

Hollywood's Vice villain isn't the Dick Cheney I know



Illustration: Eric Lobbecke

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The film *Vice* is superbly made, indeed brilliant, but profoundly dishonest in its treatment of Dick Cheney, George W. Bush's vice-president. It has a wider cultural significance, for it demonstrates one reason it is so difficult for conservatives to prevail in Western societies. The Left has colonised and politicised much of elite and even popular arts production and uses them to project political messages.

Vice is a supreme propaganda film, using all manner of sly tricks to dehumanise its villains. It is full of specific falsehoods. More generally, the innuendo and the physical mockery of its designated villains makes it manipulative and dishonourable.

There are big lies and little lies. For example, early on it has Cheney showing up in Washington to participate in a congressional fellowship program for promising young professionals interested in politics. It presents Cheney at this point as a political moron, with no convictions beyond careerism and no idea whether he wants to be a Republican or a Democrat.

In fact, by that stage in his career Cheney had undergraduate and masters degrees in politics and was working on a PhD with the realistic expectation of becoming an academic. Contrary to what the film says, the first congressman Cheney worked for was not Donald Rumsfeld but another Republican.

Cheney is presented throughout as interested only in power and with no ideals or firm beliefs. This is inaccurate and unfair.

The film's propaganda bent is evident in the way physical details about Cheney and Bush are invented and presented. There is a long sequence of Cheney gargling in his bathroom, in his pyjamas. Of course, gargling is an intensely sinister activity — anything can look weird if exaggerated sufficiently. The sequence is used to make Cheney seem grotesque.

Bush receives a similar treatment, especially in a sequence of him eating chicken. The picture stops on a still frame of Bush with the chicken piece half in and half out of his mouth. At the session I attended the audience laughed at Bush, as it was meant to.

Bush is presented as an idiot, easily manipulated by Cheney. Yet Bush had been a successful two-term governor of Texas. Tony Blair writes in his memoirs of how much he admired Bush and nominates him as the international leader he knew who had the greatest personal integrity. Blair had a high opinion of Cheney, too.



Christian Bale as Dick Cheney and Amy Adams as Lynne Cheney in a scene from Vice.

In the normal way, Cheney won and lost policy battles within the administration. The fiction of Cheney dominating Bush was meant to reinforce the idea of Bush as an idiot. None of this was remotely true. Famously, Cheney

did not want to approach the UN in an attempt to get its formal support for the operation in Iraq, but Bush decided to go to the UN.

The biggest misrepresentations in the film concern former CIA covert employee Valerie Plame. Her husband, Joe Wilson, a former ambassador, had been asked by the CIA to go to Niger and inquire about British intelligence that Iraq's Saddam Hussein had tried to buy uranium there. This claim had figured in Bush's speech as a small part of a litany of evidence that suggested, wrongly as it turned out, that Saddam still had weapons of mass destruction.

Far from Bush and Cheney lying about the intelligence, they reported the same intelligence as the Clinton administration had. I confirmed this with many senior Clinton figures who had all believed Saddam had WMDs.

Wilson concluded Niger had not provided uranium to Saddam. However, Wilson's inquiries were superficial. He had no intelligence information himself. The CIA frequently employs many different sources to check and crosscheck information.

After the Iraq war, the independent Butler inquiry in Britain into the intelligence, reported that Iraqi officials had indeed visited Niger seeking uranium and concluded that the initial British intelligence and Bush's claim were "well founded". However, at the height of controversy over missing WMDs, Wilson wrote in The New York Times about his Niger mission, denying the substance of Bush's claims and effectively accusing Bush and Cheney of lying.

It turned out that Plame had been working on WMDs for the CIA and in fact had recommended her husband in connection with the assignment. Plame's name was leaked. If Wilson had the slightest concern for his wife's cover he would not have jumped into the national press, revealing his own confidential work in an area involving his wife.

A special prosecutor was set up to find out who leaked Plame's name. Almost as soon as the prosecutor was set up, the deputy secretary of state, Richard Armitage, a man I greatly admire, told his boss, Colin Powell, it was him, and then told the special prosecutor. Armitage apparently had not known Plame was covert and, in any event, had the legal authority to declassify information. A mistake, undoubtedly. (Also wrecking the Cheney conspiracy theory, -

Armitage was a bitter enemy of Cheney in the administration. None of this figures in the film.)

Bizarrely, the special prosecutor compelled Armitage not to reveal his role to anyone else and proceeded with his investigation for two years, causing massive disruption, presumably to see if anyone else leaked as well. As with most special prosecutors the investigation came up with nothing. However, it proceeded with perjury charges against Cheney's chief of staff, Scooter Libby.

These characteristic special prosecutor charges had nothing to do with leaking Plame's name but centred on a conversation about which Libby had different recollections from the other participant. Given the fevered atmosphere and the limitless resources of the special prosecutor, perjury and related convictions were obtained against Libby.

The film records these convictions in a way that implies, virtually states, that Libby was convicted of leaking Plame's name, which is completely untrue. It also has a scene of Cheney instructing Libby to leak Plame's name, which is also a complete fiction.

So to evaluate the film properly, the viewer needs an exceptional knowledge and memory of the arcana of the Bush years. The average viewer instead concludes Cheney was a criminal. This is grossly unfair.

The only decent dimension of Cheney the film allows is his devotion to his lesbian daughter. But this is included only to set up a final-reel betrayal, in which Cheney authorises (though we have no idea if he actually did this) his other daughter, Liz, to oppose gay marriage when she is running for office. There is no sense that Liz might have her own views, that a family might disagree even if its patriarch were not a malevolent schemer.

I spent more time with Cheney than any other Australian journalist did, interviewing him at length when he was vice-president and having a lot of other interaction with him going back to his time as defence secretary. He is an immensely impressive man, some of whose judgments I think were wrong. In the film *Primary Colors* Hollywood explored some of Bill Clinton's peccadillos but nonetheless portrayed him as idealistic and noble in his intent, because he is a liberal Democrat. Whereas for Hollywood, Cheney is a pure monstrous beast.

Politics is downstream of culture. That is one reason conservatives struggle.

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