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The Farce of Dick Cheney Giving Foreign-Policy Advice

The former veep's record is marked by false claims, erroneous predictions, and catastrophic results. Now he's urging more wars. Has his audience learned its lesson?

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Former Vice President Dick Cheney failed to anticipate the September 11 terrorist attacks and responded to them by urging the catastrophic invasion of Iraq, which will cost \$6 trillion, roughly 5,000 American lives, and tens of thousands of serious injuries. In hindsight, it's clear that Cheney's assessment of pre-war intelligence was inept if not dishonest; that his predictions about how Iraqis would react to the U.S. invasion were dreadful; that his estimate of the cost to Americans was wildly inaccurate; and that he was partly responsible for an occupation as negligent as, say, a man on a duck hunt who shoots another man in the face.

Despite that dismal record of discredited claims, erroneous predictions, wrongheaded analysis, and deadly consequences, *The Weekly Standard* has chosen Dick Cheney, along with his daughter, Liz, to author an article on Iraq policy. The Cheneys advanced these four arguments:

- Invading Iraq was prudent.
- George W. Bush waged the war successfully.
- Barack Obama is responsible for the chaos in Iraq today.
- America needs to wage war in at least three countries and spend more on the military.

The chutzpah required of them to opine on Iraq at all is noteworthy. To continue doing so without acknowledging or grappling with the serious errors he has made in the past betrays a lack of either self-awareness or honor. Even beyond that, the Cheneys proceed with certitude and shamelessness that might tarnish their legacies if they weren't already known for their embrace of torturing prisoners. Take a passage from the part of the article where they defend the Iraq invasion:

As we know now, Saddam did not have stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction. However, it requires a willing suspension of disbelief and a desire to put politics above safety to assert that the absence of stockpiles meant the absence of a threat to the United States. David Kay, who led the international Iraq Survey Group tasked with finding Saddam's stockpiles, said this: "I actually think that what we learned during the inspections made Iraq a more dangerous place, potentially, than in fact we had thought before the war."

In this telling, the Bush administration understated the danger of Saddam Hussein! (The backward-looking portion of the article is also tarnished by an outright falsehood about al-Qaeda that the *Wall Street Journal* notes and corrects.) Turning to the war itself, Cheney writes, "History has proven that President Bush's decision to surge forces into Iraq and adopt a counterinsurgency strategy under the command of Generals David Petraeus and Ray Odierno worked."

"The surge" worked *to do what*?

Tellingly, the Cheneys never specify. What "the surge" didn't do is prevent Iraq from becoming a sectarian killing zone and power vacuum for Islamist radicals once troops left. The Cheneys go on to offer this laughable argument as the basis for their triumphalism: "The real proof that things were in good shape in Iraq when President Obama took office is that his administration set about claiming credit for the situation." Actually, Obama was rather critical of the Bush record in Iraq when he took over, but the absurdity here is the presumption that if a politician takes credit for something, the thing in question must be performing well. Superficial zings at ideological opponents in place of rigorous foreign-policy analysis are hallmarks of both the Cheneys and *The Weekly Standard*. Noticing the zings is useful because they almost always fill holes in the surrounding argument.

That brings us to the Cheneys' five-point plan for the future: "ISIS does not recognize the border between Syria and Iraq, and we can't either," they write, casually urging military action in two countries. "We have to strike ISIS in their sanctuaries, staging areas, command centers, and lines of communication on both sides of the border. We also need to do everything possible to defend Jordan against ISIS." That's just the beginning of the war the Cheneys want to wage.

"As we work to defeat ISIS in Iraq and prevent the growth of a terrorist state in the heart of the Middle East, we must also move globally to get back on offense in the war on terror," they continue. So renewed war in Iraq; fighting in Syria too; then, *separate from warring in those two countries*, a new counter-terror offensive.

(Where?)

Here's the rest of the plan:

Second, we need to reverse the dramatic decline in defense spending we've seen in the last six years. A nation at war cannot hope to prevail if only 4 of its 42 Army brigades are combat ready. We need to make restoration of our military and a reversal of the disastrous defense budget cuts one of our top priorities.

Third, we need to halt the drawdown of our troops in Afghanistan. The tragedy, terror, and chaos in Iraq will be repeated in Afghanistan if we abandon the fight there. Pulling out all U.S. troops without regard to conditions on the ground or the recommendations of our commanders will ensure a victory for America's enemies.

Fourth, we need to reassure our friends and allies in the Middle East that America will not abandon them. We need to demonstrate through increased intelligence cooperation, military assistance, training, joint exercises, and economic support that we know they are on the front lines of the war on terror. We should immediately provide the Apache helicopters and other military support the government of Egypt needs to fight the al Qaeda insurgency in the Sinai.

Fifth, we should be clear that we recognize a nuclear-armed Iran is an existential threat to Israel and to other nations in the region, as well. We should refuse to accept any "deal" with the Iranians that allows them to continue to spin centrifuges and enrich uranium. In the cauldron of the Middle East today, accepting a false deal—as the Obama administration seems inclined to do—will only ensure Iran attains a nuclear weapon and spark a nuclear arms race across the region. The Iranians should know without a doubt that we will not allow that to happen, and that we will take military action if necessary to stop it.

Summing up the Cheneys' strategic recommendations: definitely war in *at least* three countries; a proxy war in a fourth; unspecified warring in unnamed other countries (because terrorism); and in addition to all that, maybe a war against Iran too. Past experience isn't always an accurate guide to the future, but so far, wars of choice favored by the Cheneys have killed significantly more Americans than al-Qaeda has. Iraq alone killed roughly 2,000 more Americans than did the 9/11 attacks.

As dismal a job as Cheney has done at keeping Americans safe in the past, it is my belief that following his advice in the future would be even more ruinous to our country. He adopts a confident tone when calling for military intervention in Iraq and Syria; an endless war in Afghanistan; sundry fighting elsewhere; and a hard line against Iran; but he doesn't know how these interventions would unfold any more than he "knew" Iraq had WMDs or that America

would be treated as a liberator. Is posturing to the contrary a fraud he perpetrates on us or on himself too?*

Cheney-style interventionism doesn't work because our best designs in foreign war zones are too easily thwarted, as we've all seen these last 13 years, when our efforts have made some places more rather than less dangerous to our national security. Still others places are no better off despite massive investments. A failure to see that intervention can make things worse—and that wars of choice gone wrong are the most catastrophic policy mistake America makes—is willful blindness. When the Cheneys urge more of the same, it isn't just as if they've missed the last decade, it's also as if they never learned about opportunity costs. America should never again heed the foreign-policy advice of such incompetent analysts.