In 1992 Paul Wolfowitz, then the under secretary of defense for policy, presided over the drafting of a 46-page document called the Defense Planning Guidance. It was essentially a blueprint for American unilateral dominance in the post-cold-war era and created such a furor that Defense Secretary Dick Cheney had to withdraw its most extreme provisions. Read one way, the document looks like a dress rehearsal for the bellicose policies pursued a decade later by the Bush administration. But looked at another way, it also seems like a valuable window into Cheney's operational code.

As vice president, Cheney, you could say, has acted like a great power seeking to maximize influence and quash any rivals, forging an alliance only with Donald Rumsfeld's Pentagon. He thus treated the State Department and the National Security Council as foreign enemies, spying on them and humiliating Condoleezza Rice (when she was the national security adviser) and former Secretary of State Colin Powell. When-ever possible, he has acted unilaterally, even working behind President Bush's back to alter his tax and environmental policies. But just as critics warned back in 1992 that American overreaching would ultimately create a coalition of enemies determined to check it, so Cheney's relentless amassing of power and influence has finally rebounded on him in Bush's second term. With the rise of Defense Secretary Robert Gates and Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson, Cheney faces true rivals who command the president's ear.

Yet when Cheney originally returned to Washington with George W. Bush, he was widely seen as an old hand who would soberly guide his young charge. Time magazine, for example, gushed in February 2001 that "Cheney's calm 'comes from riding the range genetically for several generations,' says his chief of staff, referring to the vice president's Western heritage. It is a disposition that should serve Bush well, especially when the days get longer." That was then. His chief of staff, Scooter Libby, avoided the hoosegow only after Bush commuted his sentence, and Cheney, who fairly breathes contempt for the Constitution and democracy, has come to epitomize an administration that is a quicksand of -deceit.

It didn't have to be that way. As governor of Texas, Bush hewed to a centrist course, working,

as he often boasted, with the Democratic--led State Legislature. As a candidate for the presidency, he promised more of the same. But as president, he struck out on a more radical and polarizing course, one that Barton Gellman, in his engrossing and informative “Angler,” suggests he would not have followed absent Cheney. (Angler is Cheney’s Secret Service code name.) Gellman, a reporter at The Washington Post, has interviewed numerous associates and antagonists of the vice president, offering the most penetrating portrait of him yet. The result is that Cheney doesn’t seem as bad as you might think. He’s even worse.

As Gellman shows, Cheney’s intriguing began as soon as Bush entrusted him with the vice--presidential vetting proc-ess. He treated the candidates, ranging from Gov. Frank Keating of Oklahoma to Gov. Tom Ridge of Pennsylvania, almost as if they were terrorist suspects, demanding personal information about their extended families that no previous campaign had ever requested, including whether they were “vulnerable to blackmail.” According to Gellman, David Addington, Cheney’s longtime hatchet man, “oversaw the disassembly of candidates, cataloging their blemishes and mounting them for inspection.” Once Bush chose Cheney — after failing to interview any other candidate or to consult his staff — his running mate didn’t even bother to answer his own questionnaire, let alone supply medical or financial records. The pattern of Bush and Cheney operating together in secret was set.

Next came staffing the administration itself. Once again, Bush gave Cheney a free hand. And once again, it was Cheney and Addington who went to work creating a network of loyalists even before the Florida recount had been adjudicated. Cheney had a keen sense of the importance of titles and positions: Libby, for instance, got three titles — the vice president’s chief of staff and national security adviser, and assistant to the president. This, Gellman notes, meant that “no one save Cheney and Bush themselves were his superiors.” Appointees who proved ideologically unreliable, like Treasury Secretary Paul O’Neill, were quickly and ruthlessly eliminated by Cheney.

This might be seen as nothing more than rough-and-tumble bureaucratic politics. But when it came to national security, Cheney, as Gellman reminds us, established what amounted to a parallel government. Together with Defense Secretary Rumsfeld, his old boss from the Nixon administration, Cheney ran rings around the bureaucracy, which he viewed as an entrenched enemy filled with traitorous liberals. One Cheney ally explains to Gellman that the State Department is “basically an Al Qaeda cell.” Richard Haass, then the director of policy planning at the State Department, was generally viewed as an enemy agent: Cheney’s office was requesting secret National Security Agency transcripts of Haass’s conversations abroad. “In the first term,” Gellman writes, “most White House staff members were unaware that many of their e-mails were blind-copied to Cheney’s staff.” The snooping habits of these aides prompted their “nervous counterparts” at other agencies to call them the Watchers.

Gellman might have emphasized more fully that Cheney and Rumsfeld were essentially reprising their role during the Ford years, when this duo sought to rub out moderates like Vice President Nelson Rockefeller, whom Gerald Ford dumped in 1976, and move the administration to the right. While Rumsfeld’s Pentagon created spider-web charts showing links between Al Qaeda and Saddam Hussein, Cheney worked over skeptical Republicans like the House majority leader, Dick Armey, informing him, in Gellman’s words, that “Saddam could put drone

aircraft on a freighter, steam them across the Atlantic and use the route-planning software to dispatch lethal microbes anywhere from Miami to Boston.”

Much attention has already been devoted to the administration’s malignant torture and surveillance policies, erected on the wobbly foundation of a monarchical view of the presidency by the likes of Addington and John Yoo, a deputy assistant attorney general. But Gellman reveals that the F.B.I. director, Robert Mueller, and top people in the Justice Department were prepared to resign rather than accede to an extension of a surveillance program that was Cheney and Addington’s brainchild — to the extent that they kept Bush’s own terrorism adviser, Frances Townsend, in the dark about it. Gellman singles out Bush’s sudden retreat in the face of this rebellion — which Cheney had hidden from him — as a key moment: “Bush did learn something, something he would not forget. A president could not operate as Cheney did, doctrinally unbending come what may. . . . In his second term, his second chance, the president would take greater care to consult his own -instincts.”

Nevertheless, it wasn’t until the Republican debacle in the 2006 midterm elections that Bush finally divested himself of Cheney’s main ally, Rumsfeld. It’s hard to avoid the feeling that the bluster and bombast of Cheney and his aides about the president’s unlimited powers ended up subverting their own goals. As Jack Goldsmith, a former Justice Department official who helped lead the revolt against the surveillance program, put it to Gellman, Addington “was principled to the point of being stupid. He held fast to his hard-core views of unilateral executive power even when they led to self--defeatingly adverse political consequences for the presidency.” Still, Cheney’s younger disciples will probably be around and credentialed should there be a fresh Republican administration. The vice president will soon be gone, but his truculent spirit may remain.

Source...