NY Times | http://www.nytimes.com/2004/09/09/opinion/09dowd.html 9 Sept 2004

OP-ED COLUMNIST

Cheney Spits Toads

By Maureen Dowd

WASHINGTON—George W. Bush and Dick Cheney have always used the president's father as a reverse lodestar. In 1992, the senior Mr. Bush wooed the voters with "Message: I care." So this week, Mr. Cheney wooed the voters with, Message: You die.

The terrible beauty of its simplicity grows on you. It is a sign of the dark, macho, paranoid vice president's restraint that he didn't really take it to its emotionally satisfying conclusion: Message: Vote for us or we'll kill you.

Without Zell Miller around to out-crazy him, and unplugged after a convention that tried to "humanize" him with grandchildren, horses and wifely anecdotes about his inability to dance the twist, Mr. Cheney is back as Terrifier in Chief.

He finally simply spit out what the Bush team has been more subtly trying to convey for months: A vote for John Kerry is a vote for the terrorists.

"Because if we make the wrong choice," Mr. Cheney said in Des Moines in that calm baritone, "then the danger is that we'll get hit again. That we'll be hit in a way that will be devastating from the standpoint of the United States, and that we'll fall back into the pre-9/11 mind-set if you will, that in fact these terrorist attacks are just criminal acts, and that we're not really at war."

These guys figure, hey, these scare tactics worked in building support for the Iraq war, maybe they can work in tearing down support for John Kerry. They linked Saddam with terrorism and cowed the Democrats (including Mr. Kerry, who has never been able to make the case against the Bush administration's trompe l'oeil casus belli) and fooled the country into going along with their trumped-up war. So why not link Mr. Kerry with terrorism and cow the voters into sticking with the White House they've got?

It's like that fairy tale where vipers and toads jump out of the mouth of the accursed mean little girl when she tries to speak. Every time Mr. Cheney opens his mouth, vermin leap out.

The vice president and president did not even mention Osama at the convention because of the inconvenient fact that the fiend is still out there, plotting. Yet they denigrate Mr. Kerry as too weak to battle Osama, and treat him as a greater threat.

Mr. Cheney implies that John Kerry couldn't protect us from an attack like 9/11, blithely ignoring the fact that he and President Bush didn't protect us from the real 9/11. Think of what brass-knuckled Republicans could have made of a 9/11 tape of an uncertain Democratic president giving a shaky statement that looked like a hostage tape and flying randomly from air base to air base, as the veep ordered that planes be shot down.

Mr. Cheney warns against falling back "into the pre-9/11 mind-set," when, in fact, the Bush team's pre-9/11 mind-set was all about being stuck in the cold war and reviving "Star Wars"—which doesn't work and is useless against terrorist tactics. The Bush crowd played down terrorism because Bill Clinton and Sandy Berger had told their successors that Osama was a priority, and the Bushies scorned all things Clinton. The president shrugged off intelligence briefings with such headlines as "Bin Laden Determined to Attack Inside the United States" because there was brush to be cleared and unaffordable tax-cutting to be done.

After the blue-ribbon graybeards declared the Bush administration's pumped-up W.M.D. claims and Saddam-9/11 links bogus, the White House went into a defensive crouch—especially the man in the undisclosed bunker, who had veered wildly between

overly pessimistic predictions of Saddam's nukes and overly optimistic predictions of grateful Iraqis with flowers and chocolates.

For a time, it seemed that Americans were realizing they'd been flimflammed by the Bushies. But at the convention, the swaggering Bush juggernaut brazenly went back to boasting about its pre-emption doctrine, tracing imaginary connections between 9/11 and Saddam, and calling all our foes terrorists.

Why should the same group that managed to paint a flextime guardsman as a heroic commander—and a war hero as a war criminal—bother rebutting or engaging with critics?

As the deaths of American men and women fighting in Iraq topped 1,000, and with insurgents controlling parts of central Iraq, the White House trotted out the same old discredited line, assuming it can wear—and scare—everyone down by November.