

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

Special to Consortium News



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.

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America and the Plague of ‘Moral Idiocy’

When it comes to applying rules of international law and ethics, the U.S. government and its mainstream media operate with stunning hypocrisy, what might be called “moral idiocy,” says Lawrence Davidson.

By Lawrence Davidson

It was on Aug. 12, 1949, that the nations of the world, with Nazi atrocities still in mind, updated what are known as the Geneva Accords. This constituted an effort to once again set limits on the wartime behavior of states and their agents.

Among other things, the accords set the range of acceptable behavior toward prisoners of war, established protections for the wounded and the sick, and the necessary protections to be afforded civilian populations within and approximate to any war-zone. Some 193 countries, including the United States, have ratified these agreements. Now, as of August 2016, they are 67-years-old. Have they worked? The answer is, in all too many cases, no.

In just about every major conflict since 1949 the Geneva Accords have been partially or completely ignored. Certainly that was the case in the Vietnam War, where civilian deaths came close to 1.5 million people. The treaties have had minimal impact in Afghanistan (during both the Russian and U.S. invasions), Iraq, the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories, Russia’s military activity in Chechnya, and various conflicts in Africa and Asia.

The International Red Cross, which oversees observance of the accords, has not been able to do much more than shine lights on the breaches of the law and pick up the bloody pieces in the aftermath. At the rate our nation-states slaughter

the innocent, it is a wonder there is an overpopulation problem.

Honored Only In the Breach

There are likely two main reasons why the Geneva Accords have had so little influence on behavior: hypocrisy and ignorance.

As to hypocrisy, it is the case that, except in rare instances, there are no serious consequences for violating the law. Particularly, if you are agents of a strong state, or the ally (like Israel) of a strong state, the chances of state leaders or agents being arrested for war crimes or crimes against humanity is exceedingly low.

One wonders why nations bothered writing and enacting the Geneva Accords in the first place. The reason might have been specific to the moment. Faced with the atrocious behavior of leaders and soldiers (it is most often the behavior of the defeated party that is pointed to, so think here of the Holocaust), and the immediate outcry this behavior produced, the pressure for some sort of reaction carried the world's leaders forward to make and ratify agreements to prevent future repetitions of such crimes.

Yet, as it turns out, these were not serious efforts except when applied to the defeated and the weak. For the strong, it is one thing to enact an international law, it is another thing altogether to apply it to oneself or other strong states.

As to ignorance, to date it is obvious that the politicians and soldiers who wage war, or who are responsible for the arming and training of allies who do so, do not regard seriously, and in some cases are not even familiar with, the Geneva Accords. In my experience, they often cannot, or will not, discuss them when asked, and regard statements referencing the disobeying of illegal orders in the Uniform Code of Military Justice, to be rightfully honored only in the breach.

And that is the important point. We can safely say that when it comes to waging war, or for that matter, aiding and abetting others doing so, the accepted behavior of both soldiers, statesmen, and diplomats is that called moral idiocy.

Moral Idiocy

Moral Idiocy is not something this writer, creative as he is, has simply made up. It is a real concept in psychology that has been around for over a century. However, in our increasingly relativistic societies, it has fallen into disuse.

Briefly, it means the "Inability to understand moral principles and values and

to act in accordance with them, apparently without impairment of the reasoning and intellectual faculties.” The key word here is “understand.” It is not that moral idiots do not know, intellectually, that something called morality exists, but rather they cannot understand its applicability to their lives, particularly their professional lives.

At best they think it is a personal thing that operates between friends or relatives and goes no further – a reduction of values to the narrowest of social spaces. This is paralleled by the absence of such values as guiding principles for one’s actions in the wider world.

There are innumerable examples of such apparent moral idiots acting within the halls of power. The following short list specific to the U.S. reflects the opinion of this writer: George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, John Bolton, Oliver North, Richard Nixon and, my favorite, Henry Kissinger. Those reading this both in and outside of the United States can, no doubt, make a list of their own.

A particular incident related to Henry Kissinger’s behavior gives us an excellent example of this moral failing. The story is told by Stephen Talbot, a journalist and documentary producer, who in the early 2000s interviewed Robert McNamara, who had been U.S. Secretary of Defense for much of the Vietnam War years and was, by the 1990s, full of remorse and feelings of guilt for his behavior while in office.

Then, shortly thereafter, Talbot interviewed Kissinger, who had been Richard Nixon’s Secretary of State and National Security Advisor during the Vietnam War’s final years. Here is how Talbot describes what, for us, is the relevant part of his interview with Kissinger:

“I told him I had just interviewed Robert McNamara in Washington. That got his attention. . . . and then he did an extraordinary thing. He began to cry. But no, not real tears. Before my eyes, Henry Kissinger was acting. ‘Boohoo, boohoo,’ Kissinger said, pretending to cry and rub his eyes. ‘He’s [McNamara] still beating his breast, right? Still feeling guilty.’ He spoke in a mocking, singsong voice and patted his heart for emphasis.”

Kissinger obviously held McNamara and his feelings of guilt in utter disdain. He had actually committed greater crimes than McNamara – crimes documented in Christopher Hitchens’s 2001 book, *The Trial of Henry Kissinger* – and yet apparently felt no remorse at all. How does one get like that?

A Learning Deficiency

Let’s start our speculation in this regard by stating that none of us is born

with a gene that tells us right from wrong. Those notions are cultural, though some basic principles (say, seeing murder within one's tribal or clan network as morally wrong) come close to being universal.

Nonetheless, because we are not dealing with something genetic, it is quite possible that all of us have a potential for this moral failing. That being said, the vast majority of folks do successfully learn from their cultures that moral indifference is wrong and that committing what their society deems bad behavior should result in remorse and feelings of guilt.

It also seems that a minority does not learn this, or learn it only superficially. Most of this minority, realizing that such indifference is viewed negatively, keeps it hidden as much as they can. Yet when, on occasion, these closet moral idiots reach positions of power and influence, they can cause enormous damage.

There is a corollary to this. One can get socially sanctioned subgroups within which one is expected, at least temporarily, to act without reference to moral values. The military is a good example of this environment. And, under certain circumstances, so is the State Department or other foreign offices. In such a situation, most people "go with the flow" even if they know better, and then, in later life, some suffer from the trauma of the experience.

Moral idiocy can be seen as a very long-standing cultural flaw that often gives license to the violence that law and cultural mores are, simultaneously, trying to control. And, who are those who most often take advantage of this loophole? Ironically, it is the very people who lead our societies and those assigned to defend the culture and enforce the law. Lack of accountability makes for very poor public hygiene.

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Selective Outrage over Ukraine POWs

Exclusive: The U.S. news media regularly engages in selective outrage, piously denouncing some adversary for violating international law yet hypocritically silent when worse abuses are committed by the U.S. or allied governments, as the New York Times has shown again, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

The New York Times has taken deep umbrage over an unseemly parade staged by ethnic Russian rebels in eastern Ukraine featuring captured Ukrainian soldiers. The Times noted that the Geneva Conventions prohibit humiliation of POWs, surely a valid point.

But the Times in its profoundly biased coverage of the Ukraine crisis apparently feels that other aspects of this nasty civil war are less newsworthy, such as the Kiev government's bombardment of eastern Ukrainian cities sending the death toll into the thousands, including children and other non-combatants. Also downplayed has been Kiev's dispatch of neo-Nazi storm troopers to spearhead the urban combat in ethnic Russian towns and cities in the east.

When the Times finally noticed this street-fighting role of neo-Nazi militias, that remarkable fact the first time armed Nazis were dispatched by any government to kill people in Europe since World War II was consigned to the last three paragraphs of a long article on a different topic, essentially a throwaway reference.

Similarly, the Kiev regime's artillery fire on residential areas killing many civilians and, over the weekend, damaging a hospital has been treated by the Times as a minor afterthought. But Times' readers are supposed to get worked up over the tasteless demonstration in Donetsk, all the better to justify more killing of ethnic Russians.

Though no one was killed or injured during Sunday's anti-Ukrainian march and rebel troops protected the captured soldiers from angry citizens the Times led its Ukraine coverage on Monday with the humiliation of the POWs. The article by Andrew E. Kramer and Andrew Higgins made a point of contrasting the ugly scene in Donetsk with more orderly celebrations of Ukrainian independence elsewhere. The story began:

"On a day when Ukrainians celebrated their independence from the Soviet Union with parades and speeches, pro-Russia separatists in the eastern part of the country staged a grim counter-spectacle: a parade that mocked the national army and celebrated the deaths and imprisonment of its soldiers.

"Leading the procession was an attractive young blond woman carrying an assault rifle, followed by several dozen captured Ukrainian soldiers, filthy, bruised and unkempt, their heads shaved, wearing fetid camouflage uniforms and looking down at their feet.

"Onlookers shouted that the men should be shot, and pelted the prisoners with empty beer bottles, eggs and tomatoes as they stumbled down Artyomovsk Street,

Donetsk's main thoroughfare. ... People in the crowd shouted 'fascists!' and 'perverts!' and separatist fighters held back a man who tried to punch a prisoner."

The Times then noted: "The Geneva Conventions' rules for treating prisoners of war prohibit parading them in public, but the treatment of the wounded, disheveled prisoners seemed to offend few of those watching, who in any case had turned out for the promise of seeing a ghoulish spectacle. 'Shoot them!' one woman yelled."

Kiev's Abuses

While it's certainly true that POWs shouldn't be mistreated, it should be at least equally newsworthy when civilians, including children, are being killed by indiscriminate artillery fire directed into cities or when right-wing storm troopers under Nazi banners are attacking and occupying eastern Ukrainian cities and towns. But the Times' bias in favor of the Kiev regime has been most obvious in the newspaper's selective outrage.

At the start of the crisis last winter, the Times sided with the "pro-democracy" demonstrators in Kiev's Maidan square as they sought to topple democratically elected President Viktor Yanukovich, who had rebuffed an association agreement with the European Union that included harsh austerity measures prescribed by the International Monetary Fund. Yanukovich opted for a more generous offer from Russia of a \$15 billion loan.

Along with the entire U.S. mainstream media, the Times cheered on the violent overthrow of Yanukovich on Feb. 22 and downplayed the crucial role of well-organized neo-Nazi militias that surged to the front of the Maidan protests in the final violent days. Then, with Yanukovich out and a new coup regime in, led by U.S. hand-picked Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk, the IMF austerity plan was promptly approved.

Since then, the Times has behaved as essentially a propaganda organ for the new regime in Kiev and for the State Department, pushing "themes" blaming Russian President Vladimir Putin for the crisis. [For details, see Consortiumnews.com's "Ukraine, Though the US 'Looking Glass.'"]

Some of the most egregious New York Times reporting has been its slanted and erroneous summations of the Ukraine narrative. For instance, immediately after the violent coup (from Feb. 20-22), it was reported that among the 80 people killed were more than a dozen police officers. But, as the Times' pro-coup sympathies hardened, the storyline changed to: "More than 80 protesters were shot to death by the police as an uprising spiraled out of control in mid-

February.” [NYT, March 5]

Both the dead police and the murky circumstances surrounding the sniper fire that inflicted many of the casualties simply disappeared from the Times’ narrative. It became flat fact: evil “pro-Yanukovych” police gunned down innocent “pro-democracy” demonstrators.

Whose Life Matters

Just as the deaths of those early demonstrators were played up by the Times and even spun to create a more black-and-white narrative the more recent deaths of thousands of ethnic Russians have been played down. And, the anger of eastern Ukrainians over the brutal assaults on their cities as displayed in Sunday’s Donetsk demonstration is then used by the Times to, in effect, justify Kiev’s continued “anti-terrorist” operation. In other words, it seems that the Times places a greater value on the lives of the Maidan demonstrators in Kiev than the ethnic Russians in the east.

The Times also displayed this bias after dozens of ethnic Russian protesters were killed by arson and other violence in Ukraine’s southern port city of Odessa on May 2. The victims had taken refuge in a trade union building after a clash with a pro-Kiev mob.

Even the neocon-dominated Washington Post led its editions with the story of “Dozens killed in Ukraine fighting” and described the fatal incident this way: “Friday evening, a pro-Ukrainian mob attacked a camp where the pro-Russian supporters had pitched tents, forcing them to flee to a nearby government building, a witness said. The mob then threw gasoline bombs into the building. Police said 31 people were killed when they choked on smoke or jumped out of windows. [The death toll later grew.]

“Asked who had thrown the Molotov cocktails, pro-Ukrainian activist Diana Berg said, ‘Our people but now they are helping them [the survivors] escape the building.’” [In actuality, some of the survivors who jumped from windows were beaten by the pro-Kiev mob.]

By contrast, here is how the New York Times reported the event as part of a story by C.J. Chivers and Noah Snider which focused on the successes of the pro-coup armed forces in overrunning some eastern Ukrainian rebel positions.

“Violence also erupted Friday in the previously calmer port city of Odessa, on the Black Sea, where dozens of people died in a fire related to clashes that broke out between protesters holding a march for Ukrainian unity and pro-Russian activists. The fighting itself left four dead and 12 wounded, Ukraine’s Interior Ministry said. Ukrainian and Russian news media showed images of buildings and

debris burning, fire bombs being thrown and men armed with pistols.”

Note how the Times evades placing any responsibility on the pro-coup mob for trying to burn alive the “pro-Russian activists” who had sought refuge in the building. From reading the Times, you wouldn’t know who had died and who had set the fire.

Embarrassing Lapses

In the Times’ haste to perform its propaganda function, there also have been some notable journalistic embarrassments such as the Times’ front-page story touting photographs that supposedly showed Russian special forces in Russia and then the same soldiers in eastern Ukraine, allegedly proving that the popular resistance to the coup regime was simply clumsily disguised Russian aggression.

Any serious journalist would have recognized the holes in the story since it wasn’t clear where the photos were taken or whether the blurry images were even the same people but that didn’t bother the Times, which led with the scoop. However, only two days later, the scoop blew up when it turned out that a key photo supposedly showing a group of soldiers in Russia who later appeared in eastern Ukraine was actually taken in Ukraine, destroying the premise of the entire story.

There’s also the issue of U.S. selectivity in defending the principle of not parading or otherwise humiliating POWs. That issue arose last decade during the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq when the U.S. news media showed little outrage over the treatment of “war on terror” captives who were displayed in humiliating postures at the U.S. prison camp at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, or when Iraqi soldiers were paraded before U.S. cameras to demonstrate American military success in Iraq.

By contrast, there was a firestorm during the early days of the U.S. invasion of Iraq when five U.S. POWs were questioned by Iraqi television reporters in the southern Iraqi city of Nasiriya.

U.S. officials immediately denounced the brief televised interviews with the prisoners as a violation of the Geneva Conventions, a charge that was repeated over and over by U.S. television networks. “It’s illegal to do things to POWs that are humiliating to those prisoners,” declared Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld.

Yet, the mainstream U.S. media stayed silent about the obvious inconsistency between its outrage over the footage of the American soldiers and the U.S. media’s decision only a few days earlier to run repeated clips of Iraqis

identified as prisoners of war.

In that case, Iraqi POWs were paraded before U.S. cameras as “proof” that Iraqi resistance was crumbling. Some of the scenes showed Iraqi POWs forced at gunpoint to kneel down with their hands behind their heads as they were patted down by U.S. soldiers. Yet neither U.S. officials nor U.S. reporters covering the war for the major news networks observed how those scenes might be a violation of international law.

Nor did the U.S. media see fit to remind viewers how President George W. Bush had stripped prisoners of war captured in Afghanistan of their rights under the Geneva Conventions. Bush ordered hundreds of captives from Afghanistan to be put in tiny outdoor cages at Camp X-Ray in Guantanamo Bay.

The prisoners were shaved bald and forced to kneel down with their eyes, ears and mouths covered to deprive them of their senses. The shackled prisoners were filmed being carried on stretchers to interrogation sessions. Their humiliation was broadcast for all the world to see but the treatment was accepted by the U.S. press as just fine. [See Consortiumnews.com’s “[International Law a la Carte.](#)”]

That selective outrage was on display again on Monday in the New York Times.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his new book, *America’s Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)). For a limited time, you also can order Robert Parry’s trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The trilogy includes *America’s Stolen Narrative*. For details on this offer, [click here](#).
