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How Politics Took Over the Killing of Mollie Tibbetts

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WASHINGTON — President Trump and congressional Republicans, who are eager to find an issue that can help minimize the losses they expect in the midterm elections, are leaning hard into crime, illegal immigration and public safety to paint a bleak picture of how the country would become less safe under a Democratic-controlled Congress.

This week, they sought to put a face with that picture. The news that a missing Iowa college student, Mollie Tibbetts, had been found dead, and that a man the authorities said was an undocumented immigrant was charged with her murder, was seized upon by Republicans, who had already been sounding dire warnings about spreading violence and insecure borders.

“A person came in from Mexico illegally and killed her,” said Mr. Trump, speaking about Ms. Tibbetts in a video he posted to Twitter. “We need the wall, we need our immigration laws changed, we need our border laws changed.”

Then, framing the matter as a choice between the two parties in the upcoming elections, he added, “We need Republicans to do it because the Democrats aren’t going to do it.”

In messages and ads directed at voters — especially women, who are most motivated by concerns over personal safety, polling shows — Republicans say that if the Democrats are victorious in November, violent crime and drugs will become greater scourges, the MS-13 gang will run rampant, and communities will unravel. Republicans point to the sudden popularity on the left of the “Abolish ICE” movement, which seeks to dismantle the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency, as evidence of how Democrats would harm public safety.

Republicans say they believe they have an advantage over Democrats on the issue of immigration when it is presented as a matter of personal security. And, armed with party research that shows voters are far less likely to support candidates who have said they want to “abolish ICE,” Republicans have begun hitting those Democrats with ads, using their own words.

An ad from the Congressional Leadership Fund, the super PAC supporting House Republican candidates, features audio of Sharice Davids, a Democrat running for a Republican-held seat

near Kansas City, saying she would support eliminating the agency. “Sharice Davids: Open borders, amnesty — a risk we can’t take,” the ad says.

“Democrats do not want to have an election on these things,” said Pat Caddell, a veteran pollster who has worked for Republicans and Democrats and is now helping a group led by Stephen K. Bannon, the former White House chief strategist, that is trying to protect the Republican House majority. “On immigration, the Democratic Party has been pulled so far left. And that’s the story of our politics this year: deserting the center.”

On the surface, these efforts represent the latest flare-up in the intractable national debate over immigration policy. But the death of Ms. Tibbetts — police say the 20-year-old was killed by Cristhian Rivera, an immigrant farmworker, who stuffed her in the trunk of a car and then dumped her body in a field — has exposed a deeper cultural and political divide.

The din of outrage coming from all sides — on the left, accusations of callous exploitation and fearmongering; on the right, criticisms that political correctness is trumping public safety — underlines the growing disparity between those who largely trust Mr. Trump’s diagnoses of the country’s problems and believe he and Republicans should be given more time to fix them, and those who are disgusted with his leadership and want to throw him and his party out of power.

“She was killed by a person who is exactly what Trump has been warning about,” Newt Gingrich, the former House speaker, said on Fox News, bringing to mind Mr. Trump’s first speech as a presidential candidate in 2015, in which he blamed Mexico for sending criminals and rapists across the southern border. “The left has to bear the burden of being the party that is tolerating Americans being killed by people who are here illegally,” he added.

Senator Tom Cotton, the Arkansas Republican who has been one of the president’s biggest defenders on issues of immigration, tweeted, “Mollie would be alive if our government had taken immigration enforcement seriously years ago.”

The news of the break in the Tibbetts case on Monday was a tragic ending to her disappearance a month ago. But the timing, as far as Mr. Trump and his allies were concerned, could not have been better. Word that an immigrant had been charged in her death came the same afternoon that Mr. Trump’s longtime lawyer and fixer implicated him in a scheme to pay off alleged paramours and his former campaign manager was found guilty of eight counts of financial fraud.

The stories, and the different ways they were covered, played to the themes that Mr. Trump returns to frequently: illegal immigration and the crime and economic devastation he says it wreaks; a corrupted, one-sided justice system that he says punishes him and his allies but no one else; and a political system controlled by elites in both parties who he believes never accepted his victory.

Fox News set the tone for how prominently the Tibbetts story would feature in the media universe the president and his supporters follow most closely. As other networks covered the president’s growing legal exposure, Fox alone broke in with news of Ms. Tibbetts’s death. Its coverage of her disappearance, and of the discovery of her body, has been exhaustive, with correspondents on the scene in Iowa featuring in multiple segments every hour. On Wednesday

night, the host who was filling in for Laura Ingraham opened the program by boasting, “Fox News is the only network fully covering the case.”

That most other major news outlets paid the story comparatively little attention only gave Mr. Trump more ammunition to make his case that the media cannot be trusted.

Chris Buskirk, a conservative writer and radio host, summed up the attitude of many of Mr. Trump’s defenders. “See, the mainstream media is at it again,” he said. “In fact, let’s do our fourth hour with Michael Avenatti,” he added, joking about the frequency with which Mr. Avenatti, a frequent critic of the president, appears on cable news shows.

The authorities have said that Mr. Rivera, the man charged in Ms. Tibbetts’s death, was in the United States illegally. His lawyer has disputed that claim. Most social scientists who have looked at crime among immigrants have concluded that noncitizens are less likely to engage in criminal activity. A recent study by the libertarian-leaning Cato Institute, for example, found that in Texas, conviction and arrest rates for undocumented immigrants were lower than those for native-born Americans.

That has not stopped Mr. Trump, his White House or its supporters from suggesting otherwise. The administration regularly sends out emails to journalists with stories of immigrant crime, including one this week about a killing in Minnesota with the subject line, “Authorities: Immigrant in U.S. illegally killed Shakopee woman, slashed own throat.”

Violent crimes by immigrants have become staples in conservative media, and Breitbart News and Fox News often lead the way. In February, for instance, after a young child was killed in North Carolina when an impaired driver hit the ambulance that was carrying him and his mother, Fox News and other right-wing outlets seized on reports that the man was from El Salvador and was thought to be in the country illegally. Fox News was similarly abuzz earlier this month after a convicted rapist pleaded guilty to re-entering the country illegally.

Mr. Trump himself often uses these types of violent crimes to resurface his positions on immigration. Last year, after a woman was killed in Los Angeles by a drunken driver who officials said was an illegal immigrant, the woman’s fiancé said that Mr. Trump had called him to offer condolences and to reiterate his promise to secure the border.

And even before he was elected, Mr. Trump dedicated some of his acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention in Cleveland to the story of Sarah Root, 21, who had been killed in Nebraska by a Honduran immigrant who was driving drunk.

Then there is the case of Kathryn Steinle, whose killing on a San Francisco pier in 2015 was taken up by conservatives as a symbol of what was wrong with the country’s immigration laws. Throughout his campaign, Mr. Trump had invoked her name, using her death to justify his hard-line immigration policies. When the suspect, an undocumented Mexican immigrant, was acquitted of murder and manslaughter charges late last year, Mr. Trump called the verdict “disgraceful” and “a complete travesty of justice,” promptly renewing his call to build a wall on the border with Mexico.

Some members of Ms. Tibbetts's family have objected to the swift politicization of her death. "I don't want Mollie's memory to get lost amongst politics," an aunt, Billie Jo Calderwood, told CNN. Samantha Lucas, a second cousin who told CNN that she did not know Ms. Tibbetts well, said she believed Ms. Tibbetts "would not want this to be used as fuel against undocumented immigrants."

The details that have trickled out about Ms. Tibbetts's life reveal only a glimpse of who she was: a cross-country runner who sat on the homecoming court, had an infectious smile and, recalled her brother, could be "a little clumsy."

The circumstances of her disappearance and death, however, are now well known.