

The Curse of Dick Cheney

Everything he touches fails: Is Bush next?

By T.D. Allman

Should George W. Bush win this election, it will give him the distinction of being the first occupant of the White House to have survived naming Dick Cheney to a post in his administration. The Cheney jinx first manifested itself at the presidential level back in 1969, when Richard Nixon appointed him to his first job in the executive branch. It surfaced again in 1975, when Gerald Ford made Cheney his chief of staff and then—with Cheney's help—lost the 1976 election. George H.W. Bush, having named Cheney secretary of defense, was defeated for re-election in 1992. The ever-canny Ronald Reagan was the only Republican president since Eisenhower who managed to serve two full terms. He is also the only one not to have appointed Dick Cheney to office.

This pattern of misplaced confidence in Cheney, followed by disastrous results, runs throughout his life—from his days as a dropout at Yale to the geopolitical chaos he has helped create in Baghdad. Once you get to know his history, the cycle becomes clear: First, Cheney impresses someone rich or powerful, who causes unearned wealth and power to be conferred on him. Then, when things go wrong, he blames others and moves on to a new situation even more advantageous to himself.

“Cheney's manner and authority of voice far outstrip his true abilities,” says Chas Freeman, who served under Bush's father as ambassador to Saudi Arabia. “It was clear from the start that Bush required adult supervision—but it turns out Cheney has even worse instincts. He does not understand that when you act recklessly, your mistakes will come back and bite you on the ass.”

Cheney's record of mistakes begins in 1959, when Tom Stroock, a Republican politician-businessman in Casper, Wyoming, got Cheney, then a senior at Natrona County High School, a scholarship to Yale. “Dick was the all-American boy, in the top ten percent of his class,” Stroock says. “He seemed a natural.” But instead of triumphing, Cheney failed. “He spent his time partying with guys who loved football but weren't varsity quality,” recalls Stephen Billings, an Episcopalian minister who roomed with him during Cheney's freshman (and only full) year at Yale. “His idea was, you didn't need to master the material,” says his other roommate, Jacob Plotkin. “He passed one psych course without attending class or studying, and he was proud of that. But there are some things you can't bluff, and Dick reached a point where you couldn't recover.”

Cheney might have been flunking in the classroom, but he excelled at making connections. “Dick always had this very calm way of talking,” recalls Plotkin, now a retired math professor at Michigan State University. “His thoughtful manner impressed people.” Forty years before the son of a U.S. president picked Cheney to be his running mate, the son of a Massachusetts governor picked him to be his sophomore-year roommate. Mark Furcolo, whose father, Foster, had been elected governor as a Democrat, invited Cheney to Cape Cod for a visit. “Dick came back enraptured,” Plotkin says. “He was fascinated by the official state cars and planes. The trappings of it got him.”

It could have been the start of a brilliant career—in the Massachusetts of the 1960s, it would not have been too great a leap from the Furcolos to the Kennedys. Instead, after only one term as a Yale sophomore, Cheney dropped out. “Dick never had the experience of learning from his mistakes,” says Tom Fake, a Natrona classmate who also won a Yale scholarship. But he learned something perhaps more important to this future success. “He found a path that got him into powerful positions” is how Plotkin puts it.

After leaving Yale, Cheney had one of his few experiences working in the private sector, on a telephone-company repair crew. He showed no interest, one way or another, in the Vietnam War—until a Texas president, nearly forty years before George W. Bush,

turned a remote foreign struggle into a catastrophic, unwinnable war. Thanks to Lyndon Johnson's escalation of Vietnam, lounging around was suddenly no longer an option. Cheney snapped into action. First he enrolled in Casper Community College; then he went to the University of Wyoming. That kept him out of the draft until August 7th, 1964, when Congress initiated massive conscription in the armed forces. Three weeks later, Cheney married Lynne Vincent, his high school girlfriend, earning him another deferment. Then, on October 26th, 1965, the Selective Service announced that childless married men no longer would be exempted from having to fight for their country. Nine months and two days later, the first of Cheney's two daughters, Elizabeth, was born. All told, between 1963 and 1966, Cheney received five deferments.

In January 1967, when he was enrolled at the University of Wisconsin, Cheney passed his twenty-sixth birthday, making him safe from the draft—and making it safe for him to abandon work on a doctoral degree. He had taken to hanging out with local politicians and acted as an unpaid assistant to Wisconsin's moderate Republican governor, Warren Knowles. In 1968, he used Knowles to get a progressive Wisconsin Republican congressman named William Steiger to let him work as an intern in his office in Washington.

For the first time, Cheney went to live in a city with a population of more than 200,000 people. What happened next occurred with amazing ease and speed. Having used Knowles as a steppingstone to Steiger, Cheney used Steiger as a steppingstone to a Nixon appointee named Donald Rumsfeld, then head of the Office of Economic Opportunity. "What I saw was a young fellow, intelligent, purposeful, laid-back," Rumsfeld later remembered, when asked why he'd hired Cheney. His greatest utility, then and later, was that he lapped up work that higher-ranking officials were happy to see disappear from their plates. "He would take a problem, worry it through and move things to a conclusion," Rumsfeld recalled.

In 1973, while Nixon was self-destructing, Cheney, then thirty-two, got a job at the investment firm of Bradley, Woods and Company. "Dick needed to make some money," Bruce Bradley explained. "He and Lynne and their girls lived in a modest house, and he drove a used Volkswagen Beetle." Both Bradley and Cheney were Republicans, but they differed on Watergate. Bradley recognized that Nixon had violated fundamental American values; Cheney saw Watergate as a power struggle. They even debated each other, in a forum arranged for Bradley's clients.

"He claimed it was just a political ploy by the president's enemies," says Bradley. "Cheney saw politics as a game where you never stop pushing. He said the presidency was like one of those giant medicine balls. If you get ahold of it, what you do is, you keep pushing that ball and you never let the other team push back."

Nixon's resignation opened the way for Cheney's first truly astonishing inside move up. When Gerald Ford succeeded to the presidency, he needed experienced loyalists by his side who were untainted by the Nixon scandal, so he named Rumsfeld his chief of staff. Rumsfeld brought Cheney right along with him into the Oval Office.

The period between August 1974 and November 1976, when Ford lost the election to Jimmy Carter, is essential to understanding George W. Bush's disastrous misjudgments—and Dick Cheney's role in them. In both cases, Cheney and Rumsfeld played the key role in turning opportunity into chaos. Ford, like Bush later, hadn't been elected president. As he entered office, he was overshadowed by a secretary of state (Kissinger then, Powell later) who was considered incontestably his better. Ford was caught as flat-footed by the fall of Saigon in April 1975 as Bush was by the September 2001 attacks. A better president, with more astute advisers, might have arranged a more orderly ending to the long and divisive war. But instead of heeding the country's desire for honesty and reconciliation, Rumsfeld and Cheney convinced Ford that the way to turn himself into a real president was to stir up crises in international relations while

lurching to the right in domestic politics.

Having turned Ford into their instrument, Rumsfeld and Cheney staged a palace coup. They pushed Ford to fire Defense Secretary James Schlesinger, tell Vice President Nelson Rockefeller to look for another job and remove Henry Kissinger from his post as national security adviser. Rumsfeld was named secretary of defense, and Cheney became chief of staff to the president. The Yale dropout and draft dodger was, at the age of thirty-four, the second-most-powerful man in the White House.

As the 1976 election approached, Rumsfeld and Cheney used the immense powers they had arrogated to themselves to persuade Ford to scuttle the Salt II treaty on nuclear-arms control. The move helped Ford turn back Reagan's challenge for the party's nomination—but at the cost of ceding the heart of the GOP to the New Right. Then, in the presidential election, Jimmy Carter defeated Ford by 2 million votes.

In his first test-drive at the wheels of power, Cheney had played a central role in the undoing of a president. Wrote right-wing columnist Robert Novak, "White House Chief of Staff Richard Cheney . . . is blamed by Ford insiders for a succession of campaign blunders." Those in the old elitist wing of the party thought the decision to dump Rockefeller was both stupid and wrong: "I think Ford lost the election because of it," one of Kissinger's former aides says now. Ford agreed, calling it "the biggest political mistake of my life."

Back in Wyoming, Cheney used his connections to skim along to yet another success. "Some fellows from Casper called me," recalls former Sen. Alan Simpson, "told me they had found this amazing young man and were going to promote him for Congress. They gave a big to-do for him. I went to take a look. It was the first time I set eyes on Dick Cheney. You could tell right away he was a smart cookie." In the 1978 election, Cheney became Wyoming's sole member of the House.

"The top people had decided it would be Dick, so that basically settled it," recalls John Perry Barlow, a fourth-generation Wyomingite who campaigned for Cheney. "Dick had been chief of staff to a president. That made everyone assume he knew what he was doing."

In an overwhelmingly Republican state, Cheney now had a safe seat in Congress for as long as he wanted. On Capitol Hill, he combined a moderate demeanor with a radical agenda. People who find Cheney's extremism as vice president surprising have not looked at his congressional voting record. In 1986, he was one of only twenty-one members of the House to oppose the Safe Drinking Water Act. He fought efforts to clean up hazardous waste and backed tax breaks for energy corporations. He repeatedly voted against funding for the Veterans Administration. He opposed extending the Civil Rights Act. He opposed the release of Nelson Mandela from jail in South Africa. He even voted for cop-killer bullets.

"I don't believe he is an ideologue," says former Sen. Tim Wirth of Colorado. "But he is the most partisan politician I've ever met." Many weekends, while Congress was in session, Wirth and Cheney would take the same flight to Chicago, where they'd change planes for Colorado and Wyoming. "I spent a lot of time waiting for planes with Dick Cheney," Wirth, a Democrat, says. "He never talked about ideology. He talked about how the Republicans were going to take over the House of Representatives." Wirth adds, "It seemed impossible, but that's exactly what happened."

Cheney knew precisely who should lead the GOP takeover. "Dick and Lynne had their eyes on the speakership," says Professor Fred Holborn of the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies. "He and Lynne wrote a book on the speakership." As the subtitle of *Kings of the Hill* indicates, it is about how "powerful men changed the course of American history" through control of the House.

Cheney's strategy for gaining power was the same one he and Rumsfeld had foisted on Ford: making sure no one in the Republican Party outflanked him to the right. This was a deeply divisive approach, because it involved pandering to racial and religious

extremists and using complex matters of national security as flag-waving wedge issues. “Dick’s votes against civil rights and the environment were parts of complex deals aimed at enhancing his own power,” says Barlow, his former supporter.

In 1988, Cheney was named House minority whip, the second-ranking post in his party’s hierarchy. Had he stayed in the House, it is possible that he would have become speaker. But the following year, another powerful person decided to confer great nonelective power on Cheney. When President George H.W. Bush named him to head the Defense Department, the Senate unanimously confirmed the choice. Not a single senator seems to have considered it anomalous that control of the strongest armed forces on earth was being conferred on a person who had gone to notable lengths to avoid service in those same armed forces.

Appointed to another powerful position, Cheney promptly went about screwing it up. He pushed to turn many military duties over to private companies and began moving “defense intellectuals” with no military experience into key posts at the Pentagon. Most notable among them was Paul Wolfowitz, who later masterminded much of the disastrous strategy that George W. Bush has pursued in Iraq. In 1992, as undersecretary of defense, Wolfowitz turned out a forty-page report titled “Defense Planning Guidance,” arguing that historic allies should be demoted to the status of U.S. satellites, and that the modernization of India and China should be treated as a threat, as should the democratization of Russia. “We must maintain the mechanisms for deterring potential competitors from even aspiring to a larger regional or global role,” the report declared. It was nothing less than a blueprint for worldwide domination, and Cheney loved it. He maneuvered to have the president adopt it as doctrine, but the elder Bush, recognizing that the proposals were not only foolish but dangerous, immediately rejected them.

By the end of the first Bush administration, others had come to the conclusion that Cheney and his followers were dangerous. “They were referred to collectively as the crazies,” recalls Ray McGovern, a CIA professional who interpreted intelligence for presidents going back to Kennedy. Around the same time, McGovern remembers, Secretary of State James Baker and National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft counseled the elder President Bush, “Keep these guys at arm’s length.”

In November 1992, when George H.W. Bush lost to Bill Clinton, Cheney had his second president shot out from under him. He knocked around Washington at various neoconservative think tanks for two years, and the old pattern repeated itself: Powerful benefactors once again gave Cheney a big break. As Dan Briody recounts in his book *The Halliburton Agenda*, Cheney was on a fishing trip in New Brunswick, Canada, with a group of high-powered corporate CEOs. “The men were discussing the ongoing search for a CEO at Halliburton,” Briody reports. “Cheney was asleep back at the lodge and, in his absence, the men decided that Cheney would be the man for the job, despite the fact that he had never worked in the oil business.”

Halliburton was Cheney’s first real chance to get rich; he grabbed it with both hands. His principal action was his acquisition of a subsidiary called Dresser Industries. Dresser struck lucrative deals with Saddam Hussein; Halliburton did business with Muammar el-Qaddafi and the ayatollahs of Iran. By the time Cheney left in 2000, Halliburton’s stock was near an all-time high of fifty-four dollars a share. Then it turned out that Dresser had saddled Halliburton with asbestos lawsuits that could cost the company millions, and the stock plummeted to barely ten dollars a share. Even with the bounce Halliburton stock has received from the war, an investor who put \$100,000 into the company just before Cheney became vice president would have less than \$60,000 today. Cheney, meanwhile, continues to receive \$150,000 a year in deferred compensation from Halliburton, even though he is supposed to divest himself of all conflicts of interest. The company has been awarded \$8 billion in contracts by the Bush-Cheney administration for its work in Iraq.

It could be argued that the vice presidency was the first job Cheney got entirely on his own—by appointing himself to it. Bush initially asked Cheney only to advise him on whom to choose. After assuring Bush that he himself had no ambition to be vice president, Cheney then arranged it so that all options narrowed down to him.

Since Cheney lived in Texas at the time, choosing him led Bush into a situation that, if the words of our Founding Fathers still have any meaning, is unconstitutional. The Constitution forbids a state's electors from voting for candidates for president and vice president who are both "an inhabitant of the same state as themselves." Yet by voting for Bush and Cheney, electors in Texas did precisely that. Cheney lived in Texas, had a Texas driver's license and filed his federal income tax using a Texas address. He had also voted in Texas, not in Wyoming, a state where he had not lived full-time for decades.

As vice president, Cheney has been the decisive force pushing America into war. In the inner councils of the administration, it was he who emasculated Colin Powell, cut the State Department out of effective policymaking, foisted fake reports on the intelligence agencies and supplanted the National Security Council. It was also Cheney who placed appointees personally loyal to him, including Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz, in charge of the Pentagon and speckled the warmaking bureaucracy with desk officers culled from neoconservative Washington think tanks—ideologues with no military experience.

"They were like cancer cells," says retired Lt. Col. Karen Kwiatkowski, who worked on the Defense Department's Near East and South Asia desk during the buildup to the Iraq war. "They didn't care about the truth. They had an agenda. I'd never seen anything like it. They deformed everything."

Even within the State Department, officials of Cheney's choosing—not Powell's—controlled the key positions when it came to maneuvering the United States into the Iraq war. "Even when there was a show of Defense listening to State, it was just one Cheney operative talking to another," says Greg Thielmann, a former member of the State Department Intelligence Agency. "We were simply bypassed from the start."

Over at Defense, competent intelligence professionals were purged in order to ease the way to war. Douglas Feith, brought in under Rumsfeld to serve as undersecretary of defense for policy, applied an ideological test to his staff: He didn't want competence; he wanted fervor. Col. Pat Lang, a Middle East expert who served under five presidents, Republican and Democratic, in key posts in military intelligence, recalls being considered for a job at the Pentagon. During the job interview, Feith scanned Lang's impressive resume. "I see you speak Arabic," Feith said. When Lang nodded, Feith said, "Too bad," and dismissed him.

Cheney suffered his biggest failure in March 2002, when he visited nine Arab and Muslim countries six months after the 9/11 attacks. The vice president anticipated a triumphal tour of the region as, one by one, he enlisted the countries he visited in the cause of "taking out" Saddam Hussein. In the end, not a single country Cheney visited provided troops for the Bush-Cheney war—including staunch American allies in Jordan and Turkey—and almost all refused to let their territory be used for the attack.

Once again, however, Cheney did not let reality dissuade him from his course. As the disaster has unfolded in Iraq, he has continued to insist against all evidence that Saddam possessed weapons of mass destruction, that the dictator was aiding Al Qaeda, that nothing the Bush administration has done was a mistake. Those who have known him over the years remain astounded by what they describe as his almost autistic indifference to the thoughts and feelings of others. "He has the least interest in human beings of anyone I have ever met," says John Perry Barlow, his former supporter. Cheney's freshman-year roommate, Steve Billings, agrees: "If I could ask Dick one question, I'd ask him how he could be so unempathetic."

It's a question Cheney is unlikely ever to answer. Throughout the years, he has sealed himself off from the possibility of such inquiries. The most famous example is his draft

evasion during the Vietnam War. He has never candidly discussed his feelings about the war, the traumatic, formative event for American males of his age. Only once, in fact, has he even answered a question as to why he avoided serving.

“I had other priorities,” was all he has ever said.