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Dick Cheney is becoming Obama's enabler

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Dick Cheney's "Shut Up and Listen" tour continued last week on CBS's "Face the Nation." There, the former veep reiterated his favorite theme: Obama is putting America at risk by "taking down a lot of those policies we put in place that kept the nation safe."

What in the world is Cheney talking about? Granted, Obama's anti-terror policies are clouded by rhetorical "Hope" and euphemism, and the new administration is less given to chest-thumping than its predecessor. Otherwise, Obama's approach to terrorism is virtually identical to Bush/Cheney's.

Whatever you think the right policy is regarding enemy combatants, warrantless wiretapping, and "enhanced interrogation," the differences between Obama and Bush are far more stylistic than substantive.

Let's look at Obama's policies in those three key areas:

"Enemy Combatants": Actually, there's no such thing as an "enemy combatant" anymore: the Obama administration has, with great fanfare, abandoned the term. We can call terrorist suspects our "special friends" if we like, but the Obama team has fought hard in court to retain the same powers that Bush exercised.

Obama plans to close Guantanamo, but his lawyers have insisted (unsuccessfully, thus far) that the president can seize suspects anywhere in the world, and hold them at Afghanistan's Bagram base indefinitely, without meaningful judicial review.

Though candidate Obama repeatedly railed against Bush's military commissions, on Friday, President Obama announced that modified commissions were ideal for trying terrorist suspects. *National Review's* Andrew McCarthy was outraged by the president's disingenuousness: "Obama is trying to bluff the country into thinking he's engaged in a major overhaul when it's really a tweak."

Surveillance: Here too, the promised "Change" is less than meets the eye. Obama sold out on surveillance well before he was inaugurated, breaking his campaign promise to filibuster any law immunizing telecom companies that cooperated with Bush's illegal wiretapping program.

As president, Obama has gone further still than Bush, arguing in court that, as the Electronic Frontier Foundation has put it, “the government can *never* be sued for surveillance that violates federal privacy statutes.” Yet Cheney insists Obama hasn’t gone far enough over to the “dark side.” You just can’t please the guy.

Interrogation: In the first week of his presidency, Obama swore his administration would follow the Army Field Manual in interrogations. A welcome change, until you looked at the fine print, which allows the CIA to adopt other tactics if the president chooses.

If Obama sets the CIA loose, they still won’t be allowed to waterboard. But only three prisoners were subjected to that technique, and none since 2003. Which points up a weird disconnect in conservative arguments about torture: Folks like Cheney insist that these techniques were vital, but defend themselves by maintaining they were rarely used. Has Bush/Cheney timidity kept us at risk for the last six years?

Bush 43’s defenders make the opposite claim, insisting that a war footing, warrantless wiretapping, and aggressive interrogation “kept us safe” from further terror attacks. There are abundant reports to the contrary.

FBI officials scornfully referred to “leads” generated by Bush’s secret wiretapping program as “calls to Pizza Hut,” and a CIA operative told the *Washington Post* that, thanks to torture, they’d “spent millions of dollars chasing false alarms.” Lacking access to secret evidence, ordinary citizens are hard-pressed to sort out these claims.

Even so, we went more than seven years without a foreign terrorist attack on US soil after the attempted World Trade Center bombing in 1993. Should we therefore conclude that *Bill Clinton’s* policies kept us safe all that time? Or could it be that Al Qaeda terrorism isn’t quite the “existential threat” that the Right breathlessly insists it is?

Either way, the claim that Obama has abandoned “essential tools” in the fight against terror is wearing pretty thin. Real civil libertarians aren’t fooled by Obama’s “kinder, gentler” rhetoric, but Obama knows that civil libertarians are a miniscule voting block. His aim is to convince Democratic voters that he’s kept his promises to change Bush’s draconian approach to the war on terror.

In this, Dick Cheney is an enormous asset to the president. As Obama quietly adopts the Bush policies, Cheney gives him cover by loudly insisting that there’s a meaningful difference here.

It’s an odd role for a man who says he wants to set the record straight.

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