

OPINION

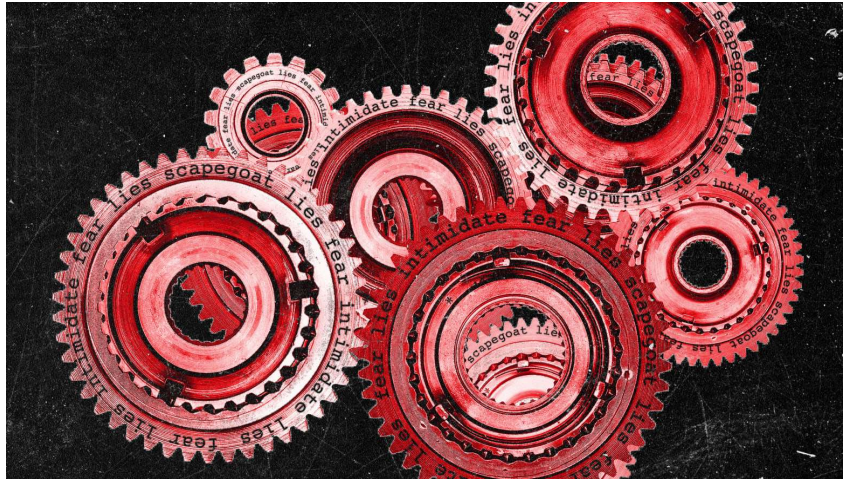
The Four Stages of Republican Misinformation

The right has a tested formula to brainwash its base. From the Big Lie to attacking a 10-year-old rape victim, here's how they do it.

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Photo Illustration by Thomas Levinson/The Daily Beast/Getty



If a 10-year-old girl cannot escape the cruel machinery of the right-wing disinformation network, then there's little hope for the rest of us trying to protect our freedom, dignity, and fragile democracy.

Conservatives' attempts to minimize, and then weaponize, the horrific story of a 10-year-old rape victim highlights their tried-and-tested four-part strategy to manufacture lies and outrage to fuel their march toward fascism.

Ohio was one of 13 states with automatic "trigger bans" that went into effect immediately after the Supreme Court overturned *Roe* in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*. As a result, Ohio now has zero exceptions for rape and incest. A 10-year-old rape victim who missed the state's new six-week deadline by three days was forced to travel to Indiana for her abortion. Earlier this month, the girl's alleged rapist, Gershon Fuentes, was arrested and charged with felony first-degree rape.

One would assume this sordid story would force most Republicans to pause in horror and reflect on the brutal consequences unleashed by the Court taking away the constitutionally protected right to abortion.

How would they feel if this was their daughter or loved one? Would they want to force an innocent girl to endure unnecessary trauma by carrying her abuser's child? Could they at least create exceptions for rape and incest, which are supported by 69 percent

of Americans, including 56 percent of Republicans?

At the very least, this story should open them up to empathize with this young girl's dilemma, right?

Wrong.

The entire right-wing ecosystem unleashed its full arsenal to discredit the 10-year-old girl as a liar, intimidate her physician, demonize liberals, and continue its march backward, undeterred, in its quest to make Handmaid's Tale cosplay a reality—in an America that subordinates and punishes women for having the audacity to control their own bodies.

To achieve its goal, the right uses a now familiar four-part strategy.

First, Republicans use any means necessary to achieve power and promote their unpopular, extremist, counter-majoritarian agenda.

Second, they create and promote disinformation and lies to frighten their base and Jedi mind-trick them into believing they are being oppressed by the actual victims.

Third, they create a specific villain, target them, and then attack them through scapegoating, smearing, and intimidation.

Fourth, they never apologize or back down once their lie is exposed, but instead, they double down, and in times of doubt, always pivot towards racism and fear-mongering.

WHAT DOES THE FOUR-POINT PLAN LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE?

To illustrate the strategy, look no further than the GOP's rationalization of the Jan. 6 insurrection and embrace of the Big Lie—which gave them the successful blueprint to promote their hateful anti-abortion policies.

First, Donald Trump deliberately promoted lies and conspiracy theories about election fraud conducted by Democrats. Instead of accepting his defeat, he unleashed a premeditated, coordinated strategy to engage in a failed coup, which eventually resulted in thousands of his supporters overtaking the U.S. Capitol in an effort to overturn a free and fair election.

To get to the point where a 10-year-old rape victim has to cross state lines for an abortion, look to the GOP's four-decade effort to kill *Roe v. Wade*. Republicans finally got their wish by packing the Supreme Court with right-wing extremists in black robes handpicked by the Federalist Society. Sen. Mitch McConnell stole Merrick Garland's seat by refusing to hold a confirmation hearing, citing the need to wait until after the 2016 election. Then, he went against his own bullshit precedent and bum-rushed

Justice Amy Coney Barrett on to the Court after millions of votes had already been cast in the 2020 election. That's how they got a right-wing majority to dutifully overturn Roe, which led to Republican-controlled states imposing draconian laws that are punishing women and their health-care providers.

Second, the right-wing media ecosystem continues to amplify the Big Lie and fuel conspiracy theories, which has since resulted in a majority of GOP voters falsely believing Biden was not fairly elected. More than 100 Republicans who have won their recent primaries support the Big Lie, which has transformed into a MAGA litmus test for aspiring GOP candidates.

Similarly, both Fox News and the Wall Street Journal used their platforms to help discredit the story of the 10-year-old rape victim. Fox host Jesse Watters referred to it as a "hoax" that, according to him, follows a "pretty dangerous pattern of politically timed disinformation" by Democrats. On his top-rated cable news show, Tucker Carlson said "politicians are lying about this [story]." MAGA politicians like Rep. Jim Jordan tweeted that the story was a lie and Ohio Attorney General Dave Yost called it a fabrication. Fox labeled it the "Biden abortion story."

However, the story, which has nothing to do with Biden, is true. The young girl was actually raped and forced to travel to another state for her abortion. Instead of owning up to their mistake and apologizing, right-wingers instead implemented the third part of the strategy by targeting a manufactured villain.

In the MAGA world, villains like Kyle Rittenhouse and Michael Flynn are rebranded and exalted, while actual heroes are ignored, ridiculed, or dismissed. This includes Capitol Hill police officers, election workers Lady Ruby and her daughter, and fellow Republicans who didn't go along with the Big Lie—such as Rusty Bowers, Speaker of the Arizona House of Representatives, who received death threats and is now censured by fellow Republican colleagues for putting country above party.

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If this is how MAGA treats its own, then what hope do a 10-year-old girl and her physician have at redemption? On Watters' show, Indiana Attorney General Todd Rokita put a target on the girl's physician by announcing he would be open to prosecuting her for failing to report the abortion. In reality, Dr. Caitlin Bernard had already reported the case, but truth doesn't matter when you're simply trying to rile up your base to score political points and ratings. (Earlier this week, Dr. Bernard announced she was thinking about suing Rokita for defamation.)

Sadly, this isn't Dr. Bernard's first rodeo with right-wing extremists. She is listed as a "local abortion threat" and her name and workplace, along with those of five other physicians, are published on the Right to Life Michiana's website. In 2006, Justice Barrett, then a law professor, signed a two-page ad published by the extremist anti-abortion group that referred to Roe as "barbaric" and "defend[ed] the right to life from fertilization to natural death." Last year, Dr. Bernard testified that she was forced to stop providing first-trimester abortions at a South Bend, Indiana, clinic after she was warned about kidnapping threats against her daughter.

Finally, the modern right-wing movement can never apologize, own up to its mistakes, or back down. Humility, grace, and decency are perceived by the base as signs of weakness. Instead, they ratchet up the lie, amp up the terror, and add more villains.

For example, despite numerous election audits supporting Biden's victory, and even loyal Trumpers—such as former Attorney General Bill Barr—affirming the 2020 election results, the GOP has instead chosen to feed its base the Big Lie.

Even after the 10-year-old rape victim's story was confirmed, Republicans who called her a liar refused to offer an apology or correction. When pressed, Rep. Jordan said he "never doubted the child" and instead blamed the media. Fox News hosts didn't correct the story for their audience, but instead decided to engage in their usual xenophobia by attacking the alleged rapist's immigration status.

After previously saying the story wasn't true, Carlson, playing to racist type, pivoted and said "the obvious headline here was not about abortion. It was about the crime committed against the child—'Who raped a 10-year-old.'" His answer: "an illegal alien."

Unfortunately, this 10-year-old rape victim is one of the many girls who will suffer from the GOP's anti-abortion policies. But unlike her, most of their stories will be forgotten statistics that never receive a headline or a column.

Perhaps that is a blessing. These victims won't be subjected to the lies manufactured by a right-wing ecosystem willing to demonize girls and health care providers simply to advance their perverse and regressive cultural agenda.

If Republicans have no mercy for 10-year-old rape victims, then the rest of us should expect nothing but cruelty and contempt in their violent and barbaric efforts to achieve minority rule.