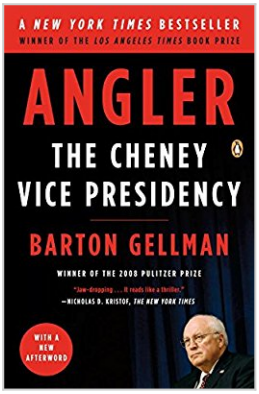

Angler: The Cheney Vice Presidency

By Barton Gellman

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Editorial Review

Review
"a forceful new study ... connecting the dots to give the reader a visceral understanding of just how Mr. Cheney maneuvered...."
a Michiko Kakutani in the "NYT"
"engrossing and informative ... the most penetrating portrait of him yet"
aJacob Heilbrunn in the "NYT Book Review"
"this new and brilliantly researched account a] went where Woodward was unable or uninterested in going.... an indispensable volume without which the Bush presidency canat be understood."
a Steve Clemons in the "American Conservative"
"Until now I assumed it would take decades ... for an author (say, some future Robert Caro) to uncover and describe Cheney's secretive role."
a James Mann in the "WP"
"It's unbelievable. I mean, get this. Just spend one night reading it by the fire, and see if you can sleep again."
a Jon Stewart on the "Daily Show"
"a remarkable tale extremely well told."
a Clive Crook in the "FT"
"a mesmerizing guided tour"
a Tom Carson ("Esquire" critic)

"Jaw-dropping . . . It reads like a thriller."
-Nicholas D. Kristof, "The New York Times"

""Angler" could well turn out to be the most revealing account of Cheney's activities as vice president that ever gets written"
-James Mann, "The Washington Post"

About the Author
Barton Gellman is a special projects reporter at *The Washington Post*, following tours that covered diplomacy, the Middle East, the Pentagon, and the D.C. superior court. His Cheney series, with partner Jo Becker, won a 2008 Pulitzer Prize, a George Polk Award, and the Goldsmith Prize for Investigative Reporting. Gellman also shared a Pulitzer for national reporting in 2002, and his work has been honored by the Overseas Press Club, the Society of Professional Journalists, and the American Society of Newspaper Editors. Gellman graduated with highest honors from Princeton University and earned a master’s degree in politics at University College, Oxford, as a Rhodes Scholar. He is the author of *Contending with Kennan: Toward a Philosophy of American Power*. Gellman lives in New York City.

Chapter One
A Very Short List

Frank Keating reached for the telephone on a desk the size of a Cadillac sedan. He was the picture of a governor in command, the first Republican to break the Oklahoma jinx on reelection. Working oil rigs outside his window—drilled right there on the capitol grounds, living relics of the old frontier exuberance—pumped cash into a booming state economy. Keating had big plans for the second term, not least the construction of a grand new dome atop the statehouse. And now here came Dick Cheney on the line.

Truth was, Keating had been half expecting the call.

The week before, a “Dear Frank” note had arrived from George W. Bush. Keating’s Texas neighbor had locked up the Republican presidential nomination on Super Tuesday, besting John McCain in six of ten states. Now Bush wanted advice on a running mate, “one of the most important decisions I will make this year,” he wrote on May 18, 2000. A form letter, Keating knew. The newspapers said Bush sent one to every big name in the GOP.

And yet . . . Keating could not help but tally his prospects. He was fifty- six years old, telegenic and tough and going places. Bush admired the way Keating handled himself in 1995, when homegrown terrorists in a Ryder van blew up the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building across town. The two men had a friendly football rivalry, liked to bet on Sooners- Longhorns games, and watched each other’s back in national politics. Bush supported Keating to chair the Republican governors; Keating endorsed Bush for president early on. More than endorsed him—Keating vouched for Bush with right- to- lifers, who needed the reassurance, and he delivered his Oklahoma political machine.All that and the right kind of résumé—special agent in the FBI, U.S. attorney, senior posts in Washington at Treasury, Justice, and Housing. True, Keating did not offer a whole lot of balance to the ticket. He was an oil- state fiscal conservative, hawkish on the death penalty and union- busting “ right- to- work” laws. Too much like Bush, most probably. Still, a person might wonder.

Cheney dialed the call himself. A lot of people liked that in a man of his rank, the sense that he refused to take on airs. The habit had other aspects. Cheney was chairman of a Fortune 500 company and had been a war- winning secretary of defense. Phoning unannounced had a way of catching people off balance, depriving them of that “Hold, please” moment to collect their thoughts. Aides said Cheney liked a glimpse at an unstudied interlocutor on the other end of the line. When Keating picked up, Cheney said his piece without preamble.

“The governor would like to have you be considered as running mate,” he said.

Cheney let the statement hang, in that disconcerting way of his, stopping before the other person quite expects. Keating found nothing to read in the man’s flat, clipped tone. He waited a beat, then probed.

“Dick, I don’t really do anything for you-all,” Keating said, thinking Cheney might add a word or two.

Cheney chose to take that as a question of geography.

“No, it doesn’t matter,” Cheney said. “Oklahoma and Texas, you may be joined by a border, but that is not a factor to us. Would you be willing to fill out all the paperwork?”

Indirection was getting Keating nowhere. He decided to ask flat out. Was this just a friendly gesture, or was Bush serious? Before running for governor, Keating had been through FBI background checks and four Senate confirmation hearings. He knew, or thought he did, what it meant to hand cool- eyed strangers the keys to every lockbox in his life. He did not care to go through that again without good cause.

“I want you to know the list is a very short list,” Cheney replied.

People would talk about all kinds of names, Cheney said matter-of-factly, but most of them would be decoys. Three, maybe four, were genuine. Keating’s was one of those, Cheney said. The next day a thick envelope arrived. Inside was the most demanding questionnaire the Oklahoma governor had ever seen.

Keating knew Cheney, trusted him. He had helped recruit Cheney five years before to chair the memorial committee for Oklahoma City bombing victims. Later, Cheney headlined a fund-raiser for Keating’s

reelection campaign. “My relationship with Cheney was a good one, a correct one, and one that I thought was aboveboard and transparent,” Keating recalled. “It turned into a very unpleasant association.”

What happened after that was prologue to the play of Cheney’s two terms as vice president. Amid stealth and misdirection, with visible formalities obscuring the action offstage, Cheney served as producer for Bush’s first presidential decision. Somewhere along the way he stepped aside as head of casting, taking the part of Bush’s running mate before anyone really auditioned. And he dodged most of the paperwork, bypassing the extraordinary scrutiny he devised for other candidates.

Keating filled out the questionnaire, handed over volumes of his most confidential files. In time he would have cause to regret that.

Two states east, in Tennessee, Lamar Alexander got word that Cheney was looking for him, too. He waited a couple of days to return the call. The campaign had come and gone for Alexander, and he had made up his mind to skip the GOP convention in July.

“You’re hard to reach,” Cheney began, the Wednesday before Memorial Day.

“Oh, not so hard, I don’t think,” Alexander said. “I’m sitting right here in front of our picture of the cabinet with President Bush.”

Bush senior, he meant. Alexander had been education secretary from 1991 to 1993, when Cheney ran the Pentagon.

“Governor Bush would like to consider you as vice president,” Cheney said.

Again the words hung, unembellished.

“I don’t know what to say,” Alexander replied. “I’ve changed my life. I’ve put politics behind me.”

Not for nothing. Alexander had mounted two drives for the presidency himself, neither a juggernaut. His 2000 campaign did not last out 1999, dying with a sixth- place finish in the Iowa straw poll—behind Gary Bauer and Pat Buchanan, for heaven’s sake. He was weary and disappointed and ready for his first long vacation in years.

“Surely there are other, better people,” Alexander said.

“The governor has told me to put race and gender and geography aside and go for the person who would make the best president.”

“There must be a long list,” Alexander said.

“*You* try to make a long list,” Cheney said. “When you make a list of Republicans, using that criterion, it is a short list.”

“How about Fred Thompson?”

“He might,” Cheney said.

Another silence.

“There are plenty of people who’d like the notoriety of being on the vice- presidential list, and I’m not one of

them," Alexander said.

"I'm not talking about that kind of list. This is a short list," Cheney repeated.

"How short?"

"A handful."

"How big is a handful?"

"I've got five fingers on my hand," Cheney said, amused or impatient or maybe neither, Alexander couldn't tell. "How many have you got on yours?"

Alexander tacked again.

"Why don't you do it?" he asked.

"It's not for me. He's asked me to find someone else to do it."

Enough. Alexander owed the nominee a yes or no. He would have to think on the offer, talk things over with Honey. She wasn't going to like it. Five days later, May 29, Alexander called Cheney in Texas. Send the forms, he said.

Alexander did have one question. What should he tell reporters?

Cheney knows, if anyone does, how to keep a secret. His reply might have raised an eyebrow on a more suspicious man. "Of course we want to keep this private," Cheney said. But he added: Confirm that you're a candidate. Tell them you're filling out thequestionnaire.

Bill Frist and Tom Ridge, John Engler and John Kasich, Chuck Hagel and John Danforth and Jon Kyl—they all got similar calls and similar instructions. Speculation in the media was intense. With the nomination decided, the race for running mate was front and center. Feed the beast, Bush's Austin campaign staff insisted, or the press pack will come up with its own story line. Alexander and Keating and the rest gave the talking heads something to chew on.

"I'll send you the papers," Cheney told Alexander, signing off. "Fill them out and send them back to me. Late in the month we'll get together."

Alexander headed to Nantucket for what would have been four weeks of biking alongside cranberry bogs and strolling the beaches of Siasconset. He spent half of it with his accountant and lawyer, on the phone and on a plane, assembling a comprehensive record of his life. He sent the package to Cheney in the second week of June, boxed in a heavy carton best left to younger backs. No easy task, but he understood that a campaign had to run all the traps.

"The only thing was," Alexander recalled, "I never heard from him again."

Secrecy was part of the bargain Cheney struck in the first week of April, when he agreed to run Bush's vice-presidential search. Worked best out of the limelight, he said. Fewer involved, fewer the leaks, fewer the egos to stroke. For Cheney, the low profile was a means to an end, the way to get things done without obstruction. Bush did not worry about losing control—the final word was his anyway—but he enjoyed the cloak- and- dagger by temperament. Old hands had long observed the pure pleasure he took in ambushing know- it- alls in the press, subverting expectations of critics and rivals. Aides who followed Bush and

Cheney to Washington would see the pattern again and again, not only in their mutual secrecy but in the way the two men reached a meeting of minds for different reasons entirely. “Cheney was pushing on an open door,” recalled Dan Bartlett, who became White House communications director, even if Bush took a different path to meet him.

Not even Bush’s closest aides were allowed inside the machine that Cheney built to sift the vice- presidential contenders. Not Dan Bartlett, not Karen Hughes, not Karl Rove, and not Joe Allbaugh, Bush’s former chief of staff and campaign manager. Sometimes Bush would tell his people about a candidate or a piece of advice he heard, like the letter from Dan Quayle on behalf of Lamar Alexander. (Quayle pitched Alexander as the kind of right- to- lifer who doesn’t scare off swing voters. Rove cared a lot more about the base than the swing, but he phoned Quayle to let him know that Bush had shared his note.) There were plenty of things Bush could not have told his retinue, though, because he did not know all the fine points himself. He was a big- picture man, comfortable with broad objectives, broadly declared. He had given Cheney marching orders, described the qualities he wanted in his Number Two. He left most of the legwork to the older man, taking briefings when his vetter had something new to say. Cheney lived in a different world. He had spent his professional life in places where ends and means collide, where the choices are often zero- sum and outcomes ride on the details.

Only three people were privy to the dossiers that Cheney assembled. One was his older daughter, Liz Cheney, thirty- three, a politically active lawyer who had left the State Department for private practice. Another was David J. Gribbin III, a loyal retainer since high school who had followed Cheney to Congress, the Pentagon, and Halliburton. The third was David Addington, the gifted and ferocious attorney who had been Cheney’s intellectual alter ego since the Iran-Contra hearings of 1987.

Addington and Liz Cheney wrote an exhaustive questionnaire, the language honed to pierce attempts at evasion. In precise legal prose, it asked about things a person might not tell his best friend—addictions, infidelities, crimes proved and unproved, plagiarism, bad debt, mental illness, embarrassing failures to pass a licensing test. Even by the bare- it- all standards of American politics after Watergate, the questions from the Cheney team were strikingly intrusive. For a Top Secret clearance in the U.S. government, which entrusts the holder with information that could do “exceptionally grave damage to the national security,” an applicant must answer thirty questions, generally limited to events of the past seven years. The Cheney form had close to two hundred questions under seventy- nine headings, requiring answers that covered the whole span of adulthood. “By definition, this is a process that looks very deeply into the lives of public figures,” Gribbin recalled. “It’s an extraordinarily sensitive process.”

Some of Cheney’s inquiries were more or less standard in the vetting of potential running mates. Presidential campaigns had accumulated lengthy checklists over the years, adding fresh queries in each election to guard against the scandals of the last. Mental health became fair game when a history of electric shock therapy drove Thomas Eagleton off the Democratic ticket in 1972. Spouses came in for scrutiny after Geraldine Ferraro, Walter Mondale’s 1984 running mate, was dogged by questions about her husband’s tax returns. Two years later, William Rehnquist made a contribution to the checklist when his confirmation as chief justice of the United States was imperiled by news that he once owned property under a deed forbidding sale to Jews. Clarence Thomas’s confirmation hearing in 1991 revealed the political risk of a sexual harassment charge. Beginning in 1993, when Zoe Baird was forced to withdraw as nominee for attorney general, candidates for high office had to answer for the green cards and tax returns of their domestic employees. Other political scandals, great and small, lent precedent to Cheney’s questions about defaults on child support or student loans, controversial business clients, and links to foreign governments or donors.

Even so, the structure of Cheney’s questionnaire bespoke unusual distrust of those who filled it out, with a corresponding demand for access to primary evidence. Cheney and his team were not prepared to accept a

doctor's summary of the candidate's present health and medical history, which traditionally focused on fitness for the rigors of office. They asked for copies of all medical records, complete with clinical notes and laboratory results. Unlike investigators for U.S. security clearances, who tell applicants they may withhold information about "marital, family, or grief counseling, not related to violence by you," the Cheney team also sought details of any visit, for any reason, to a "psychiatrist, psychologist, therapist or counselor."

Another distinguishing feature of Cheney's review was its expansion of the usual scope of inquiry. Cheney asked about the military service records, the criminal histories, and other intimate details of parents, children, siblings, spouses, and in- laws as well as the vice presidential contenders themselves. He asked about not only professional sanctions and allegations of malpractice but also "misconduct in school"; not only whether the candidate had been charged with a crime but also whether he had been identified as a suspect or witness; not only about recorded civil judgments and admissions of wrongdoing but also about no- fault settlements and cases sealed by a court.

A catchall question near the end asked each contender to specify in writing—it was just as bald as this—any event or proclivity that might leave him "vulnerable to blackmail or coercion."

To guard against omissions, Cheney ensured he had a free hand to tap directly into sources of information that are ordinarily guarded by privacy law. The vetting forms required each candidate to sign a notarized authorization for "Richard B. Cheney or . . . any person designated by him" to obtain from hospitals, doctors, and insurance companies "without limitation, any medical records" covering "any time period." Candidates were obliged to sign a similar form permitting the Internal Revenue Service to release their tax returns and schedules, and another for credit reports. They were further asked to request, on Cheney's behalf, the contents of their FBI files. One of the forms conferred on Cheney and his team, along with anyone who answered their questions, a blanket waiver of "any liability with regard to seeking, furnishing or use of" the confidential information. No expiration date was specified.

Cheney hired lawyers at Latham & Watkins to sift the thousands of pages thus produced on each of the candidates. The supervising partner was Philip J. Perry, Liz Cheney's husband.

On June 8, after two weeks of labor, Keating delivered an eight- inch stack of documents, spilling out of triple- hinged binders that proved unequal to the mass.

"Dear Dick," he wrote. "I enclose responses to the questionnaire, with supporting material. The Freedom of Information request to the FBI has been transmitted and I will forward the resulting material as soon as I receive it."

Arrayed for Cheney's inspection were photographs, Social Security numbers, education and employment histories of his wife, Catherine; his daughter, Carrie, then twenty- six; and sons Kelly and Chip, respectively twenty- four and twenty years old. Keating listed each address since 1962 and each job since 1969. As requested, he attached copies of every speech and every article he had written; interviews and transcripts of testimony; every published story in his files about the ups and downs and controversies of his career. He enumerated assets of $2,587,208.41, breaking down twenty- seven investments to the penny. (Most were mutual funds from Fidelity, Templeton, Janus, Vanguard, and T. Rowe Price.)

Keating's medical summary described a man of normal weight and robust health, based on annual physicals and his doctor's assessment of diagnostic tests. He took no prescription drug but Lipitor, which controlled a tendency to high cholesterol. He worked fifteen hour days without ill effect. An ordinary candidate screening would have stopped about there. Keating's submission, as specified by Cheney, attached scores of pages more—examination records, electrocardiograms, a scheduled sigmoidoscopy, laboratory results. The files said Keating's neck and shoulder made it hard to sleep comfortably sometimes; an orthopedist saw signs of

wear and tear that might be early arthritis. He recommended ibuprofen and cleared Keating to resume a daily three- mile run. The governor confessed to his doctors that he drank too much coffee, eight to ten cups a day, and did not eat as well as he ought to on the road. He took Geritol. He had a forty- one- inch chest and thirty-four- inch waist. His blood pressure, at 150/90, would bear watching. There was a sick visit on October 26, 1998, when Keating complained of sore throat, fever, and fatigue. (He had been self- medicating, the doctor noted, with hot tea and honey.) An unfortunate meal of catfish in 1996 left him nauseated and weak. Another exam turned up a slight enlargement of Keating's prostate, but the standard assay for cancer- related antigens found nothing untoward. Elsewhere the files recorded the usual indignities of the human animal under modern medicine, from the shape of Keating's testicles to the sphincter tone observed in rectal exams. As a physical specimen, Keating stood altogether naked before Cheney's team.

These were not the disclosures that Keating came to regret. Nor did he have trouble with the small points in his file that might open a national candidate to attack—draft deferments during the Vietnam War and tempests over ill- chosen words that inspired opponents to dub him "Governor Pop- off." Keating ascribed the latter to his "sense of humor—a saving grace in life, if occasionally a liability in politics."

What brought him low, in the bitter aftermath of his screening by Cheney, were the answers at tabs 69 and 73. The first asked about any potential question of ethics, regardless of merit. The second sought information on any other matter, whether part of the public record or not, that might embarrass the campaign.

Keating decided, in what he called "an abundance of caution," to describe a history of gifts to his family from an eccentric New York philanthropist. Keating had met Jack Dreyfus, founder of the eponymous mutual funds, in late 1988. Keating was then the third- ranking Justice Department official in the waning days of the Reagan administration. Dreyfus had suffered depression as a young man and made a spectacular recovery after taking the prescription drug Dilantin, which is government approved primarily for seizure disorders. He became convinced that Dilantin was a miracle medicine, capable of curing ailments across a broad medical landscape, from car sickness to Tourette's syndrome. Dreyfus had no known financial interest in Dilantin or the company that makes it, but he wrote two books and sank much of his fortune into a foundation to tell its story. When the two men met, Dreyfus bent Keating's ear on a proposal to promote the rehabilitation of criminals by distributing Dilantin in federal prisons. Keating deflected Dreyfus to the U.S. Bureau of Prisons, which lacked enthusiasm. When Keating left government, he turned down an offer to join the Dreyfus foundation, but the two men became friends nonetheless. "Somebody who thinks celery is a miracle fruit, you know, a lot of people might say, 'This guy's strange,'" Keating said. "But Jack is a wonderful guy."

By the spring of 1990, Keating was back in government as general counsel to Jack Kemp's Department of Housing and Urban Development. One evening over dinner Dreyfus announced that he was a wealthy man, could do as he liked, and wanted to pay the college costs of Keating's three children. A jaw-dropping temptation, no doubt. Keating, the G- man turned prosecutor, succumbed. After all, he reasoned, there was no question of personal corruption—nothing Dreyfus wanted in return, and nothing Keating could do for the man, anyway, in the Housing Department. Those rationales would come to seem naive, even vaguely untoward, in a man who had built his career on uprightness. But he decided to treat the matter as a narrow question of law: Was he allowed to accept the money or not?

Government documents back Keating's recollection that he asked for a ruling from the Housing Department's ethics staff. The lawyers had no objection so long as Keating declared the gifts on standard annual disclosure forms and recused himself from any future government business affecting his friend. Gary Davis, general counsel of theOffice of Government Ethics, seconded the departmental opinion, finding that the gifts were neither prohibited nor improper in appearance. It is undisputed that Keating reported them every year during his federal employment. Even so, Keating decided thatCheney ought to know.

“What did you do that for?” demanded Catherine Keating, his wife, when he told her what he had written in the Cheney questionnaire. A note of grievance came through seven years later, as Keating recounted the story by telephone. A woman’s voice, soft but insistent, became audible in the background. Keating laughed ruefully and said, “As a matter of fact my Cathy is standing here,” reminding him that she “and my chief of staff and everybody was saying, ‘Why would you put this down? Because it’s not what they’re after.’” The governor believed he was as square as they come, but asked himself, “You know, could an issue be raised? Possibly so.” And with the vice presidency at stake, he ought to be “purely Caesar’s wife.”

How Cheney counseled Bush as the weeks went by, and by what subtle shifts he crossed the line from adviser to running mate, are questions likely to frustrate categorical answer. Too much of the action took place without witnesses, on the back porch of the big house on Bush’s Crawford ranch or in telephone calls that, according to aides, Bush would leave the room to take. But some of Cheney’s advice, then and later, did make its way to Bush’s confidants, because the Texas governor was not half as committed as Cheney to silence. Sometimes Bush’s inner circle could see the boss reframing the older man’s observations as his own, adding new thoughts and new turns of phrase to his lexicon.

As First Son, Bush had witnessed tensions between his father’s White House staff and the hard- charging operators who looked out for the political future of Vice President Quayle. Cheney reinforced the lesson that ambition in a vice president leads inexorably to conflict with the man in the Oval Office, especially as the next election nears. Anyone could see it happening that summer between Bill Clinton and Al Gore, he said. Cheney told Bush how much Gerald Ford, a man accustomed to leadership, hated his brief tenure as Richard Nixon’s number two. He recounted inside stories of his own subsequent battles, as Ford’s White House chief of staff, with Vice President Nelson Rockefeller. (Cheney helped persuade Ford to throw Rockefeller off the ticket in 1976.) Bush, for sure, wanted none of that kind of nonsense. He sought a trustworthy adviser, conversant in the ways of Washington—but most of all loyal, content to remain back-stage. What Bush seemed to picture, the author Jacob Weisberg has proposed, was the constitutional equivalent of his wife, Laura.

Federal Reserve chairman Alan Greenspan, an old friend, chatted with Cheney about the vice- presidential search that summer. Cheney ran down the wish list—a person capable of commanding the presidency should need arise, yet satisfied to wait quietly in the wings; a confidant of sound judgment with experience in foreign affairs, in Congress, or in the corridors of the executive branch. Greenspan was struck by Cheney’s poker face. In a few economical phrases, the man had just sketched as neat a self- portrait as Greenspan could imagine. Was it possible that Cheney did not know it? Cheney appearedto be organizing a nationwide search for himself. If so, Greenspan said privately, he approved. Greenspan had worked with or for every president since 1968. Only Nixon and Clinton—an odd couple, Greenspan allowed—matched Cheney’s intellect. None was his equal at turning a strategic goal into operational plans.

Critics who cast Cheney as Svengali, luring Bush into a choice that was not his own, tend to slight the plentiful evidence that Bush took an early shine to his father’s secretary of defense. By both men’s accounts, confirmed by aides who bear no love for Cheney, Bush made the first approach. At a dinner in November 1999, he asked the Halliburton CEO to chair his national campaign. Then, in March 2000, Bush dispatched Allbaugh, his chief of staff, to sound out Cheney’s interest in being considered for running mate. In an interview with his authorized biographer, Cheney said he declined both overtures. “It was a firm no,” he said of his reply to Allbaugh. Bush depicted himself as a suitor who slowly broke down Cheney’s resistance. “It became apparent to me that Cheney was the kind of guy that would be a good fit for a two- term governor from Texas who, while he had a pretty good political pedigree, didn’t have a lot of what they call ‘Washington experience,’” he said. Bush’s biographer, who likewise spoke to both men, said the president emphasized the virtue of a partner “whose own political ambitions would not supersede his loyalty to Bush.”

And yet the story is not so simple, because ambition's link to disloyalty was exactly what Cheney impressed upon Bush with his parables of Rockefeller and Ford. In that context, Cheney's denial of interest—the very act of spurning a shot at the ticket—proclaimed him as a man who posed no threat. Bush made clear, in his most revealing interview, how much that appealed to him. "He's a thoughtful guy, he has the respect of the people around the table, and what he said made sense," Bush said. "And plus, *he didn't want it.*" There was a logic in that, from Bush's point of view. Even so, equating ambition with latent mutiny pointed Bush toward an unusual idea: that he ought to choose a running mate who had no particular interest in reaching the White House. Historically, that was anomalous. Beginning with its first two occupants, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, the vice presidency was at once the most frustrating job in government and the surest route to the top. Former vice presidents accounted for fully one- third of all presidents by the year 2000; still more had sought or won their party nominations. If that was not a good thing, as Cheney intimated, then candidates for Bush's ticket acquired a hint of suspicion the moment they agreed to apply. Most of them, unlike Cheney, were in their political primes, young enough to think of elections to come.

No one but Cheney can say for sure when he began to see a vice president in the mirror. By agreeing to manage the search, however, Cheney did something he does as well as anyone in Washington. He placed himself in the only vantage point that could show him how much time he had left to decide. Had Bush displayed signs of settling on someone else, Cheney would have been the first to know.

What Cheney did not choose to do, more than what he did, offers the strongest evidence of an intention to keep his options open. Cheney is among the most careful of men with words, and every experienced executive knows how to say no with finality. In politics the classic formula was William Tecumseh Sherman's in 1884: "If drafted I will not run; if nominated I will not accept; if elected I will not serve." Florida's Connie Mack offered an updated model in 2000, saying he would never speak to Cheney again if Cheney placed him on the list. Cheney, by contrast, took no unequivocal stand. When Bush announced at a campaign stop in Dayton, Ohio, that Cheney would lead the search for a running mate—that was April 24, 2000, three weeks after Cheney actually began—the first point Bush added was that the role did not rule out Cheney's own selection. Some weeks later, Colin Powell asked for and obtained a public announcement from Bush that he did not wish to be, and would not be, a candidate for the job. Cheney never did that. He therefore left a future president at risk of the embarrassment that comes with extending still another invitation and receiving still another rebuff. Such a breach of protocol would have been gratuitous had Cheney been determined to refuse.

Close inspection of the record, bolstered by recent interviews with senior figures in the Bush campaign, shows that Cheney in fact advanced no commanding reason to keep him off the ticket. Every objection was either curable or framed in terms that Bush might easily think unimportant, even ignoble. The official story, in accounts the two men gave in 2000 and more recently to their authorized biographers, describes the Twelfth Amendment as a thorny problem, with Cheney pointing out more than once that the Constitution does not permit a president and vice president from the same state. (As chairman of the Dallas- based Halliburton, Cheney lived in Texas.) When the time came, he plucked that thorn with a day trip to register to vote at his second home in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. Cheney told Bush, moreover, that he had been arrested twice in the 1960s for driving under the influence of alcohol. The nominee, with a DUI of his own, could hardly be expected to blanch. Much the same went for Cheney's argument that his oil- industry background might prove controversial, another point in common. As a son of Wyoming, whose paltry three electoral votes were reliably Republican anyway, Cheney said he had nothing to offer Bush in battleground states. But Bush had already declared himself indifferent, in his choice of running mate, to short- term electoral advantage. Cheney protested that he was happy in private life. That may have been the flimsiest excuse, the converse of the usual evasion of departing officials who talk about leaving their jobs for more time with the family.

On its face, Cheney's strongest argument against himself was a history of heart disease. The way he put it was circumscribed. Cheney did not profess concern that running for vice president might damage his health or pose a risk to his life. Bush would have had little choice but to accept a firm refusal on those grounds. Cheney portrayed his heart, instead, as a threat to Bush's *political* health, protection of which was properly for the nominee to decide. Cheney explained that he had not suffered a cardiac event for twelve years, and that his present health was good. In one of the few such meetings attended by the campaign's inner circle, Cheney said "he was active and vigorous," Karen Hughes recalled, "and ran a big worldwide business." He warned that if he should suffer chest pains, he would have to go to a hospital for an exam. The potential problem was the "impact it might have on the campaign," not on Cheney's fitness for office. When asked whether his heart would impede his service as vice president, Cheney told the group he "didn't think it would, since he had run an international business and been through lots of stress and intensity as secretary of defense during the Gulf War," according to Hughes. Cheney was advising Bush to worry about himself, not Cheney—and about appearances, not reality. Bush had to decide, by that rubric, whether he had the spine to stand up to an empty political attack.

The public record on David Addington, after three decades in Washington, turned up exactly one hearing in Congress, one grand jury transcript, and one on- the- record interview in print. The interview was largely unremarkable, save for its allusion to an intriguing moment in the early days of the vice- presidential search. As they designed the screening process, Addington recounted, he "joked that if Cheney did a good job on the search, Bush might ask him to be his running mate." According to both men, Cheney "dismissed the comment with a laugh."

Acquaintances said Addington and Cheney shared a dry sense of humor, but neither was given to idle chat. Their wit tended more toward the topical than the trifling. One point of context for that exchange was a history they shared on the Cheney for President exploratory committee in 1994. Cheney abandoned his brief flirtation with the 1996 Republican nomination.

For all the talk of desired qualities—judgment, experience, gravitas—the search for Bush's running mate looked harder at vice than virtue. What unpleasant surprise awaited if this or that contender joined the ticket? Which predictable lines of attack? Where were the hidden defects, the offenses against valuable interest groups? Such are the preoccupations of any national campaign, protecting itself against risk. Cheney had been through the exercise before, when he helped Ford choose Robert Dole as Rockefeller's replacement. Much later, he told his biographer that the 2000 screening bore out his "experience over the years . . . that you usually end up with the least worst option." Dan Quayle, who once passed through the wringer himself and consulted with the Bush campaign from afar, compared the process to enactment of a law. "It's a lot easier to kill legislation than pass legislation," he said. "So it's a lot easier to knock off V.P. candidates than to actually get one through the mill."

It was Addington who oversaw the disassembly of candidates, cataloging their blemishes and mounting them for inspection. Admirers and critics alike called him a paperwork prodigy, slashing through great volumes of text and carving out points of interest with uncanny speed. Bearded and barrel- chested and standing more than six feet tall, Addington was prone to strong opinions and a pugilistic tone in advancing them. After compiling the records on Keating, Alexander, Frist, Hagel, and the rest, Addington prepared a comprehensive memo on each. "That's the way presidential and vice presidential processes go," Alexander said in a conversation in early 2008, as the Democratic and Republican fields were winnowed down to two contenders each. "We can see it going on right now. You take very good people and you begin to poke holes in them."

Two things stood out in retrospect about Cheney's selection for the 2000 ticket, neither understood at the time. The hardest one to explain was that Bush—who put so much stock in his instinct for people, that knack

for decoding a handshake or the quality of a gaze—did not interview a single candidate before he settled on Cheney. Bush was acquainted with most of them, to one degree or another. But those interactions came "in a very different context," as Keating put it, in his case "on issues of importance to governors." Bush never sat the contenders down, never laid eyes on them as they answered points of doubt, never heard out their worldviews or their visions of a White House partnership. Bush and Cheney concealed that omission by maintaining a false suspense in the weeks before the Republican convention began in Philadelphia on July 31. Timing the news for best advantage is routine in any political campaign. In this case the tactic did not so much postpone the news as rewrite it, promoting a tale of scrutiny by Bush that included personal interviews with top contenders.

The calendar told the story. July 3 was the decisive day, when Bush asked Cheney to join the ticket and Cheney replied for the first time that he was willing. (Cheney told his biographer it was only then, in the sweltering heat of Bush's back porch, that he reached the reluctant conclusion that the "least worst option" was himself.) Cheney told Bush he would decide how to divest from Halliburton and gather the required assurances from his doctors.

For the next three weeks, campaign spinners fed news stories touting Ridge, Keating, and Danforth as front-runners. Only after the Independence Day weekend did Bush and Cheney begin to schedule interviews for a vacancy that no longer existed. Cheney phoned Ridge on July 5 to make one such appointment. The Pennsylvania governor replied instead that he no longer wished to be considered. Cheney asked him not to say so in public. Four days later, on July 9, CNN found Ridge in State College, Pennsylvania, where he was host of a summer gathering of fellow governors. Correspondent Gary Tuchman introduced Ridge as "the leader of an important swing state" and "a top- tier possibility" to join the ticket with Bush. "Are you nervous about waiting for this decision?" he asked. "No," Ridge replied gamely. "I believe ultimately it's a matter of trust, and let the chips fall where they may."

Two days after that, July 11, Cheney flew to Washington. On his public agenda was a meeting with Frist, in fact Cheney's first substantial interview with a contender. Not disclosed, the same day, was Cheney's appointment with his doctor to arrange a summary health report for Bush. On July 14, Bush conducted his own first audition—with New York governor George Pataki, who had filled out Cheney's questionnaire. Campaign officials said Pataki was "in the mix." Pataki did not dispute the report at the time. In truth, the New York governor chatted briefly with Bush "about their families, about politics and whatnot," David Catalfamo, Pataki's communications director, recalled recently. Bush "never brought up the issue of the vice presidency."

Back in Texas the next day, July 15, Bush disclosed for the first time to Hughes, Rove, and Allbaugh that Cheney was his man. (He heard out their best efforts as devil's advocates, but none of them had access to Cheney's files.) Three days after that, on July 18, Bush scheduled his second and last interview with a candidate, generating news coverage of a meeting with Danforth and his wife. Retired senator Alan Simpson, one of Cheney's oldest political friends, said Cheney had recommended Danforth for the job and set up the meeting, saying "Here's one for you. This guy's great." If Cheney told that toSimpson, it was not true. The deal was already done.

Only after this final feint, on July 21, did Cheney register to vote in Wyoming, a fact he had to know would become public. The same day, satisfying a requirement of his contract with Halliburton, he notified the board of directors that he might be about to depart the job. On July 25, Bush announced his decision to face Al Gore in the general election with Cheney at his side. Neither Bush nor Cheney held a face- to- face interview for the job with Keating, Alexander, Ridge, Hagel, Kasich, Engler, or any of the other ersatz finalists.

Some campaign officials disputed that, pointing to Bush's late-June campaign stop in Wayne, Michigan,

alongside Engler. Bush was quoted as saying Engler is “on the list,” adding, “What do you expect me to say? He’s standing right here.” Years later, Engler said Bush spent his downtime on a treadmill that day. The two men spoke for a few minutes about Michigan politics and their children—Bush’s twin girls, Engler’s triplets. As for becoming Bush’s running mate, “I never had that conversation,” Engler said.

The precedent Bush and Cheney set, establishing a forum of two for the most sensitive deliberations, would follow them to Washington.

Equally meaningful in light of events to come was Cheney’s deft avoidance of the scrutiny he had conducted on the other candidates. “He went down through everybody’s negatives,” Quayle recalled. “And everybody has negatives. . . . And nobody really vetted him on what his negatives were.” Gribbin, for example, was a trusted friend who maintained his own records of work with Cheney across the years. When the author asked him whether anyone requested that he produce those files, or review them, he replied, “No. Heaven and good grief, no.” Gribbin, who had full access to the other dossiers, added, “I don’t have knowledge of who vetted the vetter. I don’t know who vetted Cheney or what process they used. It was not something I was involved in or that anybody ever told me. At some point there was a decision that all these names were going to be set aside, and they were going to select Cheney. It was a shock to me.”

Cheney did not fill out his own questionnaire, a fact obscured in the days after Bush’s announcement. “Secretary Cheney told me he subjected himself to the same kind of scrutiny” as everyone else, campaign spokeswoman Karen Hughes said in a briefing for reporters. Hughes said Allbaugh scrutinized the record of Cheney’s service in the executive and legislative branches, while Bush himself—a man known even then for aversion to detail—inspected Cheney’s financial and medical history. Gradually it emerged that all this took place in the space of just over a week. The story left untold was that no one had access to Cheney’s tax or corporate records, and no one but his own doctor read a word of his medical files. Cheney, who had employed a man named James Steen for many years as a personal archivist, did not submit even his public speeches, interviews, testimony, and voting record to Allbaugh, who ostensibly was combing them for red flags.

Dan Bartlett, then and later a top communications strategist for Bush, said the campaign was “utterly unprepared” for Cheney and that weeks after the announcement he was still scrambling to uncover basic facts about Bush’s running mate. “We were caught flatfooted,” unable to respond to Democratic attacks on Cheney’s voting record against Head Start, school lunch programs, and the Martin Luther King Jr. national holiday. “Literally our in- house research team, myself and others, were just poring through—I mean, boxes were kind of just dumped, there was no road map, there were no concise answers,” Bartlett said. “Like I said, we were on our heels.” A member of Halliburton’s public relations shop, designated by Cheney to answer corporate questions, proved unhelpful. When the campaign asked questions, Bartlett said, Halliburton replied that therecords were in storage or “‘That lawyer doesn’t work for us anymore.’” Cheney set his heels against opening the books at Halliburton, saying “We’re not going to drag them in.” Bartlett went to Bush and said, “We’re getting our asses kicked in the media because we’re not prepared.”

Cheney rode it out, and Bush went along. “To his standard he probably thinks he’s an open book,” Bartlett said. “To his standard—trust me. It really goes to this whole mind-set of how he entered this job. He entered this job less in his mind as a politician than as a public servant. He made his decision not to run for president in ’96, and I think he viewed this as ‘I was in private life, this guy has convinced me to come back, I’m going to help him, [but] I’m not going to completely tear my private life apart to do this.’ When it came to things that touched home, his thing was ‘I’m not going through that.’ I’m not saying it’s logical, I’m just saying that was the Cheney worldview.”

And as for Cheney’s ailing heart? Hughes told reporters after the announcement that Bush had commissioned

an independent review of his running mate's medical fitness. Bush's father, the former president, suggested a second opinion from Denton A. Cooley, a man of sterling authority. Cooley was founder of the Texas Heart Institute and recipient of a Medal of Freedom from President Ronald Reagan. According to the Bush campaign, Cooley took his own careful look and vouched for Cheney's health.

That was not quite half true. Cooley thought he was doing the former president a quiet favor, and did not expect his involvement to be cited as an independent medical review. Reached at the soaring glass building named for him at St. Luke's Episcopal Hospital in Houston, he said Bush's father asked him to sound out Cheney's personal physician in Washington, Jonathan S. Reiner. Cooley did not know the man but found him open and persuasive. In a brief conversation, Cheney's doctor offered a "personal assurance that his cardiac status was sound." Cooley did not look at Cheney's films, electrocardiac data, or any other records, nor did he make the wide- ranging medical inquiries conducted on the other candidates for Bush's running mate.

Four months later, Cooley saw the news that Cheney had been rushed to the hospital for insertion of a stent in a coronary artery. "It wasn't a real surprise at all," he said, because Cheney clearly had chronic heart problems. In retrospect, Cooley said, he had "some misgivings to pass on his condition" without examining Cheney or seeing the records for himself. On the other hand, he said, he is a surgeon, not a cardiologist. For a thorough review of Cheney's health, another doctor would have been a better choice.

As it happened, Keating had scheduled his own news conference on the day Bush announced that Cheney would join the 2000 ticket. Keating went ahead with the unveiling of his Oklahoma Capitol Dome, a big and popular project. That evening, he accepted an invitation to sing Cheney's praises on television. "There are really only two people in public life in America, at least on our team, that certainly are stratospheric characters, and that's Colin Powell and Dick Cheney," he said on CNN's Crossfire program. "The rest of us are down with the cumulus clouds. And when Dick Cheney was selected by George, I was enthusiastic about it. This guy has a distinguished record in the Congress, in the administration, he led the country, he certainly led the Department of Defense, was Colin Powell's boss in the Persian Gulf War, did a great job. A matter of pride for all of us as Americans. He's been an extraordinarily successful business guy. I was thrilled. I wasn't disappointed at all, because I never thought I would get it."

There would be other fish to fry if Bush reached the White House. Bush liked familiar faces around him. Keating had served barbecue with the man at a high school on the Oklahoma- Texas border. By late November, Keating found himself in Palm Beach, counting chads with the other VIP volunteers as the Florida recount ground on. When the Supreme Court called the election for Bush, Keating was on everybody's lips for a senior cabinet post. Newsweek said he "was on the supershort veep list and could be attorney general or FBI chief."

Cheney, who was running the transition, had other plans. The law—its interpretation, its enforcement—was critical to the exercise of White House power. As Cheney saw things, the attorney general, like every other member of the cabinet, ought to be subordinate to the president. There was only one executive authority in the Constitution. You might hardly know it from the way some attorneys general behaved. To Cheney's way of thinking, independence and Justice Department experience might not be virtues. In any case, Cheney had another person in mind. John Ashcroft, the former Missouri senator, had just been defeated for reelection by a dead man. That was a rude way of saying it, but euphemism did not capture the chagrin. Ashcroft's opponent, Democratic governor Mel Carnahan, had perished in a plane crash three weeks before election day, too late to have his name removed from the ballot. He won anyway. (Jean Carnahan, his wife, was appointed in his place.) Ashcroft would be grateful for the Justice post, and he would have a steep learning curve to climb. Ashcroft was accustomed, as well, to minding the party leadership. Or so went the thinking at the time. Later, Ashcroft would surprise the vice president on that point.

Keating wanted the job, and he enjoyed vocal support. That needed watching. Not many constituencies mattered more than the Federalist Society, which had brought its influence to bear on government and legal education since its birth at the dawn of the Reagan revolution. “Most of the conservatives were backing either Keatingfor Ashcroft,” recalled Leonard Leo, the society’s executive vice president. “I and a number of other Catholics had kind of put our weight behind Governor Keating.” The Oklahoman’s track record in the Justice Department lent confidence that he would be not only conservative but effective. Still, as Leo added in an e- mail: “Frank Keating is a straight shooter. He doesn’t mince words. He would have believed in the unitary executive, but, as AG, certainly would have told the WH what he thought and would have pushed back when there were differences of opinion.” A conservative with comparable views said, “Maybe that’s not what they were looking for.”

Keating’s incautious wit, which had drawn him into hot water before, may have sealed his fate. Shortly before election day 2000, someone asked Keating, a bit naughtily, whether he planned a bid for the vacancy left by Cheney at Halliburton. “No,” Keating replied, smiling. “But I would like to chair the next selection committee.” Years later, a joke like that would become permissible. Cheney told it on himself in February of his final year in office. “My close association with the President goes back to the year 2000, when he asked me to lead the search for a vice presidential nominee,” he deadpanned. The friendly audience at the Omni Shoreham Hotel was laughing already. Cheney didn’t need the punch line, but he paused and then delivered it with nice comic timing: “That worked out pretty well.” The audience roared. The next month, a reporter asked Bush how he would advise John McCain to choose a running mate for 2008. “I’d tell him to be careful about who he names to be the head of the selection committee,” Bush cracked.

Back in the fall of 2000, with the general election looking close, Keating’s jibe had some sting. It got back to Bush- Cheney campaign headquarters. “I was told that my friends in the new administration were not amused,” Keating said.

Keating had risen with *Newsweek*, and

Newsweek

brought him down. The magazine’s investigative bulldog, Michael Isikoff, was fresh from a series of scoops in the long- running Clinton- Lewinsky impeachment scandal. Keating was celebrating the Oklahoma Sooners’ Orange Bowl victory in a cottage in the Florida Keys when he got word that Isikoff was looking for him. Now, that could not be anything good. Keating returned the call. Isikoff, as it turned out, had come across a fragment of Keating’s vice- presidential file.

“We have information that the reason you weren’t selected as attorney general is because of these questionable gifts to your kids,” Isikoff said, as Keating recalled the conversation. “From the highest sources, I’ve heard that you didn’t disclose any of this.”

“What?” Keating said. “The only reason you know about it, Mike, is because I disclosed it, and the only person who had the information is Dick Cheney.”

“Well, I can’t tell you how I got this, but what’s your answer?”

And so Keating explained his history with Dreyfus. Isikoff’s story did him no favors. The Oklahoma governor, Newsweek wrote, lacked the “skeleton- free closet” that Bush demanded of his nominees. “The man who wanted to be the country’s top cop quietly took cash gifts totaling about $250,000—largely unreported but legal—from one of his top political fundraisers,” Isikoff wrote. In fact, as the story

acknowledged, Keating had reported the gifts and cleared them with federal ethics officers. But the gifts had not become public knowledge in Oklahoma, which has no such disclosure requirement. The *Newsweek* story touched off an explosion in Keating's home state. The legislature launched an investigation. Scores of local stories spoke of Keating's abandonment even by his great friend George W. Bush. To stanch the bleeding, Keating decided to return all the money to Dreyfus, "a terrible burden on me financially." By the time reporters examined the federal ethics rulings, the biggest man in Oklahoma was political roadkill, crushed under wheels he never heard coming. No one caught a clear view of the driver.

There was a clue, Keating recalled. In December or early January, he said, long after the campaign returned his disclosure files, Cheney had phoned from transition headquarters. Refresh my memory, he asked, about those college gifts from your friend?"It obviously came from Dick Cheney or one of his people," Keating said, referring to the *Newsweek* piece. "To say that it was chickenshit, excuse the expression, is an understatement. It was gratuitous, and it was petty, and it appeared vindictive to me, and it was utterly beneath the dignity of a person of Cheney's achievement. . . . I mean, Dick Cheney coming into my life has been like a black cloud."

A fellow governor, John Engler—a Bush supporter from day one of the campaign—said he had reluctantly come to agree with Keating. "There's only one way that it could have emerged," he said. "I've always felt it was somebody other than Cheney himself, but Cheney as impresario of the process—someone in that process breached the confidentiality that had been promised."

The story did not go unnoticed in Washington. Keating made no public accusation—not until his interview for this book—but he hinted at his suspicion among friends. The rumor spread, and Keating thereby did the vice president a favor he did not intend. He propagated the message, educational and just deniable enough: Don't cross Cheney. The town was full of important people who had handed the vice president their most personal files—John Kasich, the House Budget Committee chairman; Tom Ridge, the future secretary of homeland security; Bill Frist, the future Senate majority leader; John Danforth, the future UN ambassador; Jon Kyl, chairman of the Senate Republican Policy Committee and the subcommittee on taxation; Chuck Hagel, a senator inclined to cast dissenting votes on some of the Bush administration's more controversial requests. "Dick Cheney knows more about me than my mother, father, and wife," Frist told the Washington Post. Not, he added, that he was complaining or anything.

Keating's bright future fell behind him. He phoned the White House, asked to speak to the president. It fell to Andrew Card, the new chief of staff, to return the call. Card absorbed Keating's rage with soothing words of surprise and concern, assuring him of the president's highest regard. "The president and I had an excellent relationship as governors," Keating said, from his postpolitical perch as an insurance lobbyist. "And of course when this issue occurred, then the doors were closed and the lights were turned off, and I never talked to him again."

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