
Book Review

Bush-Cheney Presidency: Worse Than Watergate

by Edward Spannaus

The Secret Presidency of George W. Bush

by John W. Dean

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This timely book were more accurately subtitled “The Secret and Deceptive Co-Presidency of Dick Cheney and George W. Bush”—for that is precisely what John W. Dean documents.

Dean, the one-time Counsel to President Richard Nixon, knows whereof he speaks, when he characterizes the Bush-Cheney co-Presidency as “worse than Watergate,” and he presents a compelling case that the abuse of power by this Administration is far, far worse, than that of the Nixon Administration. And this was *before* the Abu Ghraib scandal came to light, with the evidence now piling up day by day that top Administration officials are responsible for war crimes committed in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Dissembling as Policy

Dean’s *Preface* opens as follows: “George W. Bush and Richard B. Cheney have created the most secretive presidency of my lifetime. Their secrecy is far worse than during Watergate, and it bodes even more serious consequences.” Dean describes their secrecy as not only excessive, but obsessive. “It has created a White House that hides the president’s weaknesses as well as its vice president’s strengths. It has given us a presidency that operates on secret agendas. To protect their secrets, Bush and Cheney dissemble as a matter of policy.”

This is central to Dean’s argument, for this is not secrecy for its own sake, but secrecy in order to hide its policy-objectives. “Dick Cheney, who runs his own secret government operations, openly declares that he wants to turn the clock back to pre-Watergate years—a time of an unaccountable and extra-constitutional presidency.”

In examining Bush and Cheney, Dean says, he realized that what at first looked like a penchant for secrecy, was actually “a policy of concealment that they exercised throughout

the 2000 campaign.” When they entered the White House, “they quietly closed the doors, pulled the shades, and began making themselves inaccessible to the media and Congress” while also shutting down the flow of government information.

The Bush-Cheney White House is not unlike Nixon’s, in its efforts to craft the President’s public image and working for re-election, Dean observes. “But what clearly distinguishes this presidency is its vice-president, a secretive man by nature whose unmatched power is largely veiled but whose secret government operations have changed the world—and not for the better.”

“Dick Cheney, effectively a co-president incognito, works behind closed doors and does not answer to Congress or the public,” Dean continues. “His partner, the president, is not sufficiently knowledgeable about their policies to answer questions about them adequately. . . . It is not that he is stupid, only ignorant—and apparently by design.”

A Svengali and a Rasputin

Later, Dean elaborates his assessment of Bush, as one who is “mentally shallow, intellectually lazy, and incurious,” one who reads very little, gets briefed orally on the news by his staff, and demands short memos, etc. Yet, Dean surmises, Bush has a natural intelligence that he is only willing to employ when he’s really interested in a subject, such as baseball. “He has succeeded in life without doing much mental heavy lifting, and only on rare occasions has he done so as president.”

Therefore, this White House can only be understood, Dean contends, by taking into account Cheney’s powerful influence on Bush, and what Dean calls the “co-presidency,”—with Cheney preferring to operate in the shadows.

“Cheney’s persuasiveness behind closed doors, particularly one-on-one, is legendary,” Dean reports, “and with a rookie in national security matters like Bush, Cheney can be both a Svengali and a Rasputin.” As between Nixon and Kissinger, Dean notes, Nixon was the senior partner. But in contrast, “not only is Cheney the senior partner, he is prime minister *sub silentio*.”

The Strauss Factor

Much of what Dean reports will be familiar to *EIR*’s readers, although Dean is scrupulous to a fault in not mentioning Lyndon LaRouche or *EIR*, but instead citing many derivative sources, who have picked up on ideas and material first put into circulation by this magazine and by LaRouche’s campaign, particularly in the first *Children of Satan* report, *The Ignoble Liars Behind Bush’s No-Exit War*. No matter. Dean reviews the now-well-known Cheney-Wolfowitz 1992 Defense Policy Guidance, the Project for the New American Century, the Pentagon’s Office of Special Plans, and so on.

And, what Dean calls a “Cliff Notes-level analysis of neo-conservatism” is reproduced, this being a useful floor-speech given by Rep. Ron Paul (R-Tx), which describes neo-cons as

those who, among other things, “agree with Trotsky’s idea of Permanent Revolution . . . identify strongly with the writings of Leo Strauss . . . believe lying is necessary for the state to survive . . . believe certain facts should be known only by the political elite, and withheld from the general public . . . believe in pre-emptive war and the naked use of force to achieve any desired ends . . . openly endorse the idea of a American empire. . . .”

In a footnote, Dean acknowledges that in preparation for this book-project, he read several works either by, or about, Leo Strauss. It absolutely benefits from his having done so.

9/11: An Opportunity

Dean observes that Cheney, “the strong man” of the Presidency, “appears to find the sort of pleasure in power that medieval warlords once did.” But there is also an agenda, albeit hidden, which Dean illustrates—apart from Cheney’s business dealings around Halliburton and the secretive Energy Task Force—by what happened around the 9/11 attacks.

“For Cheney, the 9/11 attack was *not* a transforming event,” Dean writes; “rather it was further confirmation of his long-held Hobbesian perception of the world’s likely state of perpetual war.” Moreover, Dean notes, it was, for Cheney, “an opportunity,” and he elaborates:

“For Cheney and his like-minded associates, 9/11 was a perfect storm, a moment they had even anticipated when looking earlier for a catalyst necessary to accomplish their broader goals. . . . During the 2000 campaign, Cheney kept his dogs of war caged, and not until 9/11 did he set them free.” It is in this context that Dean reports on the imperial policies in the making for a decade, which Cheney has now put into practice.

Dean does not accuse Cheney in any way of being involved in the planning or the execution of the 9/11 attacks. But, neither did Cheney and his team just sit back and wait for the attacks to occur. Dean documents how Cheney actively sabotaged efforts by others to deal with the terrorist threat, particularly with his shutting down of the blue-ribbon, Hart-Rudman Commission, and his convincing Bush to put him in charge with his do-nothing terrorism task force in May 2001.

Dean’s hypothesis about Cheney’s and Bush’s actions prior to 9/11, and their obstruction of any investigations after 9/11, is summarized as follows:

“Given the effort to prevent others from learning what they knew about such a threat, when they knew, and what they were planning to do about it, it is reasonable to believe that they planned to exploit terrorism before 9/11 handed them the issue ready for exploitation—a fact they obviously want to keep buried.”

Impeachable Crimes

In compiling his bill of particulars, Dean argues that on every count, what Bush and Cheney have done, is far worse than anything Nixon and his team ever did. Two areas which

he documents in some detail, are the deception of Congress around the launching of the Iraq war, and then the leaking of the CIA identity of the wife of former Ambassador Joe Wilson, in order to attempt to discredit Wilson’s debunking of the Niger “uranium” fable. (Dean notes that although Nixon had his “enemies list,” Nixon never targetted his enemies’ wives, and “he never employed a dirty trick that was literally life-threatening.”)

Dean details the Administration’s lies used to justify the attack on Iraq, and he documents the fact that Congress did *not* give Bush a blank check to launch an attack on Iraq; but rather, when Congress passed its use-of-force authorization in October 2002, there were two conditions placed on it: that the President must submit to Congress a formal determination that (1) further diplomatic means would not resolve the alleged threat of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction; and that (2) the military action was part of the overall response to terrorism, and against those responsible for the 9/11 attacks.

What Bush sent to Congress in fulfillment of this requirement, Dean characterizes as “male bovine droppings” and a “blatant fraud.” Not since Lyndon Johnson’s hoodwinking of Congress around the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, “has a president so deceived Congress around a matter of such grave national importance.”

In these and other matters involving Congress, especially Congressional demands for information about the operations of the Presidency, Bush claims to be preserving the powers of the Presidency and protecting it from legislative encroachment. But in this, Dean observes, Bush is merely repeating what Cheney tells him to say, “for Cheney has long believed that Congress has no business telling presidents what to do, particularly in national security matters.”

Dean contends that Cheney’s views were shaped during his time in the White House in the mid-1970s as Gerald Ford’s chief of staff, in the wake of Vietnam and Watergate, when Congress was dismantling the imperial Presidency of Nixon. Cheney still resents this, and was also unhappy with his colleagues in Congress in the 1980s for exercising their oversight and investigative powers with respect to Iran-Contra—and, as the senior Republican on the House Iran-Contra Committee, Cheney did everything he could to protect the White House and then Vice-President George H.W. Bush.

Cheney’s view, of an unchecked, extra-constitutional imperial Presidency, is what has now come to the fore once again, and especially dramatically in recent weeks, in the form of the administration’s now-leaked legal arguments which contend that U.S. laws and international treaties prohibiting torture and war crimes, are an unconstitutional limitation on the powers of the Presidency.

Dean concludes with a stark warning that the Bush-Cheney Administration is now waiting for another terrorist event to occur, more catastrophic than 9/11, which will permit them to push the Constitution aside and establish a dictatorship. It is a warning to be taken very seriously.