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House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, R-California, is seen in Beverly Hills April 30, 2018. (C

House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, R-California, is seen in Beverly Hills April 30, 2018. (CNS/Reuters/Mike Blake)



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When the politics of paranoia is in the air, the courage of politicians is usually in short supply.

That truism has been evident this week watching House Republican leader Kevin McCarthy fail to insist that U.S. Rep. Lauren Boebert apologize for trafficking in spectacularly ugly anti-Muslim bigotry. At a campaign event, she made a bad joke that her congressional colleague, Rep. Ilhan Omar, who is Muslim, might be a terrorist. Boebert offered a fake apology and promised to call Omar, but the call went south and Omar hung up on her colleague.

The moral ugliness metastasized when Republican Rep. Nancy Mace of South Carolina condemned Boebert's bigoted remarks, only to find herself attacked by QAnon-supporting Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene from Georgia. Greene tweeted that

Mace is "trash in the GOP conference" and falsely said Mace was "pro-abort." Mace tweeted back using emojis to say "This is what Bat Shit Crazy looks like."

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Watching Republicans attack each other is not my least favorite thing to do, but this episode is alarming. A healthy democracy requires participants to actually care about democratic norms. In our democracy, one of the most essential norms from the very beginning has been that there are no religious tests for office. Article VI of the U.S. Constitution states clearly, "no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States."

Consequently, suggesting a Muslim member of Congress is a terrorist is, or should be, beyond the pale of acceptable behavior. It does not technically violate the Constitution, but it diminishes the political culture we need to make the Constitution live up to its promise.



Rep. Ilhan Omar speaks at a press conference Aug. 5, 2020, outside the Minnesota DFL Party's St. Paul, Minnesota headquarters in the final days before the primary election in Minnesota's 5th Congressional District. (Wikimedia Commons/Tony Webster)

Why can't House Minority Leader McCarthy bring himself to condemn Boebert's anti-Muslim bigotry? Because he is scared that she and Greene represent the ascendent wing of the party he hopes to lead to victory in next year's midterms.

Paranoid politics, and the cowardice it breeds, has a long history in this country. In the 1950s, Wisconsin Sen. Joseph McCarthy engineered a "Red Scare," claiming that key government officials were secretly working to promote communism. In 1952, he attacked Secretary of State Gen. George Marshall.

The GOP presidential candidate, Gen. Dwight Eisenhower, was a protégé of Marshall's. In a speech he planned to give on Oct. 3, 1952 at the Milwaukee Arena, he intended to say:

> I know that charges of disloyalty have, in the past, been leveled against General George C. Marshall. I have been privileged for thirty-five years to know General Marshall personally. I know him as a man and as a soldier, o be dedicated with singular selflessness and the profoundest patriotism to the service of America. And this episode is a sobering lesson in the way freedom must not defend itself.

McCarthy was running for reelection as Wisconsin's senator and was accompanying the campaign train through the state. This was his backyard. Upon the urging of the Republican governor of Wisconsin, and the recommendation of his chief-of-staff Sherman Adams, Ike removed that part of the speech.

Luckily, The New York Times learned of the deletion and reported it the next day. "I can't have any use for a man who treats Marshall that way," President Harry Truman said of Eisenhower's cowardly behavior. "You don't kick the man who made you."

If Eisenhower behaved so badly, should we be surprised when Kevin McCarthy can't find the courage to discipline bigotry in his ranks?

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It is an interesting question: Which is more morally repugnant, the rantings of true believers like Boebert and Greene, or the cowardice of Kevin McCarthy and Eisenhower, who do and did know better? I tend to be more offended by the cowardice, but the moral issue is not the primary one. Which is a greater threat to democracy at this moment in time is the more important issue.

That issue, also, is not entirely easy to resolve. Boebert and Greene are instigators, and if no one introduced bigotry or other forms of social pathology and moral idiocy into the political life of the nation, all would be right with the world. That would be a different world from the one in which we humans live.

So a healthy society knows how and when to stigmatize aberrant behavior, and relies on its leaders, from presidents to parents, to do so. We cannot create a society that is free from sin, so we create ways to diminish or at least contain the sin, keep it from spreading and making the body politic sick too.

It is part of our American psyche that we believe we can solve all problems, that progress is inevitable, that democracy is resilient. Alas, history tells a different tale. It recognizes that there are problems we humans cannot solve, that great evils as well as great good will flow from those who claim the mantle of progress, and that democracy is resilient — until it isn't.