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Don't believe the 'Vice' hype: Washington, DC, is more like 'Veep'

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There's a scene in Adam McKay's Oscar-nominated "Vice" that had me holding my laughter at the theater. Vice President Dick Cheney, portrayed by Christian Bale, attends Americans for Tax Reform's "Wednesday Meeting" — a weekly staple in Washington's center-right circles. In just a minute or so, the scene encapsulated what for me was the main flaw of the film: Hollywood doesn't know how Washington works.

As he enters the room, Grover Norquist and the audience of at least 50 attendees rise to attention like Darth Vader and the stormtroopers greeting Emperor Palpatine on the Death Star. Norquist introduces "marketing guru Frank Luntz" to give a presentation about rebranding the federal estate tax as the "death tax" to inspire populist outrage towards an issue that only affects the wealthy.

As ATR's John Kartch points out in the Daily Caller, the scene mangles the history of the "death tax" terminology, as the phrase was used well before when the meeting was supposedly set in 2001. More broadly, the scene completely misses the mark of what really happens at the Wednesday Meeting, which, as thousands of past attendees like myself well know, is much more mundane.

The Wednesday Meeting is not where the "vast right-wing conspiracy" receives its orders from above. Rather, it's simply a working group where representatives from mostly nonprofit organizations share their group's latest work. Unlike the political trope of the "smoke-filled room," the only thing being passed around at the Wednesday Meeting is printouts from interns, not cigars.

Although it's typically off-the-record, ATR has invited multiple journalists, including the Washington Examiner's Jason Russell, to report on past meetings. Yet, Hollywood can't resist the temptation to paint a picture of Washington, D.C., as a board game for the rich and powerful. I mean that literally. The film features another scene in which a map of Washington is gamified to look like a Monopoly board, with Cheney cronies occupying top seats at every major bureaucracy and branch of government.

As if this liberal wet dream isn't exasperating enough, lack of basic research in "Vice" behind the figures they so casually diss is stunning. In one scene set at a cocktail party, the narrator in passing recalls the growth of think tanks in Washington during the 1980s, attributing their prominence to "big money families like the Kochs and Coors that were sick of paying income

taxes.” The screen then flashes to office exteriors of the Heritage Foundation, American Enterprise Institute, and the Cato Institute — three think tanks that are by no means in chorus on every issue. In fact, as the Independent Institute’s Samuel Staley points out, Cato “actively, vocally, and consistently advocated against almost every policy McKay highlights as part of Cheney’s policy agenda — expanded executive presidential power, militarism, government surveillance, torture, etc.”

If anything, the lesson of the Bush administration should be that Washington is not Oz. There is no man behind the curtain manipulating everybody in the room. If Dick Cheney was the Wizard, he certainly wasn’t a very magical one. The War on Terror turned out to be a mess. The public quickly saw through the neoconservative administration’s military adventurism, and the decade following Bush’s exit from Obama to Trump would be politically defined by a more restrained foreign policy, at least by American standards.

Unlike "Vice," Washington more closely resembles "Veep," HBO’s comedy in which Julia Louis-Dreyfus hilariously portrays Vice President Selina Meyer in a fictional yet accurate world where the best laid plans always go awry. The truth is that our nation’s capital is not defined by political schemers like Dick Cheney or Frank Underwood. Even if such characters, real or fictional, truly do have an insatiable appetite for power, they are quickly checked by the red tape of the administrative state and the separation of powers. America has no emperor like Palpatine boarding the Death Star or Cheney entering ATR, and thank God for that.