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I Quit the GOP and Moved Left. Will Liz Cheney Do the Same?

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I've been thinking a lot about Liz Cheney. Her courage in standing up to Donald Trump and the increasingly authoritarian Republican Party shouldn't make her exceptional—ideally, she would have a considerable amount of company—but it does. Having broken with the Republican Party myself, I know that the initial break eventually led me to an almost complete cutoff with the right side of the political spectrum and a somewhat reluctant embrace of the left. I will be curious to see if Ms. Cheney follows the same path.

As is well known, Ms. Cheney's father Dick Cheney is a long-time pillar of the Republican establishment—White House chief of staff, secretary of Defense, and vice president of the United States, among other things—so Ms. Cheney was essentially born into the GOP. I'm sure she was a Republican activist even in grammar school.

While I don't have Ms. Cheney's pedigree, I remember being a Republican from an early age. For example, I supported Richard Nixon in the 1960 election when I was just nine years old. I couldn't have explained a single one of Nixon's policy positions, but I remember being turned off by John F. Kennedy's supporters.

My neighborhood was very Catholic and every Catholic kid I knew supported JFK with great enthusiasm. I thought it was as stupid to support a politician just because of their religion as it was to oppose him or her for that reason. So, my support for Nixon was essentially based on being a reactionary even then. I suspect that this was even more true for Ms. Cheney because her father was so well known as a Republican apparatchik when she was growing up in the 1970s—an era much more politicized and polarized than the one I grew up in.

Being born into a political party is quite common and few people for whom that is the case ever switch, any more than those born into a religion ever do. I remember once asking the gay writer Andrew Sullivan why he remained a staunch Catholic when the church basically hated him for who he is. He simply shrugged his shoulders, which I interpreted as meaning that it was like family; he was stuck with it and couldn't leave.

It's even harder to leave a powerful institution like a political party when your livelihood depends on it. Before being elected to Congress, Ms. Cheney held multiple political appointments at the State Department, as well as working on her father's campaign, and was deeply involved in ideological debates about the Iraq/Afghanistan wars that were highly contentious.

Like Ms. Cheney at the same point in her life, I was a relatively low-level spear-carrier in the ideological wars, but I made significant contributions and did my bit for the cause.

Being forced to defend an ideological position that is under heavy political attack tends to make you dig your heels in even more deeply with those on your side in that debate. I know. In my twenties, I got thrown in the deep end of the pool defending "supply-side economics" and fell in with a group of well-known ideologues such as the late Rep. Jack Kemp, Arthur Laffer, Jude Wanniski and others. Like Ms. Cheney at the same point in her life, I was a relatively low-level spear-carrier in the ideological wars, but I made significant contributions and did my bit for the cause.

Until November 22, 2003, I was very comfortable being a Republican with libertarian leanings. Like Ms. Cheney, I had also served as a deputy assistant secretary—at the Treasury Department—and had been involved in administration policy at the nitty-gritty level. After leaving government, I worked for conservative/libertarian think tanks and was often involved with policy developments in my area of expertise: economic and tax policy.

My estrangement from my party and its ideology can be dated very specifically, and much like Ms. Cheney, it came about because of a particular event. In my case it was passage of the Medicare Part D legislation in Congress; in her case it was the attempted coup on January 6, 2021.

During my long career in politics, which began in 1976, and even in college, I believed that government was too big and needed to be cut; I also knew that so-called entitlement programs like Medicare were the principal drivers of government growth. For decades, I wrote and worked as hard as I could to restrain the growth of such programs. Ideally, I thought they should be privatized. The last thing I ever would have supported is creation of a vast new unfunded entitlement program. But in 2003, that's exactly what my party did and it was supported by all of my congressional allies such as Rep. Paul Ryan, whom I have known since he was an intern for Jack Kemp.

I had convinced myself that all of the actions taken by Republicans during the summer of 2003 in support of Medicare Part D were just a smokescreen designed to trick elderly voters into believing that the GOP supported the legislation while killing it in conference.

I was reminded of what Sen. Bob Dole once told me: "You can never go wrong supporting a bill that fails or opposing a bill that passes." That advice always stuck with me because while it was obviously true for an individual legislator, it couldn't possibly be true for all legislators. It's an interesting conundrum worthy of a political science dissertation.

Convinced that the Republican Party was put on this earth to control and even abolish entitlement programs—or at least fund them properly—I was shocked beyond belief when I read *The Washington Post* on November 22, 2003, and discovered that in the middle of the night the Republican-controlled House of Representatives passed the Medicare Part D conference report after a massive lobbying effort by the Republican leadership, which brought every ounce of pressure it had to bear—including waking up President Bush in the middle of the night—on recalcitrant conservatives who shared my hostile view of the legislation. It was an extremely sordid affair involving *de facto* bribes, freezing the C-SPAN cameras so citizens couldn't see what Republican leaders were doing, pressure on career government officials to lie about the cost of the program and other ugly details of the sausage-making process.

Not only did I think that Medicare Part D was an awful program, I was also incredibly angry with myself for feeling like I'd let my party betray me, as well as my own naivete at not seeing what was going on until it was a done-deal.

I had a crisis of faith.

The first thing I realized was that the Medicare Part D program, which added about one percent of the gross domestic product to the deficit forever, was probably going to require a massive tax increase eventually. Opposing any and all tax increases was, of course, another key belief I held, along with every other Republican. I began saying so publicly in my syndicated column very shortly after passage of the Medicare bill.

This led my friends in the conservative think tank community to try and bring me back into the fold. I recall two lunches at the Heritage Foundation and the Cato Institute—I had worked for both organizations—where my fellow right-wing policy wonks tried to make me see the error of my ways. It was reminiscent of Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*, wherein a communist ideologue is persuaded to deny the evidence of his own eyes and ears in the name of ideological consistency.

The effort failed and I began a long process of estrangement from the party and movement I had devoted my life and career to. If I could have been so wrong about their commitment to restraining the size of government—which I thought was the core economic issue of the time—what else might I have been wrong about, I thought.

At first, I blamed George W. Bush for leading Republicans down a false path of buying votes to achieve some larger goal, such as defeating Islamic terrorism. While seductive, I thought that was a slippery slope that led to nihilism. Some principles had to remain inviolate or else one is simply rationalizing whatever is in their immediate political or self-interest; you are adrift without a compass.

I decided to write a book about Bush's violations of conservative principles. The first chapter I wrote was a detailed analysis of passage of the Medicare Part D legislation. But I had no difficulty condemning him for other heresies that I had turned a blind-eye toward—steel tariffs, subsidies for farmers, budgetary profligacy et al.

Even before it was published, I was summarily fired from the conservative think tank where I had worked for 10 years. I was hurt, but thought that once people had a chance to read the book they would find my argument irrefutable—I had gone to great pains to thoroughly document all of my facts and almost exclusively quoted conservatives and Republicans who shared my misgivings. (Like Republicans who criticized Trump for his actions on Jan. 6, this criticism turned out to be temporary and quickly forgotten.)

Ironically, my goal was to help the GOP. I thought Bush's failures would lead to inevitable defeat in 2008. I thought if my party—and I still considered myself a loyal Republican at that point—dealt honestly with them it would have a better chance of nominating someone who could win the next presidential election.

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The reaction of all my friends in the conservative policymaking community was to denounce me for disloyalty. When I would run into friends and former colleagues from conservative think tanks on the street, they would pointedly walk past me with a glare of hatred. I was a pariah. I would occasionally get private message from former allies acknowledging the truth of what I said, but none defended me publicly.

One particularly bitter example was the economist Steve Moore, with whom I'd worked with for 20 years, long before he became a close adviser to Trump. When my book came out in 2006, he was an editorial writer for *The Wall Street Journal* and he reviewed it in that publication. A positive review would have sold a lot of books, but he trashed it and did so dishonestly: He dwelt on one throw-away comment about restricting immigration—he was then for free immigration—that really had nothing to do with my argument, while ignoring the substance of what I wrote. I was very disappointed.

A few years later, I ran into Moore at a reception at anti-tax activist Grover Norquist's house. Moore seemed to be avoiding me all evening, but as he was leaving he called to me from the doorway and said, "By the way, you were right about Bush." He then quickly left. It's the last time I ever saw him.

Once untethered from the community of friends and professional acquaintances I had been allied with for decades, I became less and less involved with Republican politics and policies. I just kept plugging away with my column and other writings, hoping that my former compatriots would see that they had completely misunderstood what I was doing. When Barack Obama won in 2008, exactly as I foresaw, I thought for sure that my friends would see the wisdom of my efforts.

They didn't.

Almost immediately after my book appeared, I noticed a sharp drop-off in my contact with the GOP and conservative movement. I didn't even get fundraising mails anymore and all my invitations to political receptions and other social events evaporated.

Being a misanthrope by nature, I didn't miss the social interactions, but it nevertheless had an impact on my thinking. Lacking direct contact with those on the right, I gradually became more and more disconnected to the collective viewpoint they represented. It's one thing to be criticized philosophically from a distance, it's another to confront a friend face-to-face and be criticized unfairly. The latter is much more likely to engender ill-will and create hostile relations.

It turned out that no other think tank on the right or left had any interest in my services and I was forced to make my living as a free-lance writer. Although I didn't consciously drift leftward, I initially found myself at a relative distance from my former compatriots—as every other conservative writer seemed to be headed further rightward. For perhaps 10 years, I still thought of myself as having pretty much the same libertarian/conservative philosophy I had always had. But over time, I gradually found myself moving left myself, not just relatively but absolutely. I found myself receptive to progressive ideas I had either previously ignored or dismissed out of hand.

I found myself receptive to progressive ideas I had either previously ignored or dismissed out of hand. Part of this was simply that I no longer viewed my audience as being primarily on the right, so I stopped focusing exclusively on their interests. It helped that I stopped watching Fox News and listening to talk radio—which I had formerly done fairly regularly to keep on top of what those on my side of the street were interested in. Eventually, I stopped reading anything from those on the right. Long before Trump, the typical conservative commentary seemed to me to be shallow and increasingly anti-intellectual; it was just rote repetition of whatever meme was circulating that day.

Another thing is that I stopped outsourcing my views on issues outside my area of specialization to those on the right. Like everyone involved with policymaking, there were lots of issues I didn't have the time or inclination to think about or research. I just went along with those who did specialize in them who generally supported me on my issues. It was ideological logrolling. But now I had to think for myself about them and I often found myself in disagreement with my former allies.

In 2013, I decided to write a memoir detailing my intellectual journey. No one would publish it, so I put it aside. In 2014, I wrote a policy book about the intellectual decline of the right. In the course of writing this book, I found myself surprisingly attracted to the progressive critique of conservative policies I had long supported. Unintentionally, I found myself drifting further to the left philosophically. Although I didn't see Trump on the horizon when I finished the book in early 2015, all of my research and analysis showed that Republicans were moving inexorably in the direction of becoming the new Know-Nothing Party, divorced from reality and any intellectual grounding in facts or proper analysis. Unfortunately, no one would publish this book either.

As my regular writing opportunities dried up, I gradually retired from the political game. Sadly, I discovered that editors preferred writers who appeal exclusively to those solidly on one side of the political spectrum, rather those of an apostate or someone searching for answers on both sides of the ideological divide. While there are a few people like that in the prestige media, such

as *The Washington Post*'s Jennifer Rubin and Max Boot—and even George Will—they were already well-established before Trump pushed them out of their political comfort zone on the right, as I had been 10 years earlier.

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Eventually, I found myself writing for publications on the left that I had long thought I had nothing in common with, such as *Dissent* and *The New Republic*. Ironically, my principal disagreement with the left these days is that it isn't progressive or aggressive enough. I often find myself writing pieces urging Democrats to be more liberal and stop backsliding when attacked by those on the right. Having long been part of the right, I try to help those on the left identify and exploits its vulnerabilities and weaknesses.

I have no idea whether Liz Cheney will follow my path, but she's about the same age I was when I had my crisis of faith—she was born in 1966, I in 1951. I think as one starts to see one's own mortality, it has a way of focusing attention on one's legacy. When a polarizing event arises, as Jan. 6 was, people have to pick a side; there can be no straddling the fence or avoiding commitment. For our parents' and grandparents' generations, things such as the Spanish Civil War, the rise of Nazism and then McCarthyism were events that forced people to choose sides. And some people chose painfully, forcing them to choose honesty and principle over friends and livelihoods.

Maybe future historians will view people such as Ms. Cheney and me as the “Hollywood 10” of our era. If Ms. Cheney is stripped of her congressional leadership position, she may find, as I did when I lost my job, that it is liberating and eye-opening. It may make her receptive to progressive thinking that she has undoubtedly rejected all of her life. We will know from her voting record, which is among the most conservative in the House. If she begins drifting leftward—that is, toward the middle of the political spectrum—we will see it soon enough.

Unlike earlier apostates, Ms. Cheney has a number of advantages that may give her a better chance of success in terms of bending the political curve. Her name is first and foremost a powerful benefit and an enormous plus for her, as well as her father's vast wealth and contacts, access to resources, and potential allies among the GOP's “old guard.” Ms. Cheney is clearly playing the long game here. The future of the Republican Party may hinge on her success or failure.