

# For Hollywood, 'Vice' Is Remarkably Astute About Politics

Adam McKay's movie may be flawed, but it's still must-see for his depiction of how Cheney amassed power by exploiting Watergate, an inexperienced president and 9/11, writes James DiEugenio.

**By James DiEugenio**

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In 2015, director Adam McKay did something unusual in Hollywood. He made a good film out of a good book. In fact, one could argue that McKay's movie "The Big Short" is even better than Michael Lewis' book. It is funnier, has a faster pace and is much more innovative stylistically.

McKay has now done something even more unusual for Hollywood. He has made a good film about an unattractive and unlikeable character, former Vice-President Dick Cheney. Appropriately, the film is called "Vice." I am going to say some critical things about "Vice." But let me start by recommending that everyone who reads this website see this film. It's not often that Hollywood produces a film this honest, ambitious and intelligent about the contemporary American political scene.

Early in his life, Cheney flunked out of Yale and was tagged with two DUI's. His wife Lynne—who later became a prolific author—helped straighten him out and put him on a path toward a political career. From that point on, McKay, who also wrote the script, frames Cheney with the following

epigraph, which is written across the screen at one point:

“Beware the quiet man. For while others speak, he watched. And while others act, he plans. And when they finally rest, he strikes.”

The warning applies to three key sections covered by the film.

### **Watergate Power Vacuum**

During the Watergate scandal, Cheney believed that any Republican not touched by the scandal should be valued like gold. So he and Donald Rumsfeld schemed to fill a power vacuum in the Gerald Ford White House. In order to compensate for the laws sapping executive power after Watergate, he met with a young up-and-coming lawyer named Antonin Scalia. The future U.S. Supreme Court justice supplied Cheney with the unified executive theory, a doctrine Scalia drew from article two of the U.S. Constitution that vests “executive power” in the president. Cheney tried to utilize this doctrine as chief of staff under Ford.

### **George W’s Search for VP**

The dangerous quiet man reappears during the presidential campaign of George W. Bush. As the film depicts, due to an agreement he’d made with his wife, Cheney was only supposed to lead Bush’s search for a vice president. But sensing that W was tentative and unsure of himself on the national stage of foreign policy, Cheney made an agreement with George W. that would make him the most powerful vice-president in history. Through this pact, Cheney achieved something that

Lyndon Johnson had tried for but failed to attain with John Kennedy: a co-presidency. He set up offices for himself at both the House of Representatives and the Senate. He also had virtual offices at the CIA and the State Department.

## **Post 9/11**

These arrangements put him in a propitious position during the 9/11 attacks. Cheney advised President Bush to stay in the air for safety purposes while he—without clearance from Bush—issued a shoot-down order to Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld. And that was just the beginning of the Cheney domination of the War on Terror.

As McKay shows in the film, it was Cheney who almost unilaterally chose the suspects that he wanted the CIA to pick up and deport for rendition purposes to foreign black sites, or secret prisons. It was Cheney, aided by neoconservative lawyer David Addington and State Department analyst Doug Feith, who constructed the “stove piping” of intelligence in order to avoid any rigorous review of sources and methods for intelligence reports.

Like the Plan B neocons of the 1970s, who overrode the CIA's estimates of the Soviet military threat, Cheney descended into the spy agency's headquarters in Langley, Virginia, and rode herd on its officers and analysts. The vice-president demanded access to *all* the information, no matter how dubious the source or how much duress had been applied in attaining it. It was this imperiousness that allowed disinformation by the likes of German-born informer Rafid Ahmed Alwan al-Janabi, also known by his CIA moniker of Curveball, to lay the false foundations for the invasion of

Iraq.

And Cheney made sure that as much duress as possible was applied to the suspects he had chosen. Through Addington, Cheney recruited [John Yoo](#), a Yale-educated lawyer at work in the Justice Department's Office of Legal Counsel. Yoo agreed with Scalia's unitary executive theory. He wrote legal memoranda that stated that, in the War on Terror, America could discard the [Geneva Convention's](#) guidelines on the treatment of prisoners. Yoo's memos infamously stated that the CIA should only ban physical pain equivalent to organ failure or death. It was Yoo's almost complete denial of international law that set America on the path to [Abu Ghraib](#), the Iraq prison where the CIA and U.S. Army infamously oversaw the extreme abuse and torture of prisoners.

### **Still Incomplete**

It is remarkable that McKay managed to get all this information about Cheney into a film that runs only slightly over two hours.

But the trail of perfidy is incomplete. For example, [as chronicled by the late Bob Parry](#), it was Cheney who led the counter attack to the Iran/Contra affair from Congress. Cheney was at a meeting at the home of Evan Thomas where it was suggested that National Security Advisor John Poindexter commit perjury to protect President Reagan.

But all of the above tells you little about the experience of watching the film. As with "The Big Short," the exceptional thing about "Vice" is McKay's cinematic approach. Once again, he uses a battery of visual devices

that are unprecedented in contemporary film. About halfway through the film, for instance, before Cheney becomes vice president, the film appears to reach an abrupt ending. The credits roll, with cornily cheerful music on the soundtrack. Meaning we all would have been better off if Cheney had not become co-president.

In "Vice," however, such clever innovations don't necessarily help the overall storyline. "The Big Short" was about an event, namely the economic meltdown of 2007-08. "Vice" is about a man's life and career.

Had McKay lessened, rather than increased, his visual inventiveness he might have done a better job explaining how Cheney ended up as a character worthy of Shakespeare's treacherous Iago. (A spoofy bedroom scene written and performed in Shakespeare's iambic pentameter—which happens—does not solve the riddle of character explication.) A bit more straightforward story telling would have also given the actors—Christian Bale as Cheney and Amy Adams as his wife—more to work with. They are quite adequate here, but because of McKay's attention to other matters, neither can be really good.

None of this makes me any less enthusiastic about the film or about McKay. How can someone not admire a millionaire film director who identifies himself as a social democrat? And makes films like this? More power to him.

**James DiEugenio is a researcher and writer on the assassination of President John F. Kennedy and other mysteries of that era. His most recent book is *"The JFK Assassination : The Evidence Today."***

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## A Pointed Letter to Gen. Petraeus

**Exclusive:** As retired Gen. and ex-CIA Director David Petraeus was about to speak in New York City last Oct. 30, someone decided to spare the “great man” from impertinent questions, so ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern was barred, arrested and brought to trial, prompting McGovern to ask some questions now in an open letter.

Dear Gen. David Petraeus,

As I prepare to appear in New York City Criminal Court on Wednesday facing charges of “criminal trespass” and “resisting arrest,” it struck me that we have something in common besides being former Army officers and the fact that the charges against me resulted from my trying to attend a speech that you were giving, from which I was barred. As I understand it, you, too, may have to defend yourself in Court someday in the future.

You might call me a dreamer, but I’m not the only one who believes there may be some substance to reports last month that Justice Department prosecutors are pressing to indict you for mishandling classified information by giving it to Paula Broadwell, your mistress/biographer.

No doubt, whatever indiscretions were involved there seemed minor at the time, but unauthorized leaks of this sort – to casual acquaintances – were strongly discouraged in the Army in which I served five decades ago. Remember the old saying: “Loose lips sink ships.” There were also rules in the Universal Code of Military Justice for punishing a married soldier who took up with a mistress, an offense for which many a trooper spent time in the brig.

Yet, I don’t imagine there is much sweat on your brow regarding legal

consequences for either offense. And you may be correct in assuming that, just as the Army looked the other way about the mistress indiscretion, our timorous Attorney General Eric Holder or his successor will likely do the same on any disclosure of classified information. Some influential members of Congress and various Washington talking heads have already opined that you have suffered enough.

Still, I find myself wondering if it does not bother you to be assigned to the comfortable, "don't-look-back" compartment for excusing one class of violators, including CIA torturers and reckless investment bankers who were "too big (or well-connected) to jail." I still want to hold out hope for even-handed, blind justice rather than give up completely on the system of justice in our country.

You may not be surprised to know that, try as I might to feel some empathy for you, Schadenfreude at your misfortune is winning out, since I am convinced that you had a lot to do with other far-more-serious offenses, including aiding and abetting illegal "aggressive war." And, I suspect you also many have aided and abetted the circumstances that gave rise to the bizarre charges against me.

I refer, of course, to my violent arrest, causing pain of my fractured shoulder, and my jailing in The Tombs, simply because I wanted to hear you speak last fall at New York's 92<sup>nd</sup> Street Y and possibly pose a question from the audience.

### **Why the Police Alert?**

No doubt, your acolytes/adjutants have told you how, despite my ticket for admittance, I was denied entry, brutally arrested by the NYPD, handcuffed behind my back, jailed overnight and arraigned the following day. I'm still trying to figure it all out including the enigma as to how it became known that I was coming.

"You're not welcome here, Ray," was the greeting I got from Y security as I came in the outer door. The NYPD was prepositioned and ready to pounce.

Were you, your entourage and the Y authorities afraid that during the Q & A I might ask an "impertinent" question of the kind I posed to your patron, promoter and protector, former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, during a Q & A after he spoke in Atlanta six-plus years ago?

Speaking of Rumsfeld, you and I know him as your partner in some very serious crimes, relating to the illegal invasion of Iraq and the horrific violence that followed as well as the slaughter of so many innocent people in Afghanistan. For over a decade, I have closely observed your behavior and consider it nothing short of a media miracle that most Americans believe your worst sin to be that of adultery.

Since denial can be a very strong motivation, let me refresh your memory and remind you of the bad companions you fell in with. I am reminded of the egregious ways in which you did Rumsfeld's bidding winning promotions and richly undeserved fame by condoning the unspeakable torture, for example.

Your third star came when you were dispatched to Iraq in June 2004, committed to carrying out Rumsfeld's instructions to encourage Shia-on-Sunni torture and other human rights crimes. The all-too-predictable chickens are now coming home to roost from that unconscionably stupid attempt to defeat Sunni opponents of the U.S. occupation through such ignoble means those chickens being what we now call ISIL or ISIS or simply the Islamic State.

What amazes me is that the Teflon is still clinging to you and Rumsfeld, given the bedlam in that entire area today. You're not even held to account for the performance of the tens of thousands of the Iraqi troops that you crowed about having trained and equipped so well. They dropped their weapons and ran away early last year when the ragtag militants of ISIL attacked.

Back in April 2004 when the graphic photos of torture at Abu Ghraib in Iraq were revealed, Rumsfeld claimed he was shocked, even though the International Red Cross had been complaining about abuses there for more than a year before the revelations.

The Senate Armed Services Committee eventually concluded without dissent, in a major investigative report on Dec. 11, 2008, that Rumsfeld bore direct responsibility for the abuses committed by interrogators at Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo and other military prisons.

The Committee added that the abuse of prisoners at Abu Ghraib "was not simply the result of a few soldiers acting on their own" but grew out of interrogation policies approved by Mr. Rumsfeld and other top officials, who "conveyed the message that physical pressures and degradation were appropriate treatment for detainees."

Four years before the Senate report, in May 2004, Gen. Antonio Taguba came close to revealing precisely that, when he led the Pentagon's first (and only honest) investigation of the abuses at Abu Ghraib. Rumsfeld promptly fired him. Yet, throughout all this scandal and mayhem, you were maneuvering your way up the high-command ladder without any indication that you were objecting to any of this.

### **Dangerous Orders**

Mid-2004 was a significant watershed for torture in another way. Official messages given to WikiLeaks by Pvt. Chelsea (Bradley) Manning show that FRAGO



(Fragmentary Order) 242 of June 2004 went into effect the month you arrived in Iraq to oversee its implementation.

The WikiLeaks documents indicate that you followed Rumsfeld's order to encourage Shiite and Kurdish commandos to torture suspected Sunni militants. Examining those documents as well as your actions at the time, investigative reporter Gareth Porter saw that as the deeper significance of FRAGO 242 significance somehow missed by your ardent admirers in the "mainstream media."

Porter, too, believes it was part of the larger Rumsfeld/Petraeus strategy to exploit Shia sectarian hatred of Sunnis in order to suppress the Sunni attacks on U.S. forces. But that strategy had some very negative long-term consequences that we are still encountering.

It inflamed Sunni opposition to the U.S. and its puppet government in Baghdad, and gave rise to the massive sectarian warfare of 2006 in which tens of thousands of civilians mainly Sunnis but many Shiites as well were killed. The violence was so widespread that U.S. field generals, such as Generals John Abizaid and George Casey, and sensible experts on the region, such as former Secretary of State James Baker, urged a new strategy late that year, essentially minimizing the American footprint in Iraq.

Instead, President George W. Bush enlisted your help in doubling down on the U.S. military presence in 2007 with the so-called "surge," lest he be forced to concede defeat in Iraq before leaving office. You agreed and sacrificed the lives of almost 1,000 more American troops to secure what one might call an "indecent interval" that let Bush get out of Dodge without an outright loss hung around his neck.

As the growth of ISIL/ISIS and the chaos in the area today have made clear, your famous "surge" did little more than achieve a temporary lull (after a lot more killing). It failed to achieve its most significant stated purpose to create space for a political resolution of the Sunni-Shiite civil conflict. It did, however, have one very important benefit. The "surge" got you your fourth star.

On the issue of torture, it seems clear that the straight-arrow Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Marine General Peter Pace, did not get the memo for how to rationalize away these disgraceful crimes. For 18 months, he was apparently unaware of FRAGO 242, which became obvious when Pace and Rumsfeld gave widely different answers to a question at a Pentagon press conference on Nov. 29, 2005.

Gen. Peter Pace: It is absolutely the responsibility of every U.S. service member, if they see inhumane treatment being conducted, to intervene, to stop it.

Rumsfeld: But I don't think you mean they have an obligation to physically stop it; it's to report it.

Pace: If they are physically present when inhumane treatment is taking place, Sir, they have an obligation to try to stop it.

Needless to say, Pace did not get the usual second term as JCS Chairman.

### **Selective Prosecution**

These grave crimes are the ones for which you should stand trial. Personally, I might even be inclined to give you a pass on your marital infidelity and possibly even on sharing classified information with your mistress, if so many true patriots weren't being prosecuted and imprisoned for sharing evidence of U.S. government misconduct with the American people.

And there is one other sore point regarding your esteemed career. According to a Washington Post [report](#) by Joshua Partlow, datelined Kabul, Feb. 11, 2011, you shocked aides to then Afghan President Hamid Karzai when you suggested that Afghan parents had deliberately burned their own children in order to exaggerate claims of civilian casualties from U.S. military action in Konar Province.

Partlow quoted two of Karzai's aides who met with you in a closed-door session at the presidential palace and found your remarks "deeply offensive." They said you had dismissed allegations by Karzai's office and the provincial governor that many civilians had been killed and that you claimed that residents of Konar had invented stories, or even injured their children, to pin the blame on U.S. forces as a ruse to end the operation.

"I was dizzy. My head was spinning," said one participant, referring to Petraeus's remarks. "This was shocking. Would any father do this to his children? This is really absurd."

You declined comment at the time. So I will add my own assessment, borrowing a famous line from another dark chapter of American history: "Have you no sense of decency sir, at long last? Have you left no sense of decency?"

Yours truly,

Ray McGovern

**Ray McGovern works with Tell the Word, a publishing arm of the ecumenical Church of the Saviour in inner-city Washington. He was an infantry/intelligence officer during the early Sixties, and then served as an analyst and Presidential briefer during a 27-year career with the CIA.**

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