his former adviser Steve Bannon was the headline speaker.

But their presence isn’t what makes the rally worth remembering. When the rally got underway, an American flag that, the crowd was told, a “patriot” had carried at the January 6 insurrection was brought to the front and raised on stage. Rallygoers then participated in the pledge of allegiance to what, in essence, became the January 6 American flag.

It was an impromptu ritual, created from the fabric of the traditional American pledge of allegiance, but imbued with new and

startling meaning. As the rally attendees pledged allegiance to the American flag, they also pledged allegiance to the nation that Trump, Trump's team, and the rioters tried to create during the failed coup.

The American flag to which they pledged allegiance that day became more than an item of ceremony; it became a sacred object. As the scholar of religion Mircea Eliade explains, sacred objects exceed their bounds. They are more than just fabric, wood, or stone. "The sacred tree, the sacred stone are not adored as stone or tree; they are worshipped precisely because they are hierophanies, because they show something that is no longer stone or tree but the sacred." A hierophany is an event that unveils the sacred. It reveals objects, lands, people, and words to be set apart and special. For those pledging allegiance to the January 6 flag, the American flag—already a sacred object—became more than an object of American patriotism. January 6 turned it into a symbol of a sacred battle and the holy mission of MAGA Nation. The flag expanded into an object that manifests the story that Trump's followers are living out—one in which an election is stolen and a group of Americans attempts to overthrow a fraudulent government. In the wake of temporary defeat, the flag reminds them, God's patriots continue the war by remembering the lives lost in battle and the righteous cause for which they fight.

ONLY THE BEGINNING

In the days following the attack, prominent Republicans denounced the riot and Trump's actions. Minority leader Kevin McCarthy said, "The president bears responsibility for Wednesday's attack on Congress by mob rioters. He should have immediately denounced the mob when he saw what was unfolding. These facts require immediate action by President Trump." Senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, a staunch Trump ally throughout the former president's term, said he had never been so humiliated for the country. Their rhetoric shifted, however, once it became clear that Trump and his mob

would continue to determine the fate of the GOP on local, state, and national levels.

Republicans refused to support a bipartisan investigative commission focused on January 6. According to Senator Ron Johnson of Wisconsin, the rioters are “people that love this country, that truly respect law enforcement.” Representative Jody Hice of Georgia went a step further by claiming, “It was Trump supporters who lost their lives that day, not Trump supporters who were taking the lives of others.” Not to be outdone by his Peach State colleague, Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene said in a speech on the House floor that “the people who breached the Capitol on Jan. 6 are being abused.” A third congressperson from Georgia, Andrew Clyde, described the riot as a “normal tourist visit.”

Public opinion about January 6 shifted dramatically in the year after it happened. Whereas 80 percent of polled Republicans condemned the insurrection in January 2021, by the summer of 2021, more than 50 percent of them were labeling it an act of patriotism and “defending freedom.” By September 2021, 78 percent of Republicans believed that the election had been stolen. In a Pew Research poll from the same month, researchers found that “only about [a] quarter of Republicans (27%) view the prosecution of the rioters as very important; six months ago, half said this was very important.”

The danger here is clear: When leaders mythologize January 6, they not only tell inaccurate accounts of what happened that day, accounts that belie the overwhelming photographic and video evidence of the violent mob attacking Capitol Police. They also erode trust in democratic institutions and insinuate that the ensuing presidential administration, and perhaps other elected officials, have been elected fraudulently. They are also fomenting public opinion against those attempting to prosecute the perpetrators of the failed coup.

The myth, in other words, creates sympathy for the insurrectionists, and it legitimates the MAGA movement’s violence. History shows us that this can have tragic consequences.

STABBING DEMOCRACY IN THE BACK

In 1918, German politicians and generals began discussing surrender in World War I. They were militarily outmatched and wanted to avoid the invasion of German towns and villages by the Allied forces. For many Germans, however, surrender seemed ridiculous. When they looked around, Germany seemed as powerful as ever. War had not reached their homeland. They couldn't see the destruction or defeat happening on the battle fronts. For a century their country had proved to be the dominant military and political force in Europe. Why would their leaders decide now to humiliate the nation? Some found the facts simply too much to bear.

In response, they turned to a series of insidious myths, first to one offered by the head of the German army, General Erich Ludendorff, who blamed politicians, Marxists, and others for sabotaging the German military effort. The lie quickly circulated among both civilians and military. The *Dolchstoßlegenden*, or “stab-in-the-back” myths, offered an explanation of the present situation by claiming that traitorous politicians, Jews, and foreigners had stabbed Germany in the back by intentionally leading it to military failure. The defeat, in other words, was a false flag operation meant to destroy Germany from within.

When Germany signed the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, thereby agreeing to harsh economic, political, and military terms of surrender, the stab-in-the-back myths offered convenient explanations as to how the greatest force in Europe could be defeated—and be willing to agree to such humiliating terms. The only way, the myth instructed, was by sabotage and fraud. “It was especially incomprehensible that Germany, in just a couple of years, had gone from one of the world's most respected nations to its biggest loser,” notes German journalist Jochen Bittner.

The myth was weaponized against German Jews, who became, in the minds of many Germans, the group to blame for Germany's traitorous surrender and acceptance of the Treaty of Versailles. By

the early 1920s, the historian Klaus Schwabe observes, “the image of a *Dolchstoß* (stab in the back) became common currency in the public discourse. By implication, it indicted democracy as inadequate in dealing with military problems.”

In the wake of World War I, Germany’s first democracy, the Weimar Republic, was formed in 1919. But it was fragile and marked by internal turmoil across the vanquished nation. Different political factions and parties developed platforms and movements that they believed would return Germany to glory. One of them was the German National Socialist Party, also known as the Nazi Party. Founded in 1919 just after the war, the Nazis originally appealed to working-class Germans who had seen their economic status and national pride stripped from them. In 1921, the party was handed over in the form of a one-person dictatorship to the charismatic, cunning, and narcissistic young leader Adolf Hitler.

Hitler shaped the Nazis into a hypernationalist, anti-immigrant, and anti-Semitic party. He used the stab-in-the-back-myths to justify his hatred of Jews and his call to replace the Weimar Republic with a government—and a leader—that could avenge Germany’s economic, military, and political humiliation. “The literal term ‘stab-in-the-back’ (*Dolchstoß*) does not appear in his autobiography *Mein Kampf*, but he referred to it in many of his speeches and publications, at times, even verbally,” notes Klaus Schwabe. “Needless to add that other Nazi publications abounded with references to the *Dolchstoß*.”

In 1923 Hitler led thousands of his followers on a march in Munich in an attempt to overthrow the German government in the state of Bavaria—and eventually the entire Weimar Republic. The “Beer Hall Putsch,” as it came to be known, since the insurrectionists set out from a beer hall, famously failed. Sixteen Nazis and four police officers were killed in the attempted coup. Hitler was sentenced to five years in prison, though he only served nine months. By German law, he and some of his coconspirators should have been expelled from the country because they were Austrian rather than German

citizens. Hitler renounced his Austrian citizenship in 1925 and later became a German national. Despite their antagonism to the Weimar Republic—they used the term “Jew Government” to describe it—the judge presiding in the case gave Hitler and his cohorts the minimum sentence and allowed them to remain in the country.

While in jail, Hitler turned into a celebrated political prisoner who received visitors and gained the admiration of even more of the German Right who resented the new postwar reality. Richard Steigmann-Gall, a historian of Nazi Germany, explained it to me this way in a 2020 interview: “He’s found guilty. His term is five years, reduced to less than one for good behavior. And he takes this opportunity in jail to write *Mein Kampf*. And what you see from the photography we have of the period is that he is treated quite well in his prison. He gets visitors, and you know, there’s not what you would think of as the fate of somebody who in a US prison system would be found guilty of treason.”

So despite having been convicted of treason in the courts, Hitler won a key battle in the court of public opinion. The failed coup of 1923 only fueled the stab-in-the-back myth Hitler propagated, and it expanded the Nazi reach to further corners of German politics and society.

In addition to the stab-in-the-back myths, Hitler claimed that democracy was not the best form of government for the German people but rather one forced on them by their enemies after the war. As the 1920s wore on, his politics of resentment took hold in a German populace looking for a figure to lead them back to glory. The stab-in-the-back myths became the “heart of Nazi propaganda,” and thus the basis for violence against anyone who opposed them. Hitler used the myth to cultivate resentment and rage. He railed against democracy in the name of national pride and the greatness of Germany. In other words, he used myth to call his followers to make Germany great again.

When the Great Depression took hold of Germany in 1928, Hitler had already won the war of truth and reality in the public square.

Historical accuracy meant nothing in the face of a national citizenry looking for a story in which to place their rage, grievance, and desire for vengeance. Hitler gave them that story. And so Hitler rose to power. He was installed as chancellor in 1933, a decade after his failed coup attempt. Germany's experiment in democracy failed in the face of an authoritarian leader whose myth telling and charisma had already persuaded the German people to accept anti-Semitic, nationalist, xenophobic Nazi ideology. The traditional German conservatives of the day thought they could mold him for their own purposes. They allowed Hitler and his fringe political coalition to take the seat of power with the naive intent of "riding him like a horse." Instead, ten years after his failed coup, Hitler and the Nazis had conquered Germany's fledgling democracy. The rest is tragic history.

AMERICA'S MYTHICAL FUTURE

Myths are like ivy. They grow in all directions, and after a short time it's not only hard to tell where they came from but almost impossible to root them out. When you cut back one branch or prune away a whole section, the ivy often grows back and expands further. Myths root themselves in the public imagination when they become accepted knowledge that most people refuse to investigate. When a story rises to the level of "Everybody knows that," then it is a myth that exists in public consciousness. It is a shared reality. A foundation of the world in which people live and navigate.

January 6, 2021, could have been the end of MAGA Nation's role in the story of American politics. If politicians, media voices, religious leaders, and celebrities had formed a united front that painted the insurrection as a disqualifying event that barred Trump and anyone who advocated for the attempted coup from serving in political office, our political future might look differently. As it stands, however, it seems that J6 will become the foundational event in a long, perhaps slow-moving attempt to thwart American democracy. Like

the 1923 Beer Hall Putsch in Germany, the 2021 Capitol insurrection may have been a “failure” only for a time, and in name only. When authorities stop a coup attempt, and when that insurrection births martyr stories and rituals and symbols among its adherents, any effort to trim back the myths that led to the coup simply end up stimulating their growth.

Some historians are raising parallels between the Capitol riot and the Beer Hall Putsch. “What if the events of Jan. 6, like the Beer Hall Putsch, only mark the beginning of the rise of the far-right?” asks the historian of World War I Robert Gerwarth. “After all, militant right-wing nationalism as a political force in American life will not disappear. The question is how the Republicans will deal with Trump’s legacy and with his most fanatical supporters.”

We already know how Republicans are dealing with Trump’s legacy. He remains the leader of the party. The Big Lie is the foundation of the MAGA movement. And January 6 is viewed as the first battle in the war for the country. The question is not if there will be another attack on our democracy. The question is when.

