

# The New York Times

## Republicans Are Exploiting the Murder of Mollie Tibbetts

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August 24, 2018

Where does the conservative commitment to limited government and individual freedom, always more rhetorical than real, finally go to die?

One strong candidate is rural America, where Mollie Tibbetts, a 20-year-old student at the University of Iowa, was brutally murdered this summer at the hands, allegedly, of a Mexican immigrant who may be in the country illegally.

The killing of Ms. Tibbetts, who went missing on July 18 but whose body was found only this week, is an unspeakable tragedy. Her killer should be prosecuted and punished to the fullest extent of the law. Yet many conservatives who have long assailed the government as incompetent at best are now so blinded by xenophobic rage over her murder that they've turned into the thing they claim to despise: vociferous boosters of big government.

Consider [a piece](#) posted this week at Conservative HQ, the official site of the direct-mail innovator Richard Viguerie, the legendary "funding father" of the postwar conservative movement going back to its early days supporting Barry Goldwater in the 1960s. In "The Politicians Who Killed Mollie Tibbetts," the site's editor, George Rasley, lays the blame not on the man in police custody but on a cabal of elected officials and profit-hungry plutocrats.

"The real killers are the politicians who keep our borders open and who continue protecting illegal aliens," Mr. Rasley wrote. "Mollie Tibbetts was killed so that somebody in Iowa could have cheap labor, and she was killed so that the Business Roundtable, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, and the rest of the Washington-Wall Street-Silicon Valley Axis could hit this quarter's earnings target."

If you're not surprised by such a sentiment, that's because it's no longer news when conservatives and Republicans announce that immigrants, especially those here illegally, are uniquely prone to crime. In 2013, Representative Steve King of Iowa, who has called for electrifying the border with Mexico because we "do that with livestock all the time," declared that for every undocumented immigrant "who's a valedictorian, there's another 100 out there that

weigh 130 pounds and they've got calves the size of cantaloupes because they're hauling 75 pounds of marijuana across the desert." In his successful bid for a Senate seat in Arkansas, Tom Cotton routinely argued that "liberals in Washington want to let illegal immigrants get Social Security for work they did with forged identities." And of course, within minutes of announcing his presidential run in 2015, Donald Trump asserted that Mexicans entering the country were "bringing" drugs and crime.

Virtually all research concludes that immigrants, especially undocumented immigrants, commit fewer crimes, including violent crimes, than native-born Americans (among other things, they do not want to draw attention to themselves). In 2016, the Cato Institute's Alex Nowrathesh writes, "the homicide conviction rate for native-born Americans in Texas was 3.2 per 100,000 natives while it was 1.8 per 100,000 illegal immigrants and 0.9 per 100,000 legal immigrants." In raw numbers, 32 undocumented immigrants and 28 legal immigrants were convicted of homicide in Texas, compared with 746 native-born Americans.

But the Republican Party won't let such facts get in the way of calling for precisely the sort of big-government surveillance state against which conservatives used to rail.

Conservatives who used to denounce worker databases such as E-Verify and national ID cards as affronts to the rights of states, business owners and individuals to make their own security and hiring decisions now support all such measures to round up undocumented immigrants.

Conservatives who used to denounce government snooping and even the census now support internal checkpoint laws that result in thousands of legal citizens being mistakenly deported each year. Conservatives who used to talk passionately about family values have shown little empathy when the Trump administration has separated migrant families crossing the southern border or when ICE agents have arrested fathers accompanying their wives to give birth.

How the Republican Party became the champion of closed borders and the police state necessary to enforce them is something of a mystery. As recently as 1980, Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush, both seeking the Republican presidential nomination, outdid each other in praising not just legal but undocumented immigrants. "We're creating a whole society of really honorable, decent, family-loving people that are in violation of the law," Mr. Bush lamented. "Rather than talking about putting up a fence," Mr. Reagan suggested, "open the borders both ways."

One sure explanation is demographics. As the country becomes more multiethnic, the Republican Party is increasingly defining itself as the party of white and rural Americans. At the same time, the Democrats switched positions. As recently as 1996, their national platform denounced immigrants in what can only be dubbed proto-Trumpian terms. More recently, and in conjunction with the decline of historically anti-immigration unions, they have come to realize that the dense, urban places immigrants tend to move are Democratic Party strongholds. The result has been an almost complete shift in party policies toward immigration — a shift that Donald Trump, and the party he has remade in his image, is shameless in exploiting.

Mollie Tibbetts's murder is profoundly disturbing. But it is a very rare event in a country where the violent crime and homicide rates are near 40-year lows. It does her memory and the country no good to greatly increase the power of the state as if there are no costs to such plans.