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OP-ED COLUMNIST

Cheney, Master of Pain

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WASHINGTON

Dick Cheney has done many dastardly things. But presiding over policies so saturnine that they ended up putting the liberal speaker from San Francisco on the hot seat about torture may be one of his proudest achievements.

Nancy Pelosi's bad week of blithering responses about why she did nothing after being briefed on torture has given Republicans one of their happiest — and harpy-est — weeks in a long time. They relished casting Pelosi as contemptible for not fighting harder to stop their contemptible depredations against the Constitution. That's Cheneyesque chutzpah.

The stylish grandmother acted like a stammering child caught red-handed, refusing to admit any fault and pointing the finger at a convenient scapegoat. She charged the C.I.A. with misleading Congress, which is sort of like saying the butler did it, or accusing a generic thuggish-looking guy in a knit cap with gang tattoos to distract from your sin.

Although the briefing was classified, she could have slugged it out privately with Bush officials. But she was busy trying to be the first woman to lead a major party. And very few watchdogs — in the Democratic Party or the press — were pushing back against the Bush horde in 2002 and 2003, when magazines were gushing about W. and Cheney as conquering heroes.

Leon Panetta, the new C.I.A. chief, who is Pelosi's friend and former Democratic House colleague from California, slapped her on Friday, saying that the agency briefers were truthful. And Jon Stewart ribbed that the glossily groomed speaker was just another "Miss California U.S.A. who's also been revealing a little too much of herself."

It's discomfiting to think that the woman who's making Joe Biden seem suave is second in line to the presidency.

Of course, a lot of the hoo-ha around Pelosi makes it sound as if she knew stuff that no one else had any inkling of, when in fact the entire world had a pretty good idea of what was happening. The Bushies plied their dark arts in broad daylight.

Besides, the question of what Pelosi knew or didn't, or when she did or didn't know, is irrelevant to how W. and Cheney broke the law and authorized torture.

Philip Zelikow, who was State Department counselor for Condi Rice and executive director of the 9/11 Commission, testified last week before Congress that torture was "a collective failure and it was a mistake," perhaps "a disastrous one."

After 9/11, he recalled, "the tough, gritty world of 'the field' worked its way into the consciousness of the nation's leaders," adding that the cultural "divide between the world of secretive, bearded operators in the field coming from their 3 a.m. meetings at safe houses, and the world of Washington policy makers in their wood-paneled suites" led the policy makers to become too deferential to C.I.A. operatives, and miss the fact that even the operatives disagreed among themselves about torture.

Ali Soufan, the ex-F.B.I. agent who flatly calls torture "ineffective," helped get valuable information from Abu Zubaydah, an important Al Qaeda prisoner, simply by outwitting him. Torture, he told Congress, is designed to force the subject to submit "through humiliation and cruelty" and "see the interrogator as the master who controls his pain."

It's a good description of the bullying approach Cheney and Rummy applied to the globe, and the Arab world. But as Soufan noted, when you try to force compliance rather than elicit cooperation, it's prone to backfire.

The more telling news last week was yet another suggestion about Cheney's reverse-engineering the Iraq war. Robert Windrem, a former NBC News investigative producer, reported on The Daily Beast that in April 2003, after the invasion of Baghdad, the U.S. arrested a top officer in Saddam's security force. Even though this man was an old-fashioned P.O.W., someone in Vice's orbit reportedly suggested that the interrogations were too gentle and that waterboarding might elicit information about the fantasized connection between Osama and Saddam.

In The Washington Note, a political and foreign policy blog, Col. Lawrence Wilkerson, Colin Powell's former chief of staff at State, wrote that the "harsh interrogation in April and May of 2002 ... was not aimed at pre-empting another terrorist attack on the U.S. but discovering a smoking gun linking Iraq and Al Qaeda."

More and more the timeline is raising the question of why, if the torture was to prevent terrorist attacks, it seemed to happen mainly during the period when the Bush crowd was looking for what was essentially political information to justify the invasion of Iraq.

I used to agree with President Obama, that it was better to keep moving and focus on our myriad problems than wallow in the darkness of the past. But now I want a full accounting. I want to know every awful act committed in the name of self-defense and patriotism. Even if it only makes one ambitious congresswoman pay more attention in some future briefing

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about some future secret technique that is “uniquely” designed to protect us, it will be worth it.

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