

## TELEVISION REVIEW

# Serenity of a War Strategist

By Alessandra Stanley

March 14, 2013

Dick Cheney was often referred to as the Darth Vader of the Bush administration.

There are moments in “The World According to Dick Cheney” when this former vice president comes off more as Mrs. Danvers, the housekeeper in “Rebecca.”

Both guided young, inexperienced protégés to the brink with unflappable certitude, self-assurance and an unsettling monotone. They were so persistent and persuasive that it was almost a shock when it turned out that each had an *idée fixe* that could burn down the house, or, in Mr. Cheney’s case, whole countries.

That’s not the overt message of this documentary, which will be broadcast Friday on Showtime and was made by R. J. Cutler, a producer of “The War Room” and director of “The September Issue.” This film, a long interview with Mr. Cheney interspersed with news clips and journalists and biographers, isn’t an exposé or an indictment, nor is it the kind of spooky character study that Errol Morris made of Robert S. McNamara in “The Fog of War.”

Mostly, it’s a self-portrait in black and white that is subsequently colored in by a Greek chorus of journalists and biographers and a narrator who sounds omniscient because it’s Dennis Haysbert, who once played the president on “24” and is the voice of Allstate Insurance.

“The World According to Dick Cheney” has interesting insights and revealing moments, but for critics who long to confront Mr. Cheney it may prove dissatisfying, because it allows him to make astonishing assertions without direct contradiction or follow-up questions.

Most notably, Mr. Cheney defends his position on Saddam Hussein’s weapons of mass destruction, the Iraq war and the use of waterboarding with his usual aplomb and deft obfuscation. Other key players, including George W. Bush, have acknowledged mistakes and expressed dismay over decisions that proved misguided. Mr. Cheney says he did nothing wrong and has no regrets.

He justifies all his actions by saying that they prevented another terrorist attack on American soil, without ever explaining how the Iraq war, authorized on the basis of faulty intelligence, fits into that assertion. Biographers give a different version of events, but no one calls his bluff to his face.

Then again, Mr. Cheney’s complacency speaks for itself. “I did what I did, it’s all on the public record, and, um, I feel very good about it,” he says at the end. “If I had to do it over again, I’d do it in a minute.”

Considerable footage and commentary are spent on his boyhood and early days as a Washington insider, without offering insights into his character. There is less time left for examining his doings after Sept. 11. Mr. Cutler, who is not seen on camera, is heard only occasionally, softly lobbing polite questions at Mr. Cheney. (When he asks

him what he makes of critics who say he wanted to go to war, Mr. Cheney shuts him down with dry sarcasm. "Wanted? Why, 'cause we like war?")

Mr. Cheney, who uses the pronoun "I" so assertively that when he says "we," it sounds like the royal first-person pronoun, doesn't play down his authority in the Bush White House. But others in the film make the case that Mr. Cheney manipulated Mr. Bush and at times even deceived him in ways that endangered his presidency.



**The World According to Dick Cheney** will be on Showtime, Friday night at 9, Eastern and Pacific times; 8, Central time. David Bohrer/Showtime

One incident is almost chilling. Barton Gellman, a journalist and the author of a Cheney biography, recounts how in 2004 Mr. Cheney fought Justice Department lawyers who had determined that the top-secret, warrantless surveillance program that he had pushed for was illegal. Mr. Cheney was so insistent on keeping the wiretaps going that he kept Mr. Bush, then in his re-election campaign, out of the loop until the 11th hour, when two dozen Justice Department lawyers and the F.B.I. director threatened to resign.

Alerted at the last minute about the imminent showdown, Mr. Bush intervened and overruled Mr. Cheney. In his biography, "Decision Points," Mr. Bush said he felt "blindsided" and likened the consequences to the Saturday Night Massacre debacle during Watergate.

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Mr. Cheney, who watched Watergate unfold as a young White House aide, shrugs off the last-minute reversal as a moment of weakness by the president. "My personal view was different in the sense that I basically would have let them resign," he says blandly, "because I thought the program was perfectly legitimate."

Mr. Bush's trust in his vice president plummeted after that face-off, according to the film. Toward the end, when Mr. Bush refused to pardon Mr. Cheney's former chief of staff, I. Lewis Libby Jr., for his conviction stemming from the disclosure of the identity of a C.I.A. analyst, Valerie Plame Wilson, the two leaders basically stopped speaking.

Mr. Cheney, however, doesn't dwell on unpleasantness. He has a talent for understatement that made him a highly effective if maddening spokesman for the administration when he was in office.

It's even more disturbing in the past tense. Biographers say that one of the most costly blunders of the Iraq invasion was the administration's decision to disband the Iraqi Army and purge Baath Party members from the civil service, steps that fostered instability and helped ignite an insurgency that ultimately took the lives of thousands of American troops.

"We expected that once you took away that top layer of leadership, that the professional bureaucracy underneath could carry on," Mr. Cheney explains. "That didn't happen."

The film asserts that Mr. Cheney masterminded the march to war, building the case, since debunked, that Hussein had weapons of mass destruction and links to Qaeda terrorists. It goes into some detail about how Mr. Cheney snookered Representative Dick Armey, the House Republican majority leader and an ally, who nonetheless did not believe that Hussein presented an imminent threat to the United States.

As Mr. Gellman relates in the film, Mr. Cheney privately misled his friend, telling Mr. Armey that the top-secret evidence was actually worse than he had said publicly and that Iraq was close to developing a suitcase nuke that could be used by Qaeda terrorists. Mr. Armey changed his position and voted for war.

Mr. Cheney isn't given a chance to respond to that account. But unlike many others in the Bush administration, he is not chagrined that the intelligence he defended and promoted so ardently proved false. "We didn't find stockpiles," he says matter-of-factly. "We did find that he had the capability and we believed he had the intent."

His resistance to hindsight or self-recrimination is particularly striking when juxtaposed with the mangled remorse of his mentor and close ally, Donald H. Rumsfeld: "All I know is that the fact that the stockpiles were not found and the fact that the administration had, I think unwisely, placed so much stock in the idea that there were existing stocks."

Mr. Cheney doesn't accept blame for missteps. He takes credit for dangers averted. "You know, this is one of those kinds of situations," he says. "It isn't so much what you achieved as is what you prevented."

### **Correction: March 18, 2013**

*A television review on Friday about "The World According to Dick Cheney," a Showtime documentary about the former vice president, misstated part of the title of former President George W. Bush's autobiography in which he said he had felt "blindsided" by Mr. Cheney's keeping him out of the loop on decisions about a warrantless surveillance program. Mr. Bush's book is "Decision Points," not "Decision Point."*

### **The World According to Dick Cheney**

Showtime, Friday night at 9, Eastern and Pacific times; 8, Central time.

Produced by Showtime and Cutler Productions. Directed by R. J. Cutler and Greg Finton; written by Mr. Cutler and Francis Gasparini; Mr. Cutler, executive producer; Mr. Cutler and Mr. Gasparini, producers; Sarah Anthony, line producer; Mr. Finton, editor; Dennis Haysbert, narrator; Sean Kirby and Bob Richman, directors of photography; Craig Richey, composer; Margaret Yen, music supervisor.

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