

Opinion: Kevin McCarthy's head-spinning hypocrisy

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By Sewell Chan Editor of the Editorial Pages Jan. 8, 2021 4:07 PM PT

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Hours after a mob incited by President Trump stormed the Capitol on Wednesday, a weary Congress resumed debate on the outrageous attempt to block the certification of President-elect Joe Biden's victory.

Challenges had been threatened to the results from multiple states, but in light of the trauma a few hours earlier, several Republican senators who had promised to join this destructive effort — Marsha Blackburn of Tennessee, Mike Braun of Indiana, Steve Daines of Montana, Kelly Loeffler of Georgia, Ron Johnson of Wisconsin and James Lankford of Oklahoma — at last showed some good sense and backed down. Ultimately, lawmakers would consider challenges to the electors only in Arizona and Pennsylvania.

Acknowledging that these senators eventually did the right thing — however belatedly or grudgingly — is important. At the end of the day, putting oneself on the record matters, and while Californians may have their disagreements with these right-wing senators, we should be grateful that they did not join the ignominious ranks of their colleagues, led by Josh Hawley of Missouri and Ted Cruz of Texas, who voted to dispute the election knowing full well that all the evidence points to a November vote that was free, fair and secure.

Sadly, a majority of House Republicans continued down their reckless course. Brushing aside the reality that the mob might very well have threatened their lives too, more than 130 of them voted to support either or both of the Arizona and Pennsylvania objections. Among them were House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy (R-Bakersfield) and House Minority Whip Steve Scalise (R-La.).

For McCarthy to join this outrageous effort was especially disgraceful. Hours earlier, his Senate counterpart, Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.), no liberal, had warned that overturning the will of voters would cause the “death spiral” of democracy. The No. 3 Republican in the House, Liz Cheney of Wyoming, similarly refused to join in this radical repudiation of democracy.

McCarthy, who certainly knows better, supported the big lie — contradicted by dozens of judges, many of them Republican appointees, who have repeatedly rejected the spurious and false claims of a stolen election — that is the foundation for the shocking political violence we saw in Washington this week.

So when he said on the House floor, “Let me be clear, mobs don't rule America,” it is hard to take him seriously, given that he voted to affirm precisely the Trumpist myth that motivated that very mob.

The news only got worse from there. Punchbowl, a new Washington political news site, reports that during the mob siege, McCarthy had engaged in a screaming match with Trump, imploring him to denounce the rioters and to get control of the situation.

On Friday, as Republicans scrambled to navigate the worldwide wave of condemnation and shock over the mob riot, McCarthy issued this statement:

“The task ahead for the next Congress and incoming Biden Administration couldn’t be more momentous. But to deliver a better America for all, partisans of all stripes first must unite as Americans and show our country that a peaceful transition of power has occurred. Impeaching the President with just 12 days left in his term will only divide our country more. I have reached out to President-elect Biden today and plan to speak to him about how we must work together to lower the temperature and unite the country to solve America’s challenges. The coronavirus is still coursing through our communities, businesses and workers are facing unprecedented stress, and children are falling behind. Threats from adversaries such as Russia, China, and Iran are increasing. As leaders, we must call on our better angels and refocus our efforts on working directly for the American people. United we can deliver the peace, strength, and prosperity our country needs. Divided, we will fail.”

These are commendable words — but words are empty when they are completely at odds with actions. Fact is, McCarthy had refused until this week to join McConnell in acknowledging Biden’s victory. Up to that point, he wouldn’t even refer to Biden as president-elect. So the sudden show of comity and cooperation rings utterly hollow.

It is not for me to call for McCarthy to step down, as some commentators have done. If he is willing to show some reasonableness and work with Biden, however belatedly and begrudgingly, I say: Better late than never.

But this sudden reasonableness came about only after five people died in a needless and shocking act of political violence, which even then did not dissuade McCarthy from his reckless path. Only the deepening national crisis — with increasing demands for Trump’s immediate removal from office — seems to have elicited this change in tack.

American democracy will not be safe and secure without a stable and principled Republican Party. A center-right party that emphasizes entrepreneurship and initiative, economic growth and innovation, personal responsibility, fiscal rectitude, stable communities, a strong middle class and equal rights for all — that is, actual conservative principles — can succeed in the United States; it certainly has before. No major Western democracy I know of lacks such a party. But the current party — built on resentment, oligarchy, cynical denial of reality and a maelstrom of myths, conspiracies and frauds — is not that party. I am liberal, but not so arrogant as to believe that liberals have all the answers. Communities that have felt left behind need a strong voice, and Bakersfield, which McCarthy represents, is one of them.

The path to “peace, strength and prosperity,” as McCarthy puts it, demands a repudiation of the Trumpist horrors inflicted on this nation over the last four years. An America with only one party that cares about democracy is not an America we want to live in. If the Republicans are to survive as a political party — and not fold under the weight of their divisions, like their predecessors the Whigs did in the 1850s — their leaders must start telling the truth. They should start with the truths that Trump is a dishonest, disgraceful menace to our democracy and that Biden won a free and fair election.