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## Irony doesn't stay ironic in Adam McKay's 'Vice'

Dick Cheney never had a heart that was any good. That is the reigning metaphor of "Vice," director Adam McKay's ("The Big Short") cheeky recount of former Vice President Dick Cheney's political ascension, astonishing appropriation of presidential power and flinty Wyoming resilience.

Lynne Cheney (Amy Adams) is the Pandora who is to blame for releasing her husband onto the world to redefine the scope of executive power and the course of the free world.

We meet young Dick (Christian Bale) as he tumbles out of a car door during a DUI stop. He's already been kicked out of Yale, where Lynne had finagled a scholarship for him.

Now Lynne has had enough. Her father was a drunk, too, and she won't stand for the same life as her abused, suicidal mother.

She needs a man, but not like this. Lynne's ambitions are unlimited, and because she is a woman and this is the early '60s, she can't realize them on her own. So she gives Dick an ultimatum: Shape up, or she'll take another offer.

He is more than up to the task. Cheney lands a congressional internship and falls under the tutelage of a young, politically incorrect — even by 1962 standards — congressman from Illinois named Don Rumsfeld (Steve Carell).

At Rumsfeld's feet, Cheney learns how real power operates. From the outskirts of President Richard Nixon's inner circle, the irrepressible Rumsfeld and his

quietly watchful protege conclude that Republicans who are unscathed by Watergate will have their pick of opportunities in the power vacuum surrounding weak and weakened presidents like Nixon and Gerald Ford.

Rumsfeld became chief of staff to Ford; when Rumsfeld was promoted to secretary of defense, Cheney, then 34, succeeded him as chief of staff.

Cheney is a man of few words, which presents a problem for the filmmakers. McKay, who specializes in lighthearted breakdowns of difficult topics, enlists a narrator, Kurt (Jesse Plemons), to move things along. Lynne Cheney's adoring pep talks and Rumsfeld's goofily brash Machiavellian pronouncements are thinly veiled bouts of exposition.

Cheney inhabits a negative space, his shape defined by the impressions of others. As a character, the impassive Cheney doesn't grow so much as he accrues — wealth, dominion and the political indebtedness of others.

*He (Christian Bale) not only looks like Cheney, he assumes Cheney's voice, stillness and logistical cruelty.*

He doesn't say much, but when he does, his superpower is to make the outrageous sound measured. He's unimpressed by the vice presidency and agrees to join Texas Gov. George W. Bush on the 2000 Republican presidential ticket only if he's given "mundane" executive duties such as overseeing



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the bureaucracy, military, energy and foreign policy. A delighted candidate Bush (Sam Rockwell) unhesitatingly agrees.

McKay's ironic can-you-believe-it style of comedic quasi-reporting has the ultimate effect of making Cheney, the intended villain of the movie, look like a winner — the kind of guy who can talk his way into anything by saying nothing.

But irony doesn't stay ironic. It didn't take long for Gordon Gekko's "greed is good" rallying cry to be adopted as a prescript for success, and Pepe the Frog's "feels good, man" mantra has morphed into a permissive shrug-off for inexcusable offenses.

What makes "Vice" worth seeing

are the performances.

Bale gained 45 pounds and subjected himself to hours of state-of-the-art prosthetics for the role. He not only looks like Cheney, he assumes Cheney's voice, stillness and logistical cruelty. There is never a moment where the audience thinks of Bale rather than Cheney.

The same may be said of Amy Adams' performance as Lynne, who has an icy Shakespearian chemistry with Bale. It's disorienting to see the real Lynne Cheney in the post-credit reel, after we've already accepted Adams as more Lynne than Lynne.

The casting of Rockwell as Bush and Carell as Rumsfeld defines these characters for us.

Carell's Rumsfeld is a ridiculously arrogant comic caricature, and we laugh our way into a pointless war.

Rockwell easily impersonates George W. Bush. The callow president doesn't know what he doesn't know and is blind to the machinations of his own cabinet.

Tyler Perry is a credible Secretary of State Colin Powell, who is onscreen long enough to be outplayed on the topic of WMDs and stripped of his integrity. (Perry's Powell sounds suspiciously like Madea, who would certainly have known to stand firm.)

Cheney famously suffered five heart attacks, and the parallels drawn between his pitiless executive reign and his defective vital organ are unavoidable.

But Cheney's heart abidingly pumped adamantly in one regard: It was always about Lynne.