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We Are Living in the World Dick Cheney Made

By Howard Fineman: 03/04/2013

WASHINGTON -- The capital's dysfunction is leading some thinkers here to conclude that "power" no longer exists. In a tribal and digital world, the theory goes, top-down authority is dead.

Anyone who believes that -- and every other voter in America -- needs to see R.J. Cutler's calmly voiced yet disturbing new feature documentary called "The World According to Dick Cheney."

It's a cautionary tale of unchecked zealotry in action. "We need people of principle who have deep conviction," Cutler told me. "But deep conviction can also take down a democracy."

Watch the movie and see the risks. In a fast-moving 109 minutes, you will follow the rise of a man who, at his height, had virtually unchecked power to rain destruction on other nations and who drove the creation of the military-diplomatic world in which we still live on the eve of the 10th anniversary of the fiery "shock and awe" launch of the Iraq War.

Power wasn't dead when Cheney had it, and I doubt somehow the planet has changed that much since he was in his heyday.

Yes, the American "homeland" has not been attacked since 9/11. But the homeland we now inhabit is largely the product of Cheney's thinking.

Is that his fault -- or ours? As portrayed in Cutler's film, Cheney is a force of nature, a potent mix of ambition, aggression, insight and fear. He is a blunt instrument, in both senses of the adjective.

As such, he needed to be controlled. But by whom? The answer, for several crucial years, was no one: not the benighted and incurious president he served; not the cowed Congress and (most of) the mainstream media; not the American people, who in fact voted in 2000 in greater numbers for the Democratic ticket.

Cutler is well-known for the sunnier documentary he made 20 years ago, "The War Room," about Bill Clinton's first presidential campaign. His Cheney movie was a hit at the Sundance Film Festival earlier this year and deserves to be one on CBS' Showtime, which will run it next week (9 p.m. on March 15).

Distilling interviews with journalists, biographers and central figures in Cheney's saga, including 20 hours with the former vice president himself, Cutler chronicles how Cheney -- zealously, relentlessly, single-mindedly -- accumulated the power he then wielded in the first term of President George W. Bush. We see Cheney shrewdly and patiently playing the inside game for decades -- attaching himself to rising stars in

successive Republican administrations; becoming a leader in Congress; finally steering Bush to pick Cheney as his running mate and then insisting on unprecedented control of security matters.

The portrait is riveting because we know what Cheney's ascent led to: our seemingly irrevocable, full-blown security state, with all the attendant risks of constitutional and civil liberties abuses; wholesale destruction and civilian deaths in swaths of Afghanistan and Iraq; more than 6,500 dead and more than 50,000 wounded U.S. soldiers; the rise of remote-control warfare, now embodied by drones; and a relationship with the Arab and Muslim worlds arguably more antagonistic than ever before. The film has the dreadful fascination of a road trip you know ends in a car wreck.

Since Cheney left the capital, President Barack Obama not only hasn't dismantled most of the "world according to Dick Cheney"; in many cases, he has either actively ratified it (drones and intrusive surveillance and monitoring of leaks). In other cases in which he has opted for rollback (Afghanistan), Obama has moved with extreme caution.

The documentary is about Cheney, but by indirection it is about Bush, too. In his first term, the president let Cheney be Cheney, often without even knowing he was doing so. As the years passed, Bush belatedly moved to rein in his vice president, siding with Justice Department lawyers on surveillance issues; firing Cheney's dearest friend, Donald Rumsfeld, from his Pentagon job; letting Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice win the argument over whether to bomb a Syrian nuclear reactor site (we didn't).

Finally, in the administration's last days, Bush refused to pardon Cheney's right-hand man, Lewis I. "Scooter" Libby, who had been convicted of obstruction of justice and perjury in the Valerie Plame case (though he did commute Libby's prison sentence).

Throughout the film, in his on-camera interviews with Cutler, Cheney exudes a calm, avuncular aura that does not hide (because he does not want it to hide) his snarling impatience with critics he regards as weak, naive, partisan, unpatriotic -- or all four.

Unrepentant, convinced of his rectitude and his ultimate place in history, the 72-year-old former vice president unequivocally defends wars, harsh interrogation methods, domestic surveillance and other features of the world he made. At the same time, he uses the film to sharply criticize Bush and to settle scores with bureaucratic rivals from back in the day.

Bush should not have let Rumsfeld go, Cheney says. "Our policies in Iraq were going well," he tells Cutler. "I thought we were doing the right thing, and the strategy that was being pursued was the president's strategy."

The U.S. should have taken out the Syrian reactor site, he insists, and Rice was utterly wrong to insist on taking the matter to the ■■■. "Condi was on the wrong side of all those issues," Cheney says, "so we had significant differences."

As for Libby, "I felt we were leaving a good man wounded in the battlefield." Cheney hasn't forgiven Bush for the lack of a pardon: "It was a major strain on our relationship, obviously a source of major friction. The president had the power to fix it and make it right and chose not to."

After the filming at Cheney's home in Wyoming, he invited the filmmaker to join him for a day of fly-fishing. Cutler shows Cheney on the river, tying lines and casting with practiced ease. It would be a peaceful scene if you didn't know the man in the boat.
