

WHEN AN OLDER WHITE CATHOLIC MAN ADMITS, “THIS TOXICITY THAT EXISTS IS REALLY EMBARRASSING”

When I vowed to stop calling Liz Cheney “BabyDick” when she announced she would vote to impeach Donald Trump, the second time, I wrote:

Liz “BabyDick” Cheney and I will never be friends. But she will have served a key leadership role in this troubled time in providing another path for the Republican party by voting to impeach an authoritarian.

May she help others feel safe in rejecting this scourge.

I thought back on it as I watched this clip, from the third of three joint appearances Kamala Harris and Cheney made in the Blue Wall states yesterday, this time in Waukesha, WI, one of the most important swing suburbs in WI.

Charlie Sykes introduced the questioner as Dan [Voberil], a retired Catholic teacher (I’ll call him “Dan” since I couldn’t make out his last name) and claimed he was a genuinely undecided voter.

He didn’t appear to be undecided – at least not by the time he asked his question, 31 minutes into the event – though Cheney taunted him, “Cmon Dan,” as he started to ask his question.

It may matter that Cheney had already answered a question about choice, noting that she’s pro-life, but that post-Dobbs restrictions go too far in a number of states, because Dan described himself as a Catholic who is pro-life, pro-choice, depending, but as someone who has five

daughters.

He was there, at least in significant part, because he has daughters in the post-Dobbs era.

But Dan – who spoke of how much courage speaking up like this took (and as a teacher in a Catholic school, he may have reason to fear) – spoke most about, as a teacher and a father, how embarrassing “the toxicity that exists” is.

I was told I was going to be an alternate. I was a little worried about getting my question, but.

[Harris: Take your time, take your time.]

This is a question – actually, I retired from MPS but I currently teach and I teach at a private Catholic school and I'm Catholic but I've also been pro-life, pro-choice depending, but I have five daughters and I think it's my duty to continue, with the children I teach as well, I see that we need to respect women and I've really come to the conclusion that this toxicity that exists is just rather embarrassing and as a life-long Republican [gestures towards Cheney] I thought your father would be a great President –

[Cheney: Thank you!]

Not to say George wasn't but I've come to this realization and it's been very difficult so I'm just – my big question was for the future of my children and also students that I encounter and try to show that we have to have some kind of civility like we did back in the 80s, when Ronald Reagan and Tip O'Neill, of course, could talk about things and solve problems and now it's trying to get one better than the other and so I'm just wondering, in your position now, how to convince people like me who, some of my siblings may be questioning what

I'm doing here but, like you said, we have to be courageous, and that's what I'm trying to be, and so what do you think we can do in the last 15 days, or you can, Madam Vice President, to try to get some of these people to cross over. I know you already said that some probably won't say who they're voting for but ... or something I could take with me to say, this sounds very good. We ought to at least listen to this.

Harris didn't respond at first; Cheney did.

As she did, I recalled reports of how furious she was that Trump sent a mob after not just Mike Pence – whom, I have no doubt, Cheney includes among the “good and honorable people” that Trump betrayed – but also his daughter, Charlotte, who was with Pence that day. I remember reports that a big part of what especially infuriated Cheney was her horror that Charlotte was subjected to the mob, too.

I think that you've really put your finger on something that's so important, and you see it as a teacher. Any of us who are around young children – I see it as a mom, my kids aren't so young anymore, but you know, when they look at how elected officials – and in particular how Donald Trump is conducting himself now, that's not a lesson that anybody would look up to. And I think about it, often, from the perspective of the men and women who've worn the uniform of our country and who have sacrificed so much for our freedom. All of us have an obligation to be worthy of that sacrifice.

[applause]

In this moment, there are millions of good and honorable people who Donald Trump has just fundamentally betrayed. And I think it's so important for people

to think about this from the perspective of, you know, the decision to give somebody the power of the Presidency, means that you're handing someone the most awesome and significant power of any office, anywhere in the world. And you have to choose people who have character, choose people of good faith.

You know the Framers knew this. The Framers knew that it was so important that we take an Oath, that also, fundamentally, you had to have people of character. And Donald Trump has proven he's not one of those people by his actions.

So what I say to people is, look, for us to get back to a time where we are actually having policy debates and discussions and disagreements, we have to protect what undergirds all of this. And what undergirds all of it is the Constitution.

And we have to be willing to say, as a Nation, we're better than partisanship. And I say this as someone who spent a lot of years engaged in partisan battles. And there are important debates we have to have.

But if we allow someone, again, if we give him the power again, to do all the things he tells us he's gonna do, he says he'll terminate the Constitution, he says he deploy the military against the enemy within, that is a risk that we simply can't take as a nation. And I think that this vote, this election cycle, this time around has to be about so much more than partisanship.

And I will just end this by saying, and I also know because I have spent time with Vice President Harris, because I have come to understand what she believes about how she will govern, that

she will be a President for all Americans, that she's committed to listening, and committed to having viewpoints some of which come from different ends of the political spectrum.

And if you think about how you conduct your life outside of politics, how we all conduct our everyday lives, those are the kinds of people that you trust, those are the kinds of people you can work with.

Like, if you wouldn't hire somebody to babysit your kids, you shouldn't make that guy the President of the United States.

I'll repeat again caveats I've made before. I don't know if this appeal to Republicans will work. I don't know if Harris would have been better served doing something to listen to Muslim and Arab voters, what may be the single biggest own goal of her campaign.

But Dan – who as an older white Catholic man, is in every way a Trump demographic – modeled something pretty similar to what we watched Ramiro González model across two Univision town halls.

Dan is someone for whom being a Republican has been a core part of his identity. Dan is someone you'll never convince that Reagan and Liz's own father Dick engaged in a great deal of toxicity themselves (I was thinking of Cheney telling Pat Leahy to go fuck himself as I watched this).

But for our purposes, you don't need to do that work.

For the purposes of breaking through the concrete polarization of MAGA politics, you don't need to do that work, not in the next two weeks.

You need to give people who've come to hate that their own party runs on dick stories and

demeaning others, especially women and people of color, the courage to choose not to rejoin in that hatred out of partisan inertia or Republican self-identity. Both Cheney and Harris have talked about power and powerlessness, and I can't help but wondering if they've discussed Václav Havel's essay on the power of the powerless while flying around together on a plane Liz's father used to command, of the import of everyday people taking small acts of courage, the import of people like Dan refusing to join in Trump's attacks on people that might include his five daughters (though, to be clear, Harris' models of courage would come out of the Civil Rights movement, a culture in which she was raised).

Sykes described that Dan is a genuinely undecided voter. He sounded like a voter who had made his decision, but was asking for courage, was asking for Cheney and Harris to make it easier to sustain that courage. By 31 minutes into this town hall, he was even asking for, "something I could take with me to say, this sounds very good. We ought to at least listen to this."

I don't know whether it will work.

What I do know is that neither Harris nor Cheney are mistaking the enormity of the task, of trying to break the authoritarianism of a party that has overwhelmed voters with a blanket of disinformation and dehumanization.

They're just trying to give people the courage to break out of a lifetime habit of voting for Republicans and instead to vote for the Constitution.