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TELEVISION

Review: 'The World According to Dick Cheney' is place with no regret



A scene from the Showtime documentary "The World According to Dick Cheney." (David Bohrer)

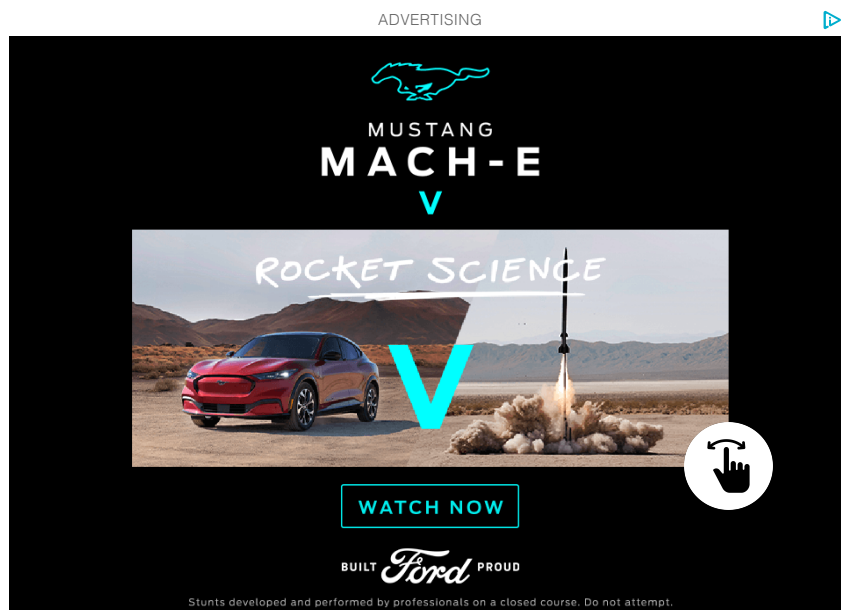
By MARY MCNAMARA, LOS ANGELES TIMES TELEVISION CRITIC

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My father always told me to beware a man with no regrets. Even a life lived wisely with the best intentions, he said, is inevitably pocked with mistakes and anyone who tells you otherwise is lying.

Dick Cheney is a man with no regrets.



When the Showtime documentary “The World According to Dick Cheney” had its premiere at this year’s Sundance Film Festival, many expressed disappointment that director R.J. Cutler, an Oscar-nominated documentarian whose films include “The War Room” and “A Perfect Candidate,” did not take a harder line or produce more damning evidence of the former vice president’s role in various national scandals.

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But this is not so much a traditional documentary as it is a character study, a look at a proudly unexamined life, the kind Socrates famously said was not worth living. “I don’t spend a lot of time thinking about my faults,” Cheney says early on, as if this were a good thing. So here he is, a man with no regrets, as queasily fascinating as a two-headed calf or a “real unicorn.”

Except, of course, that Cheney had a vital role in running the country for more than a few years, championing two wars, constructing a post-9/11 national-security policy that introduced the term “waterboarding” into the vernacular and overseeing an unprecedented intrusion into the private lives of American citizens.

Having dropped more than a few pounds post-heart transplant, with polished pate and clear blue eyes, Cheney looks more grandfatherly than one might have thought possible during his tenure as vice president.

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A long and multi-topic interview conducted by Cutler with the former vice president provides the spine of the film. Essentially, Cheney has one answer for most questions: I did what I believed was right, not what I thought would be popular.

Cutler uses the one-note absurdity not so much to inform as to illustrate the precise danger of living, as Cheney says he does, with no thought to the past. By the time the film reaches its climax during the post-9/11 Bush administration, Cheney's air of quiet confidence is so clearly inappropriate that it looks like cognitive disassociation. It is just not possible that an intelligent man could look back on the life he lived without some sense of, if not regret, at least reconsideration.

The Bush years are the meat of the story, which makes "The World According to Dick Cheney" a bit lopsided. A brief intro that includes images of Cheney peacefully fly-fishing transposed with him narrating how he effectively took over the presidency on Sept. 11, 2001, establishes Cutler's rather unsurprising thesis — Dick Cheney was the most powerful vice president in American history.

PHOTOS: Real lessons from fake presidents

We are then hustled through the obligatory early years. A son of Wyoming with no particular ambition, Cheney was kicked out of Yale twice and later worked as a lineman. Struggles with alcohol landed him in jail, but Lynne, his high school sweetheart and wife of 48 years, apparently straightened him out with a good talking to.

The son of lifelong Democrats returned to higher education as an older student, performing well but finding the campus protests disquieting. When he and Lynne moved to Washington, Cheney met Donald Rumsfeld, and the rest is, quite literally, history.

Rumsfeld, who is also interviewed, became Cheney's mentor, and Cutler uses their friendship to move the Cheney story quickly through the Nixon and Ford administrations. (Cheney and Rumsfeld advised President Ford against explaining his decision to pardon Nixon before Congress; Ford did so anyway.)

PHOTOS: Lessons from movies on the campaign trail

Their relationship, portrayed as a united two-man team of advisors constantly present just out of frame, appears to define Cheney's definition of power — the throne is most effective as a bit of furniture on which to lean.

The facts of Cheney's rise to vice presidential power are fairly well known, but Cutler assembles them here with propulsive brevity. Some key players, including former President George W. Bush and former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, are conspicuously absent as interview subjects. But Cheney's former legal counsel and chief of staff David Addington is among a host of other pundits and players who provide insider information as well as commentary and context.

The details of Cheney's fall from grace in the waning years of the Bush administration are fascinating and narratively satisfying — having overplayed his hand, he is undone by the president he created. It is an epic tale, the life of Dick Cheney, with the moral complexities of a Shakespearean tragedy and lessons in power, pride and personal honesty abound.

Not that Dick Cheney is prepared to consider them.

'The World According to Dick Cheney'



Los Angeles Times



When: 9 p.m. Friday

Rating: TV-MA-LV (may be unsuitable for children under the age of 17 with advisories for coarse language and violence)

mary.mcnamara@latimes.com

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