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Democrats Answer Cheney

By E. J. Dionne Jr.
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Perhaps Vice President Cheney should quit his current job and work within a political system more to his liking, the kind in which those in charge can protect national security by telling everyone what not to say and what not to think.

Cheney seemed terribly impatient with democracy Sunday on "Meet the Press" when he suggested that those who oppose President Bush's Iraq policies are helping -- excuse me, validating -- the terrorists.

Our allies in the war on terror, Cheney said, "want to know whether or not if they stick their heads up, the United States, in fact, is going to be there to complete the mission."

Then the punch: "And those doubts are encouraged, obviously, when they see the kind of debate that we've had in the United States. Suggestions, for example, that we should withdraw U.S. forces from Iraq, simply feed into that whole notion, validates the strategy of the terrorists."

Meaning what, exactly? If Cheney doesn't like "the kind of debate that we've had in the United States," is there any other "kind," short of a lock-step endorsement of all of Bush's choices, he'd endorse?

It's no wonder that Cheney isn't happy with the spread of democracy to the American foreign policy debate. Not only did Cheney have to answer Tim Russert for a whole series of spurious prewar claims and badly mistaken predictions. He must also be distressed with how different the political world is now from what it was four years ago, when he and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld began building their case for the Iraq war.

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Back then, Democrats were petrified. They desperately wanted to change the subject from foreign policy to . . . well, anything else. Cheney loved it when tormented Democrats failed to see that they could never win the electorate's confidence if they left national security to the other party.

Yes, there were honorable exceptions proposing alternatives to the administration's approach, including (from somewhat different points of view) Sens. Joe Biden, Carl Levin, Richard Durbin and the late Paul Wellstone. But far more than was healthy, the foreign policy debate back then was largely a Republican and conservative affair.

That's changed. As the administration's failures have become obvious to an American majority, Democrats have begun to play the opposition's essential role of offering alternatives. Voters trying to get beneath slogans such as "cut and run" might usefully consult two speeches given in the past week, one by Biden, the other by Sen. John Kerry. These days Biden is seen as a bit more "hawkish" than Kerry, but what's striking is that both speeches focused on ending the impasse Bush's policies have created.

Both emphasized what should be a central element in the debate, the potential disaster looming in Afghanistan. The administration, Biden said last Thursday, "has picked the wrong fights at the wrong times, failing to finish the job in Afghanistan, which the world agreed was the central front in the war on radical fundamentalism, and instead rushing to war in Iraq, which was not a central front in that struggle."

On Saturday, Kerry condemned the administration's "stand-still-and-lose strategy" and called on the administration to send 5,000 more troops to

Afghanistan to quell the Taliban insurgency.

Biden made an important point in arguing that elections alone, absent efforts to "build democratic institutions and bolster moderates," do not guarantee democracy.

Biden also pushed his proposal for radically decentralizing Iraq's government so that Sunnis, Shiites and Kurds can find "breathing room in their own regions" and create a circumstance in which most American troops could be home "by the end of 2007, without leaving chaos behind."

Kerry's speech put greater emphasis on the need to "redeploy" from Iraq, but even the Democrats' 2004 nominee argued for leaving a "residual force to complete the training" of Iraqi troops and "deter foreign intervention."

These speeches reflect a growing consensus within a broad swath of Democratic opinion: First, that Iraq is a blind alley, a distraction from the war on terrorism, not its "central front." Second, that the United States needs a responsible way to disengage from Iraq, reengage in Afghanistan and prepare itself to deal with the rising power of Iran, so far a real winner from Bush's Iraq policies.

The administration, in the meantime, is offering -- stasis. It seems to define victory as maintaining our troops in Iraq through the end of Bush's term without telling us exactly why doing so will make the situation there any better.

A debate about alternative futures is what the country needs. Who can be surprised that Vice President Cheney doesn't want it to happen?

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