

Cheney's world adventure

by Lionel_Van_Deerlin

Richard Cheney and his sizable entourage have returned from nearly nine days in the Orient, Australia and the Middle East. We are moved to wonder anew if vice presidents, like oversized pets, might better be kept close to home.

A half-century ago one of our more provocative veeps, Richard Nixon, traveled two weeks on what was intended to be a goodwill mission through Latin America. He became a target of riotous throngs from Montevideo to Caracas, where his Secret Service crew contended with demonstrators who rocked the Nixon limo as if he were a fleeing caudillo.

That trip had negative results for U.S. diplomacy - but for a vice president whose popularity was sagging, the attackers proved a godsend. His polls picked up, and Nixon became a shoo-in for the 1960 Republican nomination.

There's scant likelihood we'll see a repeat of that sequence. Cheney makes it clear he's not in the chase for president, so it doesn't matter much what people think of his recent overseas performance. From the standpoint of U.S. diplomacy, though, we're entitled to wonder.

First, what was the purpose of this oddly timed hegira? Some veep watchers have speculated Cheney chose to be out of the country during final stages of the "Scooter" Libby perjury trial - thus to avoid his availability as a witness in the ex-aide's defense.

As with a well-remembered explanation for evading service in Vietnam, we may assume Cheney had "other priorities" beyond Libby's fate. Few imagined the trial would drag out as it has - that the jury might still be out when his ex-boss returned home.

Whoever arranged details for the goodwill mission couldn't have looked for unpleasantness. The ostensible aim was to thank two reliable friends of the USA - Japan and Australia - for their support of our war in Iraq. Then home via Pakistan. (The Afghanistan rough-up, which he missed by merely a mile, was an add-on.)

Alas, nothing ever seems easy anymore. In Tokyo, as can happen anywhere, demonstrators greeted Cheney from behind huge signs bearing a familiar admonition, "Yankee Go Home." We learn further that one important Nipponese official, Defense Minister Fumio Kyuma, was to be excluded from meetings with the vice president. Kyuma had flouted America's amen corner some weeks ago in a speech to the Japan Press Club. He said, "President Bush went to war on a presumption that there might be nuclear weapons. That was wrong."

No polygraph could have faulted the fellow. But so what? In an all too familiar display of heavy-handedness, Cheney's coterie crossed Kyuma off their list of persons the vice president wished to hear from.

Is anyone to blame for scheduling Australia at almost the precise moment Tony Blair would be announcing the British troop pullout from southern Iraq? Cheney manfully went through the motions of thanking Prime Minister John Howard for all the help. Indeed, he saw Britain's troop withdrawal as a sign things must be going swimmingly over there.

At which point, we'd expect, a band breaks into "Waltzing Matilda."

Perhaps the forgoing provides a glimpse into the thought processes of a man who, topping almost any other, has steered our nation's fortunes over the last five years. An era of one-party U.S. rule has been interrupted by the result of November's election. Many find it hard to understand why Dick Cheney and some others can't come to grips with the change in direction that a clear majority of voters think is needed.

A long-standing rule in our public life - one substantially adhered to by both major parties - holds that politics stops at the water's edge. Public officials headed abroad traditionally leave their partisan battles behind.

But not Cheney. Hardly a day passed during his circling of the globe that this man did not have something unpleasant to say about House Speaker Nancy Pelosi. To hear his version of things, the California congresswoman and her anti-war Pennsylvania ally, Rep. John Murtha, are agents of some alien "al-Qaida strategy" aimed at breaking the will of the American people - enabling terrorism to win "because we quit."

Though unfamiliar with the ways of our domestic politics, persons elsewhere might wonder why a person who's first in line of presidential succession would speak in such terms of anyone - let alone the lady who is now close behind him in that order.

I'm disappointed. In addition to the outdated views he holds on many matters, Richard Cheney appears to have become a common grouch.

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