

‘The storm is here’: Ashli Babbitt’s journey from capital ‘guardian’ to invader



Ashli Babbitt, 35, was shot and killed in the Capitol on Wednesday. (Courtesy of Timothy McEntee)

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The politician she revered above all others had lost an election. She’d struggled with crippling amounts of debt. Her home state of California was locking down again because of a virus she believed was fiction.

As she walked east along the Mall on Wednesday, wearing a backpack emblazoned with the American flag, Ashli Babbitt was elated.

“It was amazing to get to see the president talk,” Babbitt said, beaming in a video she streamed on Facebook early Wednesday afternoon that was later published by [TMZ](#). “We are now walking down the inaugural path to the Capitol building. Three million-plus people.”

There was no crowd of three million: just [a mob, lawless and maskless](#), that numbered in the thousands. Babbitt’s mission, which she had repeatedly avowed on social media, was to restore American democracy. But she was about to take part in a riot that would go down in history as one of that democracy’s most grievous attacks.

After a long but undistinguished military career and years of personal travails, Babbitt — a 35-year-old Air Force veteran from Southern California who once supported Barack Obama — believed she had found a cause that gave her life purpose. Within hours, that cause would bring her life to [a violent end](#).

[*Trump supporters storm U.S. Capitol, with one woman killed and tear gas fired*](#)

Hers was the first death reported Jan. 6, when rioters incited by President Trump overran the seat of the U.S. government. In the coming days there would be others. [Brian D. Sicknick](#), a 42-year-old Capitol police officer who died after being injured while trying to push back the mob. Rosanne Boyland, Kevin D. Greeson and Benjamin Phillips, who died of medical emergencies during the chaos.

But it was Babbitt, fatally shot by police as she attempted to leap through the broken window of a door inside the Capitol, whose name would almost instantly become synonymous with the feverish movement that had propelled thousands of Americans to desecrate a pillar of their government.

The Post obtained video showing the chaotic moment before 35-year-old Ashli Babbitt was fatally shot as rioters rushed toward the Speaker's Lobby. (The Washington Post) Her comrades in that movement now call her a martyr and plan to gather at the Washington Monument Saturday to hold a vigil in her name.

Babbitt's journey — illuminated through her extensive social media activity, court and military records, and interviews with some who knew her — was one of paranoid devotion and enthusiasm that only increased as Trump's fortunes waned.

She avidly followed the QAnon conspiracy theory, convinced that Trump was destined to vanquish a cabal of child abusers and Satan-worshipping Democrats. She believed Wednesday would be “the storm,” when QAnon mythology holds that Trump would capture and execute his opponents.

[*Far-right forums that fomented Capitol riots voice glee in aftermath*](#)

Long before she embraced those ideas, Babbitt was on a rocky path. She was loyal but rebellious, devoted to her country but often unable to get along with those who shared it. A believer in American pluck and free enterprise, she struggled in her attempts to run a small pool-service company outside San Diego.

She served more than a decade in the armed forces but chafed under the military hierarchy. Six of those years were spent in an Air National Guard unit whose mandate is to defend the Washington region and respond to civil unrest. Its nickname: the Capital Guardians.

Like so many others, she believed Jan. 6 would be not a day of infamy, but an end to her troubles.

“Nothing will stop us,” she [tweeted](#) Jan. 5. “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!”

It was the last thing she would write.

‘Absolutely unafraid’

She was fed up with her executive officer. It was 2014, and Babbitt — along with much of her Air National Guard unit, then stationed at the Al Dhafra Air Base in the United Arab Emirates — detested him, according to a former staff sergeant in the unit who spoke on the condition of anonymity because he fears backlash online.

But despite her reputation for being outspoken, she kept herself in check. Then one day, the executive officer slipped new papers into a briefing binder shortly before quizzing service members on its contents.

Babbitt asked for permission to speak freely, the former staff sergeant said, and the executive officer granted it — “which was a huge mistake for that captain.”

For the next several minutes, she “let him have it,” the former staff sergeant said. He and other members of the unit watched, riveted, as Babbitt shouted and gesticulated, warning that the officer — who far outranked her — was sapping morale. Another former airman who served with Babbitt said he also witnessed the interaction.

“She was like a dog with a bone,” the former staff sergeant said. “She could never let go of whatever her attention was on, and she was absolutely unafraid of anything.”

Babbitt, who grew up in a small town in the foothills of Southern California’s Cuyamaca Mountains, left similarly strong impressions on others who crossed her path. She was a fast talker, whipping through sentences “like a chinchilla that had just done a line of cocaine,” the staff sergeant said. She escaped punishment for confronting the officer in 2014, according to the airmen who served with her, but it was not the only time that her personality put her at odds with the culture and rules of the military.

She deployed at least seven times, an Air Force journalist [wrote in 2014](#), and relished the opportunity to mentor newer airmen. But discipline issues and insubordination stunted her career, said two former airmen who served with her. She was demoted at least once, they said.

Babbitt left the military in 2016 as a senior airman — a relatively low rank for someone who spent more than a decade in uniform.

The same year, Babbitt spotted her husband Aaron Babbitt’s ex, Celeste Norris, pulling out of a shopping center parking lot in southern Maryland, according to a court petition for a protective order Norris later filed. Babbitt spun her white SUV in a U-turn and began chasing Norris, according to the petition, eventually rear-ending the other woman’s car three times and forcing her to stop.

[Far-right forums that fomented Capitol riots voice glee in aftermath](#)

Babbitt then exited her own car “screaming at me and verbally threatening me,” wrote Norris, who declined to comment for this report. Norris filed a second protective order petition in early 2017, saying Babbitt had followed her home from work and called her “all hours of day and night.”

Some who served with Babbitt kept in touch with her, remembering how fiercely she defended people she cared for. At one point in her life, that meant other service members.

But within a few years of leaving the military, “she had a new cause,” one of her fellow airmen said. “And her cause was QAnon.”



Supporters President Trump fly a U.S. flag with a symbol from the group QAnon as they gather outside the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6. (Win McNamee/Getty Images)

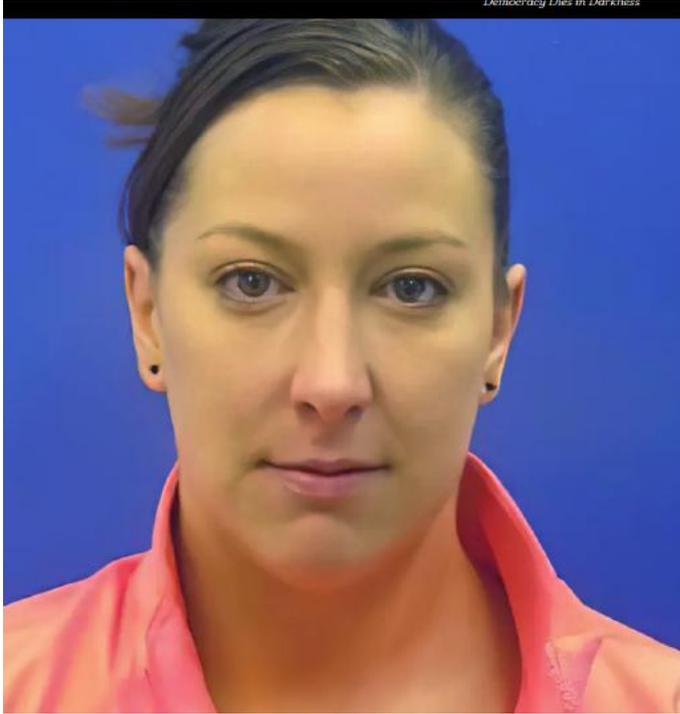
‘Today we save America’

Babbitt would eventually share more than 8,600 tweets, offering a vivid account of her descent into a world of conspiracy theories and delusion, but her first message was addressed to Trump, the man she believed was destined to rescue her country. “#love,” she wrote Oct. 31, 2016, beside his name and above a photo of three signs nailed to a tree: “Make America Great Again,” “H FOR PRISON” and “CHRISTIAN DEPLORABLES LIVE HERE.”

A week later, on Election Day, she wrote to Trump again: “today we save America from the tyranny, collusion and corruption.” When he won, Babbitt cried.

She was an avid viewer of Fox News, praising Tucker Carlson and other far-right media personalities on the network as she derided their liberal targets. A registered Libertarian, she hadn’t always despised Democrats, declaring at least three times in recent years that she voted for Obama.

“I think Obama did great things...I think he jacked some s--- up,” she wrote in November 2018, “but I think he did do a lot of good...at a time where we needed him.” But the man we needed now and for years to come, she had decided, was Trump, and her devotion only grew as she became more obsessed with baseless online propaganda — all while her professional life collapsed.



A Maryland driver's license photo of Ashli Babbitt. (Maryland MVA/Courtesy of the Calvert County Sheriff's Office via AP) (AP)

On July 1, 2019, a judge issued a \$71,000 judgment against her pool business because she had apparently failed to repay a loan. The day before, Babbitt had suggested starting a GoFundMe to pay for Trump's addition to Mount Rushmore, and the day after, she lodged an angry tirade at U.S. Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-N.Y.). "You are losing it," Babbitt wrote, "seriously."

She promoted far-right lies that Hillary Clinton has kidnapped children and described the left as modern-day enslavers. She appeared to use a QAnon hashtag for the first time early last year, parroting the cryptic jargon promoted by its most ardent followers. "The best is yet to come," she wrote Feb. 24. "What is dark will come to light!" she added a month later.

"We have to #SaveTheChildren," she demanded in one post, using a humanitarian hashtag that conspiracy theorists hijacked to promote their claim that a secretive group of elites run a pedophilia ring.



A sign on the door of the Spring Valley, Calif., pool-cleaning business co-owned by Ashli Babbitt, who believed the coronavirus was a hoax.. (REUTERS/Mike Blake)

Her anger appeared to intensify amid the pandemic, which she insisted was a hoax, calling it the “control virus” and “a F---ING JOKE.”

“We are being hoodwinked,” she wrote in July. “The sheep need to wake up.” On Dec. 29, eight days before her death, she discovered a tweet from Vice President-elect Kamala D. Harris promising to distribute more vaccines, promote mask-wearing and get students back to school. “No the f--- you will not!” Babbitt retorted.

In the days leading up to her trip to Washington for the Trump demonstration, however, her online fury receded, replaced with glee and a new sense of mission. She retweeted dozens of figures promoting Trump’s demands that his supporters gather to overturn the election, including Trump supporter Jack Posobiec, QAnon activists, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Donald Trump Jr.

“I will be there tomorrow!” she wrote Jan. 4 in response to another supporter heading to the nation’s capital. “Gods speed!”

She boarded a plane in San Diego the next morning and sat beside Will Carless, a journalist from USA Today who would later film the moment just before the pro-Trump rioters stormed the Capitol. He called her “[gregarious and chatty](#)” and said they talked about a California beach town each of them loved.

The next day, it was overcast and cold in the District. Babbitt dressed in a hooded jacket and put an American flag backpack on her shoulders. She listened to the president tell her and many others that the country could only be taken back with strength, not weakness. Then she marched to the Capitol, surrounded, she said in her final Facebook video, by fellow “patriots.”

Republicans repeatedly made false claims about the election and encouraged unrest ahead of violent scenes in the U.S. Capitol on Dec. 6. (The Washington Post)

“She loved her country, and she was doing what she thought was right to support her country, joining up with like-minded people that also love their president and their country,” her husband told [Fox-5 San Diego](#).

Not long after 2 p.m., he said, he sent her a message to ask how she was doing. She never wrote back.

[*Rioters breached the Capitol as they waved pro-police flags. Police support on the right may be eroding, experts warn.*](#)

A truth affirmed

While her husband was waiting, Babbitt was with the mob that swarmed the lightly staffed barricades surrounding their national legislature. In a scene unlike any in American history, they bashed in the windows of the U.S. Capitol. [They fought with the police](#), screaming and waving Trump campaign flags and Confederate battle flags. They wandered through the halls and chambers of the Capitol as panicked lawmakers sheltered in place or were evacuated. Tear gas canisters were discharged in the Rotunda. And a gun was fired.

Capitol Police were unable to stop a breach of the Capitol. Washington Post reporter Carol Leonnig and a former Senate Sergeant at Arms describe the events. (The Washington Post) It is unclear exactly how and when Babbitt entered the Capitol. She undoubtedly understood law enforcement could use deadly force in response to the breach. Airmen in the role Babbitt once occupied in the D.C. Air National Guard’s 113th Air Wing receive riot-control training, and her former unit was mobilized to protect the Capitol on Wednesday.

But it has since become clear [what happened inside](#): The raging crowd that bashed in the windows of a barricaded door to the Speaker’s Lobby, with a short tanned woman in an American backpack at the front of its ranks. Her attempt to climb through one of those windows, leading the way, despite a Capitol Police officer pointing a handgun in her direction. The abrupt way she toppled backward after a single shot resounded.



U.S. Capitol police officers stand near blood on the floor after demonstrators breached barricades to the Capitol. (Victor J. Blue/Bloomberg)

And it was clear how she left.

At about 3 p.m., a team of paramedics rushed a gurney to an ambulance parked at the southeast corner of the building. On it was Babbitt, staring listlessly in the direction of the building she had just tried to occupy, the place where her dreams of a revitalizing “storm” were supposed to come true.

Blood ran from her nose and covered half of her face. Her eyes were on the verge of closing. Riot police guarded the ambulance as its doors closed and pulled away. And that night — the night Babbitt died far from her home and family — Congress affirmed as true what she had died denying: Donald Trump would not remain president.

Julie Tate, Jennifer Jenkins, Dan Lamothe, Drew Harwell, Justin Jouvenal, Dalton Bennett, Greg Jaffe and Randy Dotinga contributed to this report.