Who's Got the Helicopters?

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After September 11, 2001, leaders in the House of Representatives and the United States Senate were evacuated from Washington, D.C. When Senator Don Nickles of Oklahoma asked why the executive branch should decide when members of Congress could return to the nation's capital, Vice President Dick Cheney replied, "Because we've got the helicopters."

He wasn't really joking. The Darth Vader of the Bush Administration, Cheney wielded more power -- and was more dismissive of Congressional prerogatives -- than any vice president in American history.

With *In My Time*, Cheney, who had a left ventricle assist device implanted in his heart in 2010, enters the legacy business. He remains very much in
character. Demonstrating that he has forgotten nothing and learned nothing, Cheney delivers a polemical, take-no-prisoners defense of every single position he took as vice president.

The memoir is awash in unsubstantiated assertion, distortion and omission. The Bush Administration, Cheney notes, in a two paragraph analysis, was "committed to keeping spending down." This task, he indicates, vaguely (and ungrammatically), was "sometimes performed better than others." A budget review panel, which he chaired, Cheney boasts, worked so well that it "did not have to meet very often, particularly after one cabinet member made an appeal that resulted in her budget numbers being lowered." Although he identifies himself as a fiscal conservative, Cheney does not mention the devastating impact on the federal deficit of two unfunded wars, an unfunded prescription drug plan, and two rounds of tax cuts (whose benefits flowed to the wealthiest Americans).

Even with "the benefit of hindsight," Cheney continues to insist that "there was no place more likely to be a nexus of terrorism and WMD capability than Saddam Hussein's Iraq." He relies, as he has for almost a decade, on phrases from CIA reports about "contacts" between terrorists and Iraqi officials, the discredited information, cited by President Bush in his 2003 State of the Union Address, that Saddam Hussein sought to purchase uranium from Niger to build a nuclear bomb, and the discovery of what David Kay, chair of the Iraq Survey Group, called "WMD related program activities."

The evidence Cheney recycles falls woefully short of a slam-dunk case that the threat posed by Saddam to the national security of the United States was so substantial and imminent as to justify a preemptive war. Equally important, Cheney presents no evidence at all that Americans are safer because we deposed Saddam and occupied Iraq.

When he turns to warrantless wiretapping, the prisoners at Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib, and "enhanced interrogation techniques," Cheney sticks to a shopworn script as well. He neglects to mention that the courts established by the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act of 1978 gave government officials great latitude to spy on suspected terrorists. Nonetheless, because parts of the program "remain classified," he asks us to accept on faith that the National Security Agency needed expanded authority, that the program was legal, that the objections of Attorney General John Ashcroft and Deputy Attorney General James Comey were unfounded, that the New York Times story about NSA surveillance put national security at risk, and that the surveillance initiative "saved lives and prevented attacks."

Cheney continues to believe that "detainees" of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars do not qualify for Geneva Convention protection. They are terrorists, he declares, who target civilians and have "committed horrific acts of savagery and welcomed a fight to the death." Unconcerned, apparently, that these prisoners have not been charged, let alone convicted, of anything, he shrugs off the critique of civil libertarians, judges, and informed citizens throughout the world, content that they be held "for the duration of the conflict" (even if it's only slightly shorter than forever).

Citing opinions from lawyers inside the Bush Administration, Cheney claims that "enhanced interrogation techniques" were legal. Even though he cannot "reveal much about it," he asserts, waterboarding was the only method that could work with Abu Zubaydah and Khalid Sheikh Mohammed. The views of the United States Senate (that the interrogations be conducted under the rules of the Army Field Manual) and the decision of the U.S. Supreme Court in Hamdan V. Rumsfeld does not give him pause. To date Cheney has declined to say whether it would be legitimate for other countries to subject Americans to waterboarding.

Now that Cheney no longer has helicopters, his arguments seem neither powerful nor persuasive. At odds with the recollections of George W. Bush, his "Dick, what do you think we ought to do?" account of the Oval Office meeting that preceded the air strike against Iraq, seems self-aggrandizing. His attacks on Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice seem gratuitous and mean-spirited.

Let's hope that Cheney's time has come and gone. And that we, the people for whom he has so little respect, will repair the damage and restore our democracy.