The Power of Independent Thinking: The Vice in Vice

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Viewers with more than a passing familiarity with Republican national politics over the past 30 years are likely to leave theaters with mixed feelings (at best) after seeing the Golden Globe-winning (and Oscar nominated) movie Vice. The film by Adam McKay (The Big Short, Talladega Nights, Anchorman 2) is a line-blurring, occasionally satirical look at the political career of former Vice President Dick Cheney and his rise to power. Released nationwide on Christmas Day, Vice is creative and at times artistically brilliant. The distortions in the story, however, are so partisan and propagandistic that many moviegoers will have trouble, as I did, appreciating the movie's artistry.

I am no Dick Cheney fanboy. As a libertarian, I found large swaths of the Republican policy agenda fashioned and implemented by him and others anathema to my views on the proper scope of government power. These disagreements include matters squarely in the sights of McKay's scathing narrative: the dramatic expansion of executive power, the terrifying abuse of surveillance and torture as part of a national anti-terrorism campaign, and the misguided military adventurism that continues to kill hundreds of Americans and thousands of innocent foreign civilians. I also largely agree that Cheney was a principal architect of the military and intelligence "deep state" and expansion of government control at the expense of individual liberty. But McKay crosses several lines in hiseagerness to vilify Cheney, even for a satire.

Unfortunately, Vice squanders its artistic excellence by refusing to do what writer-director McKay accomplished with his brilliant exposé of the 2008 financial crisis, The Big Short. That movie and Academy Award-winning screenplay provided an excellent window into several root causes of the housing and financial crises that triggered the Great Recession. (My review of The Big Short and its analytical accuracy is discussed here and in chapter 5 of Contemporary Film and Economics.) McKay took pains to provide a nuanced approach to the economic crisis and its human toll, informed by varied perspectives and viewpoints. The effect was dramatic, educational, and compelling visual storytelling.

In Vice, McKay has chosen to present the political power couple of Dick and Lynne Cheney as caricatures of blind (if brilliant) ambition. While McKay struggles to portray the Cheneys with some empathy, his effort largely falls flat because the relationship seems to be fashioned from the original sin of political ambition. This is particularly evident through a critical thread dealing with the Cheneys' gay daughter.

According to McKay's telling, Lynne Cheney (Amy Adams, Arrival, American Hustle, The Fighter) wasthe chief motivator of and emotional mentor to young Dick, played by Christian Bale (The Dark Knight trilogy, The Big Short, Hostiles) in a Golden Globe-winning performance. Dick is an unfocused ne'er-do-well, but Lynne sees his potential. She also sees him as her ticket out of an abusive home and a future limited by Wyoming's conservative rural culture. Dick struggles to find direction after he is kicked out of Yale for poor grades, falling into a job as a telephone linesman in their native Wyoming. She prods and inspires him to be more ambitious.

Dick Cheney ends up securing a coveted internship in Congress and is astute enough to grab on to the coattails of the politically powerful Donald Rumsfield (Steve Carell, The Big Short, Battle of the Sexes, Marwen). Cheney is a quick and patient study, and in due time he rises to become President Gerald Ford's White House chief of staff (the youngest), an influential U.S. representative from Wyoming (1979 to 1989), George H.W. Bush's secretary of defense (1989 to 1993), and vicepresident under George W. Bush (2001 to 2009).

McKay uses a variety of film and storytelling techniques to keep the audience hooked into his narrative. Flashbacks, oral and documentary-style written narration, inventive cinematography using visual contrasts, false narratives, and incongruent story trajectories, among other devices, are used to raise questions about Cheney's ethics and to link decisions across disparate timelines. Video of ground forces engaged in fierce desert fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan is flashed into a scene where Cheney (and others) are making decisions about whether to invade Iraq in the aftermath of the Twin Towers and Pentagon attacks on 9/11.

Along the way McKay plays fast and loose with facts and context. Some of the more egregious cases propagate flat-out falsehoods. For example, one of the movie's transitions links Cheney's political career under Gerald Ford to the Reagan Era: the film pauses just long enough to provide glimpses into the "progressive" policies of Jimmy Carter as solar panels are installed on the White House roof and the former president talks about the inevitability of solar power as an alternative to fossil fuels. The movie implies this was a preemptive strike against climate change when in fact Carter was responding to rising gas prices due to OPEC oil embargoes and the (misguided) belief fossil fuel resources were physically scarce. Forty years later solar power requires deep government subsidies to remain viable even as its justification has shifted to climate change.

At the same time, the movie's narrator comments on how Reagan's presidential election in 1980 triggered a flood of money from billionaires and special interests to create right-wing think tanks and fund lobbying organizations to dismantle alternative-energy programs, reduce regulation on businesses, cut taxes, and build up the military. The movie's narrator explicitly cites the Koch brothers as culprits. But the Kochs are libertarians, not conservatives, and did not become active in conservative Republican politics until the mid- to late-1990s. The film also flashes an image of the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank (funded at the time by the Kochs) that actively, vocally, and consistently opposed almost every policy McKay highlights as part of Cheney's policy agenda:expanded executive presidential power, militarism, government surveillance, torture, etc. McKay is clearly playing on the false narratives that permeate current liberal political discourse irrespective of facts or historical context. (See, for example, the false narratives propagated by progressive academics such as Nancy MacLean here and here.

Disclosure: I worked for the Cato Institute in the mid-1980s and have held leadership positions in free-market think tanks since then.)

At no point does McKay allude to anyone outside of Cheney's Republican circle as harboring the same ambitions. This telling is also deceptive and misleading. Cheney did not invent executive privilege and the quest for expanded presidential power. He was not the first to use the ambiguities of the U.S. Constitution and the permissive interpretations of the law by U.S. courts to greatly expand executive power. The many expansions of that power were pioneered, aided, and abetted by Democrats and progressives. While Cheney and friends are rightly credited with novel new interpretations of how to expand executive power, they were simply continuing a long contemporary trend toward what historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. called the "imperial presidency." The expansion of presidential power in modern times dates at least to Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal, and others trace it back to Abraham Lincoln. As a practical matter, critics of expanded presidential power are partisan—opposed to it when their party is out of power, favorable to it when their party is in power.

The partisanship on display in McKay's film is unfortunate on many levels. As a writer and director, he has squandered the acting talents of an exceptional cast, brilliant editing, and dazzling cinematography. Amy Adams and Christian Bale are top-shelf actors, among the few who could pull off Shakespearian wordplay as contemporary pillow talk, and they do it with superb comic effect at McKay's direction. While McKay does a solid job of portraying the genuine love and affection the Cheneys have for each other and their children, the emotional impact is diminished, even relegated to a minor theme, by the end of the movie.

Artistically, McKay's talent is also on full display in Vice, earning accolades including Golden Globenominations for best director, best screenplay, and best motion picture (musical or comedy), among others. Unfortunately, he appears to have traded in his gift for storytelling to promulgate a politically partisan narrative that villainizes rather than probes an important political figure who reshaped (some would more charitably say "modernized") the vice presidency as well as the presidency. In this way, McKay's creative choices in Vice contribute to a political climate that is divisive and less thoughtful, undermines effective policymaking, and unnecessarily contributes to rising levels of discord and political intolerance. The movie also diminishes the importance and role of ideas as legitimate components of political discourse in a democratic process.

Of course, none of this criticism implies that McKay shouldn't use his wealth or his craft to articulate his views of public figures or social issues of the day. Quite the contrary. This activity is properly and quite literally his right.

Nevertheless, the partisan nature of McKay's version of Cheney's life will likely mean his message will backfire. He has failed to take the ideas, political concerns, and elected representatives of a large swath of the American public seriously. In fact, based on the final scenes of the film, he may well not even understand them. Moreover, he has displayed a striking ignorance of the larger sweep of political history. The marketing subtitle for the film, "The Untold True Story That Changed The Course of History," is anything but accurate.

Rather than use his craft to provoke a thoughtful consideration of alternative points of view, he has distracted from his own artistry, undermined his story, and diminished his ability to tell an important story. This is a shame because the American public may well have needed this

discussion now more than at any other time in recent memory. And McKay may have been uniquely suited to providing it.