
PANIC

America should go “not abroad in search of monsters to destroy. . . . She might become the dictatress of the world: she would be no longer the ruler of her own spirit.”

—John Quincy Adams, *An Address . . . Celebrating the Anniversary of Independence, at the City of Washington on the Fourth of July 1821*

If anyone in America should have been prepared to respond to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, it ought to have been Vice President Dick Cheney. For decades before the planes hit the Pentagon and World Trade Center, Cheney had been secretly practicing for doomsday.

During the 1980s, while serving as a Republican congressman from Wyoming and a rising power in the conservative leadership in Congress, Cheney secretly participated in one of the most highly classified, top-secret programs of the Reagan Administration, a simulation of survival scenarios designed to ensure the smooth continuity of the U.S. government in the event of all-out nuclear war with the Soviet Union. Every year, usually during congressional recesses, Cheney would disappear in the dead of the night. He left without explanation to his wife, Lynne Vincent Cheney, who was given merely a phone number where he could be reached in the event of emergency. Along with some four or five dozen federal officials, Cheney would pretend for several weeks to be chief of staff to a designated substitute “president,” bivouacked in some remote location in the United States.

As James Mann reveals in *The Vulcans*, his rich intellectual history of the neoconservative brain trust that has guided Bush foreign policy, the exercise tried to re-create some of the anticipated hardships of surviving a nuclear holocaust. Accommodations were Spartan and cuisine was barely adequate. Civilian communications systems were presumed destroyed. The challenge was to ensure civil order and control over the military in the event that the elected president and vice president, and much of the executive branch, were decimated. The Constitution, of course, spells out the line of succession. If the president and vice president are indisposed, then power passes first to the Speaker of the House, and next to the president pro tempore of the Senate. But in a secret executive order, President Reagan, who was deeply concerned about the Soviet threat, amended the process for speed and clarity. The secret order established a means of re-creating the executive branch without informing Congress that it had been sidestepped, or asking for legislation that would have made the new “continuity-of-government” plan legally legitimate. Cheney, a proponent of expansive presidential powers, was evidently unperturbed by this oversight.

Mann and others have suggested that these doomsday drills were a dress rehearsal for Cheney’s calm, commanding performance on 9/11. It was not the first time he had stared into the abyss. One eyewitness, who kept a diary, said that inside the Presidential Emergency Operations Command, or PEOC, a hardened command center several hundred feet under the by-then-evacuated White House, Cheney never broke a sweat as he juggled orders to shoot down any additional incoming hijacked planes, coordinated efforts with other cabinet members, most particularly the Directors of the FBI and CIA, and resolved issues such as how to avoid charges of taking hostage two visiting foreign heads of state, from Australia and Lithuania, after all air traffic had been shut down.

Six weeks after the attacks on New York and Washington, the Bush Administration had successfully restored calm, reassured the financial markets, and rallied the sympathies and support of much of the world. But once again the White House was plunged into a state of controlled panic.

On October 17, 2001, a white powder that had been sent through the U.S. mail to Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle’s office in the Capitol was positively identified. Scientific analysis showed it to be an

unusually difficult to obtain and lethally potent form of the deadly bacterial poison anthrax. This news followed less than ten days after the death in Florida of a victim in another mysterious anthrax attack. The anthrax spores in the letter to Daschle were so professionally refined, the Central Intelligence Agency believed the powder must have been sent by an experienced terrorist organization, most probably Al Qaeda, as a sequel to the group's September 11 attacks. During a meeting of the White House's National Security Council that day, Cheney, who was sitting in for the President because Bush was traveling abroad, urged everyone to keep this inflammatory speculation secret.

At the time, no one, not even America's best-informed national security leaders, really knew anything for sure about what sorts of threats loomed, or from where. The only certainty shared by virtually the entire American intelligence community in the fall of 2001 was that a second wave of even more devastating terrorist attacks on America was imminent. In preparation, the CIA had compiled a list of likely targets ranging from movie studios—whose heads were warned by the Bush Administration to take precautions—to sports arenas and corporate headquarters. Topping the list was the White House.

The next day, the worst of these fears seemed realized. On October 18, 2001, an alarm in the White House went off. Chillingly, the warning signal wasn't a simple fire alarm triggered by the detection of smoke. It was a sensitive, specialized sensor, designed to alert anyone in the vicinity that the air they were breathing had been contaminated by potentially lethal radioactive, chemical, or biological agents. Everyone who had entered the Situation Room that day was believed to have been exposed, and that included Cheney. "They thought there had been a nerve attack," a former administration official, who was sworn to secrecy about it, later confided. "It was really, really scary. They thought that Cheney was already lethally infected." Facing the possibility of his own death, the Vice President nonetheless calmly reported the emergency to the rest of the National Security Council.

Members of the National Security Council were all too well aware of the seriousness of the peril they were facing. At Cheney's urging, they had received a harrowing briefing just a few weeks earlier about the possibility of biological attack. His attention had been drawn to the subject by a war game called *Dark Winter* conducted in the summer before that simulated the effects of an outbreak of smallpox in America. After the September 11 attacks, Cheney's chief of staff, I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby, screened a video of the *Dark Winter* exercise

for Cheney, showing that the United States was virtually defenseless against smallpox or any other biological attack. Cheney in particular was so stricken by the potential for attack that he insisted that the rest of the National Security Council undergo a gruesome briefing on it on September 20, 2001. When the White House sensor registered the presence of such poisons less than a month later, many, including Cheney, believed a nightmare was unfolding. “It was a really nerve-jangling time,” the former official said.

In time, the Situation Room alarm turned out to be false. But on October 22, the Secret Service reported that it had found what it believed to be additional anthrax traces on an automated letter-opening device used on White House mail. By then, Cheney had convinced the President to support a \$1.6 billion bioterrorism-preparedness program. Cheney argued that every citizen in the country should be vaccinated against smallpox.

During the ten days after the Vice President’s scare, threats of mortal attack were nonetheless so frequent, and so terrifying, that on October 29 Cheney quietly insisted upon absenting himself from the White House to what was described as “a secure, undisclosed location”—one of several Cold War-era nuclear-hardened subterranean bunkers built during the Truman and Eisenhower Administrations, the nearest of which were located hundreds of feet below bedrock in places such as Mount Weather, in Virginia’s Blue Ridge Mountains, and along the Maryland-Pennsylvania border not far from Camp David.

In a subterranean bunker crammed with communications equipment and government-issue metal desks, Cheney and other rotating cabinet members took turns occupying what was archly referred to as “The Commander in Chief’s Suite.”

Officials who worked in the White House and other sensitive posts with access to raw intelligence files during the fall of 2001 say it is nearly impossible to exaggerate the sense of mortal and existential danger that dominated the thinking of the upper rungs of the Bush Administration during those months.

“They thought they were going to get hit again. They convinced themselves that they were facing a ticking time bomb,” recalled Roger Cressey, who then headed what was known as the Terrorist Threats Sub-Group of the National Security Council.

Counterterrorism experts knew that Al Qaeda’s members had in the recent past made efforts to obtain nuclear and other horrific

weapons of mass destruction in order to commit murder on an even greater scale. Unlike earlier enemies of America, they targeted innocent civilians and fought clandestinely with inhuman disregard for life. Other foes had been better organized and more powerful, but none had struck as great a blow behind the lines in America, nor spread a greater sense of vulnerability in the population. Under the circumstances, Cressey admitted, "I firmly expected to get hit again too. It seemed highly probable."

The sense of fear within the White House was understandable, but it was intensified by what was supposed to be a valuable new intelligence tool introduced after September 11, what came to be known as the "Top Secret Codeword/Threat Matrix." Having underestimated Al Qaeda before the attacks, Bush and Cheney took aggressive steps to ensure that they would never get similarly blindsided again. In the days immediately after the attacks, he and Cheney demanded to see all available raw intelligence reports concerning additional possible threats to America on a daily basis. Cheney had long been a skeptic about the CIA's skills, and was particularly insistent on reviewing the data himself. "The mistake," Cressey concluded later, "was not to have proper analysis of the intelligence before giving it to the President. There was no filter. Most of it was garbage. None of it had been corroborated or screened. But it went directly to the President and his advisers, who are not intelligence experts. That's when mistakes got made." Others who saw the same intelligence reports found the experience mind-altering. It was "like being stuck in a room listening to Led Zeppelin music," said Jim Baker, former head of the Counsel in the Department of Justice's Office of Intelligence Policy and Review. Readers suffered "sensory overload" and became "paranoid." Former Deputy Attorney General James Comey believed that the cumulative effect turned national security concerns into "an obsession."

A sense of constant danger followed Cheney everywhere. When he commuted to his White House office from the vice presidential residence, he was chauffeured in an armored motorcade that varied its route to foil possible attackers. On the backseat behind Cheney rested a duffel bag stocked with a gas mask and a biochemical survival suit. Rarely did he travel without a medical doctor in tow.

Cheney managed to make light of these macabre arrangements, joking about evading "The Jackal" by varying his routines, and teasing

an old friend that, alas, he had too little survival equipment to be able to share his. Some of those around Cheney wondered if the attacks, perhaps in combination with his medical problems, had exacerbated his natural pessimism. An old family friend found him changed after September 11, “more steely, as if he was preoccupied by terrible things he couldn’t talk about.” Brent Scowcroft, a lifelong acquaintance, told *The New Yorker*, “I don’t know him anymore.” In the view of some detractors, such as Lawrence Wilkerson, the chief of staff to former Secretary of State Colin Powell, “Cheney was traumatized by 9/11. The poor guy became paranoid.”

From the start of the administration, Cheney had confidently assumed the national security portfolio for a president with virtually no experience in the area. But Al Qaeda’s attacks exposed a gaping shortcoming in the Vice President’s thinking. The Soviet Union, whose threat had preoccupied Cheney and other doomsday planners in the 1980s, was gone. In its place another, more intangible danger had arisen. No one in the Bush Administration, including Cheney, had had the foresight or imagination to see Bin Laden’s plot unfolding.

With the notable exception of Richard Clarke, the long-serving head of counterterrorism at the National Security Council, and a few counterterrorism experts at the CIA and FBI, terrorism hadn’t ranked anywhere near the top of the new administration’s national security concerns. Later, a number of top officials, including CIA Director George Tenet, would offer evidence that they had been keenly focused on the threat from Bin Laden before the attacks. If so, none succeeded in getting the President and Vice President’s attention.

When Al Qaeda struck, Cheney and the other hardliners who had spent decades militating for a more martial and aggressive foreign policy were caught off guard. Frozen in a Cold War–era mind-set, they overlooked threats posed not by great armed nation-states, but by small, lithe rogue groups waging “asymmetric” warfare.

The Bush White House could have demanded an instant review of how they had been so badly surprised, as Franklin Delano Roosevelt did after the attack on Pearl Harbor, and the results would not have been flattering. But instead of trying to learn from what had essentially been a colossal bureaucratic failure, combined with inattention and a lack of political will at the top, the Bush White House deferred the focus elsewhere.

The lesson for Bush and Cheney was that terrorists had struck at the United States because they saw the country as soft. Bush worried that the nation was too “materialistic, hedonistic,” and that Bin Laden “didn’t feel threatened” by it. Confronted with a new enemy and their own intelligence failure, he and Cheney turned to some familiar conservative nostrums that had preoccupied the far right wing of the Republican Party since the Watergate era. There was too much international law, too many civil liberties, too many constraints on the President’s war powers, too many rights for defendants, and too many rules against lethal covert actions. There was also too much openness and too much meddling by Congress and the press.

Cheney in particular had been chafing against the post-Watergate curbs that had been imposed on the president’s powers since the mid-1970s, when he had served as Gerald Ford’s chief of staff. As Vice President, Cheney had already begun to strengthen the power of the presidency by aggressively asserting executive privilege, most notably on his secrecy-enshrouded energy task force. He’d told Bush, who later repeated the line, that if nothing else they must leave the office stronger than they found it. Now Cheney saw the terrorist threat in such catastrophic terms that his end, saving America from possible extinction, justified virtually any means. As Wilkerson, Powell’s former Chief of Staff who went on to teach National Security Affairs at George Washington University, put it, “He had a single-minded objective in black and white, that American security was paramount to everything else. He thought that perfect security was achievable. I can’t fault the man for wanting to keep America safe. But he was willing to corrupt the whole country to save it.”

Whether the White House fears were rational will long be debated. But it was in this feverish atmosphere that a new system of law was devised to vanquish what Bush described as a new kind of enemy in “a war unlike any other.”

Beginning almost immediately after September 11, 2001, Cheney saw to it that some of the sharpest and best-trained lawyers in the country, working in secret in the White House and the United States Department of Justice, came up with legal justifications for a vast expansion of the government’s power in waging war on terror.

As part of that process, for the first time in its history, the United States sanctioned government officials to physically and psychologically

torment U.S.-held captives, making torture the official law of the land in all but name.

The lawyers also authorized other previously illegal practices, including the secret capture and indefinite detention of suspects without charges. Simply by designating the suspects “enemy combatants,” the President could suspend the ancient writ of habeas corpus that guarantees a person the right to challenge his imprisonment in front of a fair and independent authority. Once in U.S. custody, the President’s lawyers said, these suspects could be held incommunicado, hidden from their families and international monitors such as the Red Cross, and subjected to unending abuse, so long as it didn’t meet the lawyers’ own definition of torture. And they could be held for the duration of the war against terrorism, a struggle in which victory had never been clearly defined.

Few would argue against safeguarding the nation. But in the judgment of at least one of the country’s most distinguished presidential scholars, the legal steps taken by the Bush Administration in its war against terrorism were a quantum leap beyond earlier blots on the country’s history and traditions: more significant than John Adams’s Alien and Sedition Acts, than Lincoln’s suspension of habeas corpus during the Civil War, than the imprisonment of Americans of Japanese descent during World War II. Collectively, Arthur Schlesinger Jr. argued, the Bush Administration’s extralegal counterterrorism program presented the most dramatic, sustained, and radical challenge to the rule of law in American history.

Over a lunch at a genteel Upper East Side French restaurant in Manhattan in 2006, the year before he died, Schlesinger, a liberal Democrat but also an admirer of muscular foreign policy, chose his words slowly and carefully. When asked what he thought of President Bush’s policy on torture, he peered over his glasses and paused. Schlesinger’s *The Imperial Presidency* had described Richard Nixon as pushing the outer limits of abuse of presidential power. Later, his book *The Cycles of American History* had placed these excesses in a continuum of pendulum swings. With his trademark bow tie askew, Schlesinger considered, and finally said, “No position taken has done more damage to the American reputation in the world—ever.”

While there was nothing new about torture, its authorization by Bush Administration lawyers represented a dramatic break with the past. As early as the Revolutionary War, General George Washington vowed that, unlike the British, who tortured enemy captives, this

new country in the New World would distinguish itself by its humanity. In fighting to liberate the world from Communism, Fascism, and Nazism, and working to ameliorate global ignorance and poverty, America had done more than any nation on earth to abolish torture and other violations of human rights.

Yet, almost precisely on the sixtieth anniversary of the famous war crimes tribunal's judgment in Nuremberg, which established what seemed like an immutable principle, that legalisms and technicalities could not substitute for individual moral choice and conscience, America became the first nation ever to authorize violations of the Geneva Conventions. These international treaties, many of which were hammered out by American lawyers in the wake of the harrowing Nazi atrocities of World War II, set an absolute, minimum baseline for the humane treatment of all categories of prisoners taken in almost all manner of international conflicts. Rather than lining prisoners up in front of ditches and executing them, or exterminating them in gas chambers, or subjecting them to grueling physical hardships, all enemy prisoners—even spies and saboteurs—were from then on to be accorded some basic value simply because they were human. America had long played a special role as the world's most ardent champion of these fundamental rights; it was not just a signatory but also the custodian of the Geneva Conventions, the original signed copies of which resided in a vault at the State Department.

Any fair telling of how America came to sacrifice so many cherished values in its fight against terrorism has to acknowledge that the enemy that the Bush Administration faced on September 11, and which the country faces still, is both real and terrifying. Often, those in power have felt they simply had no good choices. But this country has in the past faced other mortal enemies, equally if not more threatening, without endangering its moral authority by resorting to state-sanctioned torture. Other democratic nations, meanwhile, have grappled with similar if not greater threats from terrorism without undercutting their values and laws.

But to understand the Bush Administration's self-destructive response to September 11, one has to look particularly to Cheney, the doomsday expert and unapologetic advocate of expanding presidential power. Appearing on *Meet the Press* on the first Sunday after the attacks, Cheney gave a memorable description of how the administration viewed the continuing threat and how it planned to respond.

"We'll have to work sort of the dark side, if you will," Cheney

explained in his characteristically quiet and reassuring voice. “We’ve got to spend time in the shadows in the intelligence world. A lot of what needs to be done here will have to be done quietly, without any discussion, using sources and methods that are available to our intelligence agencies—if we are going to be successful. That’s the world these folks operate in. And, uh, so it’s going to be vital for us to use any means at our disposal basically, to achieve our objectives.”

Soon afterward, Cheney disappeared from public view. But his influence had already begun to shape all that followed.

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