

BOOKS

[*Angler: The Cheney Vice Presidency*, Barton Gellman, Penguin Press, 384 pages]

A Life of Vice

By Steve Clemons

AN OLD ADAGE about America's first helmsmen is that "Washington reigned, Hamilton ruled, and Jefferson complained." The contemporary version might say that "Bush reigned, Cheney ruled, and Congress, the nation, and the world complained."

Richard Cheney has sculpted the vice presidency in a way never seen before. He revolutionized an office that has turned many of its occupants into obscure eccentrics—one that Benjamin Franklin referred to as "Your Superfluous Excellency." Cheney refused to do state funerals. Instead, he rerouted the in- and outboxes of power in the White House and turned himself into the nation's most consequential political force. Whether George W. Bush approved or not, his VP animated most of the controversial policies that will define for decades the Bush II presidency.

An interesting thought experiment is to imagine what Bush's tenure might have been like had 9/11 not occurred. Admirers have suggested that the president's legacy would have been defined by his pet interests: "compassionate conservatism," faith-based initiatives, and literacy and education programs for young and old. Now think about a Bush presidency with Oklahoma Gov. Frank Keating or Sens. Chuck Hagel, Lamar Alexander, or Bill Frist as vice president—all of whom were vetted by Cheney as he went through the shortlist of Bush's possible running mates. What would the world look like had one of these men been chosen? My hunch is that America's national security and eco-

nomic portfolios would not be in the meltdown that they are in today.

History has taken its course, however. Cheney was put in charge of finding Bush's VP, and he positioned himself for selection. He uncovered, through an exhaustive questionnaire process, the most private and intimate details of the lives of the other candidates. No one vetted Cheney, though, so nobody had anything on him. He had the goods on everyone else, and he got the nod from Bush.

The curious way in which Cheney maneuvered himself onto Bush's ticket is one of many disturbing stories in this new and brilliantly researched account of Cheney's adventures as Bush's "No. 2." Barton Gellman, Pulitzer-winning *Washington Post* journalist, examines the nuts and bolts of Cheney's power apparatus. He shows how a mere vice president engineered a massive expansion of presidential power, knocked back the constitutional authority of Congress and the judiciary, helped launch an illegitimate war, developed a system for spying on America's citizens, oversaw White House-sanctioned torture, and pushed official secrecy to unprecedented levels. We see how Cheney punctured America's mystique as a benign and respected nation—how he shattered the moral, economic, and military pillars of American power.

Gellman had access to a surprising number of Cheney's close aides and others in the Bush White House. He records previously unknown anecdotes about the inner workings of the administration and Cheney's take-no-prisoners approach to winning policy battles. While Bush and members of his inner circle like Karl Rove seemed to be obsessed with the political machinations of their work, Cheney had a deeper purpose behind his crusades. For him politics and political gamesmanship, seduction, and intimidation were all about changing the nation's policy course—all about principle. Cheney wasn't much interested in weather politics. When Bush ordered him to survey Hurricane Katrina's damage, he reluc-

tantly complied. But his heart and soul were invested in the most important and controversial aspects of the Bush presidency, the policy areas he cared about most—terrorism, intelligence, national security, energy, environmental policy, tax and budget issues.

Gellman makes the fascinating and convincing claim that Cheney's notorious secret meetings with energy lobbyists, which prompted legal complaints from various NGO's, Congress, and the U.S. Government Accountability Office, were never about anything important. Cheney and his avuncular lawyer David Addington wanted to bring on governmental crises and tensions with Congress in order to demonstrate the dominance and infallibility of presidential power, which they defined as the "unitary executive." In Gellman's framing, Cheney saw 9/11, discussions with energy lobbyists, and even torture policy as mere vehicles for asserting his vision of a near monarchical presidency.

Angler leads its readers to think that, even without 9/11, Cheney would have found triggers to justify his imperial expansion of presidential powers and official secrecy, his pugnacious disregard for international law, the huge defense spending increases, the war against Iraq—or whatever nation would show that America was an irresistible force—and the massive tax cuts. Gellman argues that Cheney was never an apostle of neoconservatism. He didn't have a burning desire to establish democracy in Iraq. For Cheney, John Bolton, Addington, and others, Iraq was but a means to an end—a tool to expand presidential prerogatives. The same does not necessarily apply to Scooter Libby, a leading neoconservative thinker who strongly favored the invasion for ideological reasons.

This book is simply one of the scariest stories ever written about contemporary America. Cheney and Addington essentially hijacked the bureaucracy of national security and put themselves in the cockpit of government. In chapter after chapter, we read how Cheney set about constructing a secretive system of

government and policymaking in which he was accountable to almost no one. We see, for instance, how Cheney pushed through the second round of tax cuts—a move that made even Bush uncomfortable—and how he undermined Christine Todd Whitman, then administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency, over laws regarding air quality.

In contrast to the protagonist and his agents, there are heroes. John Bellinger, a senior lawyer on the National Security Council and then at the State Department under Condoleezza Rice, fought for the interests of Congress and international law. For that, he was beleaguered by Addington and frozen out of the conspiracy to create the legal rationalization for the domestic electronic eavesdropping program. He has nonetheless stayed in the game for the last seven years, trying to bring about a return to Geneva-like standards and end the administration's extralegal detainee policies.

debilitated in a hospital bed, to sign his approval for Bush's domestic surveillance program. Matthew Waxman, a young attorney who worked for the National Security Council and Defense and State Departments, tenaciously tried to prevent the administration from abandoning the principles of the Geneva conventions. Philip Zelikow, former executive director of the 9/11 Commission and Condoleezza Rice's counselor, also subjected himself to the furies of Cheney, Addington, and Donald Rumsfeld by trying to terminate secret prisons, stop torture, and expedite the closing of Guantanamo. Zelikow, Bellinger, and Waxman all had their work sabotaged or undermined by Addington.

But Cheney's maneuvers, his angling inside the wide berth that Bush gave him, eventually created so much blowback from colleagues inside the administration and Congress that his office began to slide off its rails. Gellman relates a telling incident involving this

very tactic his team had so often used against their rivals.

Cheney was also frustrated on the Iran front, increasingly convinced that his team was losing in the interagency process to State Department officials R. Nicholas Burns, Condoleezza Rice, and Defense Secretary Gates. He felt his hawkish, more militarily focused strategy was being undermined by advocates of diplomacy. In a *Salon* article on Sept. 19, 2007, "Why Bush Won't Attack Iran," I disclosed that a senior member of Cheney's team had said that the vice president was considering ways to "tie the president's hands" and outflank those delaying a confrontation with Tehran—a policy that Cheney felt amounted to appeasement. Clearly, the Angler's influence was declining. Some sources suggest that Cheney still wields great power and has of late been winning his battles again against Rice, Bellinger, Gates, and others. But he is certainly a long way from his halcyon first years in office, when he had virtually nothing stopping him.

There is another recent book on the mechanics of the Bush White House, *State of Denial* by veteran *Post* correspondent Bob Woodward, the third in a series of four. Woodward, in contrast to Gellman, hardly deals with Cheney, writing him off as an irrelevant sideshow whose personal interests and passions were often swept aside by Bush. But as Gellman shows so clearly, Cheney, Addington, and others operated with great success in the shadows of government. They despised media and public attention. In the last seven years, they have been the toughest circle of power players in Washington to penetrate, to report on, and to comprehend. Gellman went where Woodward was unable or uninterested in going—and thanks to that, we have an indispensable volume without which the Bush presidency can't be understood. ■

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I ASKED CHENEY ABOUT THE **POSSIBLE CHANGE TOWARD NORTH KOREA.** THE QUESTION WAS SIMPLE, BUT **CHENEY FROZE, STARING AT ME FOR AN** **AWKWARDLY LONG TIME.** HE REFUSED TO ANSWER.

Justice Department Office of Legal Counsel's Jack Goldsmith emerges as another virtuous figure. He succeeded John Yoo, whose legal opinions on torture, domestic spying, and the unitary executive, crafted by Addington and others, became the official line for all parts of the Bush administration. Goldsmith found himself in a cesspool of the most outrageous and poorly constructed legal excuses for Cheney's projects. He became one of the first internal Bush administration officials to place successful constraints on the VP's actions. Others were also willing to stand up to the Cheney gang. Deputy Attorney General James Comey prevented White House Legal Counsel Alberto Gonzales and Chief of Staff Andy Card from persuading Attorney General John Ashcroft, drugged-up and

reviewer and the vice president on the subject of North Korea, when it appeared that Cheney was unaware of President Bush's intention to ask Congress to remove North Korea from the terrorist watch list. (I was not the source of this information: the *New York Times* reported the encounter between Cheney and me on its front page.) At an off-the-record forum, I asked Cheney about the possible change toward North Korea. The question was simple, but Cheney froze, staring at me for an awkwardly long time. He refused to answer, then left the stage. Gellman suggests that Cheney, who for years had been wired into every key national-security decision and able to paralyze nearly all policies with which he disagreed, had been left out—"not read in," according to the lingo—of the policy-making process, the

[*The Same Man: George Orwell and Evelyn Waugh in Love and War*, David Lebedoff, Random House, 264 pages]

Men at Arms

By R.J. Stove

IT IS AN OBVIOUS IDEA to treat in parallel England's two best prose writers born during the 20th century. Nevertheless, maybe because the idea is so obvious, it has never been attempted until now. (The British journalist, publisher, and parliamentarian Christopher Hollis, who went to university with Waugh, having been to school with Orwell, came close by producing separate volumes about each man.) David Lebedoff, whose earlier books include a study of the *Exxon Valdez* case, has several qualifications for the task: evident valor, a comprehensive knowledge of both his protagonists, and an impatience with cant. The result is unfailingly readable and, in its terseness—hardly more than 220 generously spaced pages—a welcome change from the efforts of such laundry-list biographers as Robert Caro and Michael Holroyd, who mistake for psychological insight the Stakhanovite assemblage of irrelevant gossip.

Both Orwell and Waugh were born in 1903. Although they corresponded quite prolifically from 1945 onward, when Orwell sent Waugh a copy of *Animal Farm*, they met only once. In 1949, Waugh visited Orwell on the latter's deathbed. (It is depressing to think that the drug streptomycin, which could have relieved if not wholly cured Orwell's tuberculosis, had yet to be permitted in England despite already being available in the United States.) No one knows what words passed between the two men—some imaginative dramatist should attempt a one-act play on the subject—but Waugh did later tell Malcolm Muggeridge that he believed Orwell to be “very close to God.” A mysterious phrase, one that Waugh scorned to clarify. Did he mean that he consid-

ered the pagan Orwell surreptitiously pious or simply that Orwell would soon be meeting his Maker? Whatever the truth, Waugh regarded Orwell with a respect that he seldom felt toward other literary figures of his time, calling *Animal Farm* “your ingenious and delightful allegory,” and reviewing with pleasure Orwell's 1946 essay collection, which he called “a work of absorbing interest.” Waugh's review contains the best description ever penned of Orwell's great strengths and chief weakness. Unfortunately, Lebedoff fails to cite more than a few lines from the relevant passage. Here is a longer extract:

He [Orwell] has an unusually high moral sense and respect for justice and truth, but he seems never to have been touched at any point by a conception of religious thought and life. He allows himself, for instance, to use the very silly expression: ‘Men are only as good’ (morally) ‘as their technical development allows them to be.’ He frequently brings his argument to the point when having, with great acuteness, seen the falsity and internal contradiction of the humanist view of life, there seems no alternative but the acceptance of a revealed religion, and then stops short. This is particularly true of his criticism of M. [Salvador] Dali, where he presents the problem of a genuine artist genuinely willing to do evil and leaves it unexplained ...

Lebedoff salutes Orwell's nonfiction at its finest, correctly commenting that if Orwell had written nothing except “Politics and the English Language”—that luminous creative-writing course crammed into two-dozen pages—“then his name would still be revered today.” Orwell confessed that “I am not a natural novelist,” but if ever anyone in the last hundred years wrote like a natural essayist, it was Orwell.

The odious campaign by British firms to ensure that *Animal Farm* would never see print—Orwell at one stage

seriously considered self-publishing—is by now famous. Still, Lebedoff recounts the story with flair, devoting particular and understandable attention to the sinister role played by Peter Smollett, a Ministry of Information official who, without arousing any suspicions at the time, worked as a Soviet agent. Some excuses might perhaps be made for Victor Gollancz's rejection of Orwell's manuscript, since Gollancz was a seething neurotic who, despite his protestations, had been reliably pro-Stalin ever since the Spanish Reds gained power. Harder, in fact impossible, to forgive is the rejection letter from Faber & Faber's spokesman, none other than T.S. Eliot. This message contained the treasurable aperçu that *Animal Farm*'s pigs “are far more intelligent than the other animals, and therefore the best qualified to run the farm.” Nor were New York publishers, even genuinely freedom-loving ones, much more sagacious: Dial Press insisted “it was impossible to sell animal stories in the U.S.A.” Eventually, Secker & Warburg took the manuscript, and made a fortune from it, acquiring the rights to 1984 as well.

It is a shame that Lebedoff, detailed and shrewd on Orwell's bruising experiences of Stalinism rampant, does not give more information on Waugh's. The Churchill-Roosevelt betrayal of Yugoslavia's General Mihajlovic to Marshal Tito and suchlike Marxian thugs—chalk up another ethical triumph for that “Anglosphere” beloved of provincial daydreamers—drew from Waugh punchy, Orwell-like prose. His 1952 lament over Tito's British sycophants is a good example:

Politicians cannot be squeamish about their business associates. We do not look to them for an example of fastidious moral rectitude. All we ask is commonsense experience of the world. Do they really suppose that Tito, who has betrayed in turn emperor, king, friends, and finally his one consistent loyalty to Stalin, will prove a trustworthy friend to