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OPINION

Mr. Cheney, LI has some questions

The Defense secretary who sounded the death knell for Grumman pays a visit

BY MICHAEL POLIMENI

At long last, former Vice President Dick Cheney is returning to the scene of the crime: Long Island.

Cheney is speaking to the Long Island Association business group tomorrow just a few miles from where thousands lost their jobs when he killed two legendary Grumman Corp. aircraft, the F-14 Tomcat and the A-6 Intruder, during his tenure as secretary of Defense under President George H.W. Bush.

His actions in 1990-91 were the beginning of the end of the corporate life of Grumman as most Long Islanders knew it. Grumman was the nation's eighth-largest defense company and the Navy's pre-eminent builder of carrier aircraft. Fortunately, Grumman was able to successfully merge with Northrop Corp. — so while Cheney ended the Long Island era of producing extraordinary aircraft, Northrop Grumman continues to play a key role in strengthening the Island's technology-driven economy.

Still, history demands an answer from Cheney as to why he took the action to kill two premier Grumman aircraft that still had the capability of being modernized, upgraded and used to project America's military force around the globe for at least another decade. He knew full well that his one-two assault, canceling two significant aircraft, would dismantle the defense firm. In the winter of his years he has the means to reflect on his actions and use his appearance before the Long Island business audience to set the record straight about what he was thinking and why.

Was it a lack of respect from the Navy when he was a freshman congressman back in the late 1970s? Did Grumman management mishandle the pricing of an obviously superior weapons system? Or did the Tomcat's competition, the McDonnell Douglas F-18, have a more powerful, cohesive congressional delegation in Missouri lobbying on its behalf, using various committee assignments to successfully engage in the kind of Capitol Hill



Defense Secretary Dick Cheney and Joint Chiefs Chairman Gen. Colin Powell at the Pentagon in January 1991

horse trading that often accompanies military spending?

A bipartisan Long Island congressional delegation, including Democrats George Hochbreuckner, Robert Mrazek and Tom Downey, and Republican Norman Lent, were among Grumman's champions, as was Sen. Alfonse D'Amato, but Cheney was indifferent. He was quoted at the time as saying the Tomcat was a 1960s design still flying in the 1990s. Still, he allowed the B-52 to remain part of our first line of defense even though its first flight was during the early days of the

Eisenhower administration.

Critics of the Tomcat said it required hundreds of man-hours to keep its aviation electronics and radar going while its initial engines were known to give trouble. The answer was Grumman's F-14D, which had enormously improved General Electric jet engines and far better radar, while the aircraft maintained a 1,000-mile range that would keep enemy cruise missiles far from America's carriers.

Outgunned and outflanked, D'Amato waged a rear-guard action on the floor of the Senate to

keep funding in the budget for additional Tomcats. But he was only able to postpone Cheney's execution order by a year, and at the end of that extension the word went out from Cheney's office that the Tomcat was done. But he wasn't done with Grumman. A year later, in 1991, the Defense secretary issued an order to cancel the company's A-6 Intruder, which had been in the middle of receiving key improvements when the death order came down.

With no Tomcat and no Intruder, there was little left for Grumman to build. The company that seemingly every family on Long Island was connected with in some way was done. In killing Grumman, Secretary of Defense Cheney cost Long Island 25,000 jobs.

But like many before him, he has returned to the scene, courtesy of the LIA — and with any luck, he will find confession to be good for the soul.



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