



# INDEPENDENT

## Vice review: Christian Bale plays Dick Cheney as an inscrutable, placid lump

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“What do we believe in?” a bemused looking Dick Cheney (Christian Bale) asks his boss, Donald Rumsfeld (Steve Carell), early on in Adam McKay’s satirical biopic Vice. At the time, he is an intern in the White House. It’s the late 1960s and Cheney is beginning to build a career for himself after a drunken, dissolute early adulthood.

At the end of the film, Cheney’s motivations and ideology are still very hard to fathom. He claims everything he was involved in as George W Bush’s vice president, from torture to extraordinary rendition, was done so that Americans could sleep more safely in their beds. The film argues the contrary. Cheney saw opportunity in the 9/11 attacks to increase his own power and to line the pockets of his neocon friends. The general welfare and safety of the US public was the last thing on his mind.

Bale plays Cheney as an inscrutable, placid lump. The vice president is the black hole at the heart of the film. He is a big man who gives nothing away. He speaks in a bear-like growl and has a complete lack of charm. His face betrays no emotion and he never apologises, not even when he accidentally shoots a friend with a gun. He accumulates wealth and influence but does so like “a ghost”, with few people having any idea who he is or where he comes from.

It’s a skilled piece of comic acting which has the unlikely effect of making Cheney buffoonish as well as sinister. At times, we pity him and sympathise with him too. But McKay is quick to remind us what happened on Cheney’s watch. There are frequent montages showing death and destruction everywhere from Iraq to tube trains on London’s Piccadilly line. This footage is accompanied by classical music and is often intercut with scenes showing Cheney at home with his wife, Lynne (played by Amy Adams like a folksy, Wyoming version of Lady Macbeth), or out fishing.

Vice is bravura storytelling. McKay isn’t only taking us through Cheney’s life and career but is giving us a whistle stop tour through US politics from the Nixon administration almost right to the present day. As he also demonstrated in *The Big Short*, McKay has the ability to take complex ideas and present them in a fast, witty and coherent fashion. We are guided through the rise of right-wing think tanks like the Cato Institute and the birth of Fox News. We are introduced to Washington insiders, among them presidents and Supreme Court judges. We are given a brisk account of the weapons of mass destruction debacle and we are taught how US foreign policy under Bush and Cheney helped Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and Isis to blossom.

To knit disparate strands of the film together, the director uses a sardonic narrator, US soldier Kurt (Jesse Plemons), who has an intimate connection to Cheney only revealed close to the end of the film.

Early scenes show Cheney as a young ne'er do well, getting drunk at Yale and waking up with dried vomit at the edge of his mouth. After being flung out of college, he takes a job laying power lines. Lynne keeps on intervening to keep his life on track. "I won't ever disappoint you again," he promises her. Even so, his prospects seem bleak. He doesn't have any obvious talents other than what his mentor Rumsfeld quickly identifies as his "dedication" to power, his loyalty and a discretion which probably comes from having nothing to say anyway.

As portrayed by Bale here, instructing his wife on how to make the macaroni and doting on his two daughters, Cheney is often more Uncle Buck than power-crazed villain. Away from Washington, he is a dedicated family man with a love of labradors and of fishing. The film skims over the 1980s and early 1990s, the period in which Cheney served in the House of Representatives and as George HW Bush's secretary of defence. It pays little attention to his business career as CEO of the Halliburton Company. McKay floats the idea that if George W Bush (Sam Rockwell) hadn't come courting him to stand as his vice president, Cheney would quietly and happily have disappeared from public life.

The most surprising scene in the film is when his daughter announces she is gay and he simply takes it in his stride. His loyalty to her is a line "drawn in concrete" and he is ready, at least for a time, to put his family above his own political career.

The originality of *Vice* lies in the idea of making such a film in the first place and in the painstaking way McKay tries to pry his reclusive subject out into the light. Before Cheney came along, vice president was regarded as "a nothing job". As the film demonstrates, Cheney, aided by his Machiavellian lawyer David Addington, transformed the role. He took on executive and legislative powers that exceeded those of the president. George W Bush (played in entertaining fashion by Rockwell) is shown here as an amiable nincompoop with a short attention span who doesn't even realise that he is being played by his vice president.

Scenes of Cheney plotting away with his henchmen, Rumsfeld, Addington and a few others, could come out of a comedy-drama about a group of ageing, disgraceful thieves like the ones portrayed by Michael Caine, Jim Broadbent and co in the recent film about the Hatton Garden robbery. The comic elements, though, are belied by the devastation that these politicians left in their wake. There isn't a *Citizen Kane*-style rosebud moment here. At the end of the film, the mystery as to what makes Cheney tick is no closer to being solved than at the beginning.