

Movie discussion resource **Vice (2018)**
Engage with culture without disengaging your faith.

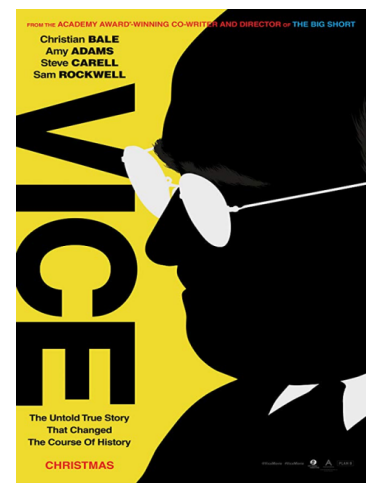
Genre: Drama/biopic

Rating: MA15+ (for some violent images)

Length: 132 minutes

Starring: Christian Bale, Amy Adams, Steve Carell, Sam Rockwell

Writer/Director: Adam McKay



Synopsis

“Vice” covers 50 years in the life of Dick Cheney (Christian Bale), beginning in his early years as a Wyoming-based electrical worker, Yale dropout, and drunken disappointment to his strong-willed and influential wife Lynne (Amy Adams). Advised to either clean up his act or lose his family, Cheney eventually finds his footing in politics, starting off as a Congressional intern in the Nixon Administration, where he is mentored by Donald Rumsfeld (Steve Carell) and gains an intimate understanding of the power system and how to thrive within it. After a successful political career that included earning the roles of White House Chief of Staff under Gerald Ford, 5 terms in Congress, and Secretary of Defence to George H.W. Bush, Cheney puts politics in his rearview to focus on his family and gain wealth in the role of CEO at oil behemoth Halliburton. At this point Cheney could have settled happily into retirement. When George H.W. Bush’s “black sheep” son, George W. (Sam Rockwell), decides to run for president in 2000, he asks Cheney to be his VP. Cheney sees an opportunity to transform the symbolic position into the most powerful role in the Oval Office. When Bush unexpectedly beats Al Gore in the 2000 election, Cheney is given carte blanche in selecting the transition team, which he populates with PNAC (*see explanation below*) loyalists. With his role as unofficial President firmly in place, Cheney uses the tragedy of 9/11 to test the full measure of his power by essentially creating a reason to invade Iraq to capitalize on the country’s vast oil fields, not to mention creating a deplorable torture program and flouting the Geneva Conventions. Throw into the equation a couple heart attacks, a lesbian daughter Mary (Alison Pill) and their politically ambitious eldest daughter Liz (Lily Rabe), and an accidental shooting, and you have the makings for one fascinating biopic. (*Source: Lucas Mirabella, LATFUSA*)

General questions for discussion

Some general questions might provide enough framework for you to discuss the movie:

- ❖ What stood out as the main points/highlights in the movie?
- ❖ What themes are explored?
- ❖ What assumptions were embedded in the story?
- ❖ What challenged you? What questions did it raise for you?
- ❖ Are there aspects of the story that resonated with your own experience or with the experience of others in a similar situation?
- ❖ Are there biblical or theological themes or characters that come to mind?
- ❖ Where is God present in the story? Where does God seem absent? What Christian themes speak into the context of this narrative?

“Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely” (Lord Acton)

This is a film about the abuse of power. It’s also an exploration about the way history unfolds slowly, the subtle and hidden changes to regulatory ‘checks and balances’ when no-one is paying attention, so we are left to wonder, ‘how did we get here?’ Cheney’s character often wields power by silence and secrecy, watching for opportunities, the man behind the curtain, pulling the country’s strings. “I can handle the more mundane jobs,” Cheney’s character tells George W. Bush (Sam Rockwell), “Overseeing bureaucracy, military, energy, and foreign policy.” Many political observers credit the Bush administration, and Cheney specifically, for the deterioration of American politics that has led to Donald Trump’s administration. Cheney was also the chief architect of the US invasion of Iraq which directly led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people and irrevocably upended global affairs. (*see reference to PNAC below*)

Discuss the sometimes incremental changes (and even use of language) that have led to huge changes in how global politics works today. Or perhaps it always been so?

The Project for the New American Century (PNAC) was a neoconservative think tank based in Washington, D.C. focused on U.S. foreign policy "to promote American global leadership" premised on the understanding that "American leadership is good both for America and for the world". Of the 25 people who signed PNAC's founding statement of principles, 10 went on to serve in the George W. Bush administration, including Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, and Paul Wolfowitz. The PNAC played a key role in shaping the foreign policy of the Bush Administration, particularly in building support for the Iraq War.

(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Project_for_the_New_American_Century)

Those who speak out about concerns with what they see happening can easily be dismissed as lovers of conspiracy theories, but in reality there are forces are working behind the scenes to determine priorities that may not always be congruent with community expectations for the common good and flourishing of all people. When is the time to speak out about policies and practices and priorities of concern? Discuss.

What do you believe in?

When Cheney was working for Rumsfeld he asks his mentor, "What do we believe in?" Rumsfeld simply guffaws and closes a door in his face. Does it matter what personal or political values politicians have? How much are we persuaded by these beliefs as voters? What do you listen for in the political spiel of political candidates? Who has inspired you with their beliefs - personal and political/public? What is the basis for your own values and the things you hold as important for our global community? Discuss.

The human side of power

The film contrasts Cheney's mild, relaxed, private personality and his dark, ruthless, public persona. He has a loving family and shows tenderness towards them. He shows his humanity when his daughter Mary comes out as gay after being jilted by a high school girlfriend. But there are no holds barred in politics, and the issue of gay marriage becomes a political weapon - with the nod from Cheney to his other daughter Liz who is running for the Senate. Does winning at all costs mean that the personal can be made public and used as a political football? Discuss.

(Another angle to discuss is Lynne Cheney herself, who was the force that propelled her husband into making something of himself, and in the process enable her to move beyond the domestic violence of her upbringing, and her stultifying hometown life. She was a supportive, courageous and loving wife. She was also a former chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities, with a Ph.D. in British literature. In her own right, in a different time and place, and different circumstances, she may have well carved out a political career for herself).

'Liberal leaning'

The last part of the film with the focus group degenerates into verbal and physical fighting with one person saying it's liberal leaning and another equating facts with the way a 'liberal leaning' person is defined. Each defines the other - easy to categorise, demonise and objectify. This happens in politics, and in religion. It happens in relation to the role of the ABC in Australia with consistent allegations that it is liberal leaning and biased. Discuss.

Sliding doors

There is a fake end-credits sequence in the film that imagines Cheney's public career had stopped after his service as George HW Bush's defence secretary, when he was one of the restrained architects of the Gulf War, and, the faux sequence suggests, could content himself with breeding Labrador retrievers in retirement. But happy endings are only for Hollywood, and as the latest news from Afghanistan shows, the Dick Cheney Story, in all its dark and human complexity, remains unfinished. (*Todd S. Purdum*). Discuss sliding door moments in your own life - opportunities missed, unexpected outcomes and serendipitous moments.