

How Mitch McConnell blew his 'LBJ moment' and handed the GOP back to Trump

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In 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson faced a choice between doing what was best for America and what was best for his Democratic Party. He put the country first by signing the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the benchmark legislation that transformed America by outlawing public segregation, even though LBJ knew that Democrats would pay a steep price. After the law's passage, an aide noticed that LBJ was downcast and asked what was wrong. "We've lost the South," said this astute politician, and he was right. Democrats still haven't gotten most of it back.

For a brief period, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) was poised to emulate LBJ and put America ahead of his party. Just before the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol, McConnell warned that the refusal of senators to accept Biden's election would send American democracy into "a death spiral." After the attack, McConnell squarely blamed Trump. "The mob was fed lies," he said in the Senate on Jan. 19. "They were provoked by the president and other powerful people."

Reportedly, McConnell was "furious" at Trump over the insurrection; told associates that Trump's behavior was an impeachable offense; and welcomed the Democrats' impeachment drive because it would help the Republican Party divorce itself from Trump. McConnell's wife, Transportation Secretary Elaine Chao, resigned from Trump's Cabinet. Insiders confidently predicted that McConnell would wring enough votes from Senate Republicans to convict Trump and bar him from ever again holding federal office.

Alas, what might have come to be called the Great Republican Moral Reckoning never happened. Just one week after his "the mob was fed lies" speech, McConnell, along with most Republican senators, voted to dismiss the impeachment article against Trump on the ground that a former president cannot be impeached. According to one account, McConnell counted the votes in his Senate caucus to convict Trump, came up short and hastily retreated. How hard he tried to persuade Senate Republicans to vote to convict Trump is not clear, but apparently Republican senators began losing their nerve, just as they always have with Trump, and then McConnell lost his.

The Republican claim that the Constitution forbids trying a former president is a flawed pretext for avoiding a long overdue moral showdown with Donald Trump. In fact, a Congressional Research Service (CRS) report suggested that, while the issue is not free from doubt, the Senate has a plausible constitutional basis for trying a former president. The CRS noted that in 1876 the Senate held an impeachment trial of William Belknap, President Ulysses S. Grant's secretary of war, even though he was no longer in office. (Belknap was acquitted.)

LBJ, a genius at arm twisting, persuading and cajoling legislators, might have rounded up the votes of Republican senators needed, along with the votes of 50 Democratic senators, to convict Trump. But the political will has to be there, and it wasn't for Mitch McConnell, who decided that it was better to keep his party together than to defend American democracy.

History could well judge this moment as a turning point for the Republican Party and America because it may have been the best and perhaps last chance for Republicans to rid themselves of Donald Trump, who could campaign for president in 2024, as suggested by historian Timothy Snyder, on the dangerously false claim that he was “stabbed in the back” by Democrats. Indeed, McConnell, before he backed down, cogently made the case that Trumpism is a mortal threat to democracy in America —and that was before Trump underscored McConnell's point by provoking an insurrectionary attack on the Capitol.

But if you pick a fight with Donald Trump and then back down, he will own you. Even though he is out of office, Trump owns Mitch McConnell and the Republican Party.

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