Here they were, a coalition of the willing: deadbeat dads, YouPorn enthusiasts, slow students, and MMA fans. They had heard the rebel yell, packed up their Confederate flags and Trump banners, and GPS-ed their way to Washington. After a few wrong turns, they had pulled into the swamp with bellies full of beer and Sausage McMuffins, maybe a little high on Adderall, ready to get it done. Like Rush Limbaugh before them, they were in search of their own Presidential Medals of Freedom, and like Donald Trump himself, they were ready to relieve themselves on the withering soul of the nation and the marble floors of the Capitol building. Out of darkness we were born and into darkness we were returning.

If they were animated by any idea, it was that America had somehow gone off track. It had something to do with feminism. It had something to do with Obama-ism. It had something to do with “globalism” and “Marxism.” In other words: It’s the Jews again. Didn’t Trump walk through a cloud of tear gas to hold up a Bible when it was all going down in Washington? Wasn’t he the only one holding the line against the Jews and the Blacks and the satanic pedophiles trying to take over the country?

Fired up by the Great Orator, they charged their way into the Capitol building, which turned out to be as heavily fortified as a slice of angel food cake. The proximate aim of the action was to get inside and stop the certification of the Electoral College vote so that Trump could win, the way Marty McFly went back in time to make sure his future parents fell in love so that he could be born. In one widely circulated [video](https://twitter.com/ElijahSchaffer/status/1346881968819105792?utm_source=fbia), police with riot shields tried to block the entry of one group of rioters, who yelled at them, “Pussies! Pussies!” And that was the first sign of some possible incoherence at the heart of the revolution. What was the cops’ manly option? Shooting the rioters? And more important: Isn’t this the pro-cop group, the party of law and order?

*[*[*David A. Graham: This is a coup*](https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/01/attempted-coup/617570/?utm_source=fbia)*]*

Once inside, they were bent on proving themselves fierce and intimidating—and they were those things. But when they got to the [National Statuary Hall](https://twitter.com/soIoucity/status/1346902355019767810?utm_source=fbia), on the second floor, where velvet ropes indicate the path that tourists must take, they immediately sorted themselves into a line and walked through it. In other words, they were biddable. They were men (and, yes, some women) lost in a modern world that no longer assumed they come first. They were looking for someone to tell them what to do. Trump told them what to do. So did the velvet ropes.

It would not be hard for a tyrant to compel men like these into violence. Like the original patriots, they were ready to crack heads and convinced they were paying too much in taxes.

It seems as though they hadn’t expected to gain entrance with such ease—an ease that becomes more suspicious as the hours pass—and once there they didn’t know what to do, exactly. One patriot made it all the way to Nancy Pelosi’s office, where (per his own gleefully repeated [description](https://twitter.com/AllMattNYT/status/1346961508564025346?utm_source=fbia)) he sat at her desk, scratched his balls, left a note—“Nancy, Bigo was here, you bitch”—and grabbed a trophy: an envelope stamped with her name. Soon enough he’d trotted back outside to show it off, the victor in a one-man panty raid. He was an envelope guy in an email world, but suddenly he was taking control of his destiny.

A man in a Viking helmet and the kind of face paint not often seen outside sporting venues held a sign [reading](https://twitter.com/waltermasterson/status/1347296435499380740?s=20&utm_source=fbia) Hold the Line Patriots, which made you wonder if he was just a misguided New England fan. Who can make sense of the new football schedule? Inside, he ran around issuing guttural cries and climbing the furniture, like someone who had been thawed out from a [1995 Robert Bly retreat](https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1985-09-25-vw-20038-story.html?utm_source=fbia). (Bly was part of the movement that coined the term toxic manhood, the toxicity being office work and too much time around bossy women, and the antidote being a return to the original state of dude nature: roaring, beating drums.) This was not a low-T group. This was not a group that had been robbed and diminished by radical feminism. And they proved it by defecating on the floors and [tracking their own filth](https://www.nydailynews.com/news/politics/ny-trump-capitol-riot-poopers-20210107-prlsqytyabgdhnexushotl4nam-story.html?utm_source=fbia) through the hallways. They were dazed by power and limited in their conception of what to do with it. Some rioters left the building in the charged, happy way people exit the Dive Devil ride at Magic Mountain: single file, grinning, and not really sure what just happened. They cried out for beer, they pumped their fists in triumph, they went looking for Mom and money for curly fries.

The Viking guy was frightening, until it turned out that he’s a notorious ham who shows up at lots of Trump events and loves publicity. Last May, in Phoenix, he was pounding his drum and [yelling](https://twitter.com/brieannafrank/status/1257723457099333632?utm_source=fbia), “Thank you, President Trump!” and “Thank you, Q!” until a reporter approached him to ask for an interview, and in an instant he turned into Beto O’Rourke. “My name is Jake Angeli,” he said smoothly. “That’s J-A-K-E and A-N-G-E-L-I. Angel with an i.”

The comedian Norm MacDonald has [observed](https://youtu.be/nYb04WQnQMk?t=44&utm_source=fbia) that the second-worst job in the world is Crack Whore and that the worst job in the world is Assistant Crack Whore. So let us cast our lonely eyes on the specter of Assistant Viking, Aaron Mostofsky, who was dressed in pelts and carried a police riot shield and who—in a rare Viking flourish—was bespectacled. Can you tell us what you’re doing here today? a reporter [asked](https://gothamist.com/news/trump-fur-ever-costumed-capitol-rioter-son-brooklyn-supreme-court-judge?utm_source=fbia) him. “What I’m doing here today is,” he began, but here the words began to fail him. He looked around and then said he was there to “express my opinion as a free American, my beliefs that this election was stolen. Um—we were cheated.” He adjusted one of his pelts and said that certain blue states—“like New York”—had once been red, and “were stolen.”

*[*[*Adam Serwer: The Capitol riot was an attack on multiracial democracy*](https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/01/multiracial-democracy-55-years-old-will-it-survive/617585/?utm_source=fbia)*]*

Where had he gotten the riot shield? “Found it on the floor,” he said in amazement. “I gave it to the cops, because it might be someone’s personal thing.” Envelope Guy hadn’t stolen Pelosi’s letter; he had left a quarter on her desk in payment. Assistant Viking had dutifully brought his shield to the lost and found, but no one had recognized it. These men had lived their lives in the ranks of a society where rules were constantly imposed upon them, and—even in the midst of the chaos they were creating—they reflexively followed a few of them. They brought items to the lost and found; they walked between the velvet ropes. They were cowed schoolboys and vicious adolescents at the same time. They were in the Capitol building because important rules had been broken. Which ones, exactly? The super-complicated, talkety-talkety ones enshrined in our beloved Constitution, of course. Unlike members of the lost generation whose minds are being poisoned by the obscenities of “critical race theory,” they had been edified and uplifted by the kind of “patriotic” education Donald Trump and Betsy DeVos were trying to deliver to all American children.

Outside, a young woman named Elizabeth was weeping and holding a blue terry-cloth towel to her eyes, while a man beside her tried to comfort her. “I made it, like, a foot inside,” she [told](https://twitter.com/hunterw/status/1346919171595137025?s=20&utm_source=fbia) a reporter, her voice an admixture of misery and grievance, “and they pushed me out and they maced me!” She made it sound like this had happened to her at the Air and Space Museum. When the reporter asked her where she was from, she said, “Knoxville, Tennessee,” in an especially aggrieved tone, as though this was itself part of the outrage. Maced? A person from Knoxville?

Why had she come to Washington? “We’re storming the Capitol!” she whined. “It’s a revolution!” Patty Hearst was more up to speed on the philosophy and goals of the Symbionese Liberation Army before she got out of the trunk. These people were dressed like cartoon characters, they believe that the country is under attack from pedophiles and “globalists,” and they are certain that Donald Trump won the election. In other words, the Founders’ worst fear—that a bunch of dumbasses would elect a tyrant—had come to pass.

This week the reign of Donald Trump reached its natural culmination, the activation of an army of white thugs who could be motivated by the oldest trick in the nationalist playbook: the promise that they operated in service of some grand idea—to be explained at a later date—and that it was going to take some head-cracking and bloodletting to be born. A 42-year-old Capitol Police officer named [Brian Sicknick](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/08/us/politics/police-officer-killed-capitol.html?utm_source=fbia) survived deployment in Iraq only to have his head fatally bashed by Americans with a fire extinguisher in the U.S. Capitol.

Barack Obama came into public life [declaring that](https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/07/send-her-back-battle-will-define-us-forever/594307/?utm_source=fbia) “in no other country in the world is my story even possible.” But by last summer, in his speech at the Democratic National Convention, he had been reduced to pleading with Americans to keep faith in the Constitution itself, a flawed document but still our “[North Star](https://www.cnn.com/2020/08/19/politics/barack-obama-speech-transcript/index.html?utm_source=fbia).” By the fall, he had begun to gesture toward America with something of a backward glance: “I’m not yet ready to abandon the possibility of America,” he [wrote](https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/11/barack-obama-i-still-believe-america/617073/?utm_source=fbia) in the preface of his memoir. Imagine it: a former president on the verge of giving up on America. Why wouldn’t he? At that moment the country was being led by someone who hadn’t merely given up on America but wanted to destroy it.

*[*[*Barack Obama: I’m not yet ready to abandon the possibility of America*](https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/11/barack-obama-i-still-believe-america/617073/?utm_source=fbia)*]*

My father was a historian, a leftist, and (in a term he would have detested) a “patriot,” in the sense that the United States government had arranged for him to be delivered from Amherst College to the Battle of Okinawa. Twenty years ago, I got the phone call that he had died in the early morning from a heart attack, and in the time it took me to get from Los Angeles to the Berkeley Hills, his body had already been taken to the Oakland morgue. My mother had died the year before, and walking into my dead parents’ empty house—maybe you have had this experience, and if you have not, you should gird yourself for it—felt ghostly, although I was the ghost. I walked upstairs to look at the bed my father had died in. Open on its spine on one side of the bed was the last book this learned man would ever read—or in this case, reread: volume two of The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire.

All things are born, live, and then die. We can remember who we are, and keep going—maybe even moving forward. Or we can make a mockery of ourselves and die in filth.