

# The Bush-Cheney Legacy

*A roundtable discussion with The Washington Post's Gene Robinson, Bob Woodward and Barton Gellman, Jan. 15, 2009*

**Gene Robinson:** Hello and welcome to [washingtonpost.com](http://washingtonpost.com). I'm Gene Robinson and today I'll be joined by Bob Woodward and Bart Gellman, my colleagues, for a roundtable discussion of the legacy of the administration of George W. Bush and Richard Cheney.

**Robinson:** Bob, you have written three books now about the Bush administration ...

**Bob Woodward:** Four books

**Robinson:** Four now.

**Woodward:** Yea, right.

**Robinson:** Four now

**Woodward:** And my wife says if there's a fifth she's gonna shoot me. [Laughter]

## The Bush-Cheney Legacy

**Robinson:** Obviously there's something that fascinates you about this administration. So what do you think is the one thing George Bush is going to be remembered for?

**Woodward:** Well, I think he's going to be remembered for lots of things. The defining event is the Iraq war, because that was a war of choice. As we know that war is not over, 146,000 troops there, almost the same number of civilian contractors. It is a massive land army in presence in the heart of the Middle East. Gen. Petraeus is keeping that large force there because he knows its not over, it's not stabilized.

Ah, Bush of course hopes that that's going to turn out well and there is an outside chance it's possible and he'll be Harry Truman. It's also possible that its' going to, and the preponderance of the evidence is, that it may not turn out well. And, so, but you know the financial crisis is a giant legacy, and I'm wondering what the financial crisis is going to be called. Is it going to be called Wall Street-gate, Capitalism-gate, ah, Bush-gate, Cheney-gate?

**Robinson:** Since you are responsible for the original gate, we're not going to call it a gate at all, [laughter] we're going to call it the financial crisis. We'll get, we'll get back to Iraq I'm sure. But I want to ask Bart.

**Robinson:** Bart, your book Angler is the definitive look at Dick Cheney and so I want to ask you the same question. What is the one thing Dick Cheney is going to be remembered for?

**Bart Gellman:** I think Dick Cheney is going to be remembered for his attempt to expand the powers of the executive and the presidency and for his overreach on that front and for the backlash that came against him.

**Robinson:** Was he indeed a uniquely powerful vice president?

**Gellman:** He clearly was uniquely powerful as vice president. I think in the modern era he's the most powerful person who's ever held high office who was not president. He's the nearest thing I guess you could say to the deputy president we've ever had.

## The Roots of War

**Robinson:** You know Bob, I would tend to agree, just in general, that Iraq is probably the headline of the Bush-Cheney administration. So take me back. Where was the germ for Iraq really laid? Does it come out of the first Gulf War? Does it come out of 9/11? Where does it come from?

**Woodward:** Well, it comes from like all historical causation a convergence of events. 9/11 was significant, changed the world. I agree with Bart that Cheney was such a presence after 9/11, such a steamroller for the offensive mode that became really the Bush doctrine. That it was in the chronology from 9/11 until they launched the Iraq war, the war plan looked easier. So it was going to be quick, as Cheney with great intensity said, we're going to be welcomed with sweets and flowers.

There was a sense that we had to do something. There was a sense that was valid that Saddam was a bad actor. But when you look back on that, and study it and study particularly the neglect and the failure to manage the aftermath, it's hard to look at it as a good thing.

**Robinson:** Bart, how do you see Dick Cheney's role in the run-up to the Iraq War, indeed, in the decision to go to war in Iraq.

**Gellman:** His role, and in fact his chief of staff's Scooter Libby's role, were very important. I like what Bob said about convergence. I think that George Bush and Dick Cheney sort of came to the gates of Baghdad by way of two very different paths, and they converged on the same point of view and the same decision.

Cheney saw this in much more sort of classical security and balance of power terms. He wanted to send a message. Some of his staff told me, and this was something we didn't know before, that he was looking for a demonstration effect. The idea you sort of knock one bad guy down to send a message to others. He was actually more worried about North Korea and Iran as constituting this nexus he always talked about between hostile state, WMD and terrorists who would use them. But those were not attractive military options, and he hoped to deter them with this kind of war.

I mean, the other surprising thing that we didn't know before, is that despite his public comments, Cheney was quite ambivalent about the war. He thought it was a close call. Once he made the call, and once the president made the call more importantly, he would go and make it a 100 percent case in public. But he was worried it wouldn't turn out well.

**Woodward:** And the other factor here is the mind of George Bush. In one interview, he told me, I believe we have a duty to free people, to liberate people. And that liberation, the freedom agenda, was a giant driver. You had the support, the encouragement of Cheney, the intelligence community saying Saddam has weapons of mass destruction. And Bush looked at this, ah, as an opportunity. And I think when he stood on the deck of the aircraft carrier with the well-remembered sign mission accomplished, he had that sense. They've done it, they've really pulled something off that was going to be important.

I've reached the conclusion, I never kind of questioned Bush's sincerity. I think he really wanted to do the right thing. The problem is, and this if you're looking for a theme in all of this, it juxtaposes very dramatically with Cheney. Bush doesn't like homework, whereas Cheney—

**Robinson:** Right, he does all his homework, doesn't he—

**Woodward:** Cheney is all homework, is all homework and he knows how to marshal arguments and evidence. And so after the appearance on the aircraft carrier was that sense, "Oh, we've done it." And of course on the ground in Iraq is the intelligence people who were telling Bush and Cheney both, "This is turning into a catastrophe." And they didn't wake up for really years.

### The 9/11 Factor

**Robinson:** In terms of deciding to go to war in Iraq and also how to prosecute the war, I do wonder what impact 9/11 had on the mindset of each man. I ask because I've been talking to another of the principals who was in and around the White House that day, and I once in a conversation I said, um, something to the effect, I know what it must have been like in the administration that day. And this person said, "No you don't. You have no idea what it felt like, the feeling that we had missed something, the feeling that we were under attack, the feeling that we had to do everything we could to avoid another attack." Was that sort of sense of responsibility, weighty responsibility present in Dick Cheney? Was it present in George Bush?

**Gellman:** Yea, it's hard to remember how intense that moment was. It wasn't just that, sort of Dick Cheney in the bunker under the White House and President Bush sort of outside a Florida classroom and then on Air Force One, are watching the great symbols of American capitalism and American military might falling down, or burning.

It's that they believed another attack was very likely imminent. That there were crucial things they didn't know and that something worse might be right around the corner. And that's why Cheney begged George Bush not to come back to Washington right away. And Bush eventually overruled all of his advisers including the Secret Service to come back. But the idea that Washington might not be here tomorrow. And so Dick Cheney pressed very hard on the idea that we have to take off all the restraints.

And for him, although there's a lot of disagreement with this in the intelligence community, coercion, cruelty works in interrogations. For him, ah, domestic surveillance was essential. What good is listening in to terrorists overseas when the ones who might already be in our borders are the ones that we really have to worry about? And right down the line, and so 9/11 on the one hand intensified Cheney's longstanding views about the sort of over-bureaucratization and over-legalization of national security and on the other hand gave him an opportunity to press that agenda.

**Woodward:** And he kind of became the self-appointed examiner of worst-case scenarios. And that, I mean, Ron Suskind in his book *The One Percent Solution* [sic: *The One Percent Doctrine*]—if there's a one percent chance that it might happen, you have to take all steps. And—see if Bart agrees with this because he's the expert on it—the nightmare for Cheney was a nuke going off in an American city, and that is not something you can dismiss. And he was right analytically that that had to be prevented. If that happened and hundreds of thousands of people were killed, 9/11 would be a footnote in the history books.

So, I remember going to interview Cheney in October of 2001. And I had known him quite well and interviewed him extensively when he was defense secretary for the first Gulf War. And he

was kind of laid back and direct. But he was just like a stretched rubber band in October 2001. He was, he was just off balance to the extent that Dick Cheney ever gives off balance. And it was this fear, a legitimate fear, and Bart uses the right word I think, that in there response there was an overreaching that maybe looked necessary at the moment.

But there should have been somebody there saying, you know, about the wiretapping—it's called domestic surveillance, I think it's kind of really not domestic surveillance, but it's listening in on these calls from people in this country, abroad, which they do all the time—and somebody should have said now wait a minute, let's legitimize this, let's legalize it, let's make some of this transparent rather than crawl in the bunker. And so they really—

### Torture and Interrogation

**Robinson:** They certainly didn't want to, and the surveillance or wiretapping or eavesdropping, the secret CIA prisons, and as far as I'm concerned, the interrogations which you mentioned. How does a fundamentally decent man like George Bush, a fundamentally decent man like Dick Cheney get to the point where they can sit in the, you know, the White House and discuss torturing people?

**Woodward:** Well, I mean I think what they did in the White House is they avoided the details and they didn't really ask the kinds of questions they should have had. What does this mean enhanced interrogation? So I don't think we're going to find was that vivid discussion of it. What I think happened is they had this responsibility for protecting the country. If there had been other attacks, large attacks, many attacks, quite frankly—and this doesn't speak well to the country—probably these things wouldn't have been an issue, people would have accepted it and the dark side would have been okay.

The problem is there weren't more attacks, and that's another thing for books in the future, exactly why that happened. But they didn't realize, and of course leadership entails looking at changed circumstances and altering your behavior, and they didn't do that.

**Gellman:** If I could just say a word on this. First of all, Cheney persuaded Bush not to go to Congress to ask for legislation on things like surveillance and interrogation because asking means you think you need permission. And it's Cheney's view that the president doesn't need permission. And so surprisingly to a lot of people, Cheney played very little role in the Patriot Act. That's legislation. He was interested in what Bush could do on his own.

I have to disagree in emphasis I think a little bit with you, Bob, about the details of interrogations, because you've talked to all these people. People who were in the room during these crucial meetings, especially in 2003 and 2004, say they got very explicit about what was going to be done, and they got very explicit because George Tenet demanded it. Tenet was saying, "Don't give me vague instructions, tell me to interpret them and then hang us out to dry one day. If I'm going to go ahead with waterboarding or sleep deprivation, you're going to know exactly what we're doing."

**Woodward:** I guess there's a big dispute on that, and it will be interesting to see when all of the sides are presented. And, ah, waterboard – I mean there's a way to describe waterboarding where it's kind of is, what did Cheney call it? A "dunk" or something like that? A dunk in the water—

**Robinson:** We're not dunking for apples, I don't think so—

## Skimming Homework

**Woodward:** And then there's a way to describe the way it really is, and I think they got, as often the case—and this is the theme, the lack of homework—they got sugarcoated versions of these things and they persuaded themselves, “Well this is going to work and this is necessary.” And that's a giant part of their legacy.

**Gellman:** But Cheney had actually been thinking about coercion and interrogations for a very long time. Back in the 80s he sat on the intelligence committee at the time when William Buckley, the station chief of the CIA in Beirut was kidnapped, tortured and killed by Hezbollah. And as a member of the committee he got a chance to review some videotape of Buckley and his treatment and it was gruesome. And Cheney expressed a lot of concern at that time about what the implications were for U.S. secrets in the Mideast. His premise was torture works. Now in this administration they've redefined torture so narrowly that it's actually almost impossible to commit it. But he explicitly was arguing for throwing off the restraints against cruelty – cruel, inhumane and degrading treatment, that's the language of Geneva – that he said didn't and shouldn't apply.

**Woodward:** What's interesting, and this goes right to the core, did Bush—whose responsible for all of this—ask questions and have the mindset to kind of say, “Hey what are you really doing, what does this involve? Let's get detail so I know what I'm approving.” And as I understand it, they skimmed over that as Bush skimmed over so many things.

**Gellman:** This is where the whole homework point comes in and it's exactly right. Bush got by all his life on charm and instinct, and his ability to read people. And Cheney was Mr. Homework, he came to class, he didn't read the book, he read the teacher's edition.

## Responding to Hurricane Katrina

**Robinson:** Exactly. Moving on, let's just switch one topic for a second. I'd like to move to a couple of domestic issues. Hurricane Katrina, and the response to that: I was in New Orleans the week of the flood and I just saw things that made me lose sleep for months afterward, [things] I just didn't think I could, I would ever see in an American city. How do you read the administration's response, or lack of response, to Katrina? To what would you attribute that?

**Woodward:** It's exactly what we're talking about: a failure to understand and involve yourself in details so you make the right decisions. As we know now, Bush said he didn't get the weather report and there's video of him getting the weather report, whether it sunk in or not. And that was a symbol. And what was so interesting about the response was that they couldn't recover in time to kind of show real leadership and an identification with the agony you witnessed firsthand.

**Gellman:** One of the secrets of Cheney's success is that he decides what he cares about and what he doesn't, and he didn't care about this in terms of a mission for the federal government, in terms of a mission for him.

Bush actually asked him, we didn't know this before, to be the czar of the government's response. He is, after all, maybe the preeminent crisis manager of the administration, an extremely talented manager. And he politely declined. You know, he didn't say and he would never say that he would refuse an order from the president. He said, “If it's all the same to you Mr. President, I'll focus elsewhere.” And Bush expressed some irritation with that, according to Dan Bartlett who talked about the meeting. So bush asked him to go down, assess how it's going. He came back

and said, "This guy you just said 'heck of a job Brownie' is a disaster," but he washed his hands of it after that.

**Robinson:** So the picture that emerges, the president had made Michael Brown, the former official with the International Arabian Horse Association, head of FEMA, our emergency response agency. It's a complete disaster. In other words, it's not the sort of detail, that part of government, the actual nuts and bolts of government, is not the kind of sort of detail that George Bush would have paid attention to and if it wasn't something that Dick Cheney wasn't interested in, it didn't necessarily get done? Is that—

**Woodward:** Yea, I think that's exactly right. I mean you decoded it, Bart, when Cheney wouldn't step in, that meant there was a vacuum.

### The Lame Duck

**Gellman:** The details glaze George Bush's eyes. Just take the federal budget -- this is where the government puts its money where its mouth is. It has enormous impact. In every other administration, and Bob would testify to this, if a cabinet officer or secretary of state or defense says, "White House you're not giving me enough money and it's a really big deal," they'd come to the president and they'd appeal it in the Oval Office. In this administration, the bucks stop at Dick Cheney kind of literally. He was the head of a newly-invented budget review board, and that shielded George Bush from the details he didn't want.

**Woodward:** When I interviewed Bush this May, so about seven, eight months ago, about the Iraq War, for two mornings in the Oval Office I kept looking around Bush's chair to see if there was a suitcase packed—

**Robinson:** [laughter]

**Woodward:** --because he had that sense of, "I'm getting out of here," an impatience with questions. I mean at one point, he just kind of turned to Hadley, the national security adviser who was also there during the interviews, and said, "Huh, we're going to have to go through all of this." And here, he had a chance -- because the questions were very "What did you think, what did you do, why did you do it?" -- a megaphone to kind of explain what he did. And instead of using that as an opportunity, he got impatient. He literally said at one point, "I'm hungry—my lunch is waiting." You know—

**Robinson:** You can't have that.

**Woodward:** —Why are you bothering me with this Iraq War that I decided on and I am responsible for and has not gone well for so many years? It's mildly mind-boggling.

**Gellman:** It's almost a bookend of your four books. You know you start off with Andy Card going to fetch a hamburger because the president asked him to from the early account, and with his legacy being interrupted for lunch.

**Woodward:** From hamburger to—

### Cheney: Public vs. Private

**Robinson:** Is there any, sort of looking back, reflection, self-criticism from Dick Cheney?

**Gellman:** Cheney is in the never apologize, never explain school in public. On the other hand, he is very interested in honest after-action reports, after-action assessments. There was a defense intelligence agency analyst named Derek Harvey, who came to the White House and gave a very sort of dark assessment of progress of the war in Iraq. Bush heard him once and never wanted to hear it again, Cheney called him back over and over again. He was saying things that Cheney was saying—they were the opposite of what Cheney was saying in public, and Cheney kept saying it in public—but he wanted to know.

He wanted to know that fine-grained detail, he wanted to learn lessons from it. I doubt he'll ever say it. Liz Cheney, his older daughter, wants him to write a memoir, but this is so out of keeping with everything we know about him, I'd be surprised.

**Woodward:** Lynn Cheney told me, I think it was last year sometime, that she and her husband, the vice president, Dick Cheney, are going to do some kind of book. So we will see. But Bart's exactly right, there is—and Derek Harvey is a magnificent example of somebody bringing the truth in a very authoritative way, and Bush was just, "Oh my God, I don't want to deal with this." And Cheney had him back, and back, and back.

### The Financial Crisis and Barack Obama's Transition

**Robinson:** I don't think we can finish this conversation without touching on the financial crisis. Is this, how do we assess the administration's performance? Temptation is to say somebody was asleep at the switch. Obviously it's not entirely the fault of any White House. But how do—were they paying attention? How do you see this. Bob?

**Woodward:** The real honest answer is, we don't know. We're in the early stages of it. One CEO who traveled up to New York, said it's nice to be in this backwater because I come from Washington, D.C., which is now the financial capital of the United States, because we own all the banks.

**Robinson:** [laughter] We do.

**Woodward:** And, ah, we being the taxpayers. There is going to be, not a day of reckoning, but a series of years of reckoning on this. And the question, legitimately always goes back to, the famous Nixon question: What did the president know and when did he know it on these issues? I happened to sit sometime earlier this year in an off-the-record dinner where Cheney was there, and one of Wall Street's barons spoke, Cheney sat next to him, and the baron said, "We are going into the soup. We are in and on the edge of a real crisis." And Cheney just kind of sat there and smiled. And at the end of the dinner, I said, if I ever right a novel about the financial collapse in the United States, it's going to open with this dinner. [laughter]

**Robinson:** Yea, but, that just doesn't compute, to me, with what we know about Dick Cheney. This is not, doesn't seem to me to be the kind of detail that would slip his attention.

**Gellman:** Here's how it does compute. Cheney never shows his cards, as Bob well knows. He will sit through a long meeting and answer a lot of questions, often, but he doesn't even reveal his leanings. That's something he develops privately. And the problem with knowing a lot about it in this administration is that Cheney really is a purist on free market, and as strong an anti-regulator you get in the upper reaches of government. And there was a reluctance to conceptualize, for

example, the big banks running what amounts to a big utility and controlling in many ways the supply of money in the economy, shifting risk to the taxpayers, which is the government's job.

And so it's not all government, and it's not all Bush, because it started with Clinton. But the decisive hands off in regulation of Wall Street came under Bush for very direct reasons that they didn't believe in regulation.

**Robinson:** Right, right. No, they didn't believe in it, and, but, you know again, Cheney is big on after-action reports. If you see that something isn't working, I just think of him as being pragmatic enough to take a look at it. But, but, you're right—

**Woodward:** As Bart says, it's not his portfolio, it's not his focus, and I think one of the Cheney rules is, focus on the big issue. Keep your eye on the ball. And he still is haunted—and rightly so, it's good somebody is haunted about the possibility of a serious nuke going off in an American city—and those are all real issues. And, you know, on a positive note, at least to this point there has not been another attack in this country—

**Gellman:** Nuke or biological weapons was his other huge focus—

**Woodward:** Yes, that's right.

**Gellman:** And the question arises, in reference to what you said earlier, how many one percent threats can you afford to face now? How many can you afford to treat as if there one percent, because, we don't have the resources and we can't afford the price of addressing every one of those as if it's a certainty?

As one example, Cheney wanted Bush to order that every American be inoculated against smallpox, because even though it's been eradicated as a disease, he feared it might be placed in the hands of terrorists as a weapon. Bush found out that this was going to kill two- or three-hundred Americans. Dan Bartlett says he was sitting in the room wondering how he's going to sell that as a public relations campaign, and Bush got off the bus. He said, I'm just not going to kill several hundred people against a maybe threat down the road.

**Woodward:** That's a perfect example of that, but you get—what, you know, what is the condition of the country that is handed to Barack Obama? And you know, that ultimately, I mean the Bush legacy starts on January 20, 2009.

### History vs. Public Opinion

**Robinson:** We have a few minutes left, and I just want to ask a question to each of you. George Bush and Dick Cheney leave office at the height of unpopularity. Bush's popularity ratings are subterranean, there's a feeling of "Let's just get it over with and get on with the new thing." How—

**Woodward:** Dick Cheney jokes, it's funny, about Bush tells this joke about [how] Cheney will come to him and say, "Hey, Mr. President, how do you get your popularity ratings so high?" Because compared to Cheney, they are. [laughter]

**Robinson:** So Bart, with what you know about Dick Cheney, his joking aside, is that how it affects him? Or does it have more of an impact?

**Gellman:** I think he really, truly, as much as anyone who ever held a high office, does not care what we think. He has his eye on the verdict of history, he's pretty sure he knows what that

verdict will be. And he doesn't believe that public opinion is competent to make decisions on government

**Robinson:** He's going to [unintelligible] for the historians.

**Gellman:** Although, although he gets in there way too, because he has put up a lot of road blocks to historians finding out what really happened.

**Robinson:** That's true, that's another—

**Woodward:** There's a lot of evidence to support what Bart says about Cheney—

**Robinson:** But what about Bush?

**Woodward:** —but my sense of Cheney and Bush is that they do care. That this idea, particularly with Cheney and, you know, the steel shield that he carries around, that underneath it's not fun to be such a figure of disregard and hostility. And in the end, I think that's the way Bush looks at it, and it hurts.

**Robinson:** George Bush has essentially said, as Fidel Castro said in his famous trial in 1953, you know, history will absolve me. Does he believe that history will absolve him?

**Woodward:** To a certain extent, that's all he's got.

**Robinson:** [laughter]

**Gellman:** Dick Arme, who was once a very close ally to both men, the minority leader of the Republicans in the House, told me that if you're looking, if you're sitting in Bush or Cheney's shoes now, it would behoove you to think that history will absolve you. But he, and old friend and ally of theirs, said that he thinks that history will judge both of them quite harshly.

**Robinson:** Well, thank you both for being here this morning, Bob Woodward and Bart Gellman. For The Washington Post and [washingtonpost.com](http://washingtonpost.com), I'm Gene Robinson and thanks for tuning in.

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