



AFTER watching the farce surrounding Dick Cheney's coming-out party this month, you have to wonder: Which will reach Washington first, change or the terrorists? If change doesn't arrive soon, terrorists may well rush in where the capital's fools now tread.

The Beltway antics that greeted the great Cheney-Obama torture debate were an unsettling return to the post-9/11 dynamic that landed America in Iraq. Once again Cheney and his cohort were using lies and fear to try to gain political advantage — this time to rewrite history and escape accountability for the failed Bush presidency rather than to drum up a new war. Once again Democrats in Congress were cowed. And once again too much of the so-called liberal news media parroted the right's scare tactics, putting America's real security interests at risk by failing to challenge any Washington politician carrying a big stick.

Cheney's "no middle ground" speech on torture at the American Enterprise Institute arrived with the kind of orchestrated media campaign that he, his boss and Karl Rove patented in the good old days. It was bookended by a pair of Republican attack ads on the Web that crosscut President Obama's planned closure of the Guantánamo Bay detention center with apocalyptic imagery — graphic video of the burning twin towers in one ad, a roar of nuclear holocaust (borrowed from the L.B.J. "daisy" ad of 1964) in the other.

The speech itself, with 20 mentions of 9/11, struck the same cynical note as the ads, as if the G.O.P. was almost rooting for a terrorist attack on Obama's watch. "No one wishes the current administration more success in defending the country than we do," Cheney said as a disingenuous disclaimer before going on to charge that Obama's "half measures" were leaving Americans "half exposed." The new president, he said, is unraveling "the very policies that kept our people safe since 9/11." In other words, when the next attack comes, it will be all Obama's fault. A new ad shouting "We told you so!" awaits only the updated video.

The Republicans at least have an excuse for pushing this poison. They are desperate. The trio of Pillsbury doughboys now leading the party — Rush Limbaugh, Newt Gingrich, Cheney — have variously cemented the G.O.P.'s brand as a whites-only men's club by revoking Colin Powell's membership and smearing the first Latina Supreme Court nominee as a "reverse racist." Republicans in Congress have no plausible economic, health care or energy policies to counter Obama's. The only card left to play is 9/11.

Yet even before Cheney spoke, Congressional Democrats were quaking in fear, purporting with straight faces that the transfer of detainees to "supermax" American prisons constituted a serious security threat. Many of the same senators who signed on to the Iraq war resolution in the fall of 2002 joined the 90-to-6 majority that put a hold on Obama's Gitmo closure plans.

The déjà vu in the news media was more chilling. Rather than vet the substance of Cheney's fulmination, talking heads instead hyped the split-screen "dueling speeches" gimmick of the back-to-back Obama-Cheney scheduling. Time magazine's political Web site Photoshopped Cheney and Obama's faces atop prize fighters' bodies.

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