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'Vice' Delivers Muddled View Of Cheney

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In these deeply politically divided times, the vast majority of Americans can agree on one thing: Dick Cheney was a terrible vice president. When he left office, his approval rating was 13 percent, the lowest of any president or vice president in the history of approval polls. Given his standing, a critical biopic of Cheney could be therapeutic for the nation and serve to exorcise all of the righteous anger that millions of Americans feel about the failed Iraq War. Sadly, "Vice," Adam McKay's film about Cheney, is about as ambitious and embarrassing as the war itself.

The film begins with a sequence where Cheney comes home to his wife, Lynne, with a drunk driving ticket. She questions their marriage; he promises to make something of himself so that he won't be an embarrassment to her. The scene recalls the famous moment in "Gone with the Wind" when Scarlett O'Hara cries, "With God as my witness, I'll never go hungry again." Both depict Dickensian figures who have hit a low point, vowing to live the American Dream even if it means selling their soul.

Referencing "Gone with the Wind" is the closest "Vice" comes to greatness. We then see Cheney fight for a role in the Nixon administration. From then on, the film feels like less of a Cheney biopic and more like a chronological takedown of the last 50 years of the Republican Party. Every Republican president from Nixon onward is targeted, as are Henry Kissinger, Donald Rumsfeld, Roger Ailes, Antonin Scalia, the Koch brothers, the Cato Institute, Christianity, femininity, patriotism and Jeb Bush. What do we learn? Cheney was ambitious, the Iraq War was a bad idea and Jeb Bush did not become president. Anyone hoping for Hedda Hopper-style dirt will want their \$12 back.

While Christian Bale's portrayal of Cheney is always on point, the film is muddled. Most of "Vice" characterizes Cheney as a Macbeth willing to slay as many Banquos as necessary to get to the top. Yet, the film also stresses Cheney's dedication as a husband and a father, as well as the fact that he believes that his foreign policy decisions are morally upright. Spike Lee's "Malcolm X" failed as a film because it nearly refused to provide commentary on its subject. "Vice" fails by providing us with more commentary than we would ever want. McKay's Cheney is too dehumanized for us to love him and too humanized for us to love to hate him.

The film's other greatest flaw is its humor. The filmmakers emulate the gallows humor and goofy political satire of Stanley Kubrick's "Dr. Strangelove," but Kubrick had it easier than McKay and company do. He was working in the realm of fiction. Getting an audience to laugh at the build-up to a fictional nuclear war is one thing. Getting an audience to laugh at the buildup to a real, pointless war is far more difficult. Even when McKay does make us laugh, like the oddly funny scene where Condoleezza Rice runs political rhetoric by a focus group, the laughs leave a bad aftertaste.

Given his unpopularity, Cheney is fruit that hangs so low that he's far beneath the ground. McKay doesn't dig deep enough to hit him.

Rating: 2** out of 5*****