

THE POINT

WITH CHRIS CILLIZZA

How Liz Cheney became the conscience of Republicans



Analysis by [Chris Cillizza](#), CNN Editor-at-large
Updated 6:03 PM ET, Tue January 12, 2021



(CNN) — On a conference call with her fellow House Republicans on Monday night in advance of Wednesday's expected vote on impeaching President Donald Trump, Wyoming's Liz Cheney, the third-ranking GOP leader, called it "[a vote of conscience](#)."

Which is a very interesting choice of words.

It signals to rank-and-file Republicans that leadership won't -- at least not yet -- whip the vote (i.e., pressure them to vote) to support the President. That would make this a "free" vote, meaning that leadership isn't going to hold it against you if you support impeaching Trump over his role in inciting the mob seizure of the US Capitol six days ago.

Later Tuesday, Cheney announced that she plans to vote for Trump's impeachment in the wake of the violent attack on the US Capitol last week.

"The President of the United States summoned this mob, assembled the mob, and lit the flame of this attack," she said in a statement. "Everything that followed was his doing. None of this would have happened without the President. The President could have immediately and forcefully intervened to stop the violence. He did not. There has never been a greater betrayal by a President of the United States of his office and his oath to the Constitution."

Cheney's use of the word "conscience" earlier in the day was also telling in that, increasingly over these final months of Trump's presidency, she has been a lone voice among prominent House Republicans willing to speak up when she disagrees with the President.

Consider:

* As Trump and his allies pushed to reopen the country (and the economy) in early spring 2020, [Cheney tweeted this](#): "There will be no normally functioning economy if our hospitals are overwhelmed and thousands of Americans of all ages, including our doctors and nurses, lay dying because we have failed to do what's necessary to stop the virus."

* Cheney broke with Trump over his assertion -- made last April -- that he had ["total" authority to force states to reopen](#) even if their governors objected. "The federal government does not have absolute power," [tweeted Cheney](#). "The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people." United States Constitution, Amendment X"

* When, in May, Trump spent several days pushing a debunked conspiracy theory about the death of a young intern in former Florida Rep. Joe Scarborough's office, [Cheney told reporters](#) that the "President should stop tweeting about Joe Scarborough. I think we're in the middle of a pandemic. He's the commander in chief of this nation, and it's causing great pain to the family of the young woman who died. So I would urge him to stop it."

* In June, as Trump continued to reject the science on mask-wearing as a way to slow the spread of Covid-19, [Cheney tweeted a picture of her father](#) (aka the former vice president of the United States) wearing a mask, with this caption: "Dick Cheney says WEAR A MASK. #realmenwearmasks"

* As Trump was ramping up his rhetoric around the election being stolen, [Cheney called on him](#) to either produce evidence of the alleged fraud or bow to "the sanctity of our electoral process" and concede.



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* In the immediate aftermath of last week's Capitol riot, Cheney blasted Trump. "What he has done and what he has caused here is something that we've never seen before in our history," [she said in a statement](#). "It's been 245 years, and no president has ever failed to concede or agree to leave office after the Electoral College has voted, and I think what we are seeing today is the result of that, the result of convincing people that somehow Congress was going to overturn the results of this election, the results of suggesting that he wouldn't leave office."

Cheney's emergence as the one GOP leader willing to stand up and say, essentially, "What the hell are we doing here," is intriguing for a number of reasons -- not the least of which is that her father, prior to the Trump presidency, was the Republican who Democrats most loved to hate. And yet now his daughter has emerged as a voice of reason and sanity within a party that has gone full Trump.

There's a through line there, of course. Dick Cheney, while loathed by Democrats, was a very traditional establishment politician. He had spent decades in Washington -- in and out of elected office -- prior to signing on as George W. Bush's vice president. He was not radical in any meaningful way. And his brand of hawkish Republicanism bears zero resemblance to how Trump sees the world. 1/13/2021, 12:37 PM

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But beyond even that, Liz Cheney was not, at all, the most obvious choice to carry the common-sense banner for Republicans against Trump.

She got off to a very shaky start in Washington. Her short-lived 2014 primary challenge to Sen. Mike Enzi (R) ruffled lots of feathers in the nation's capital --- especially among the same establishment types who were her father's bread and butter. But Cheney bounced back in winning an open House seat in 2016. And she rapidly moved up the House leadership ladder -- seemingly committing to that path when [she decided against running for the open seat](#) created by Enzi's retirement in 2020.

What distinguishes Cheney is that unlike the two lawmakers higher than she is on the leadership chart -- House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy (California) and House Minority Whip Steve Scalise (Louisiana) -- she has not fallen in line with Trump. (Both McCarthy and Scalise, even after the Capitol riot last week, voted to object to the Electoral College results in Arizona and Pennsylvania.)

Cheney, instead, has gone in the other direction, which, in truth, looked like a giant leap of faith in her GOP colleagues (and the broader Republican Party). While it still looks like a risky strategy, politically speaking, Cheney's questioning of Trump -- and calling on her colleagues to do the same -- sure does look like the right thing to do in the light of last week's riot.

CNN's Allison Gordon contributed to this report.



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