

## **Dick Takes Manhattan**

## So now the ex-veep can't stop talking

## Howard Fineman NEWSWEEK

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Dick Cheney hadn't planned to speak, but others at the dinner in Manhattan noticed him growing a grimmer shade of grim. He was listening to Nicholas Burns, a former State Department official in Cheney's own Bush administration, wax eloquent about the virtue of diplomacy: how a new joint effort with France, Britain, Germany and even Russia and China could prevent Iran from gaining nuclear weapons and terrorizing the Persian Gulf region and the world. In other words, President Barack Obama's position. The host asked if the former vice president wished to respond. Yes indeedy, he did.

Cheney rose to his feet and began to speak in his fatefully avuncular I've-been-there-and-you-haven't tone. Diplomacy, he said, works only if the countries share the same objectives. Here, they don't. The Iranians are merely stalling for time to build the bomb. The Europeans are willing to accept a nuclear-armed Iran and want primarily to avoid military action of any kind, especially by us. There will be no progress unless the Iranians "believe the threat of military force is on the table." At that, he sat down again beside his daughter Elizabeth.

For most families, a father-daughter trip to Manhattan would be a lighthearted affair: some shopping, perhaps; a Broadway show; a museum. Not for Dick and Liz Cheney, at least not now. Matters are too urgent; the nation, as the Cheneys see it, is too much imperiled by the weakness and naiveté of the Obama administration. So the 68-year-old dad's main mission in New York was to cheer on his 42-year-old daughter at a debate about Iran sponsored by Intelligence Squared US (NEWSWEEK is one of the group's media partners), and to make sure that force was forcefully "on the table" at dinner. "I was kind of nervous, but he applauded at all of my lines," Liz Cheney said later.

So, to sample a riff from another era, we still have Dick to kick around. He was and is one of our least popular leaders. And yet he remains one of the most visible, attacking the new president on waterboarding (Cheney's for it); the camp at Guant‡namo (he's for keeping it open); and the sanctioning of lawyers who wrote memos enabling the use of "enhanced interrogation techniques" (he's for thanking, not prosecuting them).

Cheney doesn't mind the resulting derision. In fact, friends say, he rather enjoys it, the way Winston Churchill and Al Capone did. He is not running for office ever again. He owns three houses and is worth many millions. He is working on a memoir that will cover 40 years in politics. He has a circle of advisers, led by Liz, that includes old veep staffers such as David Addington, national-security and defense officials such as Elliott Abrams and Dan Senor, and political types such as Karl Rove and Mary Matalin. He rarely talks to George W. Bush. They disagree on whether to speak up. The former president favors a discreet Texas silence.

It's not clear that Cheney's prominence is a good thing for fellow Republicans. Conservatives applaud him for taking a stand in the face of Obama's popularity. "I look at him as Grendel, coming out of his den," says Hugh Hewitt, the conservative talk-show host. "I admire the veep, so I'm glad when he does it." By taking the lead, Rove tells me, Cheney has empowered other Republicans to come forward and put House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and her Democratic colleagues on the defensive about their own knowledge of interrogation details. A GOP polling firm has conducted a survey showing voters have nuanced and divided views about harsh interrogation methods. "Democrats are opposed, Republicans and independents are in favor," Rove says.

Still, if you must resort to polls to make your case for slamming heads into walls, you've probably already lost the argument. "It's kind of hard to be seen as the guy defending torture right now," says Charlie Black, a longtime GOP operative. Another GOP strategist insisted on anonymity in order to be more blunt: "Cheney as the face of our party is nothing short of a disaster—a grumpy old man with a gun."

The deeper question is whether Cheney loose upon the land helps our security. He thinks so. His only goal, friends and family insist, is to defend policies he believes in (and, critics might well note, to be free to say "I told you so" if we are attacked again). Meantime, he and his circle think they are pulling Obama in their direction. They crowed last week when Obama reversed course and came out against the release of 2,000 photographs depicting prisoner interrogations. In reality, Obama hasn't been listening to Cheney, but rather to his own circle of trusted advisers.

Cheney could never be one of them. The reasons are obvious. He was wrong about Iraq—before, during and after. He had a tenuous relationship with the facts. He is right that we can't afford to be naive about the world, but he was the naive one, if he really ever believed that we could create a Hanging Garden of Democracy in Babylon. And he is right that diplomacy has its limits, but he never came close to testing them. So it's good to have Cheney around. We need someone to tell us hard, unpleasant truths. And it is useful to remind ourselves of the mistake we made in thinking that he was the man to do it.

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