

Comment

Are We Sleepwalking Into Dictatorship?

Liz Cheney has not ceased ringing the alarm. She now contends that, if Trump wins back the White House in November, his election could be our last election.

By

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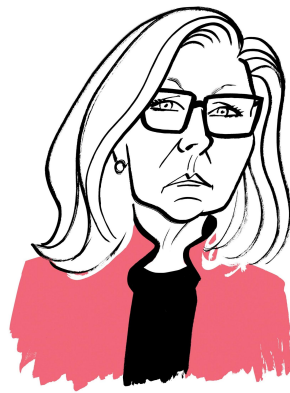


Illustration by João Fazenda

Betrayal, vengeance, invective, and apostasy: these are constants in the turmoil and carnival of American political history. Aaron Burr was accused of launching a strange and semi-farcical attempt to establish a separate country on four hundred thousand acres of farmland in what is now Louisiana. His leading accuser was Thomas Jefferson, whom he had recently served as Vice-President. (Burr was acquitted of treason, first by the courts, and then, centuries later, by revisionist scholars.) John Quincy Adams left the White House only to return to the House of Representatives, where he and his supporters attacked his successor, Andrew Jackson, as an authoritarian, a bigamist, a drunk, a “backwoods

Napoleon.” Theodore Roosevelt championed his fellow-Republican and Secretary of War, William Howard Taft, as his successor, but grew so disenchanted that he declared Taft an avatar of “political crookedness,” broke with the G.O.P., and ran against him, in 1912, as the leader of the Bull Moose Party.

Liz Cheney, the former Republican congresswoman from Wyoming and an ardent conservative, is an apostate for modern times. In a political party that has evolved into a personality cult, her apostasy resides in her refusal to worship its leader and in her defense of the Constitution. For such impudence, she was banished. She was thrown out of the Wyoming Republican Party, censured by the Republican National Committee, and voted out of Congress simply for insisting on the facts: that Donald Trump incited a violent insurrection on Capitol Hill as part of an elaborate attempt to steal the 2020 Presidential election. Cheney did not merely withdraw her support for Trump. She helped lead the congressional select committee investigating the January 6th uprising, which assembled so much of the evidence that informs the federal criminal case against Trump.

Cheney has not ceased ringing the alarm. She now contends that, if Trump wins back the White House in November, his election could be our last election. Mainstream media outlets, including this one, are filled with detailed descriptions of an incipient Trump autocracy, a second

term in which he is no longer restrained by conscience-stricken counsellors. Yet tens of millions of Americans seem undeterred by the prospect of absolutism, cruelty, and corruption on the horizon. The caucuses and the primaries begin next month, and Trump not only dominates his party—he leads in some national polls against the sitting President, Joe Biden. The country, as Cheney puts it, is “sleepwalking into dictatorship.”

There are many reasons for Democrats and Independents to be, at best, skeptical of Liz Cheney. Her hairpin turn to Damascus came late. She voted for Trump in 2016 and 2020. As a member of the House of Representatives, she voted with him ninety-three per cent of the time. During the war in Iraq, a catastrophe designed in no small measure by her father, Dick Cheney, she defended the use of “enhanced interrogation techniques.” When asked about the conspiracy theory that Barack Obama had not been born in the United States, she delivered the squirrely reply that people believed it because they were “uncomfortable with an American President who seems to be afraid to defend America.”

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In a saner world, Cheney’s apostasy would be irrelevant. Defeated or convicted, Trump would be relegated to Palm Beach or to a prison cell.

And yet his persistence and shamelessness, his Republican preëminence, defy understanding. He has been judged liable for sexual abuse. In courts from Georgia to New York and Washington, D.C., he faces four criminal indictments and ninety-one felony charges. (Of course, Trump denies all charges.) One of his campaign's greatest challenges will be scheduling his rallies around his court appearances. He has suggested that the former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff deserves to be executed. He has promised to wage vengeful "retribution" on the press, as well as on the Justice Department, the F.B.I., the I.R.S., and a host of other federal agencies. And he regularly deploys the rhetoric and the imagery of twentieth-century European fascism. "We pledge to you," he told supporters recently, "that we will root out the communists, Marxists, fascists, and the radical-left thugs that live like vermin within the confines of our country." Perhaps the most diabolical aspect of Trump's postmodern authoritarian skill set is his way of winking at his darkest intentions. Asked by Sean Hannity at a Fox News town hall if he intended to be a dictator, Trump replied that he didn't—"other than Day One," when he would close the southern border and resume wide-scale oil drilling. "After that, I'm not a dictator." This is neither hilarious nor comforting.

But this is not that saner world, particularly in the Republican Party, which remains prostrate at Trump's feet. It is the world in which Kevin McCarthy, the ex-House Speaker, reportedly rushed to visit Trump after

the insurrection because Trump was “not eating.” (Trump credibly allows that he was, in fact, “eating too much.”) It is the world in which the new House Speaker, Mike Johnson, who once said that Trump “lacks the character and the moral center” to be President, has now concluded that he’s “all in for President Trump.”

So, though Cheney’s rebellion is belated, it is a distinctly lonely stance, and she does not hold back. When she was asked recently on “The New Yorker Radio Hour” whether she thought that Trump should go to prison if he is convicted of serious felonies, she replied, “I do. That’s going to be up to our justice system, to a jury of his peers, to the judges involved, but I think it’s fundamental to who we are as a country that no person is above the law.”

Meanwhile, Republican operatives in the capital are planning for Trump’s return to power. Like Bolsheviks plotting in the coffeehouses of Zurich, right-wing instituteniks at the Heritage Foundation have drafted Project 2025, a gargantuan instruction manual and ideological manifesto for Trump 2.0. It envisions a Presidential transition in which “conservative warriors” are recruited to assist in the dismantling of “the deep state.” Curbing the independence of the Department of Justice is just one of the countless Trumpist goals in Project 2025. Or, as Trump himself has posted, “I have the absolute right to PARDON myself.”

Cheney has said that she is not ruling out a run for the White House but would do nothing that might help Trump win. Democrats and Independents hardly need to bow to her every policy prescription, but her principled stand against an assault on the Constitution and against an incipient dictator from her own party is notable and potentially important. As a Republican apostate, Cheney need not preach to the converted, but in an inevitably close election she could prove effective in helping to convert the undecided. ♦

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