

**RICHARD B. CHENEY**  
**46<sup>th</sup> Vice President: 2001-2009**

*“When you’re talking to Dick Cheney, you’re talking to me. When Dick Cheney’s talking, it’s me talking.”*

–President George W. Bush

When a prospective member of George W. Bush’s cabinet drew up a list of reasons why he was not right for the job, the incoming vice president interjected: “I had a list just like yours, except I had three heart attacks on mine.” Dick Cheney had been an unusual choice for a running mate. Besides his heart problems, he had been out of elective politics for over a decade, was not particularly photogenic nor a stirring orator, resided in the same state as Bush, and matched his ideological leanings so closely that he provided little balance for the ticket. Cheney instead offered experience and gravity to an unseasoned presidential candidate. Unique among vice presidents, he claimed no presidential ambitions and would make no effort to campaign for the highest office in his own right. This detachment made him appear impervious to public opinion.<sup>1</sup>

### **Wyoming to Washington**

Richard Bruce Cheney was born in Lincoln, Nebraska, on January 30, 1941. That happened to be President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s birthday, so Cheney’s grandfather—a cook for the Union Pacific Railroad, and a New Deal Democrat—sent the president a birth announcement. Cheney’s father was an agent for the U.S. Soil Conservation Service whose job moved the family to Wyoming when Cheney was thirteen.

Growing up in Casper, Wyoming, Cheney played football and baseball, fished, and hunted rabbits. In high school he was co-captain of the football team, and dated the school’s homecoming queen, Lynne Vincent. “I first met Dick Cheney when he was a teenager, quite a handsome teenager, as a matter of fact,” she later recalled. “He had a crew cut. He played football. He was the president of our senior class.” What stood out most in her mind was that Cheney “spent as much time listening as he did talking, which is pretty unusual in a teenager.”<sup>2</sup>

The pronunciation of his family name changed over time. “We used to call him ‘Cheeney,’” said a childhood friend. “But I guess ‘Chainey’ is what happens when you move east.” A Yale alumnus from Wyoming had recruited Cheney with a full scholarship to Yale. Poor grades cost him the scholarship, however, and he left Yale after three semesters. Back in Wyoming, Cheney worked as a lineman for a power company. Twice arrested for driving while intoxicated, he realized that he was “headed down a bad road.” By then, Lynne Vincent had graduated from college and gotten her master’s degree. She made it clear that she expected him to return to college before they married. Cheney attended the two-year Casper College and graduated from the University of Wyoming. Facing the military draft during the Vietnam War, Cheney took five student and parental deferments, and never served in uniform. When his deferments later became a political issue, he explained that he had “other priorities in the ‘60s than military service.”<sup>3</sup>

After marrying in 1964, he worked on a master’s degree in government at the University

of Wyoming, while his wife taught in the English department there. In 1965, he received one of the two internships at the state legislature funded by the state's Democratic and Republican parties. The other intern had been active in the Young Democrats and asked to work for the lower house, with its Democratic majority. Cheney, whose own political identity remained unformed, interned for the Republican-led state senate. "You had to know every legislator," Cheney recalled, "be there when they needed you, and remember how they wanted their coffee."<sup>4</sup>

The Cheneyes went on to pursue doctorates at the University of Wisconsin. Lynne Cheney earned a Ph.D. in British literature, but her husband never finished his degree in political science. He diverted into the political arena, interning for the Republican governor of Wisconsin, Warren P. Knowles, and then taking an American Political Science Association (APSA) fellowship to spend a year on Capitol Hill in 1968. After hearing Illinois Republican representative Donald Rumsfeld address the congressional fellows, Cheney applied to work in Rumsfeld's office. The interview did not go well. "In fact, he pretty much threw me out of his office," Cheney recalled. "Don's impression of me was that I was a detached, theoretical, impractical academic type." Cheney instead worked in the office of Representative William Steiger, a Wisconsin Republican.<sup>5</sup>

Congressional fellows were required to split their year between the House and Senate, so Cheney made arrangements to join the staff of Democratic senator Edward M. Kennedy. Before that could happen, the inauguration of Richard Nixon as president in 1969 set in motion a chain of events that would propel Cheney from a congressional fellow to White House chief of staff in seven fast years. His rapid ascent began when Nixon appointed Rumsfeld to head the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO). Cheney sent Rumsfeld an unsolicited memo suggesting ways to handle his confirmation hearings, which prompted Rumsfeld to hire him. Since Rumsfeld simultaneously held the title of special assistant to the president, he took Cheney with him to the West Wing for daily staff meetings. On becoming ambassador to NATO in 1973, Rumsfeld asked Cheney to join his staff in Europe. Rather than uproot his family, Cheney instead joined a Washington-based investment consulting firm. Then, in August 1974, Nixon resigned in the wake of the Watergate scandal. Vice President and former House Republican leader Gerald Ford assumed the presidency and made Rumsfeld his chief of staff. Cheney returned to government service as Rumsfeld's deputy.<sup>6</sup>

### **White House Chief of Staff**

Inside the Ford administration, Rumsfeld and Cheney acquired reputations as pragmatic problem-solvers, despite their strikingly different personalities: Cheney was as understated as Rumsfeld was intense. An assertive administrator, Rumsfeld controlled access to the president and developed a network of deputies for all of the senior staff. Rumsfeld's own deputy stood ready to relieve him when necessary. "If you have a competent and capable deputy," Cheney explained, "you can get a few Sundays off during the year."<sup>7</sup>

In the wake of Vietnam and Watergate, Congress was eager to reassert its authority against an "Imperial Presidency." Clashing with Congress over domestic and foreign policy, Ford vetoed sixty-one bills, twelve of which were overridden. Ford faced opposition in Congress to his proposal for additional military aid to keep South Vietnam and Cambodia from

falling to the Communists. The president and Congress similarly disagreed over how to handle the economy, particularly inflation. With prices rising while the economy stagnated, economist Arthur Laffer approached the Ford administration with his theory that a cut in taxes could stimulate the economy and thereby increase government revenues. A skeptical Rumsfeld sent his deputy to meet the economist at a restaurant. Laffer tried to make his point clearer by drawing a bell curve on a napkin. Although the sketch failed to convince Cheney, conservative Republicans adopted the “Laffer Curve” as the basis for supply-side economics.<sup>8</sup>

Bracing for an uphill battle for election, Ford instituted major changes within his administration in November 1975, among which he replaced Henry Kissinger with his deputy Brent Scowcroft as national security advisor, and moved Rumsfeld to the Pentagon as Secretary of Defense. The shuffle elevated Rumsfeld’s low-profile deputy to the position of the president’s chief of staff. Reporters could not recall anyone who had “risen so high with so much anonymity.” Only thirty-four years old, and not yet listed in *Who’s Who*, Cheney had achieved favorable standing within the administration as someone who could get things done quietly, without showing personal ambition. When he appeared on television, his friends advised him to smile more. “Why?” he responded. “I’m not running for anything.”<sup>9</sup>

Cheney became chief of staff just as the White House was preparing for the presidential campaign. President Ford faced a challenge for the Republican nomination from former California Governor Ronald Reagan. To counter Reagan’s attack on detente with the Soviet Union and China, and to avoid a divisive floor fight, Cheney negotiated a “morality in foreign policy” plank in the Republican platform that essentially repudiated Secretary of State Kissinger’s policies. After narrowly prevailing at the convention, Ford emerged thirty points behind the Democratic candidate, Jimmy Carter. His campaign cut Carter’s lead in the polls, but not enough to win.<sup>10</sup>

### **The Gentleman from Wyoming**

As a former White House chief of staff, Cheney could have found a lucrative position as a Washington lobbyist. Instead, he piled his belongings into a rented truck and drove back to Wyoming. Prior to the 1978 elections, Cheney consulted former governor Stanley Hathaway about his chances of running for a U.S. Senate seat where the incumbent was retiring. Hathaway advised him that the popular Alan Simpson planned to run for the Senate and would “kick your butt.” Cheney instead ran for the state’s sole House seat, whose incumbent had also announced his retirement. Wyoming’s “high altitudes and low multitudes” made it a grueling ordeal to canvass the vast but sparsely populated state. Cheney rented a Winnebago and drove from town to town with his parents, wife, daughters, and family dog. In mid-campaign, he suffered his first heart attack. Sidelined for six weeks of recuperation, he mulled over withdrawing, but his family campaigned in his place, and he rose in the polls. He sent a letter to every registered Republican in the state announcing that he had quit smoking and was returning to the campaign.<sup>11</sup>

With 42 percent of the vote, Dick Cheney won the Republican nomination for Congress against two other candidates. His chief rival, the state treasurer, had made his support for Ronald Reagan the centerpiece of his campaign. In the general election, Cheney received a boost from the “Sage Brush Rebellion”—popular unrest in the West against federal policies on water and land use, environmental protection, energy, and taxes—and a 2:1 advantage in

campaign spending. Cheney defeated the Democratic candidate with 58.6 percent of the vote. (He would win reelection five times by even larger margins.) Cheney saved on the congressional relocation allowance by renting a truck to bring the family belongings back to Washington. They hit a snowstorm in Indianapolis and were stuck for days at a motel. Cheney had to leave his family behind and catch a plane so he could be sworn into Congress.

Becoming a freshman member of the House minority seemed a long step down from presidential chief of staff, but Cheney was determined to establish himself as a legislator. “When you’re in a staff job, you’re never yourself. It’s humbling—you’re just somebody’s hired gun,” he explained. “Congress is different. You’re responsible for your own decisions. You act for yourself.” He gained a seat on the Interior and Insular Affairs Committee, whose jurisdiction covered matters of vital concern to his state.<sup>12</sup>

His association with the Ford administration identified Cheney as a moderate and brought an invitation to attend the Wednesday morning breakfasts held by the “Wednesday Group” of centrist Republicans in the House. But Ford’s defeat had made Cheney wary of being outflanked from the right, and he sent his administrative assistant to breakfast with the Conservative Opportunity Society. Cheney’s voting record placed him to the right of most House members. As “the gentleman from Wyoming,” he cast one of the four votes against a ban on plastic guns that would not set off magnetometers. He voted against the Safe Drinking Water Act, Head Start, and sanctions on South African apartheid. Yet he avoided an ideological reputation because people attributed his votes to the prevailing attitudes in his state.<sup>13</sup>

During his second term, election as chair of the House Republican Policy Committee gave Cheney a “hunting license” to become involved in a broader range of issues. The ranking Republicans on the House committees had been seeking bipartisan accord with the Democratic committee chairs, and they complained about the confrontational tactics being employed by their junior colleagues, led by Georgia’s Newt Gingrich. As Policy Committee chair, Cheney shared Gingrich’s frustration with their party’s minority status, and argued that if Republicans continued to help pass Democratic bills, they would never chair committees themselves.<sup>14</sup>

In the 1980 election, Ronald Reagan’s coattails carried Republicans into the majority in the Senate and trimmed the Democrats’ lead in the House. House Republicans forged an alliance with conservative “Boll Weevil” Democrats to enact Reagan’s tax cuts and military spending increases. Cheney supported Reagan’s programs, particularly in foreign affairs, where he concluded that Congress had exercised too much restraint on presidential authority since Vietnam. He was a member of the House Intelligence Committee when news broke that the Reagan administration had violated the congressional sanction against aid for the Contras in their fight against the elected Communist-led government of Nicaragua, by providing unappropriated funds raised from selling arms to Iran. The House and Senate investigated, and their Iran-Contra committees met jointly in 1987.<sup>15</sup>

The Iran-Contra committees’ majority report placed responsibility on Reagan, but Cheney led the minority in insisting that there had been no evidence that the president had known about the scheme or engaged in a cover-up. In his diary, President Reagan recorded his pleasure in Cheney’s defense of the administration, and Reagan’s press secretary described Cheney as “probably the most effective supporter the President has in the House of Representatives, because he’s intelligent and he can support the President without appearing to be following the President blindly.” The minority report, drafted by Cheney’s staff, accused

Congress of tying the president's hands, and asserted that national security would occasionally require chief executives "to exceed the laws."<sup>16</sup>

House Republicans elected Cheney as conference chairman in 1987, and as minority whip in 1988. With his wife, Cheney wrote a history of Speakers of the House, an office that he seemed destined to hold himself—until an unexpected twist of political fate. In 1989, President George H. W. Bush's nomination of Senator John Tower for Secretary of Defense went down to defeat in the Senate. National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft and Secretary of State James Baker, veterans of the Ford administration, recommended Cheney as a replacement. His departure from Congress elevated Gingrich to Republican whip. Gingrich, instead of Cheney, would later become the first Republican Speaker in forty years.<sup>17</sup>

### **Secretary of Defense**

The end of the Cold War called for new military strategies and budgets. Secretary of Defense Cheney anticipated a "peace dividend" from reducing forces and weapons systems. The top brass regarded the new Defense Secretary as tough, incisive, sometimes sarcastic, but always confident and well-informed. General Colin Powell, whom Cheney had recommended to be chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, called him "a glutton for information," adding that the military appreciated having a civilian head who "knew what he was talking about militarily."<sup>18</sup>

Cheney recruited a team of "defense intellectuals." Identified as neoconservatives, they issued planning papers that envisioned a "new world order," with the United States as the sole superpower, possessing such overwhelming military power that it could prevail over all global rivals. Consequently, they opposed post-Cold War reductions in the nation's defense structure. When General Powell circulated a report recommending the elimination of small, artillery-fired nuclear weapons as "irrelevant in the present world," Secretary Cheney advised him that "Not one of my civilian advisors supports you," and rejected the proposal.<sup>19</sup>

When the Berlin Wall came down and the Soviet bloc unraveled, a debate took place at the Pentagon between Cheney, who remained suspicious of the Russians, and General Powell, who pressed for conversion to a post-Cold War defense mode. Powell saw regional conflicts as more likely in the future. On August 2, 1990, President George H. W. Bush scheduled a speech in Aspen, Colorado, to announce a new regional strategy. That same day, Iraqi forces invaded Kuwait.<sup>20</sup>

The Defense Secretary advocated U.S. military action to drive Iraqis out of Kuwait, and he advised the president not to wait for a congressional resolution of approval. Congress would be with them if they were successful and against them if they were not, Cheney reasoned, regardless of whether it adopted a resolution. Bush instead pressed for congressional authorization of military action. Cheney meanwhile devised plans to restrict news reporting of the Gulf War. Only closely-supervised pools of correspondents could cover the actual fighting. Defense Department public affairs officers would decide where reporters could go, whom they could interview, and how close camera crews could get to the fighting. Cheney's objective was to keep American public opinion united until Iraq had been defeated and Kuwait liberated.<sup>21</sup>

Following an air campaign that pounded Iraqi forces, Secretary Cheney announced the beginning of the ground war on February 23, 1991, and invoked a total blackout of news coverage of the assault until further notice. The scope of this censorship stunned reporters, but

within hours General Norman Schwarzkopf declared that the allies had achieved a dramatic success with few casualties, and the government allowed news reports once again. The blackout had been “a political security blanket” in case of heavy casualties, and was lifted when Iraq’s resistance proved so weak. With the Iraqis in full retreat, Cheney’s Pentagon staff wanted American forces to pursue the war until Iraqi president Saddam Hussein was overthrown. General Powell and General Schwarzkopf instead recommended an end to the ground war, the U.S. having achieved its military objectives. Cheney defended the decision not to send troops into Baghdad as a wise policy that avoided getting U.S. troops bogged down in a quagmire.<sup>22</sup>

President Bush’s approval rating soared with victory in the Persian Gulf, but slumped when the economy fell into recession. In a three-way race in 1992, Arkansas’ governor William J. Clinton beat both Bush and the billionaire independent H. Ross Perot. On the day that Cheney stepped down as Secretary of Defense, General Powell went to Cheney’s office only to learn that he had left without fanfare. “The lone cowboy had gone off into the sunset,” Powell noted, “without even a last ‘So long.’” Cheney rented another truck to haul his papers and other belongings back to Wyoming. He owned a house in Jackson Hole, where he enjoyed fishing and skiing. This time his children were grown and his wife declined to ride with him. At truck stops during his long drive across the country, those he encountered would occasionally remark that he looked like Dick Cheney. “A lot of people tell me that,” he would reply.<sup>23</sup>

### **Business and Politics**

During Cheney’s Pentagon service, his wife headed the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). After earning her Ph.D., Lynne Cheney raised her children and taught part-time at George Washington University. In 1979, she published a political novel, *Executive Privilege*, and followed that in 1981 with *Sisters*, a feminist saga about a woman who “broke all the rules of the American frontier.” During the conservative Reagan era, however, she developed doubts about feminism and spoke out against educators who emphasized gender and race, calling them divisive issues. She also denounced speech codes and other forms of “political correctness” as inhibiting thought on campus, and insisted that universities “should be about pursuing truth, not agendas.”<sup>24</sup>

Both Cheneys became senior fellows at the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative research center in Washington, D.C. At the start of the Clinton administration, Dick Cheney explored his chances for running for president, and formed a campaign committee to raise funds. Yet when Republicans swept the congressional elections and won majorities in both houses of Congress in 1994, Cheney dropped out of the presidential race. He decided that the change in majority in Congress had put the country back on the right track, and that his committee had not raised sufficient funds to mount a serious campaign. Nor did he want to run for vice president, describing it to his hometown paper, the *Casper Star-Tribune*, as “a cruddy job.”<sup>25</sup>

On a Canadian fishing trip with a group of corporate executives, Cheney became their top choice to head the Texas-based energy services and construction company Halliburton, despite his lack of experience in the oil industry. Halliburton did business throughout the world, especially in the Middle East, where Cheney’s military and diplomatic contacts could assist the company’s bids for government contracts—some \$1.5 billion during his tenure. His salary and shares of Halliburton stock made him a multimillionaire.<sup>26</sup>

Cheney was living in Dallas when Texas Governor George W. Bush began preparing to run for president in 2000. Content with private life, Cheney declined an offer to chair Bush's campaign, but he agreed to head the selection process for a running mate. For months, Cheney vetted potential candidates, until a meeting at Bush's new ranch in Crawford, Texas, in July 2000, when the governor said, "You know, you're the solution to my problem." Cheney agreed, although running for vice president meant resigning from Halliburton. He also had to rush back to Wyoming to change his voter registration and reestablish residency there, to avoid the constitutional restriction against having two candidates on the same ticket from the same state.<sup>27</sup>

### **Redefining the Vice Presidency**

"I didn't pick Dick Cheney because of Wyoming's three electoral votes," George W. Bush said of his selection of a running mate, but because he would make "a valuable partner in a Bush administration." Bush's chief political advisor, Karl Rove, had cautioned that Cheney's selection made the presidential candidate appear "needy," but the choice added to the ticket an expertise in defense and foreign policy that many voters found reassuring. Bush exuded optimism on the campaign trail, while Cheney usually looked grim. To lighten his image, his outgoing wife campaigned at his side. They ran against a Democratic ticket headed by Vice President Al Gore and Connecticut Senator Joseph Lieberman. In a televised vice presidential debate, reporters noted that Cheney exhibited "a way of answering questions about government policy which communicates the feeling that he has really mastered it."<sup>28</sup>

On election night, Gore-Lieberman led Bush-Cheney by a half-million popular votes, and Democrats gained five seats to tie the Republicans in the U.S. Senate. But the electoral vote hinged on some disputed ballots in Florida. During the protracted contest over the recount, Cheney suffered another heart attack (his previous attacks had occurred in 1978, 1984, and 1988). As soon as he recovered, Bush put him in charge of the transition, feeling that they could not afford to wait until the election was settled to begin putting an administration together. While national attention focused on the court battles over the election, Cheney quietly worked out of a temporary office near his home in McLean, Virginia, recruiting cabinet members, including Donald Rumsfeld for secretary of defense. "Everything had to stay hush-hush," recorded Mel Martinez, whom Cheney interviewed for secretary of Housing and Urban Development. "Nobody could know about these cabinet maneuverings, and the Bush-Cheney team certainly didn't want word getting out to the press." On December 12, 2000, a 5-4 decision of the U.S. Supreme Court halted the recount in Florida, preserving Bush's majority in the Electoral College. Cheney headed to Capitol Hill to cement ties with the Republican congressional leadership. "He's a creature of Congress," said House Speaker Dennis Hastert, "so he knows and understands what we need as a team." For the first time, the House gave office space near its chamber to the vice president.<sup>29</sup>

The 2000 election also resulted in a tied U.S. Senate, with an even 50-50 split between Democrats and Republicans. As vice president, Cheney's deciding vote would keep the Republicans in the majority. He held one of his first post-election meetings with a group of five moderate Republican senators whose votes could affect the balance of power. Instead of conciliation, Cheney laid out what Rhode Island Senator Lincoln Chafee described as "a shockingly divisive political agenda." Cheney "ticked off the issues at the top of his agenda and

did it fearlessly,” the senator noted. “It made no difference to him that we were potential adversaries.” The new vice president made it clear to them that he welcomed conflict.<sup>30</sup>

President Bush advised Republican senators: “When you’re talking to Dick Cheney, you’re talking to me. When Dick Cheney’s talking, it’s me talking.” Former Vice President Dan Quayle reminisced with Cheney about the usual roles of modern vice presidents, advising that he should expect to do a lot of international traveling and fund-raising. Cheney replied that he had reached a different arrangement with President Bush. He did not want a specific assignment like Quayle’s Council on Competitiveness. Having determined that the vice presidency had “no real job description,” Cheney wanted a seat at “every table and every meeting” to get involved in the full range of domestic and international issues. For this, he hired a larger-than-ever vice-presidential staff.<sup>31</sup>

In the pattern of the modern vice presidency, Cheney functioned principally as part of the executive rather than the legislative branch. He was teamed with a president who preferred to be seen as decisive rather than deliberative, and who delegated to him much of the day-to-day managerial responsibilities. Instead of going out to stump for the president’s policies, Cheney would stay behind to work out the policy details while the president barnstormed the country. Reporters noted the contrast between the president’s paper-free Oval Office, and the vice president’s “working desk,” piled high with reference and reading material. Cheney preferred not to offer advice to Bush in large meetings, so the two men spent considerable time together in private, confidential sessions. This direct access to the president enabled Cheney to circumvent interagency deliberation over policy matters and expedite decisions that he advocated.<sup>32</sup>

Now serving in his third tour of duty in the White House, Cheney valued the opportunity “to come back now at my stage in life, 60 years old, and get to do it one more time, sort of correct all those mistakes you made earlier in your career.” His first effort was to form a task force to revise national energy policies away from the Clinton administration’s environmental restrictions towards increased oil and gas drilling. Cheney assembled a group composed entirely of government officials, without the usual mix of outside experts, a tactic that exempted it from the Federal Advisory Committee Act’s requirement that such task forces make public the minutes of their meetings and the names of those who attended.<sup>33</sup>

Environmentalists demanded the names of the energy industry officials with whom Cheney had consulted on energy policy, but he refused on grounds of executive privilege. When the Government Accountability Office (GAO) contacted the vice president for information about his task force, it met similar resistance. Cheney visited congressional leaders to argue that the GAO lacked statutory authority to examine his records. Meeting with Senator Robert C. Byrd, chairman of the Appropriations Committee, the vice president talked at length about the constitutionality of his office and his belief that the GAO had exceeded its authority. Byrd replied that Watergate had shown that efforts to keep information away from public scrutiny usually ended badly, and asked: “Why don’t you give them what they want?” The vice president did not respond. In 2004, the Supreme Court agreed that the GAO request had violated the separation of powers, a ruling that Cheney felt vindicated his views on executive authority.<sup>34</sup>

Cheney’s biographer, Stephen Hayes, observed that the vice president “likes to work in the background and he does not care much about being loved.” He also resisted efforts to document his activities, such as writing memos. Reporters who contacted his office were told: “When we have something to announce, we’ll announce it.” Cheney stopped providing the

National Archives with a list of the classified data he held, insisting that as president of the Senate he was part of the legislative branch and therefore exempt from this executive branch requirement. The notion of a vice president who worked out of the West Wing and exerted executive privilege claiming protection under his legislative status produced widespread skepticism—the columnist George Will, for instance, accused him of practicing “situational constitutionalism.” Cheney shifted to an argument that he shared the president’s exemption from the executive order. Regarding his papers, however, he insisted that vice presidents were not included under the Presidential Records Act that set rules of preservation and access.<sup>35</sup>

On Capitol Hill, the vice president brokered disagreements between Republicans in the House and Senate. Iowa Republican Senator Charles Grassley compared Cheney to “a pastor coming in and settling a family dispute within the congregation.” Within the administration, he had a hand in seemingly every policy matter. Because he chaired the budget review panel, cabinet officers seeking funding increases went to see the vice president rather than the president. He supported the president’s tax cuts—asserting that Ronald Reagan had “proved deficits don’t matter”—and he advocated post-Cold War cost-cutting at the Pentagon. He encouraged Defense Secretary Rumsfeld to build “a military that makes sense for the 21st century,” based on a new set of assumptions about what the nation needed to defend itself against. Cheney cited a need to rethink “homeland defense,” in an era when it appeared that no other nation could mount conventional assaults against the United States.<sup>36</sup>

### **The War on Terrorism**

On the morning of September 11, 2001, President Bush was visiting an elementary school in Florida while Vice President Cheney was working in the West Wing. An aide reported that a plane had hit one of New York’s World Trade Center towers. As Cheney watched on television, the second tower was hit, marking it as a terrorist attack. The Secret Service learned that another plane headed toward Washington, D.C., was not communicating with the controllers at National Airport. Agents rushed the vice president to the emergency operations center. By the time they got there, television pictures showed smoke rising from the Pentagon.

In Congress, Cheney had participated in highly-classified exercises with a small group of federal officials who convened at remote locations to conduct planning exercises in the event that some catastrophe required the establishment of a temporary government. Drawing on those experiences, he took charge of continuity of operations on September 11. He advised the president not to return to Washington, and he arranged for congressional leaders to be taken to a protected location in West Virginia. When another commercial airliner unaccountably turned towards Washington, the military requested authority to shoot it down. Cheney, according to his chief of staff, responded “in about the time it takes a batter to decide to swing.” Although the 9/11 Commission later could find no record of a call, Cheney insisted that he had first obtained the president’s permission to order the plane shot down. The fourth plane crashed in a field in Pennsylvania. Cheney at first assumed the air force had been responsible. Learning that it had gone down on its own, he commented, “I think an act of heroism just took place on that plane.”

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September 11 transformed George W. Bush’s presidency, propelling the war on terrorism to the top of his priorities. The enhanced security that followed the terrorist attacks suited

Cheney's inclinations, allowing him to work in a "secure, undisclosed location," away from public view. Retreating into the background also muted criticism that he had overshadowed the president on the day of the attacks, when their roles had been, in Cheney's words, "sort of reversed." The terrorist attacks united the nation, and Congress rushed the Patriot Act through to enactment within a week, giving the government greater intelligence-gathering authority. Despite such bipartisan cooperation, Cheney insisted that the commander in chief needed neither congressional authorization nor court warrants to authorize government agencies to intercept the mail and telephone calls of those suspected of aiding terrorism.<sup>38</sup>

Once the federal government determined that the terrorist attacks had been carried out by al-Qaeda, a radical Muslim organization led by Osama bin Laden, retaliation took form as an invasion of Afghanistan, where the ruling Taliban had allowed al-Qaeda to operate. Bin Laden eluded capture, but American forces toppled the Taliban, installed a pro-Western government, and seized hundreds of suspected terrorists. To hold them, the U.S. erected prisons at its naval base at Guantanamo Bay, in Cuba. Cheney advocated a suspension of U.S. compliance with the Geneva Convention and supported interrogation methods that included torture. "We'll have to work sort of the dark side," he said on *Meet the Press* soon after the September 11 attacks; ". . . it's going to be vital for us to use any means at our disposal, basically, to achieve our objectives."<sup>39</sup>

Vice President Cheney led the administration's most hawkish faction. His neoconservative aides believed that the invasion of Afghanistan had not been enough, and that the American response to the terrorist attacks needed to be "more than proportionate." They fixed on Saddam Hussein, whom they viewed as having had a hand in the attacks by al-Qaeda, and argued that removing him from power would "send a larger message," completing what the president's father had left unfinished. Although U.S. intelligence agencies could find no credible evidence linking Saddam Hussein to al-Qaeda, the vice president embraced the alternative interpretation. "We will not permit a brutal dictator with ties to terror and a record of reckless aggression to dominate the Middle East and to threaten the United States," he told audiences.<sup>40</sup>

Determined that the U.S. should take the offensive before terrorists could launch another attack, Cheney advocated a preventive war against Iraq, on the grounds that Saddam Hussein was trying to acquire nuclear weapons. Secretary of State Colin Powell counseled that UN inspectors should be given enough time to prove whether Iraq had any weapons of mass destruction (WMD), and to build international support for American policies. The journalist Bob Woodward described the two poles of thinking within the administration as: "Powell's internationalism versus Cheney's unilateralism." Secretary Powell enjoyed the highest public approval rating in the Bush administration. "You can afford to lose some poll points," said Cheney, pressing him to make the case for war at the United Nations. Surmounting his doubts, Powell assured the UN Security Council that Saddam Hussein's stockpiling of chemical, biological, and perhaps nuclear weapons made him a threat to world peace. The evidence that he offered convinced few of America's allies in Europe and the Middle East, so the coalition that waged the war consisted mostly of U.S. and British troops.<sup>41</sup>

The job of selling the war on Capitol Hill fell to the vice president. He attended the weekly luncheons of Senate Republicans, usually without participating in their discussions, his presence helping to muffle dissent from the administration's positions. When he spoke, senators took his words seriously. At a luncheon in March 2003, Cheney vigorously addressed the

situation in Iraq, assuring senators that if the UN failed to pass a resolution against Iraq, the United States would act on its own and would triumph in a quick war. When House Republican majority leader Dick Arme expressed his misgivings about an unprovoked war on Iraq, Cheney brought him classified information about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction. "When I get done with this briefing," he told Arme, "you're going to be with me." Arme introduced the war resolution in the House.<sup>42</sup>

Cheney's bellicosity surprised his former associates in the Ford and senior Bush administrations. Brent Scowcroft aired these concerns in a *Wall Street Journal* column in August 2002, "Don't Attack Saddam." He warned that intervention in Iraq would deflect the war on terrorism and worsen conditions in the Middle East. Cheney responded with a speech before the Veterans of Foreign Wars that dismissed such alarms and strongly advocated war. "The real anomaly in the administration is Cheney," Scowcroft commented afterwards. "I consider Cheney a good friend—I've known him for thirty years. But Dick Cheney I don't know anymore."<sup>43</sup>

For months leading up to war with Iraq, Cheney and his chief of staff, I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby, repeatedly visited CIA headquarters for intelligence briefings. During the first Gulf War CIA analysts had missed Iraq's developing nuclear weapons program, making Cheney skeptical when analysts reported no signs of collusion between Iraq and al-Qaeda. CIA director George Tenet regarded the vice president as an avid consumer of intelligence and appreciated his willingness to call world leaders to get the information or access the CIA needed; but analysts complained about Cheney's "constant drumbeat of repetitive queries" to connect Iraq to 9/11. David Kay, who headed the WMD inspection team in Iraq, noted that the vice president's many questions showed him to be well-read on intelligence details, but also caused him to keep remembering little facts that he thought proved his conclusions. "The problem with intelligence is that little facts often don't prove anything, let alone something big," Kay mused. "They're just pieces of puzzles—sometimes just pieces that don't even make a puzzle."<sup>44</sup>

Cheney's grasp of the issues and confident demeanor came across well on television. He talked in a reasonable manner that raised few questions about his assumptions. In the campaign to build public support for the war, the normally taciturn vice president made the rounds of the Sunday morning television news programs, asserting that Saddam Hussein had pursued weapons of mass destruction, and had ties to the 9/11 terrorists. The vice president discounted warnings from the army's chief of staff that the stabilization of a post-war Iraq would require hundreds of thousands of American troops.<sup>45</sup>

As Cheney predicted, the Iraq war proceeded swiftly. Aerial bombardments began on March 22, 2003, and American troops took Baghdad by April 9. On May 1, President Bush, wearing a flight suit, landed in a military jet on the aircraft carrier *USS Abraham Lincoln*. Standing beneath a "Mission Accomplished" banner, he proclaimed an end to the ground combat. Vice President Cheney assured the nation that Iraqis would greet American troops as liberators. Such optimistic assumptions hindered the planning needed to secure a post-invasion Iraq. The ousting of Saddam Hussein did not restore peace and order. The U.S. Army later determined that the levels of troops it deployed had been insufficient, and that their training in "stability operations" had been inadequate. Widespread looting occurred, followed by an unexpected insurgency and sectarian violence. Terrorists exploited the power vacuum.<sup>46</sup>

## Campaigning for Reelection

American forces in Iraq found no weapons of mass destruction, nor any significant connection between Saddam Hussein's regime and al-Qaeda, undermining Cheney's argument that Iraq had posed an immediate danger to the United States. *Newsweek* put the vice president on its cover under the heading: "How Dick Cheney Sold the War: Why He Fell for Bad Intelligence—And Pitched It to the President." Other national publications pictured the vice president as "the decisive foreign policy player in the White House," who had driven the policies in Iraq that had gone wrong. Faced with such negative publicity in an election year, Cheney made himself more available to journalists. Where previously reporters could identify him only as a senior administration official, he now gave attributed interviews.<sup>47</sup>

In May 2004, the Abu Ghraib prison scandal broke. An army investigation confirmed the mistreatment of Iraqi prisoners held by the American military, with "numerous incidents of sadistic, blatant, and wanton criminal abuses" inflicted on detainees. The prison abuse scandal and the deteriorating military situation in Iraq prompted calls for a change in Pentagon leadership. Senator Joseph Biden, then ranking Democrat on the Foreign Relations Committee, met with the president and vice president on his return from Iraq and said that he would have fired Donald Rumsfeld. Turning to Cheney, Senator Biden said, "Were you not a constitutional officer, I'd fire you, too." Asked why, Biden responded: "Mr. President, can you name me one piece of substantial advice given about the war in Iraq that's turned out to be true? That's why, Mr. President."<sup>48</sup>

On Capitol Hill for a group photograph with all of the senators in June 2004, Cheney encountered Vermont Democrat Patrick Leahy in the Senate Chamber and used the occasion to protest Leahy's speeches linking him to Halliburton's no-bid contracts for services in Iraq and at Guantanamo Bay. (Although Cheney had cut his ties with the company, he was still entitled to deferred payment and stock options enhanced by these government contracts.) When the senator responded with his own complaint about White House attacks on Democrats, the vice president uttered an expletive and stormed out of the chamber. Reporters in the press gallery had heard him, and news of the incident spread across the media. Cheney admitted cursing the senator, adding that he had felt better for saying it. This breach of Senate decorum indicated that he was feeling the strain of office. "I think he was having a bad day," said Leahy.<sup>49</sup>

Bush and Cheney ran for reelection in 2004 against Massachusetts Senator John Kerry and North Carolina Senator John Edwards. Democrats counted on the youthful, charismatic Edwards comparing well with Cheney, whose popularity in the polls had fallen by 15% since the last election. Rather than being a drag on the ticket, however, Cheney's toughness appealed to those Republicans and independents who expressed the most concern about terrorism. He made the war on terrorism the central theme of his speeches and warned Americans that they risked another attack if they did not make the right electoral choice. President Bush was also campaigning against same-sex marriage, and the Democratic candidates hoped to goad Cheney by pointing out that one of his daughters was a lesbian. The vice president simply responded that "freedom means freedom for everyone," and that the marriage issue should be left to the states.<sup>50</sup>

The Bush-Cheney ticket won 51% of the vote. In the aftermath of the election, the vice president resisted efforts from within the administration to remove Secretary of Defense

Rumsfeld, arguing that it would create an impression of doubt and hesitation within the administration that would embolden critics of the war. Instead, the president accepted the resignation of Secretary of State Powell. Powell's aide, Marine Colonel Lawrence Wilkerson, publicly accused the "Cheney-Rumsfeld cabal" of having hijacked American foreign policy and courting disaster "in Iraq, in North Korea, in Iran."<sup>51</sup>

Cheney described the insurgency in Iraq as being in its "last throes," but as daily deadly attacks targeted Iraqi civilians, police, and soldiers, American casualties mounted. The administration extended the tour of duty for American forces and sent reserve units back to Iraq. The U.S. Supreme Court rejected the Bush administration's plan to try suspected terrorists at Guantanamo Bay by military commissions, countering Cheney's assertion of the commander in chief's unchecked authority. Congress also discounted the vice president's arguments and enacted a Detainee Treatment Act that restored American commitment to the Geneva conventions. "Well, I don't win all the arguments," Cheney commented when the president signed the bill. As his policymaking role went into decline, the vice president became preoccupied with the fate of his alter ego.<sup>52</sup>

### **A Cloud Over the Vice President**

In 2005, Scooter Libby resigned as the vice president's chief of staff after being indicted for perjury and obstruction of justice. The events leading to his indictment began two years earlier when Cheney read intelligence reports about Iraq's attempts to buy uranium "yellowcake" in Nigeria. This suggested that Saddam Hussein was pursuing nuclear weapons, enabling him to threaten "anyone he chooses, in his own region and beyond."<sup>53</sup>

Responding to the vice president's inquiries, the CIA sent former Ambassador Joseph Wilson IV on an investigative mission to Niger. Wilson's report that the "yellowcake" claim had been erroneous did not stop President Bush from asserting in his State of the Union address: "The British government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa." On July 6, 2003, the *New York Times* published a column by Ambassador Wilson, under the headline, "What I Didn't Find in Africa," which accused the administration of having twisted intelligence data to make its claim for war. The White House retracted the sixteen words about the Niger deal from the State of the Union. Concerned about the impression that he had arranged for Wilson's trip, Cheney clipped Wilson's column and gave it to Libby with a note in the margin: "Do we ordinarily send people out pro bono to work for us? Or did his wife send him on a junket?" On July 14, the syndicated columnist Robert Novak revealed that unnamed administration officials had identified Valerie Plame Wilson as the CIA employee who had recommended her husband for the mission. Since she worked in a covert capacity, she accused the administration of having recklessly exposed her for political purposes. At the CIA's request, the Justice Department appointed a special prosecutor to track the source of the leak.<sup>54</sup>

Leak investigations rarely produce results since neither reporters nor their sources gain anything from confessing. Reporters will risk imprisonment before exposing their informants. Special prosecutor Peter Fitzgerald countered by asking White House officials to sign waivers releasing reporters from any promises of confidentiality. Refusal to sign a waiver would be tantamount to admitting guilt. After *New York Times* reporter Judith Miller went to jail for

refusing to name her sources, Cheney's chief of staff signed a waiver and wrote her a note urging her to testify. Miller then testified that Scooter Libby had told her about Valerie Plame Wilson, although she had not written about it. Other members of the administration had been Novak's sources, but since Libby had told the FBI that he had not known Wilson's identity, Fitzgerald prosecuted him for perjury and obstruction of justice. The prosecutor indicated that he had a higher target in mind. "There is a cloud over the vice president," he told the jury. "And that cloud remains because this defendant obstructed justice."<sup>55</sup>

Evidence offered at Libby's trial revealed that the vice president had orchestrated much of the administration's response to negative publicity about Iraq. His communications director testified that Cheney had advised her on how to refute allegations about the twisting of intelligence information, ordered her to monitor television reports on the Niger controversy, and arranged a luncheon with sympathetic columnists to circulate his side of the story. Cheney had involved himself personally in the campaign to discredit the Wilsons, dictating talking points for his aides to read to reporters, and directing Libby to leak classified intelligence estimates of Iraq's alleged weapons of mass destruction.<sup>56</sup>

In 2007, Libby was convicted on four of the five counts against him and sentenced to two and half years in prison. President Bush commuted his sentence. Had the Iraq war gone as well as predicted, the trial might have drawn less attention, but because conditions worsened between Libby's indictment and conviction, Cheney's connection to the case stayed for months on the front pages.<sup>57</sup>

### **More than a Vice President**

Cheney endured more negative publicity when he accidentally shot a 78-year-old lawyer, Harry Whittington, while hunting in Texas. Whittington survived, but Cheney left the state without saying a word about the incident to the press. The story broke only after the host of the shooting party revealed it to a local paper, and the national media demanded to know why the vice president had not issued a statement. Following four days of silence, Cheney accepted responsibility, calling the shooting one of the worst moments of his life. Cartoonists and comedians seized on the incident, comparing him to Aaron Burr, the last vice president to have shot anyone. Senator Leahy, reflecting on the vice president's earlier verbal abuse, commented that "in retrospect, it looks like I got off easy." Even President Bush could not resist telling reporters that they had blown the matter way out of proportion: "Good Lord, you'd thought he shot somebody or something." Cheney's standing in public opinion dropped precipitously, with two-thirds of those polled now giving him an unfavorable rating.<sup>58</sup>

The vice president stumped widely for his party's congressional candidates in 2006, warning of dire consequences if they lost. The world was better without Saddam Hussein, he insisted, and political opponents who called for a withdrawal of American troops were validating the terrorists' strategy. The Bush administration was looking for victory, he declared, not an exit strategy. The voters instead gave control of Congress to the Democrats. On the day after the election, Bush removed Defense Secretary Rumsfeld. "Well, Mr. President, I disagree," said Cheney, "but obviously it's your call." Dan Bartlett, counsel to President Bush, credited Cheney with thinking from a policy perspective on national security and executive prerogatives in giving advice to the president, but noted that the president had other considerations he needed to take into account: "The political fallout of certain reactions—he's just going to calculate differently

than Cheney does.”<sup>59</sup>

On the fifth anniversary of the war in Iraq, a television interviewer pointed out that two-thirds of Americans were saying that the war was not worth fighting, and were questioning its value against its cost in American and Iraqi lives. “So?” Vice President Cheney replied. “So—you don’t care what the American people think?” the interviewer asked. “No,” Cheney said, “I think you cannot be blown off course by the fluctuation in the public opinion polls.” Editorial writers assailed this attitude and berated his record of secrecy and “backroom dealings,” accusing him of acting as if “the normal rules of American democracy don’t apply to him.” Cheney’s hometown newspaper, the *Casper Star-Tribune*, held his own behavior to blame for his “battered public image.”<sup>60</sup>

During the 2008 presidential campaign, candidates from both parties rejected Cheney’s model for the vice presidency. The Republican nominee, Senator John McCain, advocated a more limited role for the vice president so that “everybody understood that there’s only one president.” The Democratic vice presidential candidate, Senator Joseph Biden, called Cheney “the most dangerous vice president” in American history. Cheney’s defenders saw him differently and rebutted that he had been “more than a vice president.” He had served a president who defined himself as an executive officer who decided policy, and had relied on his vice president as an operating officer to handle the details of policy making. That gave Cheney a hand in almost everything the administration did, turning his office into “a center of vast independent power.” Largely undefined by the Constitution, vice presidencies have been determined by whatever the Senate or the president saw fit for them to do, and the position evolved over time from a largely legislative function into a assistant president—a role that Dick Cheney exerted to an unprecedented degree. The question remained whether future presidents would cede such expansive authority over policy making to their vice presidents.<sup>61</sup>

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