

In the Darkness of Dick Cheney

By [Mark Danner](#)

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If you're a man of principle, compromise is a bit of a dirty word. —Dick Cheney, 2013

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1.

In early 2007, as Iraq seemed to be slipping inexorably into chaos and President George W. Bush into inescapable political purgatory, Meir Dagan, the head of the Israeli Mossad, flew to Washington, sat down in a sunlit office of the West Wing of the White House, and spread out on the coffee table before him a series of photographs showing a strange-looking building rising out of the sands in the desert of eastern Syria. Vice President Dick Cheney did not have to be told what it was. “They tried to hide it down *awadi*, a gulley,” he recalls to filmmaker R.J. Cutler.

There’s no population around it anyplace.... You can’t say it’s to generate electricity, there’s no power line coming out of it. It’s just out there obviously for production of plutonium.

The Syrians were secretly building a nuclear plant—with the help, it appeared, of the North Koreans. Though the United States was already embroiled in two difficult, unpopular, and seemingly endless wars, though its military was overstretched and its people impatient and angry, the vice-president had no doubt what needed to be done:

Condi recommended taking it to the United Nations. I strongly recommended that we ought to take it out.

Launching an immediate surprise attack on Syria, Cheney tells us in his memoirs, would not only “make the region and the world safer, but it would also demonstrate our seriousness with respect to nonproliferation.” This was the heart of the Bush Doctrine: henceforth terrorists and the states harboring them would be treated as one and, as President Bush vowed before Congress in January 2002, “the United States of America will not permit the world’s most dangerous regimes to threaten us with the world’s most destructive weapons.” It was according to this strategic thinking that the United States answered attacks on New York and Washington by a handful of terrorists not by a carefully circumscribed counterinsurgency aimed at al-Qaeda but by a worldwide “war on terror” that also targeted states—Iraq, Iran, North Korea—that formed part of a newly defined “axis of evil.”¹ According to those attending National Security Council meetings in the days after September 11,

The primary impetus for invading Iraq...was to make an example of [Saddam] Hussein, to create a demonstration model to guide the behavior of anyone with the temerity to acquire destructive weapons or, in any way, flout the authority of the United States.²

And yet five years after the president had denounced the “axis of evil” before Congress, and four years after his administration had invaded and occupied Iraq in the declared aim of ridding Saddam’s regime of its weapons of mass destruction, the North Koreans had detonated their own nuclear weapon and the Syrians and Iranians, as the vice-president tells us in his memoirs, were “both working to develop nuclear capability.” What’s more,

Syria was facilitating the flow of foreign fighters into Iraq, where they killed US soldiers. Iran was providing funding and weapons for exactly the same purpose, as well as providing weapons to the Taliban in Afghanistan. They were both involved in supporting Hezbollah in its efforts to threaten Israel and destabilize the Lebanese government. They constituted a major threat to America’s interests in the Middle East.

By the vice-president’s own analysis the “demonstration model” approach, judged by whether it was “guiding the behavior” of the axis of evil countries and their allies, was delivering distinctly mixed results. No matter:

I told the president we needed a more effective and aggressive strategy to counter these threats, and I believed that an important first step would be to destroy the reactor in the Syrian desert.

Launching an air strike on Syria, as he tells Cutler, “would sort of again reassert the kind of authority and influence we had back in ’03—when we took down Saddam Hussein and eliminated Iraq as a potential source of WMD.”

“Back in ’03” had been the Golden Age, when American power had reached its zenith. After Kabul had fallen in a few weeks, the shock and awe launched from American planes and missiles had brought American warriors storming all the way to Baghdad. Saddam’s statue, with the help of an American tank and a strong chain, crashed to the pavement. The first of the “axis of evil” countries had fallen. President Bush donned his flight suit and swaggered across the deck of the USS Abraham Lincoln. It was the “Mission Accomplished” moment.

And yet is there not something distinctly odd in pointing, in 2007—not to mention in the memoirs of 2011 and the film interview in 2013—to “the kind of authority and influence we had back in ’03”? Four years after the Americans had declared victory in Iraq—even as the vice-president was “strongly recommending” that the United States attack Syria—more than a hundred thousand Iraqis and nearly five thousand Americans were dead, Iraq was near anarchy, and no end was yet in sight. Not only the war’s ending but its beginning had disappeared into a dark cloud of confusion and controversy, as the weapons of mass destruction that were its justification turned out not to exist. The invasion had produced not the rapid and overwhelming victory Cheney had anticipated but a quagmire in which the American military had occupied and repressed a Muslim country and, four years later, been brought to the verge of defeat. As for “authority and influence,” during that time North Korea had acquired nuclear weapons and Iran and Syria had started down the road to building them.

Given this, what exactly had the “demonstration model” demonstrated? If such demonstrations really did “guide the behavior of anyone with the temerity...to flout the authority of the United States,” how exactly had the decision to invade Iraq and the disastrous outcome of the war guided the actions and policies of those authority-flouting countries? The least one could say is that if the theory worked, then that “authority and influence we had back in ‘03,” in conquered Baghdad, had been unmasked, as the insurgency got underway, as an illusion.

The pinnacle of power had been attained not in Baghdad but long before, when the leaders decided to set out on this ill-starred military adventure. By invading Iraq Bush administration policymakers—and at their head, Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld—had managed to demonstrate to the world not the grand extent of American power but its limits. The most one could say is that the “demonstration model” had had the opposite result of that intended, encouraging “rogue states,” faced with the prospect of an aggressive United States determined to wield its unmatched conventional military forces, to pursue the least expensive means by which to deter such an attack: nuclear weapons of their own. Now the Iraq war suggested that even if the Americans did invade, a determined core of insurgents equipped with small arms, suicide vests, and other improvised explosive devices might well be enough to outlast them, or at least outlast the patience of the American public.

2.

By November 2007 two in three Americans had concluded that the Iraq war had not been worth fighting. President Bush, bidding fair to become the least popular president since modern polling began, had just led the Republicans to a decisive “thumping” at the polls, losing control of both houses of Congress—and had felt obliged finally to fire Rumsfeld, Cheney’s longtime mentor, over the latter’s dogged and strenuous objections. It was Rumsfeld who had brought the young Cheney into the White House in the late 1960s and who had presided over his astonishing rise, and it was Rumsfeld who had been Cheney’s critical partner in advocating “the strategy of the demonstration effect.” Even as Bush secretly interviewed Robert M. Gates, Rumsfeld’s prospective replacement, at his Crawford, Texas, ranch two days before the election, discussing Iraq, Afghanistan, and the perilous state of the American military, the vice-president’s shadow loomed. According to Gates, “After about an hour together, the president leaned forward and asked if I had any more questions. I said no. He then sort of smiled and said, ‘Cheney?’”³

Two syllables. One word. Hearing it Gates “sort of smiled back.” Reading it, we do the same. But what exactly does that word, accompanied by that “sort of” smile, mean? It raises first and foremost a question about power—secret power. Untrammelled power. Hard power. The power behind **POTUS**. The Dark Side. The man who, even as he could no longer prevent his longtime mentor and close collaborator from being fired, himself never could be.

Richard Bruce Cheney, the man who had acceded to Governor George W. Bush’s request in 2000 that he lead his search to find a perfect vice-president, and who found that this arduous and exacting effort led to none other than himself, would be there at Bush’s side, or somewhere in the murk behind him, until the bitter end. For all his experience and sophistication, that grimly blank expression—calmly unflinching gaze, slightly lopsided frown—embodied a philosophy of power unapologetically, brutally simple: attack, crush enemies; cause others to fear, submit. Power from time to time must be embodied in vivid violence, like Voltaire’s executions, *pour encourager les autres*.

When it comes to Cheney's rise and his persistence we are in the realm of miracles and wonders. In 1969, Cheney was a twenty-eight-year-old fledgling academic wannabe from Wyoming laboring obscurely as an intern on Capitol Hill—and lucky to be there, having twice flunked out of Yale, twice been jailed for drunk driving. Five years later he was Gerald Ford's White House chief of staff. Can American history offer a more rapid rise to power? Even the firework arc of his mentor Donald Rumsfeld pales before it.⁴ He'd owed his rise in large part to Rumsfeld's patronage, but also to Watergate itself, to the once in a lifetime opportunities offered by the resignation of one president and the humbling of his successor. At close range Cheney, still in his early thirties, had seen the secret organs of executive power, notably the CIA, exposed to the light, humiliated, leashed. If it was true that "after 9/11, the gloves came off," Cheney, as a young and unlikely power in the Nixon and Ford White Houses, had had a front-row seat to observe the methods by which Congress first put those gloves on.

After Ford's defeat in 1976, Cheney won Wyoming's single House seat and rose with astonishing speed, advancing within a decade from freshman to minority whip, the number-three leadership position. He was on his way to the Speakership when he accepted President George H.W. Bush's offer to become secretary of defense and then, after leading the Pentagon during the wildly popular Desert Storm, left after Bush's defeat to become CEO of Halliburton, the giant oil services company. After gaining wealth and influence as a corporate leader, he finally departed to become—to use the commonplace but entirely inadequate phrase—"the most powerful vice-president in history."

And all the while, like an ominous ground bass booming along beneath this public tale of power and triumph, runs another, darker narrative of mortality, in some ways even more remarkable. While campaigning for the House in Cheyenne, Wyoming, in 1978, Cheney was struck down by a heart attack. His doctor, and coauthor of *Heart: An American Medical Odyssey*, Jonathan Reiner, remarks that he knows no one who had a heart attack in the Seventies who is still alive today. For Cheney that 1978 coronary would be the first of five, his survival increasingly owed to the most advanced medical technology that with almost miraculous fortune became available just as he needed it to survive—as if, Cheney writes, he "were traveling down a street, late for work, and all the lights ahead of me were red, but they turned green just before I got there." In the book's most striking scene, Reiner recalls hearing a colleague summoning him back to the operating table late one afternoon in March 2012: "Hey, Jon, take a look." Entering, he is confronted with a singular vision:

In Alan's raised right hand, festooned with surgical clamps and now separated from the body that it had sustained for seventy-one years, rested the vice president's heart. It was huge, more than twice the size of a normal organ, and it bore the scars of its four-decade battle with the relentless disease that eventually killed it.

I turned from the heart to look down into the chest.... The surreal void was a vivid reminder that there was no turning back.

3.



Dick Cheney; drawing by Pancho

No turning back would be a good slogan for Dick Cheney. His memoirs are remarkable—and

he shares this with Rumsfeld—for an almost perfect lack of second-guessing, regret, or even the mildest reconsideration. “I thought the best way to get on with my life and my career was to do what I thought was right,” he tells Cutler. “I did what I did, it’s all on the public record, and I feel very good about it.” Decisions are now as they were then. If that Mission Accomplished moment in 2003 seemed at the time to be the height of American power and authority, then so it will remain—unquestioned, unaltered, uninflected by subsequent public events that show it quite clearly to have been nothing of the kind. “If I had to do it over again,” says Cheney, “I’d do it in a minute.”

Yet lack of regret, refusal to reconsider, doesn’t alter the train of cause and effect; certainty that decisions were right, no matter how powerful—and the imperturbable perfection of Cheney’s certainty is nothing short of dazzling—cannot obscure evidence that they were wrong. Often the sheer unpopularity of a given course seems to offer to Cheney its own satisfaction, a token of his disinterestedness, as if the lack of political support must serve as a testament to the purity of his motives. “Cheney is an anti-politician,” remarks Barton Gellman, author of the brilliant study of Cheney’s vice-presidency, *Angler*.⁵ “But no president can be an anti-politician. No president can govern that way.”

By 2007, even President Bush had begun to realize this, to understand the pitfalls and risks of Cheney’s certainty. Having ventured his own one-word query in the interview with Robert Gates—“Cheney?”—Bush supplies his own answer: “He is a voice, an important voice, but only one voice.” This observation would appear to be proved true in the debate over attacking Syria, in which Gates as secretary of defense joined Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley in opposing Cheney. “The idea that we could bomb the Syria reactor to make a point about proliferation in the face of uncertain intelligence,” Rice remarks in her memoirs, “was, to put it mildly, reckless.”

It was not just the possibility that such a surprise attack could ignite a regional conflagration and pull the Syrians and Iranians deeper into the Iraq quagmire, or the fact that the American public was exhausted with war and desperate to withdraw from the Middle East rather than attack another country there. The Chinese were deeply involved—they were critical to pressuring the North Koreans, who had helped build the Syrian reactor—and, Rice notes, “they (and the rest of the region) would never have tolerated the military strike the Vice President recommended.”⁶

No matter. Cheney prided himself on keeping political concerns out of decisions about “what was right”; and no war gone wrong, let alone a defeat at the polls, would change his views on the terrible “nexus” between terrorists and their state sponsors and weapons of mass destruction. As he tells Cutler: “You don’t want Syria to have that kind of capability that they might be able to pass along to Hamas or Hezbollah or al-Qaeda.” Despite the ongoing war in Iraq, and the widespread fears of a regional conflagration, and the war-weariness and anger among Americans, the United States had no choice but to attack Syria and to do it without delay. And as Gates remarks, though “Cheney knew that, among the four of us, he alone thought a strike should be the first and only option,...perhaps he could persuade the president.”⁷

Perhaps he could; if so, it would not be the first time that Cheney’s voice, isolated or not, had carried the day. The vice-president lobbied the president directly and then made his case to a National Security Council meeting in June 2007:

I argued in front of the group and in front of the President.... I thought I was rather eloquent.... The President said, "All right, how many people agree with the Vice President?" And nobody put their hand up.

The days had passed when Bush would ignore the hands and choose Cheney's path anyway. There would be no return to the glorious "authority and influence we had back in '03." Having refused Israeli demands that he order an air strike, Bush also discouraged, at least nominally, direct Israeli action, supposedly intending to follow Rice's and Gates's insistence that the reactor be exposed at the United Nations. But the Israelis had other plans. Late one night in September 2007, American-made Israeli F-15s streaked across the Syrian border and, using precisely targeted bombs, "took out" the reactor. In the event, the Israelis made no grand announcement to promote Israel's "authority and influence" or that of its American ally. The Israelis kept the attack secret and insisted the Americans do the same—as did the Syrians, who quietly demolished the ruins and plowed them under. The era of the "demonstration effect" was over.

4.

And yet we live still in Cheney's world. All around us are the consequences of those decisions: in Fallujah, Iraq, where al-Qaeda-allied jihadis who were nowhere to be found in Saddam Hussein's Iraq have just again seized control; in Syria, where Iraqi jihadists play a prominent part in the rebellion against the Assad regime; in Afghanistan, where the Taliban, largely ignored after 2002 in the rush to turn American attention to Saddam Hussein, are resurgent. And then there is the other side of the "war on terror," the darker story that Cheney, five days after the September 11 attacks, was able to describe so precisely for the country during an interview on *Meet the Press*:

We also have to work, though, sort of the dark side, if you will. We've got to spend time in the shadows in the intelligence world. A lot of what needs to be done here will have to be done quietly, without any discussion, using sources and methods that are available to our intelligence agencies.... That's the world these folks operate in, and so it's going to be vital for us to use any means at our disposal, basically, to achieve our objective.

The day after Cheney made these comments President Bush signed a secret document that, according to longtime ~~CIA~~ counsel John Rizzo,

was the most comprehensive, most ambitious, most aggressive, and most risky Finding or ~~MON~~ [Memorandum of Notification] I was ever involved in. One short paragraph authorized the capture and detention of Al Qaeda terrorists, another authorized taking lethal action against them. The language was simple and stark.... We had filled the entire covert-action tool kit, including tools we had never before used.[8](#)

This memorandum, as Rizzo remarks, "remains in effect to this day." So too does Congress's Authorization for the Use of Military Force that Bush signed the following day. More than a dozen years later these are the two pillars, secret and public, dark side and light, on which the unending "war on terror" still rests. Though we have become accustomed to President Obama telling us, as he most recently did in the State of the Union address, that "America must move off a permanent war footing," these words have come to sound, in their

repetition, less like the orders of a commander in chief than the pleas of one lonely man hoping to persuade.

What are these words, after all, next to the iron realities of the post-September 11 world? The defense budget has more than doubled, including a Special Operations Command able to launch secret, lethal raids anywhere in the world that has grown from 30,000 elite troops to more than 67,000. The drone force has expanded from fewer than 200 unmanned aerial vehicles to more than 11,000, including perhaps 400 “armed-capable” drones that can and do target and kill from the sky—and that, following the computer directives of “pilots” manning terminals in Virginia and Nevada and elsewhere in the United States, have killed in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Yemen, and Somalia an estimated 3,600 people.

The “black sites”—the network of secret prisons the CIA set up around the world, from Thailand and Afghanistan to Romania and Poland and Morocco—were ordered shut down by President Obama, but despite his executive order on his second day in office, Guantánamo Bay, the “public black site,” remains open, its 155 detainees, but for a handful, uncharged and untried. Among that number live “high-value detainees” who were once secretly imprisoned at the black sites, where many were subjected to “enhanced interrogation techniques.”⁹ Asked by Cutler whether he considers “a prolonged period of creating the sensation of drowning”—waterboarding—to be torture, Cheney’s response comes fast and certain:

I don’t. Tell me what terrorist attacks that you would have let go forward because you didn’t want to be a mean and nasty fellow. Are you gonna trade the lives of a number of people because you want to preserve your, your honor, or are you going to do your job, do what’s required first and foremost, your responsibility to safeguard the United States of America and the lives of its citizens. Now given a choice between doing what we did or backing off and saying, “We know you know their next attack against the United States but we’re not gonna force you to tell us what is is because it might create a bad image for us.” That’s not a close call for me.

Quite apart from the large factual questions blithely begged, there is a kind of stark amoral grandeur to this answer that takes one’s breath away. Just as he was likely the most important and influential American official in making the decision to withhold the protection of the Geneva Conventions from detainees, Cheney was likely the most important and influential American when it came to imposing an official government policy of torture. It is quite clear he simply cannot, or will not, acknowledge that such a policy raises any serious moral or legal questions at all. Those who do acknowledge such questions, he appears to believe, are poseurs, acting out some highfalutin and affected pretense based on—there is a barely suppressed sneer here—“preserving your *honor*.” What does he think of those—and their number includes the current attorney general of the United States and the president himself—who believe and have declared publicly that waterboarding is torture and thus plainly illegal? For Cheney the question is not only “not a close call.” It is not even a question.

As I write, five men are being tried for plotting the attacks of September 11, 2001. Though one would expect that such proceedings might be dubbed “the trial of the century” and attract commensurate attention, it is quite possible—likely, even—that you have not even heard of them. The five defendants accused of killing nearly three thousand Americans are being tried before a military commission at Guantánamo Bay. Those handful of visitors who

are able to gain permission to attend, including a very few journalists, find the conditions rather unusual, quite unlike any courtroom they have ever seen, as Carroll Bogert of Human Rights Watch reports:

Visitors observe the hearings behind sound-proof glass, with an audio feed that runs 40 seconds behind. When something sensitive is said in the courtroom, the infamous “hockey light” on the judge’s bench lights up and the comment is bleeped out....

The degree of classification of banal matters is bewildering. A former camp commander issued a memo on exactly what material the defense lawyers were allowed to bring in to their clients. One thing that was not allowed to be brought in? The memo itself.

The defendants include Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the confessed mastermind of September 11, who was captured in Rawalpindi, Pakistan, in March 2003 and immediately disappeared into the CIA’s network of secret prisons, spending time, reportedly, at black sites in Afghanistan, Thailand, and Poland, where he was subjected to a medley of “enhanced interrogation techniques,” including prolonged sleep deprivation, beatings, forced nudity, “walling,” cold water immersions, and waterboarding, which procedure he endured no less than 183 times. Though this particular information comes from CIA documents, including an authoritative report by the CIA’s inspector general, which have long been public, any mention of the treatment of Mohammed, and the other defendants, is forbidden in court. And yet, Bogert writes, “Torture is Guantanamo’s Original Sin.”

It is both invisible and omnipresent. The US government wants coverage of the 9/11 attacks, but not the waterboarding, sleep deprivation, prolonged standing and other forms of torture that the CIA applied to the defendants. It’s tricky, prosecuting the 9/11 case while trying to keep torture out of the public eye. “Torture is the thread running through all of this,” one of the detainees’ psychiatrists told me. “You can’t tell the story [of 9/11] without it.”

And yet in that Guantánamo pseudo-courtroom American military officers acting under color of law as well as some civilian lawyers are trying to do so. This peculiar, mortifying procedure—a futile attempt to render a kind of disfigured justice to those responsible for killing thousands of Americans and upending the history of the country—is one more legacy of the misshapen response to the attacks: not a remnant of a past we want to forget but of a present we are trying to ignore. Bogert goes on:

The 9/11 defendants are not being tortured today, at least not in the way they once were. But we don’t know much about conditions in their prison. For years, even its name, “Camp Seven,” was a secret. Proceedings have now ground to a halt while the mental competency of one defendant, Ramzi bin al-Shibh, is evaluated. He kept interrupting the hearings last month with shouts of “This is my life. This is torture. TOR! TURE!”

We’re not sure what else he said.... Bin al-Shibh’s audio went fuzzy partway through.[10](#)

Orwellian? Kafkaesque? The words seem pale and inadequate. Against the backroom noise of these distant, choked-off voices, largely forgotten and ignored, stands the former vice-president, speaking clearly and forthrightly, defiantly unashamed. One can't help feeling grim gratitude to him for this, for, as I shall explore in the next article, it was Dick Cheney, more than any other official, who set the terms for the post-September 11 world we all share.

—This is the fourth in a series of articles

1. See my earlier articles in this series, "[Rumsfeld's War and Its Consequences Now](#)," *The New York Review*, December 19, 2013, "[Rumsfeld Revealed](#)," *The New York Review*, January 9, 2014, and "[Rumsfeld: Why We Live in His Ruins](#)," *The New York Review*, February 6, 2014. [↪](#)
2. See Ron Suskind, *The One Percent Doctrine: Deep Inside America's Pursuit of Its Enemies Since 9/11* (Simon and Schuster, 2006), p. 123. [↪](#)
3. See Robert M. Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War* (Knopf, 2014), p. 7. [↪](#)
4. See "[Rumsfeld's War and Its Consequences Now](#)." Perhaps Theodore Roosevelt, who rose from New York City police commissioner to president in six years, comes close. See Tevi Troy, "Heavy Heart: The Life and Cardiac Times of Dick Cheney," *The Weekly Standard*, January 27, 2014. [↪](#)
5. Barton Gellman, *Angler: The Cheney Vice Presidency* (Penguin, 2008). [↪](#)
6. See Condoleezza Rice, *No Higher Honor: A Memoir of My Years in Washington* (Crown, 2011), p. 713. [↪](#)
7. Gates, *Duty*, p. 172. [↪](#)
8. See John Rizzo, *Company Man: Thirty Years of Controversy and Crisis in the CIA* (Scribner, 2014), p. 174. [↪](#)
9. See my article "[US Torture: Voices from the Black Sites](#)," *The New York Review*, April 9, 2009. [↪](#)
10. See Carroll Bogert, "There's Something You Need to See at Guantanamo Bay," *Politico*, January 22, 2014. [↪](#)

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