

Opinion – Bad Omens for America after Liz Cheney’s Defeat

Written by Alexander Brotman

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ALEXANDER BROTMAN, AUG 21 2022

Liz Cheney, a stalwart conservative from a political dynasty in the red state of Wyoming, lost her primary race to a candidate who chose to embrace Donald Trump’s ‘big lie’ about the 2020 presidential election being stolen. Cheney, as a true conservative and believer in the constitution, democracy, and the rule of law, held firm to her principles. Cheney’s loss shows how it is incumbent upon all Americans to support candidates on either side of the political spectrum who voters may disagree sharply with policy-wise but who are committed to democratic values and the rule of law. As Tim Alberta of *The Atlantic* and many other prominent writers have proclaimed a new era of political violence is upon us. Political violence is not the death knell of democracy, but it can severely constrain its growth.

Just two years ago, Cheney won her primary race by close to 70% and no one questioned her conservative credentials or commitment to her home state of Wyoming. What changed was not Cheney’s principles but the tenets of the Republican Party, which left Cheney, and not the other way around. As the midterm elections approach and 2024 weighs heavily on the horizon, the next great battle for American democracy is even more critical than the last. The next two rounds of elections are about whether the peaceful transfer of power can occur in America, and whether officials who oversee elections at the state level, likely including many election deniers, can put country before party when the moment demands it. At present, there is not much to instill high confidence.

Zooming out, Cheney’s loss, and the future of the Republican Party also has ramifications globally. The perception of the United States as formally a two-party system with only one party committed to democracy and the other engaged in the maintenance of an anti-democratic, personalist regime has severe repercussions for America’s place in the world. President Biden, despite his many significant domestic achievements lately, is increasingly looking like the placeholder exception in American politics and not the norm. Furthermore, any successes Democrats can sell over their legislative accomplishments risk being overshadowed by a wave of political violence targeting federal and state judges, the FBI, and election officials for the remainder of 2022 and beyond.

That the FBI, historically one of America’s most conservative institutions as the author Garrett Graff has chronicled, has become the subject of the Republicans’ disdain shows just how removed from conservatism the majority of the party has become. ‘The issue here is Mr. Trump and not institutional bias’, according to Graff, as every FBI director has been a Republican-leaning official going back to the bureau’s founding in which it has historically tried to uphold traditional, conservative, and Christian values. The attacks on the FBI and other critical institutions shows that the political violence the United States now faces is one of pure political expediency and not ideology. The US has witnessed political violence before and the targeted harassment of civil society, minority groups, and others, but the scale and amplification of the present moment makes it much more dangerous. The number of enablers of the whims of a defeated former president has grown since Trump left office and Trumpism is a cancer that will continue to long outlast its namesake.

For the remainder of her term Cheney will remain vice chair of the January 6th Committee, meaning she will have a public platform to hold Trump accountable and to attempt to shape the future of the GOP. Her order is a tall one particularly when her favourability rating is three times greater among Democrats than it is among Republicans. In a two-party system the options are narrow for candidates who don’t fit a particular political mould and receive the

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support of the party’s base. The extremes have become ever more incentivised – to the detriment of those who wish for a pluralistic, multiparty democracy to flourish.

Most Americans identify as moderates or conservatives who can be persuaded to vote in either direction and who value the character of the politicians who represent them. Critically, there is a base of moderate, classical conservative Republicans who can reclaim the principles of the Republican Party. At present, however, they don’t have the room to lead and break free from the Trumpian pack. The masses may want Trump but only because the system at present rewards the reactionary fringe that can hijack the party platform. Political parties can demand loyalty, but they differ from cults in that they don’t penalise or ostracise those who choose to step aside. Personal freedom, a key conservative principle, is paramount, and blind loyalty is the opposite of what a party should stand for, as it signifies a lack of debate and competition over the best ideas and the best candidates to put forward. For the Republican Party to move forward, and for Liz Cheney to feel at home in that party, the trappings of a cult of personality need to be removed so that a democratic and competitive political landscape can start to emerge.

At this juncture, Cheney’s loss is an opportunity for all Americans to look inwards. As Cheney said of her Republican colleagues during the January 6th Committee hearings: ‘there will come a day when Donald Trump is gone, but your dishonour will remain.’ In the era of ever-breaking news cycles and sensational headlines it can be easy to believe that dishonour will be fleeting if it ever takes root at all. Whether or not she returns to the political scene in 2024, Liz Cheney has already cemented her place in American history. To support her is to support democracy, accountability, and the continual growth of a constitutional republic, regardless of one’s party affiliation. Cheney’s battle is America’s battle, and it would be a dishonour not to make the nation safe for her and other principled candidates to flourish.

About the author:

Alexander Brotman is a political risk and intelligence analyst with a focus on EU politics and security developments. He has written for Global Risk Insights and Foreign Brief, two political risk publications, and has provided direct research support to a leading scholar of Russia and Eurasia in Washington. Alexander received his MSc. in International Relations from The University of Edinburgh. He is currently based in Washington DC.

He writes in a personal capacity and not with any professional affiliation.