

# ***VICE*: Film Review – Black comedy showing the black heart of U.S. Imperialism**

*Vice* is a Hollywood biography of former Vice President Dick Cheney. This black comedy paints a damning portrait, not only of the Machiavellian Cheney, but of the trail of horror left behind by U.S. Imperialism. For all the movie's limitations, it contains moments that so viscerally capture the impact of these crimes that as a viewer I didn't know whether I wanted to look away in horror or walk up to the screen to punch Cheney in the face. These moments alone make this a significant Hollywood movie and worth seeing.

*Vice* is written and directed by Adam McKay who has most notably directed *The Big Short* examining the GFC. *Vice* is slickly directed and flashes between scenes that cut across place and time for dramatic and comedic effect.

As the movie opens a statement appears acknowledging the difficulty of presenting the story of "one of the most secretive leaders in history". Perhaps the full story of Cheney crimes will not be told until after the socialist revolution when the archives are opened and Cheney is in the dock for his war crimes!

McKay gives it a red hot go though. The movie focusses on Cheney time as Vice President under George Bush Jnr but also shows how Cheney's career began as Donald Rumsfeld's intern under Nixon. This highlights that the cabal of warmongers (Cheney, Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz) who engineered the Iraq invasion had worked together for decades. I was also unaware that Cheney was Secretary of Defence under George Bush Snr when the U.S. unleashed the attack on Iraq in 1991.



Sam Rockwell as Bush Jnr

The movie is well acted with Bale both convincing and charismatic as Cheney. As someone who remembers Rumsfeld's cheerfully fraudulent press statements amidst the mounting evidence of disaster in Iraq, I thought Steve Carrol did a great job capturing the exuberantly evil Rumsfeld. Sam Rockwell is also uncanny as the cynical but dopey George Bush Jnr. He almost steals the movie in the scene where, as he casually snacks on some chicken wings, he readily agrees to appoint Cheney his VP in return for Cheney running the more "mundane" areas such as "overseeing bureaucracy, managing military, energy, foreign policy." Amy Adams as Lynne Cheney is also strong as the "Lady

Macbeth” of the Cheney drama, ruthlessly supporting her husband’s pursuit of power.

The most memorable moments of the movie almost flashed by. In one scene, set in 1968, Rumsfeld tells a young Cheney how at that moment, Kissinger and Nixon were in an office deciding to bomb Cambodia. As he talks the film flashes to a village scene of Cambodian peasants. Rumsfeld boasts that because of that conversation bombs would soon be dropping and “That was kind of power that exists in this building”. The film then flashes back to Cambodia just long enough to show the Cambodian civilians being obliterated by an exploding bomb.



Bombing of Baghdad March 2003.

A similar device is used when showing George Bush Jnr announcing the commencement of the “Shock and Awe” bombing of Iraq. The camera pans down and shows a nervous Bush tapping his toes. The film flashes to a family cowering under a table in Baghdad as U.S. bombs fall

and the camera reveals the father's toes nervously tapping. In other scenes Cheney is shown giving orders whilst flashes appear of people being brutally waterboarded, tortured or kidnapped by the CIA.



Abu Graib torture victim

The cumulative effect of these short scenes is to undermine the collective amnesia propagated by the ruling class. Such amnesia is necessary to maintain the lie that the U.S. Empire upholds humanitarian values rather than brutally advancing geopolitical interests. To see cinema used this way to emphasize rather than obscure reality only emphasizes how Hollywood serves to chloroform popular consciousness much of the time.

Though limited in its focus on the "villain" Cheney, the movie reveals the decay of U.S. democracy over the last fifty years. It shows how a culture of growing impunity and lawlessness developed from Watergate, to the stolen election of 2000 and then to the full scale assault on democratic rights and institutions launched under the bogus "War on

Terror.

Cheney is shown working to give a veneer of legality to torture, surveillance and war crimes including the infamous "Torture memo" of 2002. Cheney justified these actions under an extreme interpretation of the "Unitary Executive Theory" which views the President as able to act without any oversight from the other branches of government. It is essentially the legal view of Nixon's infamous statement "Well, when the president does it, that means that it is not illegal".

The threadbare nature of this "legality" is suggested by the scene where Rumsfeld, after being fired by Cheney as the Iraq War goes from bad to worse, mutters into the phone "Do you think they will indict us?". There is a reason that the U.S. refuses to ratify the International Criminal Court Convention and under Bush/Cheney Congress passed a law authorizing the President to "use all means necessary" to release any U.S and allied personal detained by the ICC. Just recently John Bolton threatened sanctions and even the arrest of ICC officials if they dared to investigate U.S. war crimes in Afghanistan or Israel's war crimes in Gaza.



The cynical use of the “War on Terror” is also excoriated. In a chilling scene a calm Cheney is shown in the war room in the hours after the 9/11 attacks whilst those around him panic. The narrator explains that Cheney saw something in those moments that others couldn’t – “opportunity”. Indeed audiences are told how FOI requests reveal Cheney met with oil company executives prior to 9/11 and dividing up a map of Iraq into various company concessions. It is also made clear how Cheney and Haliburton both made out like bandits through the privatisation of swathes of the Iraq War. McKay explains that ISIS is actually a product of the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the blood of the thousands of people murdered by them subsequently ultimately lies at the foot of U.S. Imperialism.

The movie however suffers from some serious political limitations. In terms of the War on Terror the movie tries to “have a bob each way”. Whilst showing that the invasion of Iraq was indeed a premediated act of plunder some scenes imply that Cheney was acting from genuine if misguided motivations to “protect” the United States in response to the attacks of 9/11.

This points to a deeper flaw in the director McKay's perspective, that the crimes of Cheney do not flow from the actions of a small malevolent cabal of Washington insiders but inevitably from U.S. Imperialism attempts to offset its relative decline over the last forty years though increasingly reckless use of military power. This is the dynamic that has driven the explosion of U.S. violence across the Middle East in the last 27 years, backed by Republicans and Democrats and is now driving the U.S. into conflict with Russia and China threatening World War 3.

McKay's presentation of events also seems to imply that the U.S. wars of aggression can be divided into "good" and "bad" wars. Clearly Vietnam and the 2003 Iraq war fall in his view into the "bad" wars. Meanwhile he offers no criticisms of either the Persian Gulf War of 1991 or the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 both which resulted in horrific loss of life.



Director Adam McKay

In an interview with “Entertainment Weekly” McKay discussed an amusing sequence in the middle of the film where inserted a counterfactual “ending” based on a reality where Cheney never takes the job as VP but instead devotes himself to among other things the breeding of pedigree Golden Retrievers! McKay in his discussion states fairly clearly that he has no objection to Cheney’s involvement in the Persian Gulf War:

“There is an underlying emotion. In writing this story, it so easily could have ended there. The guy had a solid career. Yeah, he was a little to the right, and he saw some dodgy things, but he did a good job as secretary of defense. I mean, he was making a fortune as a CEO of Halliburton. That could’ve been it, and he got that phone call.”

The most serious flaw in the movie though is the free pass it gives the Democrats. Whilst acknowledging Hillary Clintons support for the 2003 invasion the movie presents both Carter and Obama in a



wholly uncritical way. This is not entirely surprising when the end credits reveal the producers of Vice included well know Hollywood Democrat supporters such as Will Ferrell and Brad Pitt.



The movie's politics would have been immeasurably strengthened by even a brief mention of the way Obama protected the CIA torturers, kept Guantanamo open, built on the surveillance powers of Bush/Cheney, expanded lethal drone bombings, was personally involved in drawing up kill lists and oversaw the destruction of Libya. Instead the only shot of Obama is crowds cheering him at his inauguration.

It's as if Obama's Presidency played no part in the continued decay of U.S. democracy. The baton of imperialist violence was instead passed somehow from Nixon to Bush Jnr to Trump without ever touching the unsullied hand of the Democrats!

The final weakness of the movie is its portrayal of the U.S. working class. Ordinary people are repeatedly portrayed as gullible, easily manipulated and distracted by mindless pursuits. The metaphor of Cheney baiting a hook is used repeatedly throughout the movie to demonstrate his Machiavellian methods. Watching Vice, one would think that every American "took the bait".

The protests against the 2000 stolen election are airbrushed out of view. We see a shot of Bush's limousine speeding to the White House on inauguration day in an empty street. It is not explained the streets are empty as police struggled to keep thousands of protestors who lined the streets away from the motorcade.



Protesters march in San Francisco Thursday, March 20, 2003.. (AP Photo/Noah Berger)

Whilst the effectiveness of the Cheney orchestrated lies about WMD's is emphasized the movie omits any reference to the fact February 2003 saw the largest protests in history within the U.S. and internationally against the looming invasion.

This makes one of the final scene in the movies ring hollow

when Cheney breaks the fourth wall and accuses the audience of being partly responsible for his crimes stating "you chose me". Not only does this ignore the very real opposition that existed to Bush/Cheney, the fraudulent way they gained power but it also ignores the way under capitalism the U.S. working class is trapped within the bogus "choice" of two war mongering parties of Wall St.

Despite all of these limitations, *Vice* contains more political truths about the nature of U.S. Imperialism and the sickness at the heart of the U.S. ruling class than any other comparable Hollywood movie in recent times. It is a timely and important contribution.

Perhaps the most terrifying point that flows from *Vice* though is all the illegitimate powers that were concentrated in the hands of the Presidency are now available for the openly fascist Trump to utilise. Trump has made it clear he intends to try to extend these powers into a full Presidential dictatorship where the President can amend the Constitution by decree and authorize any spending that he wishes such as on "The Wall" without Congressional approval. Trump is both the product and an active agent in the complete collapse of bourgeois democratic norms that is now occurring within the U.S. I could only think of Trump when I watched a chilling moment in *Vice*, where Cheney whispers to his wife "The world has not yet seen the full power of the American Presidency."