



Why Are So Many MAGA Martyrs Serial Criminals?

Description

From my vantage point abroad, the American political landscape often seems like an ever-escalating drama, equal parts tragic and absurd. Yet even from a distance, the spectacle of January 6 and its aftermath looms large, a constant reminder of how the threads of democracy can fray. Among the many disturbing elements of that day—and the years since—one question continues to gnaw at me: why does a movement so loudly proclaiming its allegiance to law and order rally behind individuals with histories that betray those very principles? The case of Ryan Samsel, and others like him, is a particularly baffling example.

For those unfamiliar with Samsel, he's one of the many participants in the Capitol riot who now finds himself behind bars. Arrested in January 2021, Samsel has spent nearly four years in pretrial detention, awaiting sentencing for his role in the insurrection. His supporters have cast him as a political prisoner, a victim of cruel and unusual punishment at the hands of a tyrannical government. Images of Samsel in what appears to be a windowless, closet-like cell circulate on social media, sparking outrage from MAGA loyalists. But as is often the case, the full picture tells a very different story.

Samsel's history reads more like a rap sheet than a résumé of patriotism. Before January 6, he was a man well-acquainted with the inside of a courtroom, having been convicted of multiple violent crimes, including an assault on a pregnant woman. On the day of the Capitol riot, he wasn't a passive observer or hapless bystander; he was an instigator, leading the charge to breach the first police barricades. The result? A Capitol Police officer left unconscious and concussed, and a nation shaken by the visual of law enforcement overwhelmed by the very citizens they are sworn to protect.

Disturbingly, Samsel isn't an anomaly. Nearly 30% of the individuals charged in connection with January 6 had prior criminal records, many of them involving violent offences. This statistic, reported in the aftermath of the attack, shatters any illusions that the rioters were predominantly concerned citizens caught up in the moment. Instead, it reveals a troubling trend: the MAGA movement's willingness to elevate individuals with deeply problematic pasts to the status of folk heroes.

Take Dominic Pezzola, a Proud Boys member who smashed a Capitol window with a stolen police riot shield, or Guy Reffitt, a militia affiliate who brought a firearm to the Capitol and later threatened his

children to keep them from testifying against him. Like Samsel, these men have been embraced as martyrs by a movement that seems intent on rewriting the narrative of January 6. Their crimes—both past and present—are brushed aside, reframed as acts of courage in the face of supposed tyranny.

As a Brit with dual UK-US citizenship, I find this phenomenon both perplexing and deeply unsettling. In the UK, even the whiff of a criminal past is often enough to discredit public figures or movements. The notion of rallying behind individuals with such brazenly violent histories would be, quite frankly, unthinkable. Yet in the MAGA universe, these men are not only excused but celebrated, their deeds recast as part of a larger fight for freedom.

This willingness to overlook moral failings in favour of political expediency reveals much about the movement's priorities. At its core, MAGA is less about principle and more about loyalty—to Donald Trump, to the narrative of grievance, and to the idea of perpetual victimhood. In this context, figures like Samsel are useful not because of who they are, but because of what they represent: a symbol of alleged government overreach, proof of the deep state's supposed vendetta against the "real" Americans.

The danger in this, of course, is that it erodes the very foundations of justice and accountability. By championing individuals like Samsel, the movement legitimises behaviour that should be universally condemned. It also sets a troubling precedent: that allegiance to the cause outweighs all else, including character, integrity, and even basic decency.

As Samsel awaits his sentencing in February 2025, his story serves as a grim reminder of the moral compromises political movements are willing to make in the name of power. For those of us watching from abroad, it's hard not to see this as a cautionary tale—a stark warning of what happens when loyalty to a cause eclipses all sense of right and wrong.

America, for all its flaws, has always been a nation that aspired to the highest ideals. But the willingness of a significant portion of its population to excuse the inexcusable raises uncomfortable questions about the future of those ideals. From where I sit, it's clear that the real danger to democracy isn't in the so-called "deep state" or a rigged election, but in the elevation of figures like Ryan Samsel. If America is to reclaim its moral authority, it must start by refusing to lionise those who so brazenly undermine the principles it claims to cherish.

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1. U.S.

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1. doj
2. fbi
3. insurrection
4. j6
5. January 6th
6. trump
7. trump2024

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