



The Exploitation of “Beautiful Kate”

How Donald Trump and his conservative allies twisted the facts of a deadly San Francisco shooting to stoke America’s xenophobia.

Jeremy Stahl

August 10, 2017

On June 16, 2015, Donald Trump announced his bid for the presidency of the United States with what back then constituted a shocking statement. “When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best,” he said. “They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.” The outrage poured in quickly. Leaders in the Republican field vehemently denounced their fellow candidate and major corporations—including NBC, which broadcast his reality TV series *Celebrity Apprentice*—cut ties with Trump.

He did not back down. That same month, Trump told CNN’s Jake Tapper that people coming into the United States “from all over ... are killers and rapists.” He also threw in an additional claim, declaring, “Public reports routinely state great amounts of crime are being committed by illegal immigrants.”

This is not true. Study after study shows undocumented immigrants commit crimes at lower rates than the general population, and crime rates in cities with large immigrant populations have fallen disproportionately in recent years. Regardless, the lie that undocumented immigrants are likely to be violent criminals would help propel Trump to the GOP nomination and ultimately the presidency. Propagating this myth and using it to justify an immigration crackdown have since become a central focus of Trump’s Justice Department, which in late July announced potentially unconstitutional new policies that will attempt to punish cities that refuse to comply with requests from Immigration and Customs Enforcement. (On Monday, the city of Chicago sued the Department of Justice over its plan to withhold grant money from these sanctuary cities.)

Since he won the White House, Trump has continued to galvanize support for his anti-immigrant agenda by highlighting individual horror stories of “predators and criminal aliens who poison our communities.” At a rally in Youngstown, Ohio, two weeks ago, Trump cited one such case in graphic detail:

You’ve seen the stories about some of these animals. They don’t want to use guns, because it’s too fast and it’s not painful enough. So they’ll take a young, beautiful girl, 16, 15, and others, and they slice them and dice them with a knife because they want them to go through excruciating pain before they die. And these are the animals that we’ve been protecting for so long. Well, they’re not being protected any longer, folks.

Upon Trump's promise to give these "animals" what they have coming to them, the crowd erupted in applause. After stalking around the stage to soak up the adulation, Trump announced "a nationwide crackdown on sanctuary cities," a promise that instigated yet another ovation. He continued:

American cities should be sanctuaries for law-abiding Americans, for people that look up to the law, for people that respect the law, not for criminals and gang members that we want the hell out of our country.

Sanctuary cities legislation has passed the House, along with Kate's Law, named for Kate Steinle, who was brutally killed by a five-time-deported illegal immigrant. We are asking the Senate to vote on sanctuary cities and Kate's Law legislation. We've got to get it passed.

This time, the Trump supporters gathered in Youngstown launched into applause at the mere invocation of Kate Steinle's name. They'd heard her story before.

On July 1, 2015, Jose Ines Garcia Zarate shot 32-year-old Kathryn Michelle Steinle in the back as she walked with her father on San Francisco's Pier 14. Her dying words were "Help me, dad."

Garcia Zarate, a Mexican national who'd been deported from the U.S. five times and had seven felony convictions, including for heroin possession and manufacturing narcotics, quickly admitted to firing the gun. Within days, it also came out that the San Francisco Sheriff's Department had refused to tell federal immigration officials when Garcia Zarate—who would have been deported upon his return to federal custody—was scheduled to be released from jail, instead allowing him to go free a few months prior to Steinle's killing. (Until recently, reports have referred to Garcia Zarate by what his lawyer says is an alias, Juan Francisco Lopez-Sanchez.)

For Trump, Steinle's death—coming as it did two weeks after his notorious Mexican rapists speech—was the most convenient of tragedies. On July 10, 2015, Trump was seventh in the Republican field, according to the *RealClearPolitics* polling average. Ten days later he'd overtaken Jeb Bush for the No. 1 spot among GOP contenders. While Trump's rise to the top of the Republican primaries was probably inevitable, the timing of that rise was not. "Something happened in July to send Trump's numbers soaring," noted David Frum in the *Atlantic* that month. "That something may have been the murder of Kathryn Steinle."

Two days after Steinle's killing, then-candidate Trump came out with a statement describing the young woman's death as "yet another example of why we must secure our border immediately." He added, "This is an absolutely disgraceful situation and I am the only one that can fix it. Nobody else has the guts to even talk about it. That won't happen if I become president."

Whereas Trump had previously been buffeted with criticism for describing undocumented immigrants as violent criminals, Steinle's death shifted the narrative of the primary in his favor. Within a week, he was telling an uncorroborated version of the story, one that vindicated his entire platform. "This man, or this animal, that shot that wonderful, that beautiful woman in San Francisco, this guy was pushed back by Mexico," Trump told CNN on July 8. "Mexico pushes back people across the border that are criminals, that are drug dealers."

Less than two weeks later, at the Family Leadership Summit in Ames, Iowa, Trump again told this distorted tale, this time bragging about the good it had done for his campaign:

I am so proud of the fact that I got dialogue started on illegal immigration. And people in the media—in all fairness, they were very rough on me that first week and then many of them have now apologized to me, and almost everybody’s apologized, because it turned out I was right. Beautiful Kate in San Francisco was shot by an illegal, who was here five times and they couldn’t do anything about it. And believe me, Mexico kept pushing him back because they didn’t want him. Believe me, that’s true.

Trump then transitioned into noting that the moderator of the Family Leadership Summit was (allegedly) wearing “one of my ties,” explaining that Trump-branded apparel is “very nice.” He then said John McCain wasn’t a real war hero.

For Trump, the death of Kate Steinle was a branding opportunity—a chance to mark himself as the candidate who’d stood up to a supposed immigrant scourge, and to advertise to voters that he’d been right about an issue that everyone else was too “politically correct” to talk about. Steinle’s death also gave Trump an opening to stoke the fears of primary voters. If “beautiful Kate in San Francisco”—a young, innocent white woman—could be murdered in cold blood by a Mexican “animal,” so could any young, innocent white woman in any town in the United States.

Predictably, the Kate Steinle story caught fire in conservative media. In a commentary five days after the shooting, Rush Limbaugh said Steinle’s killer was “exactly the kind of guy Donald Trump was talking about.” *Breitbart News* also covered the story obsessively, with one typical headline reading “Media Cover Up Illegal Immigrant Criminality.”

The media figure who did the most to push the story was Fox News’ Bill O’Reilly. On July 6, 2015, he began *The O’Reilly Factor* with a lengthy monologue on Steinle’s killing. “Mexican criminals represent a whopping 16 percent of all convicts serving time in federal penitentiaries,” he shouted. “That’s a huge burden on the American taxpayer and a dangerous situation for we the people, like 32-year-old Kate Steinle.” O’Reilly, who was practically snarling, told the camera that “the mayor and city supervisors of San Francisco are *directly responsible* for the murder of Kate Steinle and the Obama administration is *complicit*.” He then encouraged the Department of Justice to arrest San Francisco Mayor Ed Lee and the city’s board of supervisors. “That’s not going to happen because racial politics drives the law these days, which is why Trump caught so much hell,” O’Reilly explained.

O’Reilly, whose employment was terminated by Fox News earlier this year amid reports that he and the network had settled five sexual harassment lawsuits that had been brought against the commentator, had a solution for the various problems he’d enumerated. The Fox News host urged Congress to pass “Kate’s Law,” a piece of legislation of his own conception that would make it a felony punishable by five years in prison to recross the border after having previously been deported. “Who will sponsor the new law? Who will do it? Please let me know directly,” O’Reilly pleaded. “We’re looking for some legislators in Washington who have courage. Are you out there? Are you out there?”

The next day, O’Reilly announced that he had posted a petition on his website calling on Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell and Speaker of the House John Boehner to pass Kate’s Law,

which at that point did not exist. The following evening, O'Reilly said that about 150,000 people had already signed the petition.

On July 9, three days after O'Reilly's initial plea, Republican Rep. Matt Salmon of Arizona introduced the Establishing Mandatory Minimums for Illegal Reentry Act, which he dutifully dubbed "Kate's Law." As Salmon announced in a press release, his bill did exactly what O'Reilly had asked, "amend[ing] existing law to mandate five-year minimum sentences for individuals who return to the United States illegally after deportation." Less than two weeks later, Trump's campaign rival Ted Cruz introduced a parallel bill in the Senate, saying, "What happened to this young woman on a pier in San Francisco is heartbreaking. ... Clearly, our laws are not adequately deterring those who have already been deported from illegally reentering the country."

O'Reilly built his successful persuasion campaign on a highly misleading factual claim. His assertion that "a whopping 16 percent of all convicts" in federal prisons are "Mexican criminals" did not account for the fact that a huge proportion of those incarcerated individuals have been locked up for committing immigration offenses—that is, nonviolent crimes—and are awaiting deportation. A 2017 Cato Institute study found what many previous studies have reported: When you exclude immigration-related offenses, both documented and undocumented immigrants are much less likely to be incarcerated than native-born Americans.

It was true that Garcia Zarate was an undocumented immigrant. It was also true that he killed Kate Steinle. It was not true that her death emblemized a nationwide trend of undocumented immigrants—or "animals," in the parlance of Donald Trump—murdering innocent people. And despite what O'Reilly, Trump, and many Republican legislators would have you believe, the more you examine the details of Steinle's killing, the more obvious it becomes that this is not a crime that lends itself to easy lessons.

Jose Ines Garcia Zarate, whose trial for the murder of Kathryn Steinle is scheduled to begin later this month, has spent the vast majority of the past 25 years in American prisons after repeated attempts to re-enter the country from Mexico. NBC Bay Area, which obtained Garcia Zarate's criminal history via a federal database, found that he'd been convicted of four drug-related felonies, the most recent of which came in 1996. His other three felony convictions resulted from his repeated attempts to enter the United States. His lawyer says that prior to Kate Steinle's killing, he'd never been charged with a gun offense or violent crime.

In September 2009, Garcia Zarate was caught once more trying to re-enter the United States and spent five-plus years behind bars. He was set to be deported upon his release in 2015. That's when the system broke down.

In March 2015, Department of Justice officials decided to send Garcia Zarate to San Francisco on a 20-year-old outstanding warrant for the purchase of \$20 worth of marijuana. The city, however, was no longer prioritizing such crimes and dismissed his case. At that point, it would have made sense to return him to federal custody for deportation.

That month, though, San Francisco Sheriff Ross Mirkarimi had sent guidance to his office with a new interpretation of San Francisco's "sanctuary city" policy. Mirkarimi decreed that the sheriff's department would deny Immigration and Customs Enforcement "access to inmates in jail" and would not provide their "release dates or times" without a court order or warrant, even

in cases where the inmate had been convicted of multiple felonies. His department ignored ICE's request to be made aware of Garcia Zarate's release date, and the seven-time felon was set free in San Francisco in April. According to his lawyer, Garcia Zarate started wandering the streets in a city where he had no connections.

On June 27, 2015, two months after Garcia Zarate was released from custody, a .40-caliber SIG Sauer semi-automatic pistol was stolen from a car belonging to a Bureau of Land Management ranger. The gun was allegedly left loaded and unsecured—a violation of agency policy—in a backpack in the car, which was broken into in downtown San Francisco. Garcia Zarate says that on the day of the shooting he found the pistol wrapped in a T-shirt or rag, and that the trigger went off when he picked it up. He has not been charged with stealing that gun, and his lawyer says the prosecution hasn't presented any evidence that he did. Regardless, it is undeniable that Jose Ines Garcia Zarate picked up that pistol on July 1, 2015, and that a bullet fired from the gun struck and killed Kate Steinle.

Garcia Zarate did not know Kate Steinle. He had no known motive to murder her on the pier that day. Most significantly, the shot that struck Steinle in the back hadn't been aimed at her or anyone else.

Both the prosecution and the defense acknowledge that the bullet that killed Steinle had first ricocheted off the pier. According to testimony from a preliminary hearing, that bullet appears to have hit the ground 12 to 15 feet in front of where Garcia Zarate was sitting, then bounced off the pavement and traveled an estimated 90 feet farther before killing Steinle.

"You couldn't do this on purpose," James Norris, the former head of the San Francisco Police Department's crime lab, told the court as a witness for the defense at one of Garcia Zarate's preliminary hearings in San Francisco Superior Court. (Norris also says the bullet likely hit the ground just three feet in front of where Garcia Zarate was sitting.)

In an interview, Norris told me that, given the path of the bullet, it was "impossible" that Garcia Zarate had tried to shoot Steinle on purpose. Craig Fries, a forensics expert who is not involved in the Steinle case but has been testifying for 20 years on ballistics trajectory analysis, told me he agreed that Steinle's killing was likely unintentional. "It would be highly unlikely that anybody could predict the path of that bullet with enough accuracy to strike somebody," he said, adding that this "is not the way that somebody would try to shoot somebody, just based on common sense."

During preliminary hearings and in public statements about the case, prosecutor Diana Garcia has argued that Garcia Zarate did shoot Steinle intentionally. "This was no accident," she told the court in September 2015. "He had in his hands an instrument of death and he used it." She suggested that Garcia Zarate had executed a "skip shot" in which he "was aiming the gun at the victim or the area of the victim, and the bullet skipped off the cement of the pier and hit the victim in the back." The prosecutor added that Steinle was "his target," and that Garcia Zarate "was playing his own version of Russian roulette." (The district attorney's office would not discuss the case with me on the record.)

According to a civil suit brought by the Steinle family, Garcia Zarate admitted to being "under the influence of narcotics, including but not limited to, marijuana and sleeping pills" at the time

of the shooting. Garcia Zarate—who reportedly has a second-grade education and barely speaks any English—also told police he was shooting at “seals or a black fish” when Steinle was killed.

In an interview with the local ABC News affiliate four days after the shooting, Garcia Zarate said he’d been on sleeping pills and couldn’t remember exactly what he’d done but that he was sure the shooting was an accident. “He proffered this idea that he may have been shooting at seals, but even the police officers don’t believe it,” Matt Gonzalez, Garcia Zarate’s lawyer, said during a preliminary hearing. “[He was] trying to put out an [accidental] explanation for what happened because he doesn’t understand American jurisprudence.”

Garcia Zarate’s story is plausible. While on drugs, he could have picked up a gun wrapped in a shirt, and that gun could have gone off by accident. The SIG Sauer weapon that killed Steinle is a favorite of law enforcement on account of its quick-shooting capacity. “If Mr. [Garcia Zarate] encountered this weapon when it was cocked and loaded [in what’s known as single-action mode] . . . it’s pretty easy for this thing to just go off,” ballistics expert James Norris told me. In an op-ed for the *San Francisco Examiner* last month, Gonzalez listed dozens of cases in which law enforcement officers have accidentally discharged a SIG Sauer. In 2014, a federal air marshal in New Jersey accidentally shot himself. In 2015 in Pennsylvania, a state trooper and firearms instructor accidentally killed another trooper during safety training. This year in Michigan, a sheriff’s deputy accidentally shot a schoolteacher in the neck.

Garcia Zarate has been charged with second-degree murder. That means the prosecution would have to prove he acted with an “abandoned and malignant heart”—that is, that he was recklessly indifferent to the high risk that someone might be killed or that he intended to commit a dangerous felony that could result in someone dying. Second-degree murder in California carries a punishment of 15 years to life in prison. If Garcia Zarate isn’t convicted of second-degree murder, he could be found guilty of manslaughter. Given his prior felonies, his lawyers told me, Garcia Zarate could get a maximum of 17 years if he’s convicted of involuntary manslaughter.

By virtue of when, how, and where it took place, Kate Steinle’s death instantly became a political event. In the immediate aftermath of her killing, politicians of both parties found one point of consensus: Jose Ines Garcia Zarate should not have been in the United States. Democratic Sen. Dianne Feinstein, who as San Francisco mayor in 1985 signed the city’s first sanctuary city ordinance, wrote to the city’s current mayor to say Garcia Zarate should never have been released from custody. For his part, Mayor Ed Lee wrote to San Francisco Sheriff Ross Mirkarimi urging him “to rescind [the] policy [that led to Garcia Zarate’s release] immediately, in the interest of public safety.” Hillary Clinton told CNN in July 2015 that San Francisco had “made a mistake” in allowing Garcia Zarate to go free and said she had “absolutely no support for a city that ignores the strong evidence that should be acted on.”

Meanwhile, the effort to sell “Kate’s Law” was intensifying. Bill O’Reilly hosted Steinle’s parents on his show on July 13, their drained, grief-stricken faces appearing alongside a rotating gallery of photos of their smiling daughter. Her father, Jim Steinle, told the story of his daughter’s final moments, how they “laughed and went in the Ferry Building and came out and . . . stopped at the pier and enjoyed the beauty of San Francisco.” And then, he said, “We heard a shot and Kate went down, and the rest—we all know what happened then.”

It was a shattering piece of television, one that invited audience members to share in the pain of a devastated mother and father. “We are hoping for some good to come out of all of this,” said her mother, Liz Sullivan.

“Well, that’s where we come in,” O’Reilly offered.

After a commercial break, O’Reilly brought up his petition to pass a law named after their daughter, which by then had about 400,000 signatures. Steinle’s parents said they backed O’Reilly’s efforts. “I support Kate’s Law because it would be a legacy in her name and her death would not go unnoticed,” her father said. “You just want it to be a good, solid law that won’t have holes in it,” her mother added.

When Jim Steinle said “the family wants to be involved in the language of the law,” O’Reilly offered to send the couple to Washington. Eight days later, Kate’s father was testifying before the Senate Judiciary Committee, his chair positioned a few feet away from a poster-size photo of his daughter. Steinle, who appeared to be holding back tears, said Kate “was beautiful, kind, happy, caring, loving, and deep in faith.” The nation, he explained, “had suffered a self-inflicted wound in the murder of our daughter by the hand of a person that should have never been on the streets in this country.” He did not go into policy details, simply expressing that “we feel strongly that some legislation should be discussed, enacted, or changed, to take these undocumented immigrant felons off our streets for good.” He concluded his testimony by saying, “We’d be proud to see Kate’s name associated with some of this new legislation. We feel that if Kate’s Law saves one daughter, one son, a mother, a father, Kate’s death won’t be in vain.”

Jim Steinle hoped to instigate an effort to improve immigration enforcement. It soon became clear, though, that his daughter’s death would be deployed in service of a xenophobic, racialized message. On the campaign trail, Trump erased every bit of nuance from the Kate Steinle narrative. At an event in Oskaloosa, Iowa, four days after Jim Steinle testified on Capitol Hill, the candidate invoked the memory of “beautiful Kate” and suggested her killer may have been “forced over” the border by the Mexican government.

The next month, Trump used Garcia Zarate’s mug shot in an attack ad against the immigration-friendly Jeb Bush—a commercial that evoked the infamous Willie Horton ad that had been used to stoke racial fear in the service of George H.W. Bush’s 1988 election. In its coverage of the Steinle killing, conservative media played up this not-so-subtle dog whistle. “Fox [often] took the opportunity to juxtapose pictures of the white-skinned, fair-haired, smiling Ms. Steinle with the grim mug shot of the brown-skinned” Garcia Zarate, law professor Christopher N. Lasch wrote in a journal article published last year. “Ultimately, the narrative spun out by Donald Trump is that he alone is the one who can build a wall to protect ‘beautiful [white] Kate’ from the brown ‘animal’ who killed her.”

Kate Steinle’s parents did not endorse these racialized politics. They had wanted to do something to honor their daughter’s memory, and to prevent other mothers and fathers from feeling the pain that they felt. Despite what Trump implied on the stump, they did not sign on to be a part of his campaign. Unlike other “victims of immigration crime,” they never stood beside him at a rally. They had not asked him to get on stage, at event after event, and invite his supporters to seethe at the memory of “beautiful Kate,” the young woman who’d been shot and killed by a Mexican immigrant.

In the first few weeks after Kate's death, her brother, Brad Steinle, had bristled at Trump's "sensationalizing" of his sister's killing. "Donald Trump talks about Kate Steinle like he knows her," he told CNN's Anderson Cooper. He said that the candidate didn't know the family's political views and that Trump's immigration policies were "not rational" and "not common sense."

In September 2015, the San Francisco Chronicle's C.W. Nevius reported that Jim Steinle and Liz Sullivan "quickly realized they'd gone from a family tragedy to a political talking point." They did not oppose sanctuary cities, Steinle said, and they didn't believe undocumented workers in California's Central Valley should be deported. "If you deport them, what are you going to eat? Rocks?" he told the *Chronicle*. "I mean, they feed the United States."

Sullivan was blunt in her assessment of what her daughter's death had meant for Donald Trump. "[We] were just what he needed—beautiful girl, San Francisco, illegal immigrant, arrested a million times, a violent crime and yadda, yadda, yadda," she said. "We were the perfect storm for that man."

Steinle's parents have gone back and forth in their desire to be public figures, and it's hard to fault them for this wavering. In October, one month after saying that *Chronicle* interview would be their last, they went back on the O'Reilly Factor to express their frustrations about Congress' failure to pass Kate's Law. "It's very frustrating to see how Washington doesn't work," Sullivan said. "It's pretty consistent and it's frustrating and it's aggravating and something needs to change." In 2016, the Steinle family filed a wrongful death suit against the city of San Francisco over its release of Garcia Zarate; that lawsuit was dismissed earlier this year, but the family is appealing the case. Their federal lawsuit, which accuses the Bureau of Land Management ranger of negligence for allegedly leaving his gun unsecured, has been allowed to go forward.

Aside from public statements around these lawsuits, the family has mostly stayed quiet since late 2015. Through the family's lawyer, Steinle and Sullivan declined to comment for this story. Jim Steinle did say a few words to a Chronicle writer this June, expressing regret that his daughter's name had ever been attached to a piece of legislation. "I don't know who coined 'Kate's Law.' It certainly wasn't us," he said.

Kate's Law passed in the House of Representatives three weeks after Steinle's death. It didn't stand a chance in the U.S. Senate. "This vile legislation might as well be called the Donald Trump Act," Minority Leader Harry Reid said in October 2015. The bill, which needed 60 votes to proceed, went down with 54 senators voting in favor and 45 voting against.

Bill O'Reilly's brainchild had at that point been tacked on to a larger bill to withhold funds from sanctuary cities, basically dooming it with Democrats. But passing legislation wasn't Republicans' primary goal. A speech from Ted Cruz on the Senate floor showed the October vote was more about preening than problem solving. "For every Democratic senator, this vote today is a simple decision: With whom do you stand?" the then-presidential candidate said. "Do you stand with the violent, criminal illegal aliens who are being released over and over again?"

In San Francisco, too, all the political posturing that followed Steinle's death failed to produce any reforms that might have prevented her killing. Sheriff Ross Mirkarimi would be voted out of office in November 2015 after facing a barrage of criticism over his handling of the Steinle case and other unrelated scandals. His successor Vicki Hennessy said during the campaign that there

was “room for notification—not detention, but notification—when we have someone in our custody that has a felony.” Ultimately, Hennessy and the San Francisco Board of Supervisors agreed to a half-reform that would allow the sheriff’s department to notify ICE if a detainee had committed a violent or serious felony in the past seven years or three or more lower-grade felonies in the previous five years. This new policy, though, would not have applied to Jose Ines Garcia Zarate, whose felony convictions would not have been considered violent or serious.

Representatives from both the San Francisco Sheriff’s Department and the mayor’s office declined to comment when asked why the city’s revised sanctuary city policy was not written to encompass a case like Garcia Zarate’s. John Avalos, the former member of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors who crafted the revised policy, told me he’d written it to be as limited as possible, with the goal of protecting undocumented immigrants from getting caught up in the criminal justice system unnecessarily. City Attorney Dennis Herrera, who defended the sheriff’s department in the lawsuit brought by the Steinle family against the city of San Francisco, told me that “the tragedy clouds what really is the issue, and that is that sanctuary city jurisdictions for the most part have been successful in promoting public safety in their communities.”

Steinle’s death raises an incredibly thorny question: How do we enforce our immigration laws without damaging the very communities we’re trying to protect? On the national level, Trump and the Republican Party have shown little interest in assessing that question in good faith.

This June, the House of Representatives once again passed Kate’s Law—this time in tandem with the No Sanctuary for Criminals Act, which would block federal grants from sanctuary cities and allow families of victims like Kate Steinle to sue those cities. Again, Republicans tortured the truth about Kate Steinle’s death for political ends. In an editorial written for Fox News, Attorney General Jeff Sessions described Steinle’s killing as an intentional act of murder committed “in cold blood.” In a press conference held by Speaker of the House Paul Ryan and then–Homeland Security Secretary John Kelly, Rep. Raúl Labrador used the occasion of Kate Law’s passage to attack Democrats. “They oppose the policies that would have prevented Kate’s death and murder,” he said.

Kate’s Law and the No Sanctuary for Criminals Act are now headed to the Senate, where Democrats likely hold enough votes to block their final passage. Sen. Al Franken, a member of the judiciary committee that will take up these bills, told me the GOP’s exploitation of the Steinle case and others like it goes back to Trump’s initial campaign announcement. “It bothers me the way that this [case] is used to attack” undocumented immigrants, he said. “The first thing in [the president’s] announcement speech was ‘they’re rapists and murderers.’ I think there is a kind of hateful appeal to xenophobia in all of this. I think we have to not reward that.”

More than anyone else, it was Donald Trump who turned Kate Steinle’s death into a piece of propaganda. He portrayed the killer as a violent “animal,” a depiction that doesn’t line up with the facts of the case. He said Mexico “pushed” Jose Ines Garcia Zarate back across the border onto the United States. This is a total lie. During at least one campaign event, Trump said Garcia Zarate shot Steinle five times. She was shot once and that shot was likely a freak accident.

The story of how Trump has used Kate Steinle is the story of his political career. He claimed millions of undocumented immigrants stole the popular vote for Hillary Clinton, then launched an “election integrity” commission to affirm his beliefs. His fabricated memory of seeing “thousands and thousands” of Muslims in New Jersey cheer the collapse of the World Trade

Center on 9/11 helped inspire his call for a Muslim ban that is now law. His repeated incantations of “beautiful Kate” led to the establishment of Victims of Immigration Crime Engagement, a group within ICE that will help sell the false belief that undocumented immigrants are a criminal blight.

This is government by anecdote, not evidence—the proliferation of often imaginary and sometimes exaggerated stories that exist to validate the worldview of a man who owes his job to racial resentment. Trump, of course, couldn’t sell this vision if there weren’t millions of people who wanted to believe it and a political party who wanted to buy it. The president’s lies about immigration have become our national agenda, and the Republican Party has abetted Trump every step of the way.

In his most recent interview, Jim Steinle told the *San Francisco Chronicle* that at this point he doesn’t want to see his daughter’s name invoked by either side in the immigration debate. “You just hope it ends someday,” he pleaded. “I don’t know when.”

So long as the Steinle family’s tragedy can be used to promote a campaign of fear, it’s not going to end any time soon.