Opinion
News
NCR Voices



Rep. Liz Cheney, R-Wyo., and Rep. Adam Kinzinger, R-Ill., listen during an Oct. 19 meeting of the House select committee investigating the Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol. The Republican National Committee voted Feb. 4 to censure Cheney and Kinzinger, the only Republicans participating in the House investigation. (AP/J. Scott Applewhite)



by Michael Sean Winters

View Author Profile

Follow on Twitter at @michaelswinters

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

February 11, 2022
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Much of the past week has been spent discussing the shocking Republican National Committee resolution that not only censured Republican Representatives Liz Cheney and Adam Kinzinger for their participation in the House Select Committee investigating the assault on the Capitol Jan. 6, 2021, but that asserted that the mob that attacked the Capitol was engaged in "legitimate political discourse."

The resolution has divided Republicans since. Sen. Mitch McConnell, the GOP Senate leader, said the Jan. 6 attack was a "violent insurrection for the purpose of trying to prevent the peaceful transfer of power, after a legitimately-certified election, from one administration to the next." He chastised the RNC, saying it was not their job to be "singling out" Cheney and Kinzinger.

Memo to the RNC chair Ronna Romney McDaniel: If Mitch McConnell can articulate a position that is obviously morally superior to yours, it is time to rethink your entire life.

Don't give the senior senator from Kentucky too much credit. He could have lanced the boil of Trumpism by voting for impeachment when he had the chance. As New York Times reporter Jeremy Peters recently said on NPR's "Fresh Air," Trump delivered a lot of what Republicans wanted, especially social conservatives concerned about the courts.

Advertisement

Still, at least McConnell didn't backtrack the way Sen. Ted Cruz did. The senator from Texas called the Jan. 6 assault a "terrorist attack" but then quickly took it back. His appearance on Tucker Carlson's show to retreat from is remark was one of the most abjectly pathetic things I have ever, ever seen.

The always splendid columnist Dana Milbank at the Washington Post wondered what would happen if the media were also to adopt the RNC's approach. "Russian troops are massed for what appears to be a large-scale engagement of legitimate political discourse in Ukraine," wrote Milbank. "President Biden says legitimate political discourse is imminent." And "U.S. alpine skier Mikaela Shiffrin's Olympic hopes were set back on Monday when she engaged in legitimate political discourse with the fifth gate during the giant slalom."

Such humor is useful in demonstrating the sheer outrageousness of the RNC's resolution, but it must be employed in such a way that we do not obscure the Orwellian reality of that which we are making fun. The history of political misinformation is long and almost omnipresent, but in the history of healthy democracies, it tends to be anecdotal and infrequent, an exaggeration here, an unkeepable promise there. These minor sins pave the way for greater sins — politics is never free from the economy of salvation — but only with the ascendency of Trump did the greater and grosser deceits become normal, expected, routine.

Political misinformation is a dominant melody only in the rising choruses of fascist and other authoritarian regimes. At the Bulwark, William Saletan isn't laughing about the state of the Republican Party, and he thinks the ability of Republicans to tolerate lies is the heart of the problem.

"It turns out that you don't have to renounce any of our nation's founding principles to betray them," writes Saletan. "All you have to do is believe lies: that real ballots are fake, that prosecutors are criminals, and that insurrectionists are political prisoners. Once you believe these things, you're ready to disenfranchise your fellow citizens in the name of democracy. You're ready to cover up crimes in the name of fighting corruption. You're ready to liberate coup plotters in the name of justice."

He then catalogues the long list of lies being peddled currently by GOP leaders.

The immediate question is how the divisions within the GOP will affect their candidates going forward. If you are trying to present yourself as a decisive leader, it is never a good look when you dodge a question. But Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis took the chance when he refused to answer a direct question on whether Trump or Pence was right. I do not see how this refusal to confront the reality of Jan. 6 can sustain itself. But, then again, I thought candidate Trump's disparaging comments about the wartime heroism of the late John McCain in 2015 would have been enough to doom his campaign.

Related: Editorial: Catholics need to confess their complicity in the failed coup

Still, it seems this time more Republicans are willing to distance themselves from the RNC's slavish acceptance of the former president's "big lie" about the 2020 election. Why? I think we can rule out the possibility that McConnell, Pence, Christie and others have suddenly found political courage they had heretofore misplaced.

My bet is that internal polling is showing them what they should have learned when the good people of Georgia sent two Democrats to the Senate weeks after the 2020 election: Trump has no coattails. Out of power and with no access to Twitter, he can't dominate the news cycle as he once did.

McConnell et al. think they can begin shifting to a post-Trump future. The most interesting question in 2022 might be: Will the GOP base let them?

Even if they can, work remains. In the "Fresh Air" interview noted above, Peters gave a warning that all morally serious people need to heed regarding the role race-baiting played in the rise of Trump and continues to play in GOP politics. For his new book, *Insurgency*, Peters interviewed Pat Buchanan, whose 1992 run for the GOP nomination really kicked off the culture wars as we know them.

> *George Bush had supported an affirmative action law that really angered conservatives, and that was the last straw for Buchanan. So what that shows you is that there has always been a type of voter who, let's say, at the time, bristled at the fact that they had to press one to hear English when they dialed an automated number. Or they were angry that their kid got denied a slot at a competitive college, and they blamed affirmative action for that. Buchanan saw all of that and took advantage of that in a way that endeared him to the kind of voter who would become Trump's voter.*

Buchanan saw, and Trump exploited, the ugly ways class and racism sometimes mix in American society and culture. When Democrats had a chance to disentangle the two by pursuing policies that actually helped the working class after the 2008 economic meltdown, they balked, bailing out Wall Street, not Main Street. That was the last chance to weed out the class-based part of the Trumpist equation.

Now, every weeknight, Tucker Carlson, Sean Hannity and Laura Ingraham manage to work racist dog whistles into their shows, alongside their faux economic populism and their perpetuation of lies big and small. That won't stop even if Trump decides not to run in 2024. Trump discovered an audience for it.

It is hard to keep at bay the depressing thought that the worst aspects of the culture portrayed by George Orwell in his famous work *1984* are coming to fruition. It is clear, it has always been clear, that Trump spoke to the lower angels of human nature and that it is incumbent on the rest of us to resist him and his evil approach to politics and culture with every fiber of our being. This week, however tardily, and however self-interested their motives, it was nice to see a few more Republicans resisting.