

The former vice-president fears being held to account on torture and is lashing out.

Barack Obama's most underrated talent is his ability to get his enemies to self-destruct. It takes a lot less energy than defeating them directly, and helps maintain Obama's largely false patina of apolitical niceness.

Growling and sneering, Cheney accused the new president of actively endangering the lives of Americans by ending the detention and interrogation programmes of the last administration, and vowing to close Guantanamo Bay. It's hard to overstate how unseemly and unusual this was.

It is fine for a former vice-president to criticise his successor in due course. But there is a decorum that allows for a new president not to be immediately undermined by his predecessor. To be accused of what amounts to treason – a willingness to endanger the lives of Americans – is simply unheard of.

So what was Cheney thinking? My guess is that he fears he is in trouble. This fear has been created by Obama, but indirectly. Obama has declined to launch a prosecution of Cheney for war crimes, as many in his party (and outside it) would like. He has set up a review of detention, rendition and interrogation policies. And he has simply declassified many of the infamous torture memos kept under wraps by Bush.

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