

Why McCarthy's Jan. 6 calls reflect a deep Republican divide

House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy is having to do damage control after the leak of audio of those calls in the wake of January 6

[Howard Kurtz](#) April 28, 2022 3:00am EDT

Kevin McCarthy was sounding quite reasonable.

He didn't want to "play politics" with the Capitol riot; the country was "too crazy" at the moment.

He wanted his more extreme members to rein it in.

In private calls with his leadership team, he named names, [reacting](#) to the latest reports of who was fueling the flames of divisiveness.

And for that, he is now under fire.



House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., responds to reporters at the Capitol in Washington, Friday, Dec. 3, 2021, about the behavior of Rep. Lauren Boebert, R-Colo., and her repeated "anti-Muslim" attacks against Rep. Ilhan Omar, D-Minn. (AP Photo/J. Scott Applewhite)

The House minority leader, and likely next speaker, is [having](#) to do damage control after the leak of audio of those calls in the wake of January 6. The recordings were obtained by two New York Times

[reporters](#) for a book about to be published.

In the early days of 2021, McCarthy was holding Donald Trump responsible for the riot and telling his team he was considering suggesting to the president that he resign. In the spring of 2022, having decided against that course of action, McCarthy has mended fences with Trump and is trying to hold his party together through the midterm elections.

What's happening now is that the conduct of some ultra-conservative Republican lawmakers is being melded into the broader narrative of what happened on that tragic day and will undoubtedly be spotlighted when the Democratic-controlled committee launches its hearings.

Some of this is partisan politics, to be sure. But McCarthy's private [comments](#) provide cover for Democrats to argue this is a legitimate area of inquiry.



WASHINGTON, DC - MAY 14: Rep. Matt Gaetz (R-FL) walks out of the committee room during a hearing with the House Armed Services Subcommittee on Cyber, Innovative Technologies, and Information System in the Rayburn House Office Building on May 14, 2021, in Washington, D.C. (Photo by Anna Moneymaker/Getty Images)

One target in those recorded calls was Florida Rep. Matt Gaetz. McCarthy said he would call Gaetz and tell him "this is serious s[***], to cut this out."

McCarthy's deputy, Steve Scalise, said "that's potentially illegal what he's doing."

McCarthy responded: "Well, he's putting people in jeopardy. He doesn't need to be doing this. We saw what people were doing in the Capitol, you know, came prepared with rope and everything else."

Another subject of discussion was Alabama Rep. Mo Brooks, who spoke at the Trump rally before the riot and said it was time for American patriots to take down names and "kick some ass."

McCarthy said: "You think the president deserves to be impeached for his comments? That sounds like it goes further than what the president did."

Other Republicans who were discussed are Louie Gohmert and Lauren Boebert.

Gaetz has hit back, saying of McCarthy and Scalise that "this is the behavior of weak men, not leaders." Brooks said that "Kevin McCarthy spoke before knowing the facts."

Rep. Andy Biggs took a harder shot, saying that "basically negotiating with Liz Cheney on whether he should encourage President Trump to resign or not, becomes a huge, huge trust issue for me." Cheney was on some calls before McCarthy booted her from the leadership.



"Tucker Carlson Tonight" finished atop the advertiser-coveted demographic of adults age 25-54, averaging 552,000 viewers from the critical group. (Fox news)

And the split on the right was clear when Tucker Carlson objected to McCarthy [saying](#) of his dissident members, "Can't they take their Twitter accounts away too?"

Carlson said on Fox that in favoring "censorship," McCarthy "sounds like an MSNBC contributor," and that if he or Elise Stefanik win the speakership, "That would mean we would have a Republican Congress led by a puppet of the Democratic Party."

The California congressman initially denied a Times account that he had told colleagues he was considering telling the president he should

resign. Audio of the call showed his denial to be false.

Asked by Fox's Bill Melugin, McCarthy said no, because "I never called the president to resign. He and I have a very good relationship." But that is moving the goalposts, because Jonathan Martin and Alex Burns of the Times never reported that he had such a conversation with Trump.

McCarthy has made a political calculation that being on Trump's side is [crucial](#) to the party's success. Most Republicans, fearing the former president may oppose their reelection, have made a similar bet, and therefore have to maintain good ties with Trump. And as Trump insists that they side with his claims of a rigged election, that will be a significant issue this fall – despite what McCarthy and others said 16 months ago.

McCarthy may well be right on the internal politics. Media reports say that when he met with the Republican caucus yesterday, he explained that he was exploring different scenarios, that the recordings were out of context. And he got a standing ovation.