

Dick Cheney dead at 84: A war criminal who paved the way for Trump

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Dick Cheney is dead. The American people will now be subjected to the predictable deluge of tributes for the former vice president from the political establishment and the corporate media. Every effort will be made to sanitize the record of a war criminal and enemy of democratic rights who helped paved the way for the dictatorial actions of Donald Trump.

No one should be taken in by the official whitewashing of the blood on Cheney's hands. He was a man who personified the greed and ruthlessness of the American capitalist elite, serving as White House chief of staff, secretary of defense, CEO of the giant oilfield services company Halliburton and then vice president for George W. Bush where he acted as the power behind the throne. Cheney played leading roles in three major imperialist wars, against Iraq in 1990-91, Afghanistan from 2001 on and Iraq again from 2003 on. The death toll in these wars alone comes to several million, to say nothing of "lesser" conflicts, such as the 1989 US invasion of Panama and the 1992 intervention in Somalia.

Cheney was a man of the state. He was initially mentored and promoted by another such figure, Donald Rumsfeld, who brought him into the White House in the Ford administration, where he eventually became chief of staff. After Ford was defeated for reelection, Cheney won a congressional seat in Wyoming in 1978. He rose rapidly to the number two position in the party leadership before being named to head the Pentagon by President George H. W. Bush. There he oversaw the Persian Gulf War, the largest mobilization of American military forces since World War II, with nearly 600,000 troops. US high-tech weaponry, including uranium-tipped tank rounds and laser-guided bombs and missiles inflicted a one-sided slaughter of the virtually defenseless conscript military forces sent into Kuwait by Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

After Bush was defeated for reelection, Cheney became CEO of Halliburton, where he raked in \$40 million during the eight years of the Clinton administration. He was selected by George W. Bush as his running mate in 2000, largely because his record as a ruthless warmonger and corporate executive reassured sections of the ruling elite dubious about the younger Bush's inexperience in the one field and lack of success in the other.

After the stolen election of 2000, when the Supreme Court intervened to halt vote-counting in Florida and install Bush and Cheney in power, the vice president wasted little time in rewarding his corporate cronies. He immediately set up an "energy task force" whose proceedings and even membership were kept secret. There, oil company executives and military-intelligence operatives

prepared a set of targets for US military aggression—a series of "wars for oil" which required only the necessary pretext to initiate.

The September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks—which were carried out with high-level foreknowledge within the US state apparatus—supplied that pretext, not only for imperialist wars abroad but also for an onslaught against the democratic rights of the American people at home. In both of these criminal activities, Cheney played a leading role. In response to the terrorist attacks—by suicide attackers mainly from Saudi Arabia—the Bush administration immediately targeted Afghanistan, where Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden was based. With bipartisan support, Congress passed a war resolution authorizing the US invasion and occupation of Afghanistan, as well as a "war on terror," which continues in force to this day. Similarly, Democrats and Republicans approved, almost unanimously, the Patriot Act, which gave the US president wide powers to order surveillance and detention of supposed "terrorists" within the United States, with little judicial oversight.

Afghanistan was only a stepping stone, however, to a much larger and bloodier conflict: the US invasion, conquest and occupation of Iraq. While Afghanistan had vast mineral wealth that remained largely undeveloped, Iraq was one of the largest and most profitable of oil-producing countries, a rich prize for imperialist plunder. Cheney played the principal role in spreading the lies about "weapons of mass destruction" and supposed connections between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda. (The two were actually bitter enemies.) These lies were taken up by the corporate media, with the *New York Times* playing the leading role, and embraced by Congress, which gave authorization for war with Iraq by a bipartisan vote in October 2002. Less than five months later, US forces invaded Iraq, in complete violation of international law, and in defiance of mass protests, both in the United States and around the world, which mobilized millions.

Cheney was the principal architect and apologist for the legal and administrative framework that made these crimes possible. He built and defended the architecture of lawlessness: the doctrine of preemptive war, the legal rationales for "enhanced interrogation," extraordinary rendition, indefinite detention and the surveillance state. Cheney was the intellectual and political supervisor of systems of torture. That regime of abuse reached its grotesque apogee in Abu Ghraib, and its methods were institutionalized across secret prisons and CIA "black sites." The state's brutality was his policy.

When asked about the growing public opposition to the Iraq war, reflected in demonstrations, opinion polls and a rout of the Republicans in the 2006 midterm elections, Cheney answered with the cold syllable, “So?” As the WSWS commented at the time, Cheney’s remark “gave vent ... to his utter contempt for the will of the American people.”

Cheney only faced rebuke when he came into conflict with the military-intelligence apparatus itself, as revealed in the affair of Joe Wilson, a former US diplomat who had visited Niger for the Bush administration, seeking evidence of Iraqi purchases of uranium, only to find nothing. After Wilson publicly broke with the administration and criticized the war, Cheney counterattacked. The identity of Wilson’s wife, Valerie Plame, a covert CIA agent, was leaked to the press, along with a smear campaign suggesting that she had engineered the trip to Niger as a perk for her husband. Congressional Democrats and the intelligence agencies rallied to support the “outed” agent, the Bush administration was forced to investigate the leak and Cheney’s Chief of Staff Lewis Libby was eventually convicted of lying to a grand jury.

While this affair affected Cheney’s personal standing, the measures to promote war and domestic repression which he had promoted remained in place. The Obama-Biden administration continued the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and added new wars, against oil-rich Libya and, by proxy, against Syria, the lone client state of Russia in the Middle East. The authorizations for the use of military force, passed in 2001 and 2002, remain on the statute books.

The entire domestic apparatus of surveillance and repression has swelled to an unheard-of size. Obama began his term by ending any possibility of prosecution for the CIA torturers and those, like Cheney, who gave them their orders. He authorized drone-missile assassinations, including of American citizens, with kill lists drawn up and approved on “terror Tuesdays” at the White House. As revealed by courageous whistleblowers like Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden, the covert operations of the American government against the entire population of the world, including the American people, expanded exponentially.

The development of an American police state, given impetus under Bush and Cheney and continued under Obama, Trump and Biden, has now reached its culmination in the second Trump term. This fact by itself demonstrates that Cheney was not some rogue official but a representative of the ruling social layer, the financial aristocracy which controls both capitalist parties, the Democrats and the Republicans, and which is turning to dictatorship to defend its wealth and power from the working class.

When Cheney left office in January 2009, he was among the most hated figures in America and worldwide. His name was indelibly connected in popular consciousness with monstrous crimes against defenseless people, both at home and abroad. This was not a misunderstanding. Based on the principles established at the Nuremberg tribunal after World War II, the same punishments handed down to the Nazi war criminals should be applied to the leaders of any country that commits similar crimes: the launching of aggressive wars and the deliberate perpetration of mass death and genocide. If the Nuremberg precedent of 1946 had been applied consistently, Cheney’s career would have ended in a

prison cell or at the end of a rope.

In the final years of his life, Cheney and his daughter Liz moved closer to the Democratic Party. In 2024, the elder Cheney announced that he would vote for Kamala Harris. This was not, as the media portrays it, an act of principle and a defense of “democracy” against Trump’s coup. In reality, Cheney’s real motivation was his alignment with the Democrats’ principal concern—the US-NATO war against Russia.

The reaction of the Democratic Party to Cheney’s death exposes its own thoroughly reactionary and pro-imperialist character. Former Vice President Harris issued a statement declaring, “Cheney was a devoted public servant, from the halls of Congress to many positions of leadership in multiple presidential administrations. His passing marks the loss of a figure who, with a strong sense of dedication, gave so much of his life to the country he loved.”

Every word of this nauseating tribute underscores the identity of interests between the Democrats and Republicans as parties of Wall Street and war. For Harris and her party, Cheney’s life of criminality—of invasion, torture and lies—is celebrated because it embodied the ruthless pursuit of American imperial dominance.

Whatever tactical disputes may have emerged between Cheney and Trump, the two are bound together by deeper social and political processes: the descent of American capitalism and imperialism into barbarism and criminality. The entire political establishment lives in the shadow of the crimes that Cheney helped unleash.

The developing movement of the working class, armed with a socialist program, will settle accounts with Cheney and his ilk and the capitalist oligarchy that they represent.



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