

# CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

BILL KRISTOL:

Hi, I'm Bill Kristol. Welcome back to *Conversations*. I'm very pleased to be joined today by my good friend, a former colleague for, God, quite a while, almost two decades, I guess, at *The Weekly Standard*, Steve Hayes now the editor and CEO of *The Dispatch*, author of an excellent biography of on Dick Cheney that was published in 2007, and we're going to discuss the late Dick Cheney who passed away a couple of weeks ago. And this is Wednesday, November 19th. Actually, the funeral is tomorrow, which will be an event here in Washington, and a deserved one in my view. But anyway, we want to talk about this man and his really remarkable career. So Steve, thanks for joining me.

STEVE HAYES:

Of course. Happy to be with you.

BILL KRISTOL:

I mean, it really is. Well, I'm just ask you about the book first. I think it's so interesting, you were youngish at the time, not junior, but not—

STEVE HAYES:

Unlike today.

BILL KRISTOL:

Unlike today, at *The Weekly Standard*, and you decided in 2004 or 5, you'd done an awful lot of work covering 9/11, right after 9/11, pivoting to cover that, its aftermath and wars and so forth. I guess you got to know Vice President Cheney, and his people in that period. But why the decision... There are many, many books you could have written on Iraq and on other people involved. Why the decision to write about Dick Cheney?

STEVE HAYES:

Yeah, I think it's largely the context that you suggest. It was obvious that he was playing this outsized role as vice president after having called the... you know, in 1996 when he was thought to be a potential running mate for Bob Dole. He was asked about the job of the vice presidency, and he said, "It's a cruddy job, nobody should want it." And he becomes vice president, and immediately... I mean, I think he was very influential even before the 9/11 attacks, but certainly after the 9/11 attacks, given his career and his experience in national security and intelligence questions, he became, I think, sort of the intellectual architect of that response, and that was obvious as somebody who was covering the Bush White House and covering what was happening in response to those attacks. Everything kept going back to Dick Cheney, and so that made it kind of an obvious project for me.

But I think the other thing that was particularly appealing was he wasn't talking about any of this stuff with anybody. Just the way he operated is he wasn't given interviews. He would do the occasional sort of big meet the press one-on-one interview with Tim Russert at a big moment, but he wasn't in all of the news stories about what was

happening, and he wasn't doing cable news, talking head circuit or any of that. He really was kind of secreted away and reserving his feedback and his advice to George W. Bush, and that made... Anytime you have a public official who's not talking a lot, that's really tantalizing as a reporter. So I sort of bugged the Cheney team and the Cheney family for, as I recall, the better part of a year and said, "Hey, this is going to be a reported book. It's going to be a researched book. This is not going to be a hagiography. I would only do it if I can get access to him."

But I come to the project being more or less sympathetic to the arguments that he's making on national security and foreign policy and on domestic policy broadly, and you can be sure that I'll give him a fair hearing anyway. And after... Maybe it was just that I kind of wore them down. And it was great then, thanks in large part to you and your willingness to give me time to spend with him and away from *The Standard*. I still did a lot of reporting and writing for the magazine through that three year project, but it was an incredible experience to be able to travel the world with him, to cover these meetings, small meetings, big meetings, to talk to everybody involved. It really was sort of a young reporter's dream job.

BILL KRISTOL:

It strikes me in retrospect, I can't remember if we talked about this at the time, is you decided to really do a full scale biography of him and to go back to his youth and certainly his early career in Washington and his career in the House and Secretary of Defense. You didn't have to do that. I mean, the easier book, honestly, to write, would've been Cheney and the Bush Administration, Cheney and Post 9/11, and perfectly legitimate book and other people did write more that kind of thing. I'm curious both sort of why you decided to do that and what you learned during that. That was something you obviously knew about, you were interested in American history and you followed some of this, but it was less... It wasn't what you were covering day-to-day, so to speak.

STEVE HAYES:

Right. Yeah, it's a good question, and I could make an argument as I go back and reflect on it and having spent the past several weeks reflecting on his career and on my interactions with him and the work that I did on him that maybe it wasn't the best decision. I was sort of young and naive and didn't know how ambitious an undertaking that was probably at the time. I mean, hard to imagine cranking out a biography of really of anybody in a three-year time period to say nothing of somebody who had worked at the highest levels of US government for 40 years. So to go back and to talk to all of his buddies from the Natrona County High School football team and the guy that he traveled to Yale with. But at the same time, there wasn't an obvious entry point beyond that. And as is the case with anybody you're covering on a contemporaneous basis, what happened to them as a kid and they're growing up and the influence of their parents and all that, that really matters.

And I didn't think it was... The more I sort of jumped into the project, the less confident I was that there was any other way to do it. Probably if I had to do it again, the thing to have done would've been to take six or seven years to write the book and not try to do it in three, but the publisher wanted it out before they left office. You know all of the challenges and the pressures. But I do think having put in the work and put in the time, it is a better book because of it. Because so much of what we came to know as Dick Cheney, as a member of Congress, as Secretary of Defense, as Vice President, comes out of the person he was as a kid and as a teenager and as a college dropout and all of those things.

BILL KRISTOL:

So without going through the whole [inaudible], people should get the book and read it, honestly. It really is a good read and very instructive on many levels about Dick Cheney, but also about American politics and American life, to some degree, over the 50 years he was so... at that time had been already prominent for 40... but a long time, right? So what did you learn? I mean, what surprised you? What struck you about his upbringing, his younger experiences in the late '60s and '70s in Washington? Who did he admire? Who did he model himself on? Just those kinds of questions I'm very intrigued by.

STEVE HAYES:

Yeah, I mean, in some respects, he was who we all came to know as vice president, even back as a kid. He came from a family with taciturn reserved role models. Of the people, his brother was not talkative, his father was not talkative. Somebody told me in reporting the book that Dick Cheney was the most talkative male in his family, which is hard to believe. But if you see that that's kind of how he's grown up, it doesn't surprise you at all. I guess the thing that stands out as much as anything is the stumbles he had along the way and how much those shaped him. So he grew up a lot in Lincoln, Nebraska, moved to Wyoming, sort of shaped by Wyoming and the libertarian ethos of Wyoming, in a sense of values, I would say more than ideology. He was not an ideological... He wasn't an ideological person even when he was working as Gerald Ford's chief of staff. He was sort of clinical and analytical about American politics and about how Washington works and how Washington should work.

But I would say he was shaped by Wyoming values, and you see that. When he went away to Yale after he graduated from high school, he went with one of his best friends. They took a train all the way across the country, showed up at Yale, and very obvious, very early, I think, that he was a fish out of water. It didn't click, it didn't fit. He had a job as somebody who worked in the dining halls, they called them the Bursary Boys. So Cheney was working and he was at the same time socializing with people who had gone to a year of the most exclusive finishing schools and the kinds of things that happened at Yale.

And I think as a result, he certainly had a good time at Yale according to all of his friends who I talked to. There were some funny stories that came out of that period of his life. And while he was a smart guy, I don't think he applied himself. He would say that he didn't apply himself. So he got a letter from Yale saying, "Hey, you better buck up." And then he got another one saying, "We're revoking your scholarship," and he wanted to stay. They basically disinvited him. So he went back to Wyoming and he took a job as a telephone lineman in rural Wyoming, living the kind of hard living existence that telephone linemen did, which was a lot of work, a lot of really hard physical labor and a lot of hard nights drinking and hanging out with that crowd. He ends up sort of separating from the drinking crowd and moving in with this old veteran in this kind of odd mobile home setup.

And he spends a lot of time with this guy listening to this guy's history, and Cheney develops a further interest in American history and the history of our wars. He did, in that short period of time, pick up two DUIs and they would later, I think, become pretty important. The second one he got in Rock Springs, Wyoming, ended up in jail, and he was in jail for a short period of time. I believe it was the very week that his friends at Yale were graduating from Yale. So it's this sort of very dramatic, the rock bottom in Rock Springs, while all of the people that he knew from Yale are going on to bigger and better things. He had a big sit down with his wife, Lynn, who was the star student

at Natrona County High School and probably was the one who should have gone to Yale and maybe would've succeeded at Yale.

She basically said, "I don't want to marry somebody like this." And by all accounts, that put him on the right path. He went to University of Wyoming, went to grad school at University of Wisconsin, picked up his old intellectual habits, and went to Washington from there after a couple of internships in Wyoming politics and Wisconsin politics.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. So you think that was important for him, just that experience? I mean, that is interesting. I do think that's true of a lot of people who end up being very successful. There's some moments in their lives when it's not all an easy path.

STEVE HAYES:

No, absolutely. And of course, typical of Dick Cheney, he tells this... It's a very dramatic story. I mean, just the facts of the story are incredibly dramatic, and when you talk to everybody else about it, they tell it in a very dramatic fashion. And Cheney downplays all the drama, "Ah, well, I don't know. It wasn't that big a speech." There's sort of a legend about the speech she gave him, and she sat him down and sort of wagged her finger and said, "I don't want to marry a failed Wyoming telephone lineman, and you need to get..." And he kind of downplays that and pooh-poos that. But I think it was a big moment, and it becomes... It factors later. He goes to Washington. As I said, he has a couple of internships and fellowships. He was pursuing a PhD at the University of Wisconsin because of his interest in politics, again, from much more an analytical and clinical perspective than an ideological perspective.

He didn't come to Washington for the reasons I came to Washington, was this deep belief in limited government and changing the world. He came because he was interested in the mechanics of government and how it worked. And he gets to Washington, does a stint at the Cost of Living Council, the Nixon administration, meets Donald Rumsfeld, who goes on to be Gerald Ford's Chief of Staff. And there's this moment where Rumsfeld brings Cheney in as his deputy, Deputy White House Chief of Staff under Gerald Ford. That's less than 10 years after he was in jail in Rock Springs, Wyoming, he's put forth by Donald Rumsfeld—

BILL KRISTOL:

And just in five... I guess five years after he comes to Washington and begins working in a rather junior level at the Nixon White House, in a rather not the most important agency there at the Cost of Living Council. I mean, it's kind of... I guess he just... What was the story? He just impressed everyone so much with his just ability? I mean, it is unusual to... that level.

STEVE HAYES:

I think he was impressive... Yeah, I think he impressed people with his willing to work. He really didn't have an ego. He wasn't there with his own agenda. People gave him a set of responsibilities and executed them, and by all accounts, executed him very well. I mean, the Cost of Living Council, for instance, this is part of Richard Nixon's wage and price controls efforts, and a lot of the people who were involved, strongly opposed the policies that they were being asked to design and implement. I mean, the team is sort of incredible. It's Alan Greenspan, it's Rumsfeld, it's these others. And Cheney is, in effect, kind of the typist, the low level guy as you suggest, who's brought in.

And he describes the experience, and this is where I think it's one of these points where his non-ideological approach to government and to thinking about how citizens interact with our government really changes because he says, "We're sitting in a room and we're asked to come up with the price of hamburger across the country. We don't know. It doesn't make any sense for us to be doing this, but this is the job Nixon has told us to do it." So Cheney goes in and he does it, and he does it well, and he doesn't have these ideological objections that a lot of these other people did, Rumsfeld and Greenspan and others. So he just does the job well. And I think that was... As I talked to people who worked with him in that era, that's what you heard again and again and again, is this guy... He has no ego. You give him a task, he does it, and he does it really well, and he's accountable.

And that certainly was one of the reasons that he and Rumsfeld hit it off the way that they did. They had had sort of a disastrous first interview where they disliked each other. Rumsfeld said Cheney was this arrogant academic on a PhD track at University of Wisconsin. And Cheney thought Rumsfeld was this fast-talking, rising star, new member of Congress, and they just didn't like each other, but they overcame that. Rumsfeld hires Cheney, then wants to bring him on as his Deputy Chief of Staff for Gerald Ford when Ford taps Rumsfeld, and Rumsfeld did not know about Cheney's DUIs, but Cheney does the full field FBI investigation, and Rumsfeld gets this call and they say, "What's going on with these DUIs?" And Rumsfeld calls Cheney, of course, and his first question, and the most important question is, "Did you disclose this when you were asked? Or is this something that they ferreted out?" And Cheney said, "No. Of course I disclosed it."

And at that point, Rumsfeld said, "I care that you told the truth." And Rumsfeld's telling to me, he walks down the hall to Ford's office and said he had to spend a fair amount of time convincing the new president that this guy he was about to hire as his deputy chief of staff was worth whatever risk could come from hiring Cheney. But convinced Cheney and Cheney goes on and—

**BILL KRISTOL:**

Because they have a unique—

**STEVE HAYES:**

Yeah, they have a unique power-sharing agreement where Cheney is almost Rumsfeld's replacement. It's almost like co-chief of staff where he sits on all the meetings if Rumsfeld isn't there. He does the travel if Rumsfeld doesn't travel. And he's 34 at the time, and this is this moment, I think again, a hinge moment where if Rumsfeld doesn't step in on his behalf, what happens to Dick Cheney? I mean, he's not the new deputy chief of staff in the Ford White House, and he doesn't make all the contacts he made, learn all the things he made. So pretty extraordinary moment.

**BILL KRISTOL:**

I mean, the degree to which I just... Having been a youngish staffer, I mean, in the executive ranch, the degree of confidence, the degree to which you must impress people including Rumsfeld, not an easy guy to impress. The guy that I knew one point moderately well and had big falling out with Cheney, stayed on better terms for their whole lives, I suppose. And close to him. But I mean, he wasn't an easy guy to impress. And the others weren't either, the Nixon White House and the Ford White House too were full of talented people and people with really great credentials and people who would've been... And people who would've loved that job, it would've been former

members of Congress, former governors, one can only imagine, right? That's a high level job. And then Rumsfeld insists on having him at age 32 or 3, I guess, it would've been then, as deputy chief of staff.

And then he become... And then he succeeds Rumsfeld as chief of staff. And Rumsfeld goes off to the defense department. I remember vaguely, I mean, I was in grad school myself at that point, first year or two, and not following staff movements in the Ford White House very closely, but I mean... Fraught time, Ford pardons Nixon, he's way behind in the polls. He's going to run for reelection. Reagan's going to challenge him. And Ford has the confidence by this point to make Cheney his chief of staff in, what is that, mid '75, something like that?

STEVE HAYES:

Yeah.

BILL KRISTOL:

And Cheney then runs the White House and kind of the reelection campaign, right? In '75, '76.

STEVE HAYES:

Yes. Yes. He plays a huge role. I mean, he doesn't know anything about campaigns, right? He's never done this before. He studied campaigns. He did some work on the campaigns of a governor in Wisconsin and had some hands-on experience in the very shortest-term way, with some smaller stakes. Yeah. He comes in and he's effectively helping to run that campaign and serving as chief of staff. And I think, again, that was an area where he kind of distinguished himself. He also did several things in those roles that I think were unique to the way that Washington was operating and made people think, "This guy might be a little different." And one of those moments came when Rumsfeld did go, Cheney was named chief of staff, and Rumsfeld had had cabinet level status as White House Chief of Staff. Cheney came in, and the assumption was he too would have that status. And he turned it down.

He said, "I'm not a cabinet level person. I'm a staffer. I want to sit in the back row at these meetings. I don't want to be at the table." And I mean, Washington is a power obsessed place. All of that stuff, it matters both in terms of the kinds of decisions you're able to make, but it matters to some extent how people see you, what kind of power you really have. And I think that was unique enough that it said to people, "This guy does operate by his own set of rules," and obviously, it suggests a level of confidence with his relationship with Ford, and the work that he was going to be able to do substantively that he didn't think he needed, whatever additional status that would've brought him.

BILL KRISTOL:

Cheney was very fond of Ford. Throughout the rest of Ford's life, I remember talking to Cheney when I got to know a little more in the George HW Bush administration. I knew him a little when he was a member of Congress. And then in the first Bush administration, I wasn't palling around with him, he was Secretary of Defense. I was the Vice President's Chief of Staff. I was a staff guy, and he was a principal at that point to say the least. But I would interact with him some and strike up a conversation and so forth. We both had some interest in history and yeah, he really thought Ford didn't get the respect he deserved and was just very loyal to him and fond of him. And then later on as well, I remember when Cheney was associated with AEI for a while, and Ford was hosting conferences out in Colorado, and Cheney was very much a

intermediary I think, in that relationship and so forth. Say a word about that. I'm just struck by the admiration of Ford, and what Cheney learned from him, or maybe didn't, I don't know.

STEVE HAYES:

I think he learned a lot. Look, a lot of it goes to Ford's decision to pardon Nixon, which was not an obvious, it wasn't something that was necessarily going to make him popular. There was a lot of risk involved in doing it, but Ford decided that he had to do it because he thought it was the right thing to do. And I do think people can, certainly, Dick Cheney has a lot of critics, he has a lot of admirers. But the one thing that is pretty consistent through his career is that he always thought that what he was doing was the right thing. Often with tremendous disregard to his own personal status and his reputation potentially. This was not somebody who spent a lot of time, Cheney, cultivating his own political reputation, or spending a lot of time with the media in service of growing his own public perception, or improving what people thought of him.

And he did, I think repeatedly at every step of his career, do what he thought was the right thing to do. And I think that explains a lot of his fondness for Gerald Ford, because he took, in those days, he made several of those kinds of decisions. And Cheney certainly admired that. You're right that that never really diminished. There was a time in the Bush administration when he was Vice President, where Cheney had more or less gone dark. He was not giving interviews. He didn't give many interviews the whole time as we discussed, but it was a time later in the Bush administration when things were difficult in Iraq, after the re-elect, and looking at the possibility of a surge of troops. And Cheney wasn't talking to anybody at that time. And Bob Woodward had come to him and said, "Hey, I need to talk to you for this book." And an approach like that from Woodward always meant, "Talk to me, or you're going to be reflected poorly in this book." And Cheney said, "No." He didn't want to do it. He didn't like the earlier Woodward books or some parts of them, and said he wasn't going to talk to him. And Woodward came back to Cheney and said, "Hey, I'm working on this revisionist history on Gerald Ford's life. Would you talk to me for that?" It was a separate request, separate book, project. And Cheney said, "I will talk to you for the Ford Book. It really matters. It matters for history. It matters for Gerald Ford. So I will talk to you.

And then there was this controversy where it was all restricted and embargoed for the Ford book specifically. And according to Cheney and his team, this was very clearly understood by everybody involved. But Cheney arrives for the interview and Woodward asks him some question about something that was happening with the Iraq War at the time, I think it was. And Cheney answers the question without saying, "Hey, this is all still off the record." And Woodward uses it in that book, and it becomes a big deal, and Cheney and Woodward have this falling out. But I think it was telling to your question, that as he's rejecting interview, after interview after interview, that might help him shape how people are thinking about the current Bush administration, or help people understand better what Dick Cheney is trying to do. He won't do those, but a request comes to help people understand the history of Gerald Ford, and Cheney leaps at the opportunity to do that. I think you're right. He did learn a lot from Ford in that sense.

BILL KRISTOL:

That's a couple other things about Cheney you could say a word on that struck me. He was ambitious as well as, he wasn't a self-promoter, not that kind of ambition. But he becomes Chief of Staff. He goes back to Wyoming and runs for Congress right away,

wins obviously and serves in Congress. He takes the Sec Def job, the Secretary of Defense job after Tower isn't confirmed in 1989. I don't know that he really campaigned for that job much. Maybe behind the scenes he let it be known that he'd be available, but I don't recall him. But I think he was an obvious, safe pick after the Tower debacle.

STEVE HAYES:

Except for his two DUIs.

BILL KRISTOL:

Well, good point. Which was Tower's problem was partly drinking mostly. But I guess the ambition strikes me as just something that one shouldn't... He thought he could do these jobs, and he wanted to have the chance to prove himself and to do them and, I think, contribute to the country, as you were saying. So he's complicated. He was modest, but he was also very self-confident and fairly ambitious. Is that right?

STEVE HAYES:

Certainly. I think that's exactly right. Yeah. You don't do the things he did without being ambitious. You don't really serve in public office without being ambitious. I don't think there's any question that he was ambitious. I think the question is, was it ambition for the sake of ambition? Was it ambition for the sake of self-glory? Was it ambition because he thought he could help, he thought he could do the jobs well? Yeah, there was one point at which of course Cheney famously helped run George W. Bush's search for Vice President, then became Vice President. And there's all sorts of bad reporting about that and mythmaking about what he did and the role there. The reality is George W. Bush wanted him for that job from the outset, as he watched Cheney do the job and hold these meetings with staff.

Bush was impressed at how often Cheney didn't speak a lot, but when he did, everybody in the room stopped, and listened and paid attention to Cheney. There were all sorts of reasons that Bush eventually settled on Cheney. But when I was talking to Cheney about the process, and we got to the discussion about the end of that process, how it ended. And Cheney said, "I'll be honest, looking at the other candidates, I did think I was the best candidate at that point. I didn't want the job. I thought it was a crummy job. I certainly didn't take the assignment of leading the search with the expectation that I would take the job." Bush had more or less offered the job to him at the beginning of the process. Cheney didn't want to do that, that wasn't why he got into it.

But he said at the end of it, "Yeah, I thought I could do the job better than these other guys." It was Frank Keating, and it was Governor of Oklahoma and a couple of others. And Cheney said, "No insult to them. I thought I would be better at the job." So certainly, he had ambition. He has some level of self-regard. I would say by contemporary standards, not much, compared to more recent American political leaders. But yeah, I think you framed it exactly right. It's not that this was all selfless, and he didn't think about his role in American history. But in terms of what we've come to expect from people who serve at those levels of government, I do think he was unique in that sense. It wasn't all about power grabbing and self-aggrandizement.

BILL KRISTOL:

You said earlier as we were talking, that he was genuinely very powerful as Vice President. I think maybe that's in the subtitle of your book, I can't remember. Most

powerful Vice President in American history or something. So what about that? There were myths about Cheney I think there was reality. What's the truth about Cheney's role as you did the reporting, having gotten interested in it? As you said, because you thought he was so central, he turned out to be as central as you thought. And how, in what way, persuading Bush, putting proteges around the government and manipulating the system... What was...?

STEVE HAYES:

Yeah, I would make the distinction between the first term and the second term. He was certainly less powerful in the second term for a bunch of reasons we can get into. I think that the main reason he was as powerful as he was, was because George W. Bush wanted him to be that powerful. So that was the arrangement they had going in. Bush really did make the decision, I think, to pick Dick Cheney because he cared more about governance than winning. Of course he cared about winning, but he didn't pick Dick Cheney because he thought he could get Wyoming's three electoral votes or something. Obviously he wanted Cheney because he thought Cheney could help him govern. And even in those pre-9/11 months, 10 months before 9/11, 8 months before 9/11, I guess Cheney had big jobs, and he was involved in a lot of different things. He ran the Energy task force, and Cheney could pick and choose where he wanted to involve himself. But when I talked to Bush, and I had two long interviews with Bush about Cheney for the book. And the thing that Bush kept coming back to was that he had been convinced early that Cheney—it's the ambition question in some ways that we were discussing just a moment ago—he had become convinced that Cheney didn't have any political ambitions of his own. He wasn't going to run for president. Cheney thought that the job was just to give Bush the best advice he could possibly give him on a wide range of issues. And certainly George W. Bush believed that. So Cheney wasn't running around talking to reporters on background. He wasn't running around holding meetings where he had his own separate agenda from George W. Bush's agenda.

Certainly they had policy disagreements, they would hash them out. But you don't get the sense that Cheney did a lot of undermining Bush. Certainly Bush didn't think that Cheney was undermining Bush, as he was giving him this advice. And in large part, Bush explained to me that was because he didn't have to worry about this stuff. He felt like when Cheney was giving him advice, he was just giving him advice because that's what he thought the right thing to do was. And I think we all have those kinds of people in our lives, and if you've got a personal crisis, or you're trying to make a big career decision or something, you go out to a number of different people, all of them close to you, presumably, and you're asking these people for their advice for reasons. But to a certain extent, you can think, “Why is this person giving me the advice that they're giving? Is this going to help this person do this thing?”

And there are some people who at moments like that, you come to really count on because you trust that they're just giving you the advice that they think is best for you, in that moment for your decision. And I think Bush regarded Cheney as that kind of a person from the beginning. And that was true I think really through the campaign, through the first eight months of the administration. But then it became especially true after September 11th, where Cheney had vast experience on the intelligence committee in the House. He was a consumer of intelligence as Chief of Staff for Gerald Ford. He served as Secretary of Defense during a war. He understood this, and could give Bush context for the decisions that they were making early on. And that enhanced his power, I think right away. I think the caricature of their relationship. There was a *Saturday Night Live* spoof of Cheney as the President and Bush, not really the president. And Cheney, I think it was Daryl Hammond as Cheney, hosts this press availability where

he's the President and Bush doesn't really get to say anything. That was never the case. I think nobody who worked in that White House thought that that was the way that the White House ran. But Cheney was silent in many of the meetings. He didn't speak much in National Security Council meetings. He didn't try to persuade people in a semi-public way. He reserved the advice that he gave to George W. Bush in their one-on-one meetings. And that really mattered, I think, to Bush.

BILL KRISTOL:

Interesting. I want to get back a little bit to what you learned about Cheney personally when you had spent all that time with him, it's so interesting. And what he liked, who he respected, who he admired, what books he read. But let me ask one more thing just on this, since it's so important, Cheney's role in the Bush administration, especially in national security policy. There were people who had known Cheney well, who were surprised that he became, I'll use a shorthand, so hawkish, so insistent on going after Saddam, on a tough stance on the War on Terror, both in terms of dealing with the interrogation stuff, and surveillance, as well as the foreign policy side of it, so to speak. There were people who thought of him still like he was a Ford Republican, and the first George H.W. Bush administration he had not, I think, been in favor of, or if he had, he kept it awfully quiet of getting rid of Saddam. He was content with at least the decision to stop the war after 100 hours. So I'm just curious, did something happen? Or was he always that way? Or was it just he looked at the new situation and decided this was the right policy response? Well, I'm just curious.

STEVE HAYES:

Yeah, you've latched onto one of the I think the central questions in the book really, was this a different Dick Cheney in the Bush administration, or was this Dick Cheney? And I think probably both things are true at once. This is not a mono-causal explanation. Yeah, you heard from people like Brent Scowcroft that I don't even recognize this Dick Cheney. But you also heard from people who remained Dick Cheney admirers like Bob Michael, who was in some ways a Dick Cheney mentor when they were in Congress together who said, "Yeah, I never really imagined him to be quite as hawkish as he turned out to be." My own view is that Cheney had always been pretty hawkish. You're right about Saddam and the first Gulf War. He made that argument at the time. He defended that argument later. And at one point he said, flippantly, "We had to make a calculation, how many American lives would it be to get rid of Saddam Hussein? And we concluded, not too damn many."

So I think he believed in that restraint in that context. I don't think there's any question that 9/11 changed the way that he saw the world and the way that he calculated risk. And one of the things that I think can't be over-emphasized is his work on these continuity of government exercises. And basically the simple description of these is, dating back decades long before Cheney was in government, there are preparations that are undertaken by senior government officials, legislative, executive branches, to make sure that the US government could exist in the case of a massive catastrophic attack. And Cheney was involved with those as Chief of Staff to Gerald Ford. He remained involved with them when he was in congressional leadership, and with the House Intelligence Committee, obviously was involved with him as Secretary of Defense, and then as Vice President.

And I think when 9/11 happened, we lost more than 3,000 people on US soil. Cheney said, "Well, this is what we've been preparing for. So this is that moment." And in the exercises that he'd participated in, in some cases, there were exponentially more casualties and deaths, hundreds of thousands, millions of people dying in an attempt to

decapitate the US government. And he looked at that and he looked at the preparations that he'd made, and he said, he said this at the time, he didn't see 9/11 as a one-off attack... "This is this horrible thing that happened and now we can kind of move on." It was, "This could be—maybe is likely to be—the first in a series of what could be more catastrophic attacks, and further attempts to decapitate the US government." And I think there was a fair amount of intelligence that suggested he was right about that.

So I do think having anticipated—and participated in anticipating—those kind of attacks, and participated in those kinds of preparations for as long as he did, when this happened, his mind immediately said, "My job, my central job now for as long as I'm in public office, as long as I'm Vice President, is to make sure that there's not another attack on US soil." And I think it changed the way that he looked at, again, his risk tolerance, the way that he looked at how we could preempt attacks. One of his main arguments against John Kerry in the 2004 presidential election, was that Kerry didn't learn that lesson. That the Bush administration understood, we can't wait until after we're attacked to take action. We have to preempt these threats when and where we can. And John Kerry didn't learn that lesson. He has this law enforcement mentality of the Clinton administration. We can't afford to take those risks. And I do think that that's so central to how Cheney made decisions at every step of the Bush administration.

BILL KRISTOL:

You were with him from traveling with him, as you said, having interviews with him, and spending a lot of time with him, and certainly his team, what, 2004 to 2006, 2007, something like that? 2003? Well, I'm curious, we'll come back to what he was like when you were with him, but did he ever, later on, you stayed in touch with him, second guess himself, so to speak? Or think he got some things wrong? Or conversely, did he defend himself fervently and say, "they don't understand how much worse it could have been if we hadn't done some of these things?" Or did he just think he had done what he thought was right and not agonized too much about it?

STEVE HAYES:

Yeah, he's not much of a second-guesser. One of our running jokes in the times that I went and interviewed him was that every interview, I would preface it by saying, "Is this finally the interview where I get Dick Cheney to put himself on the couch, and do deep psychoanalysis?" This is this not him. He doesn't do that. That's not to say he wouldn't admit mistakes, or say when he got something wrong. You remember probably when it was near or around the time that the US government, I think it may have just followed the killing of Abū Muṣ'ab Zarqāwī who was leading Al-Qaeda in Iraq for a while, and had been a figure in Al-Qaeda before the Iraq War. And Cheney went on *Meet the Press*, and usually when he talked about these things, he was pretty measured. And he said, "One of the things that we really have to understand, that this isn't going to be over quickly. This is going to be a long-term commitment that requires national seriousness about getting the job done and winning this war and did everything he could, I think, not to minimize the task before the country. In this case, he said something to the effect of, "I think we see that Al-Qaeda is in its last throes", or something like that. "Al-Qaeda in Iraq is in its last throes. The insurgency is in its last throes." And it wasn't, it wasn't close. And certainly behind the scenes he wasn't making that argument. He was making the argument that we need to double and triple down, but he said it. And so we talked about it when I interviewed him and I said, "How could you say something like that? Obviously it wasn't in its last throes." And he gave me first the dictionary definition of "throes", and it doesn't necessarily mean there's a... And he said, "Yeah, look, I made a mistake, that wasn't true."

So he was willing to do that, I would say on occasion, but he's not somebody who's going to spend a lot of time publicly second-guessing what he's done. And I think he would make the argument, did make the argument through the end of the administration and beyond that it's too easy now to look back and say, "We didn't need to do all these things", because we didn't have another mass casualty attack on the scale of 9/11 or the things that he had imagined we could. And I think he was frustrated by people like Barack Obama who ran and said in effect, "Eh, the war on terror is over. They overreacted. We didn't need to do all this stuff." And Cheney would say that the reason that we haven't had another mass casualty attack is because of the things that we did. Of course, that's going to be hotly debated forever. But I think there's a good reason to believe that he was right on a lot of that argument.

BILL KRISTOL:

You mentioned in passing that he was a serious man. Man, I'm very struck by that. And there are others of his generation who were as well, but really fundamentally serious about governance, serious about what he took to be his responsibilities and the decisions he made. I don't know, just curious, were there particular models he had in mind for American history or just that's the way he was and the way he had made himself as he moved up the ladder in Washington? And then maybe on the personal side, I remember you coming back from some of these trips with Cheney and alluding sometimes a little bit just to he's a little different and private and he's not 24/7 pouring over intelligence reports. And our colleague, Matt Labash, went fly-fishing with him and stuff and wrote how much he loved fly-fishing. Cheney I guess was very good at it.

STEVE HAYES:

Obsessed.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, I remember myself once being struck that he had read a novel that wasn't particularly famous, and I hadn't read and someone had recommended it to him. So it struck me that he was a little more complex man than people who think of him as entirely the studious, as they say, 12 hour a day government official.

STEVE HAYES:

Yeah, I would say he was very serious about the job that he held. He gave this commencement speech at Natrona High School where he graduated, in 2006, and it was one of these speeches when I read it as I was putting the book together, you can immediately see he's giving advice to students, as one does, in these kinds of speeches. And you can immediately see that this is the Dick Cheney outline for how to succeed in life. And one of the things he said was, "Do the work in front of you, most important thing. Don't look down the road, don't be ambitious beyond what you have to do. Do a really good job at the stuff in front of you and take it seriously and focus on it and good things will happen." That's exactly how he operated in all of these different places along his career, I think that's what he did. And so he took the job very seriously and he had, I think, a deep appreciation for the moment in history and his role.

He understood clearly that he was the most powerful vice president in American history, or at least could be in the discussion and understood what the responsibilities were. But yeah, he's very different in private. He's a funny guy, like a cut-up. He used to tell stories about campaigning with Alan Simpson, late senator, very good Dick Cheney friend and they would campaign together around Wyoming. And he'd get bored

with campaigning, giving the same speech and droning on and on at one of these events because he had basically memorized Simpson's remarks because they'd campaigned so often. He went up and gave Simpson's speech and then ended the speech and said, "I don't know what Al's going to say because I just gave his speech verbatim", and he basically had, and he would do silly things like that.

He wasn't as grim and gruff as I think his public reputation would have, but he also didn't do much to fight that public perception and in some ways liked to do that. I asked him about it and he said, "Do I like the idea that people think I'm Darth Vader and I operate in secret over here? Yeah, I think that's a great way to operate." He caught me on one trip. I went with him to the Middle East and we had a refueling stop in Dublin at Shannon Airport in Dublin. I think it's in Dublin, Ireland. And I had wandered off the plane, we had, I don't know, an hour or something. It had been a long, long trip, endless, these are 18-hour days. You know this well, you're tired at the end of these trips.

And I walked to a stand-up little bar with Olivier Knox, who was then I think of Agence France-Presse, and we got a couple of Guinnesses in rapid succession, and we were talking to the bartender and I said, "Hey, could we...", the really cool Guinness pint glasses from Ireland, I said, "Hey, could we take one of these pint glasses to go?" He said, "Sure, go ahead." So we gave him a little extra tip, took the pint glasses, but we basically tried to sneak a Guinness back onto Air Force 2 to come back and we realized there was some risk and the Secret Service might see it and held the beers low as we were walking back on the flight. And sure enough, we get to the door of Air Force 2 and we hear a voice behind us, "Hey", and we get busted bringing these beers back on, and it's Cheney and the Secret Service, see this, and Cheney sees it, and I'm embarrassed, like could this be like an incident?

Could I get in trouble? And Cheney just laughs and waves his hand and he's like, "Ah, you're fine. Go ahead, take the beers back on." He was not a super serious guy all of the time. And I think that shows in some of the stories that are in the book, and certainly people who know him well, there are all sorts of stories about Cheney as a cut-up, certainly in his Yale days. But on the campaign trail and he definitely was not the person that most Americans, I think, came to know or think that they knew. And again, that was in part because he just chose not to engage with the media. He didn't make himself available. At one point, Bill Keller, who was then the editor of the *New York Times* wrote to Cheney this impassioned letter asking for additional access. Obviously self-serving, *New York Times* wants more access.

But also saying to Cheney, making the argument to Cheney, "Hey, Paul Wolfowitz has made himself"—Deputy Secretary of Defense at the time—"has made himself available to *New York Times* reporters. We've written nuanced pieces about Paul Wolfowitz. We think our readers understand Wolfowitz better now, not just the caricature." And then he contrasted Wolfowitz with John Ashcroft, Attorney General, and said, "Ashcroft hasn't done that, and his reputation has really suffered as a result." And the obvious implication in the Keller letter was to Cheney, you too are suffering because you don't make yourself available. And I actually think that Keller was right. I think some of the reasons that people didn't ever see that side of Dick Cheney is because he really didn't make himself available. Now, that was of great benefit to me as somebody who was writing a book him, but I think he could have done a lot more had he made himself available.

And the last point I'll mention on that is the interesting thing is he didn't always have such fraught relations with the media. In 2000 to 2008, they were enemies. I had a reporter at a dinner in 2008 in Iowa, when I told her I had written a book about Dick

Cheney, she just looked at me and said, "What was it like to write a biography of Lucifer?" And just wasn't kidding, prominent network on-air reporter said this to me. But in the Ford administration, Ford relied on Cheney's background as deputy chief of staff and chief of staff to maintain relations with the media. He was the main person for the Ford Administration who had background reporters on substantive policy discussions and what was happening at the White House.

And Ron Nessen at the end of the Ford Administration, who was Ford's press secretary, said, credit to Cheney, in this letter he wrote to Cheney and said, "Gerald Ford would not have the reputation that he has or wouldn't have had the relations that he has with the news media were it not for your constant efforts to make sure that the media were kept up to date and understood why we were making the decisions we were making." So he didn't always have that reputation, but certainly, I think it hurt him as vice president that he didn't spend more time with the news media.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. It was a big change. When I got to Washington in '85 and then into the George... Certainly when he was on the Hill, he was well liked and respected and almost a favorite, I would almost say, among the mainstream media, of the Republicans they covered. He was thoughtful. He didn't yell at them. He didn't, from their point of view, obsess about some of the issues they found most fraught. And so he was a hardliner on national security, and that was a respectable thing to be in the Reagan years. Wasn't surprised, let's put it that way. I think as Sec Def, maybe he became more... He had access to so much information, and then people forget, he ran a war that ended up going well and being viewed as an easy victory, 100 hours against Saddam... It wasn't obvious that it was going to go so well.

They were preparing for 10,000 deaths. There was a lot of opposition, the war almost didn't make it through the Senate, the authorization. I remember that well, and I think at that point, maybe he became just... And also just the actual security questions that came up. And I think he became a little less interested in doing what he had done in the Ford White House because it wasn't his job either. There were other people doing this of course, and really became concerned with running the war well. And Colin Powell was very good with the press, and Jim Baker worked the press a lot, and Cheney may have just felt "Fine, let them do it." I don't know if that's correct.

STEVE HAYES:

Yeah. No, and it's [inaudible].

BILL KRISTOL:

So I think that was the prelude maybe a little bit to the 2001-2009 period.

STEVE HAYES:

Yeah. I think there was an internal debate at the beginning of the first Gulf War about who would be doing the briefings. Remember in the Afghanistan war and the post-9/11 wars, Donald Rumsfeld himself did many of these briefings. He put himself out, he seemed to love it, right? Remember Rumsfeld, and there was a time where the right-wing press was like, "Donald Rumsfeld is this rock star."

BILL KRISTOL:

Right.

STEVE HAYES:

There was a debate at the beginning of the first Gulf War about whether Cheney would do those briefings, whether Powell would do those briefings, I think in part because of the reputation that you described. He had cultivated a reputation among serious mainstream journals like David Broder at *The Washington Post* and others. And Cheney said, “No, we’re going to have the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff do these briefings. That’s the appropriate person. I don’t need to be out in front of the cameras.” And so he made those choices. These interviews would sometimes devolve into debates where I’d push him because I found it... I mean it was so different than so many of the people that you cover as a reporter in Washington.

And to me, so self-evidently destructive for him and even if he thought that the real work that he was in the administration to do was to give advice directly to George W Bush in a one-on-one setting, if he had a reputation where people saw him as aloof or detached or power hungry, the question I put to him was, “Doesn’t your public reputation at some point potentially damage your one-on-one relationship with Bush if the perception is that you’re pulling all these strings behind the scenes or what have you?”

And he just rejected that outright, never cared. And he also, there was one funny moment early in the book where, again, alluding to his unwillingness or inability to put himself on the couch, he’s not a touchy-feely guy, right? Nobody would ever say that about him, including his own family. And he felt to a certain extent, he was not in a position to give the modern news media what they wanted in a way. He was perfectly comfortable giving policy backgrounders and would go on, could talk for an hour about the nuances of policy. But a couple months after 9/11, the Bush administration had arranged to cooperate with *Newsweek* Magazine on... *Newsweek* was doing a piece that profiled a NYPD firefighter, a couple other people, and then the vice president.

And they said, “Yeah, we will give you interview time with Dick Cheney about what his life was like on 9/11 and those subsequent days.” And so they prepped Cheney for this interview. And the emphasis for Cheney in their prep is, “You’ve got to give them a lot of color. They need to know how you were feeling, they need to understand the details of what you’re seeing.” And the interview takes place and it’s Evan Thomas, who’s very serious, writes a lot of these profiles, and he’s asking Cheney all these questions, trying to get Cheney to put himself on the couch. Cheney just won’t do it. And he changes, he turns every question back to a policy issue. And at the end, Cheney realizes that he’s not giving Evan Thomas what he needs for this thing.

And Evan is trying the fifth way in to ask this certain question to get some emotion or something. And Cheney just says, “Evan, I know you’re looking for a lot of good color. That’s what my staff tells me. That’s not how my mind works. I can’t give you the color.” And it is like Cheney reading the stage prompts, and that is how his mind works. He wasn’t as good at that and I think some of that is the changing nature of the media and what the media wanted was different in 1975 when he’s Ford’s chief of staff than it was in 2001 or 2008.

BILL KRISTOL:

No, that’s for sure. So, you write the book, you stay in touch with Dick Cheney and Liz Cheney for that matter after that, and others close to the Cheney world. And of course, the big thing that happens is Trump. And so say a word about his thoughts about Trump, what his relationship or lack thereof to Trump, and then of course, his relationship to what Liz Cheney more famously did about Trump. And then that Secretary of Defense letter that was so important, I think, right around the very, very

end of 2020, just before January 6th, where he's 1 of 10 secretaries of defense, I think all living secretaries of defense signed the letters cautioning, in effect, supporting Mark Milley and against the use of the military for political and election denying purposes. But anyway, that whole stretch, did he talk to you during that period? Did he tell you things off the record that we didn't know? Did he defer to Liz because she was already in Congress from, what, 2015 on?

STEVE HAYES:

Yeah. I talked to him. I saw him, I would say not regularly. We weren't calling each other up and comparing notes, but I saw him semi-regularly, I would say. It was obvious if you know Dick Cheney at all, he was not going to like Donald Trump. This was not a positive development. For Cheney, they are opposites in so many different ways. The seriousness with which Cheney took politics, the substantive focus, the obsession over policy. Trump is the opposite in every... Dick Cheney saw campaigning as a very unpleasant, necessary thing to do to get to be able to govern. And Trump cares about the rallies, he has three-hour speeches at the rallies and doesn't care about the policies at all. He just wants to have celebrations and people to worship. Cheney disdained adulation from people who were brown-nosing and trying to get on his good side. Trump, he lives for adulation.

We could come up with a list of 150 ways in which they're opposites, so I don't think Cheney ever saw Trump as a positive development in any way. He endorsed him in 2016, was largely silent, didn't campaign against him hard in 2020, although I think he was certainly more alarmed by what he saw from Trump. It is important to remember, I would say, Cheney, as I said earlier, I think most of the decisions that he made throughout the course of his career, he did what he did because he thought he was doing the right thing. He was also a partisan. He was very much a Republican partisan. He didn't start that way. As I said, he was non-ideological. He could have chosen to work for Republicans or Democrats early in his career.

He would've been perfectly happy working for Democrats because of the clinical analytical approach that he took to politics. But as he served, he became a partisan Republican. When he defended Ronald Reagan in the context of Iran-Contra and Cheney was the lead Republican on the house side through those hearings, he was critical of a lot of the decision making there and accused the Reagan administration of misleading the American people and very critical at certain points. But also sought to defend the executive prerogative and protect against Democrats who wanted to further erode executive power.

But one of the other things he did was he fought as a Republican, and he was unapologetic about that. And he said it to me, he said, "Look, I thought Democrats were going after Ronald Reagan in a way that was cheap and unfair, and I thought they made a bunch of mistakes, but I'm a Republican. I thought I needed to fight on behalf of my party." So I think there was that partisan instinct that kicked in, and we saw it, of course, kick in for too many Republicans at the time. But yeah, at a certain point, I think if you're Dick Cheney, you can't watch what Trump is doing to the country and Trump is doing to the Republican Party and the conservative movement without saying something, if you actually believe the things that you believe. And so he became quite openly critical. And obviously watching his daughter. Liz Cheney and Dick Cheney are in incredibly close, I think she learned a ton from him. One of, I think, his lasting legacies is what Liz and Mary have become. And what Liz, in particular, in that very public prominent role did to challenge Donald Trump. And the more extreme Trump was, I think the more Cheney felt like he had to speak out. And he of course recorded that famous ad where he called Trump, I think it was an individual who presents the

greatest threat to the continued existence of the Republic, or something like that. So I think he believed it deeply. And we have seen in the kinds of arguments that Liz made over all of those years, exactly the kinds of arguments we would've expected Dick Cheney to be making too.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, that 2022 ad, I guess it was Liz's Wyoming campaign. And maybe one of his last public statements. Really very powerful about Trump. Yeah, I saw him at a conference 2018, '19, the middle of the first term. And he clearly disdained Trump. And I don't know that he even privately voted for him, honestly. Maybe he did, maybe he didn't. Liz was already a Republican member of Congress in 2016, so I think he felt he would just not make her life even more difficult. She was going to be in leadership, I guess, as he had been. But I think the way he made in this particular conference, he clearly wanted to strengthen to the degree he could, the Jim Mattis and the Mark Espers and the John Kelly's in the Trump administration, and weaken Trump himself, honestly. The people more who are pushing in other directions, especially in national security policy. But I think generally—

STEVE HAYES:

I don't know if this is the same conference or if this is a different conference, you're probably still bound by confidentiality applications if it was the same. But he attended one AEI, American Enterprise Institute World Forum Conference, big conference. Lots of powerful people and interviewed Mike Pence on stage at that conference. And made very clear that he did not see Trump the way that Pence saw Trump. And Pence I think defended Trump where he could, defended what the administration was doing. And Cheney pushed and pushed and pushed. And from the people I was talking to who were in the room said it was a very uncomfortable exchange. And Cheney had made very clear, I don't remember exactly when that was in the administration in the first term, but Cheney made very clear that he despised Trump and hated what he was doing to the country.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, it's really kind of crazy, to be the highest levels of the government so long. And then to see it in his own party's, well, we know he didn't like the Obama administration particularly much, but in his own party to see that development. And then I guess he saw Trump, he saw January 6th, let's say a word about that Secretary of Defense letter, you and I talked, I remember, during that period. Liz was behind the scenes, very involved in that. Cheney was a signatory of it. I think some of Cheney's top aides, former aides helped draft it. Just say a word about that. Everyone focuses on January 6th, understandably, drama and dangerous.

And people focus a little bit on some of the stuff that came out more in the January 6th committee hearings, especially the Justice Department stuff where they refused to go along and legitimize Cheney's claims. I feel like the Defense Department side of it gets a little bit short-changed. He fires Esper for five days after the election, puts in people who will do what he wants. He thinks. Still a little more resistance there, especially from Milley. And so anyway, say something about that, if you will.

STEVE HAYES:

Well, the level of alarm, my own view is we're still not alarmed enough about what was happening there. Donald Trump wants to use the US military on the streets for reasons

that the US military was never designed to, and arguably illegal. And we are having firsthand testimonials from people who are involved in this offering these warnings. And yeah, I think Liz was very involved in helping to put together that level. Eric Edelman, who had worked for Cheney for a long time, distinguished ambassador to Turkey and elsewhere involved in putting that together. But I think what they tried to do was capture the sentiment of all of the living secretaries of defense about exactly how extreme what we were seeing was. Because it is one of those, I mean, this has been true so much of what we've seen in the Trump era, if you cover it as just another day's news story, it's hard to convey to people the magnitude of the departure and the seriousness of the level of the insanity.

And I think what they tried to do with that letter was make clear, together, with Democrats and Republicans, people who disagree on a number of things, like, "Hey, we all see this as really crazy, and this is something that we shouldn't abide." And I do think it mattered. Certainly, there are many other times that I wish that Republicans in Congress would've had their spine stiffened, but I think it was the kind of thing that people set up and paid attention to in that moment.

If the easy thing for elected Republicans to do would've been the cowardly thing that I think they've done too often, which is just shrug it off or say, that's not my responsibility, or there's not much I can do, or I don't want to expose myself by criticizing Trump, or challenging these things. What that letter did was in a sense, give them cover to do that by saying, this really is beyond. This is crazy. And I think he believed it very strongly. And it was of a piece of the rest of the criticism that we saw that he was making more privately at the time, but that we've seen Liz make ever since.

**BILL KRISTOL:**

Yeah, I think people didn't appreciate also that it was a voluntary thing. It's one thing if you're a member of Congress, you vote one way or the other. You have to answer questions. And so you say what you say. He didn't have to help organize that letter. No one was saying, "Where's the letter from the Secretary of Defense?" Other former cabinet agent heads didn't write letters to my knowledge, former attorneys general could have written letters, former chief of staff, some of them spoke up, I think even critically or just they didn't do this. And the fact that he did it, A, I think it really was a signal certainly to people like me, but I think beyond Washington insider types that these are serious people. This is Leon Panetta and Dick Cheney and Don Rumsfeld.

Guess, I think Cheney got Rumsfeld maybe to sign. I don't know. I heard that at the time. But anyway, everyone who had been Sec Def. to go, to volunteer to say something that they weren't just answering. It wasn't just like, "I'll do an interview on CNN. I'll say this." A formal letter signed by a really unprecedented, I think, almost. Yeah, it certainly helped, I think, reinforce those within the administration who weren't going to go along with what Trump wanted on January six particularly Milley especially, and some others in the Defense Department. But of course, others as well.

**STEVE HAYES:**

Yeah. Well, yeah, that's a good point. It wasn't just members of Congress who probably at that point were unlikely to do anything. They weren't in a position to do the kinds of things that I would've liked for them to do, arguably. They didn't have the power to do it. But inside the administration, I know it hit hard inside the administration. I talked to people who mentioned it as they went on to take stands that were difficult to take or they were thinking about resigning or otherwise protesting. People have cited that letter in conversations to me as mattering. This is a different order of magnitude.

BILL KRISTOL:

I guess that was really his last big public act of supporting his daughter in Wyoming in 2022 after that. I guess too as well. So say a few words of, I don't know, what people should think. I was thinking about this in the context of John McCain for some reason, a month or two ago, someone asked me about McCain. Maybe he was doing a biography, I can't remember. Yeah, it was someone doing a biography. I guess he'll go down as one of those people in American history has a certain type of people, a lot of them senators, but not only senators who we're extremely important and major figures who never became president.

That's the Henry Clay maybe starts that kind of trend. That is the early figure of that. And then others along the way, Henry Cabot Lodge, there are many, but Bob Dole, John McCain, I'd say Dick Cheney is in that category. A little different, the vice-presidential side of it, but he doesn't run for president. I remember in '96, people were talking to him about running. That's when I knew him a bit, because he was hanging around AEI. So I think Lynn maybe had a position at AEI, and I was in that world. He had serious discussions, let's just say. Take a minute on that. He really did have serious discussions. Yeah.

STEVE HAYES:

Yeah. I think looking back over the long arc of his career, he would've been perfectly happy to serve as president. I think he was mostly unwilling to do the things one needed to do to become president. It's consistent with his disdain for campaigning. Yeah, he tells a great story about while he was considering running for president, taking this long cross-country solo drive. And this is perfect Dick Cheney, gets in a car by himself, and he hasn't driven for a while because he's been Secretary of Defense. And he uses that alone time to really give thought to the kinds of feedback that he was getting and people urging him to run. And ultimately decides, "This isn't something I want to go through, this isn't something I wanted to pursue." Yeah, I think he certainly fits in the category that you are describing in many ways as greater, greater impact than probably a lot of those other folks because of the power that he had in the Bush administration. In particular in that first term, in creating the intellectual framework of the US response to the attacks on 9-11 and then removing Saddam Hussein.

So yeah, I don't think there's any question about that being the central part of his legacy. Again, we've seen since his passing, this has become the main argument that you've heard from critics in ways that, for me at least, it's been an interesting, and I suppose a necessary look back on, in my view, just how bad the shortcuts in reporting and writing about Dick Cheney were. You have people now writing about him saying he persuaded the CIA to lie about WMDs. The shorthand on this stuff is just insane. I hope it gets corrected because it's so at odds with the actual reality. But I do think there are real questions, real debates. He was a long time and strong proponent of executive power. This was true, I think because of his work in the Ford administration after the post-Watergate reforms and the erosion of executive power then

But he was a strong proponent of executive power when he was in Congress. Early in Congress, there was this debate that he did with Newt Gingrich at the American Enterprise Institute, where Gingrich was in favor of increasing the power of Congress. And Cheney said, "No, no, we can't further erode executive power." So this is not something he sort of latched onto as vice president because he wanted to accumulate power for himself. This was a long-term principled view. I think it's an open question. I don't think Dick Cheney ever imagined Donald Trump as president, or somebody like

Donald Trump as president. And the abuses that we're seeing on executive power, I can't imagine that he wouldn't have thought, "Oh, this didn't turn out."

You have to assume at a certain level you're going to have principled people as president. I think that probably drove some of the assumptions he made behind the arguments he put forward on executive power. I think people will debate that. People will debate the legacy of the Iraq War and the post-9/11 approach to international relations and US national security. But it does feel, particularly as we've seen these obituaries of him and remembrances of him, it does feel pretty simple for people to say, "We didn't have any more attacks. Therefore, all of this was an overreaction, and it was driven by Dick Cheney." And I don't think history will remember his contributions that way once we're maybe a little bit more removed from that moment.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. Now, it occurs to me as we were talking, when I did this conversation with him, I guess 10 years ago now, people can go look at it on the website, the same website they can watch this conversation on. And it was a good one with Dick Cheney. And he was guarded and a bit terse at times but talks about his jobs really. And you've shed more light in some ways than he did. But one thing he did say was actually, I don't think I even asked him maybe what his favorite job was. Somehow, I asked him about the different jobs he'd had though obviously. And I think he said that he enjoyed being Secretary of Defense the most. I think he thought what he did as vice president was obviously very important, but he did being Secretary of Defense. And I think he was proud of, and justly so. That's another thing that no one gets.

Of course, the Cold War was going to end the way it did with almost literally no war, no casualties really on our part. Just Soviet Union imploding, Germany becoming part of NATO, extending protection to the Central and Eastern European states that of course the Gulf War was going to go easily. And nothing terrible was going to happen. And we were going to kick Saddam out of Kuwait and at least restore for a while, stability. All taken for granted. And it certainly then made huge downsizing to the military, which Cheney wasn't entirely happy about. But done responsibly enough that we didn't invite aggression really in the next decade or anything like that. So anyway, I feel [inaudible] —

STEVE HAYES:

That's a good question. I don't think I ever put that question to him. That's a really good question. What did you enjoy most? [inaudible] —

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, I'm not sure I asked him. He raised it, maybe, but people can go back and look at the transcript or watch it. But anyway, yeah, it is striking to me. For me, he was an example though. He is the kind of person you want running things because he took running things seriously. And that's not something we have that much of in America these days. Maybe not just in politics incidentally.

STEVE HAYES:

Yeah. And look, as I look back on it, I'm comforted particularly in the current context that again, whether you agree or disagree with the decisions that he made, he was making them for what he thought were the right reasons. He made these decisions because he said this is the right thing for the country. And I think he did that again and again and again throughout his career. And I think that was unique to a certain extent

20 years ago. But we're so far removed from that now. Think about the Republicans in Congress these days, half of whom I think still disagree with most of what Trump is doing. And they can't even be bothered to speak up meekly for the right thing, much less do the right thing on a repeated basis at the potential cost of their reputation or their job. So I do think that is comforting to have somebody like that in that role, even if you think he's making mistakes as he's making some of the decisions, it's what we have come to expect.

BILL KRISTOL:

Well, maybe this conversation will remind people. And of course, his example, not just the conversation about him, will remind people of that model of being a political leader and a political figure. Really, for me, that's the main thing, thinking about this last two weeks since his death. And just less the particulars, a bit more the type of political leader that America produced. And America really did produce. And with all due respect to first President Bush, who I have a high regard for others, he wasn't the son of a senator. He wasn't groomed for this, somehow. He made it himself, but there's something very impressive about that. Hopefully others can follow in those footsteps. Whatever their views, honestly, in terms of whatever their party even. I feel like that's an important aspect of just who he was. And your book captures that well, I think so. Steve, thank you so much for taking the time today. And really, I found this discussion fascinating. I'm sure others will. Thanks—

STEVE HAYES:

Thanks for having me, and thanks for giving me the opportunity to do all that reporting on him.

BILL KRISTOL:

No, well that was great. It was a great book, and it was one of the many good things about editing a magazine. In the old days, when it was a weekly magazine, you didn't even have to write everything. These days, you'd be writing the book in between doing eight posts a day to keep the content up on the internet. But anyway, thank you for writing the book. It's a great book and people should read it. They can take a look at the conversation I had with Cheney 10 years ago. But really thanks for joining me today. And thank you all for joining us on *Conversations*.