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Cheney Is Fulcrum of Foreign Policy

In Interagency Fights, His Views Often Prevail

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Vice President Cheney likes to operate discreetly, leaving the spotlight to others. But in the doldrums of late August, as President Bush relaxed on his ranch in Texas, it was Cheney who stepped forward to address the gathering chorus of complaints about the administration's Iraq policy.

"If the United States could have preempted 9/11, we would have, no question," he declared at the annual convention of the Veterans of Foreign Wars in Nashville. "Should we be able to prevent another, much more devastating attack, we will, no question. This nation will not live at the mercy of terrorists or terror regimes."

Cheney's speech, laden with historical references and a detailed rebuttal of administration critics, was the moment when the administration turned from debating Iraq internally to publicly setting the stage for a confrontation. It also offered a rare glimpse of the singular role that Cheney plays in the making of U.S. foreign policy.

Secretary of State Colin L. Powell has an approval rating that tops the president's. Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld is a media star through his frequent briefings. National security adviser Condoleezza Rice is constantly at Bush's side. But, inside the White House, Cheney and his small but powerful staff have emerged as the fulcrum of Bush's foreign policy, according to extensive interviews with officials in and outside the White House, as well as diplomats who deal with the administration.

From the moment hijacked airliners crashed into the World Trade Center towers and the Pentagon last year, Cheney has used his power and authority -- unrivaled by that of any vice president in modern times -- to help set the course of the administration's war on terrorism.

Now, on the eve of a possible conflict with Iraq, Cheney's influence is again coming to the fore. Cheney's assertive and active promotion of a forceful U.S. foreign policy in many ways defines the Bush era. In fierce interagency policy battles, Cheney's views -- that the United States, backed at times by military force, must set an example for the world -- often prevail.

Cheney's position about the importance of confronting Iraq over its weapons of mass destruction has changed significantly since Sept. 11, both because of a new sense of vulnerability and increasingly alarming intelligence, according to administration officials.

"He is as concerned as any human being I know about the danger of a much more serious terrorist attack on the United States, that Sept. 11 was only the beginning," said Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, who said Cheney "was influenced significantly by the developing intelligence on Iraq in general and al Qaeda in particular."

"He has shaped a consensus on the need to deal with Saddam Hussein," said Dennis B. Ross, director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and a Middle East envoy for President George H.W. Bush and President Bill Clinton. "It's clear that's not where the State Department was coming from. Cheney's having a clear position on this helped shape the president's view. He's the single greatest influence on the president."

Cheney's influence is not without controversy. In previous administrations, the secretary of state or national security adviser has often been the dominant force in formulating foreign policy. But the roles are more diffuse now, and the resulting differences are more acute in an administration characterized for its often-visible policy disputes.

Congressional officials complain that, unlike with Powell or Rumsfeld, they have no constitutional authority to require Cheney's testimony.

State Department officials fret that Cheney so frequently sides with Rumsfeld -- Cheney's former boss in the Nixon and Ford administrations -- that Powell is constantly frustrated by his inability to prevail in a host of policy disputes, especially those involving Iraq and the Middle East.

Some officials say that Rice, too, at times is irritated by Cheney's influence, and believes that Cheney's staff roams too freely over the national security council terrain. "I have heard it said, in the situation room, in the White House, that this situation is creating a dysfunctional foreign policy," said a senior administration official who frequently disagrees with Cheney.

White House officials and Cheney's staffers dismiss this as an exaggeration, saying the president values the "creative tension" that emerges from foreign policy advisers -- many of whom worked closely with Cheney in previous administrations.

"The truth of the matter is it is hard to keep score" on whether State or Defense wins more battles, Wolfowitz said. He contends the conflict results in compromises that are often better than the original positions set forth by the agencies.

Cheney and his staff are "not the forces of evil," a White House official said. "But it is a hardheaded approach focused on how to defend America or how to defend American interests."

'War, War, War and War'

When Bush selected Cheney as his running mate in 2000, he got a lieutenant who was remarkably well-connected in Washington, having served as White House chief of staff, a Republican leader in Congress and secretary of defense .

After taking office, Cheney assembled a staff of 14 foreign policy specialists, creating what officials say amounts to a mini-National Security Council. Cheney's office, in effect, is an agile cruiser, able to maneuver around the lumbering aircraft carriers of the departments of State and Defense to make its mark.

Foreign officials, including 17 presidents or prime ministers this year, have learned they must schedule a visit with Cheney as they make their rounds in Washington. A meeting with Cheney is so highly prized that when the vice president recently canceled a meeting with the foreign minister of Kazakhstan because the government had not released a Turkmen dissident, the Kazakh government quickly decided to set the man free.

While Vice President Al Gore had a staff roughly the same size, Gore more often focused on specific issues such as global warming or commissions involving Russian or South African policy. Cheney deliberately scrapped any direct operational responsibility in the foreign policy realm, giving him the freedom to roam across the policy landscape -- and exert a powerful impact on Bush's decisions.

Cheney, officials said, never openly tips his hand in internal debates, instead saving his advice for the president. What he does instead is ask detailed questions, in the Socratic method, that has the effect of demonstrating holes in the other person's argument. "He moves the argument along," an

aide said, adding, "Most of the time he knows the answers."

A foreign diplomat who meets frequently with Cheney said he always asks exact questions and rarely ventures his opinion. "He uses the meeting to add to the information he has," he said. "He does not use the meeting to lecture you about what he feels."

Cheney declined requests through his office to be interviewed for this article. But according to sources familiar with his thinking, Cheney believes he brings to the administration's foreign policy debate a hardheaded realism about geopolitics. In his view, the United States owes no apology for being a great power and, in fact, has a responsibility to act forcefully to build a world in the image of the United States.

Cheney contends that the great events of the last century, such as the defeat of communism and the acceptance of capitalism as a global economic model, are due in no small part to U.S. leadership backed by military force. And Cheney is frustrated by those who, in his view, think the United States is a greater threat to peace and freedom than its adversaries are.

"America is again called by history to use our overwhelming power in defense of our freedom," Cheney said in a speech earlier this month. "We've accepted that duty, certain of the justice of our cause, and confident of the victory to come."

While a student at Yale University in the early 1960s, Cheney took a course with H. Bradford Westerfield, then a conservative foreign policy specialist in the tradition of Sen. Henry "Scoop" Jackson (D-Wash.). Westerfield, who also taught George W. Bush a few years later, said he stressed the long-term global contest for freedom, promoting the idea that it was permissible to overthrow regimes if it would bring the new government within the Western alliance.

Cheney remembers little of the specifics of the course, but it hooked him on political science. He became a military history buff with a passion for maps and fondness for political biography. One of his daughter's most vivid memories as a child was the annual trek to watch faux soldiers re-create Civil War battles. "He would drag us [her and her sister] around to visit Civil War battlefields in July, in really humid weather, with the basset hound in the back seat of the Toyota station wagon," said Elizabeth Cheney, a deputy assistant secretary of state.

Cheney is now reading "An Autumn of War," by Victor Davis Hanson, and raving to his staff that it captures his philosophy. Hanson cites the thinking of ancient Greeks who would argue that war is "terrible but innate to civilization -- and not always unjust or amoral if it is waged for good causes to destroy evil and save the innocent."

It is a measure of Cheney's influence that, by some accounts, he is viewed as responsible for the pace of the administration's campaign against Iraq -- slowing it down when he sides with Powell, a skeptic on a war with Iraq, and speeding it up when he backs the more hawkish Rumsfeld. It is a portrait that White House insiders say is inaccurate, since it ignores the central role of the president, but it is a view prevalent in the bureaucracy.

For a period last spring, as violence erupted in the Mideast, Cheney appeared to agree with Powell's argument that the administration needed to concentrate on settling the Israeli-Palestinian conflict before turning its attention to Iraq. But Cheney, according to sources, had already concluded after a trip to the region in March that peace could never be achieved as long as Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat was in power.

It was a position the president adopted publicly in a speech June 24, to the surprise of the State Department. Having steered the Middle East to the policy back burner, Cheney now, in the words of one senior official, "has only four talking points: War, war, war and war."

It Could Have Been Worse

Cheney's impact on the Iraq debate -- or his influence on the president -- cannot be overstated, officials and experts said. Cheney is involved in key aspects of the planning for Iraq, from the wording of the administration's draft U.N. resolution on resumed weapons inspections to what to do with Iraq if President Saddam Hussein is toppled. In interagency councils, Cheney has been consumed with whether the Iraqi president has obtained weapons of mass destruction, officials say.

Cheney was defense secretary when in 1991 Bush's father chose to halt the Persian Gulf War with Hussein still in power. Cheney has never publicly second-guessed his support of that decision. But, even then, he was keenly interested in Iraq's possible use of chemical and biological weapons. He ordered a secret study when he felt that Powell, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was not taking the problem seriously enough.

It was also one of the first thoughts that jumped to his mind as he watched the World Trade Center towers collapse while he was sitting in the White House's underground bunker. "As unfathomable as this was," Cheney said to an aide as they stared at the television, "it could have been so much worse if they had weapons of mass destruction."

The anthrax attacks last year, soon after Sept. 11, heightened the vice president's unease about the possibility that Iraq or other countries could distribute biological or chemical weapons to terrorists, one White House official said. Even though the culprit has not been found, he said, "I'm not sure the provenance in the end mattered, because it showed how vulnerable we were to an attack."

Iraq moved to the front burner, once the administration had dispensed with the Taliban government in Afghanistan. Officials such as Cheney were also alarmed by what they considered damning intelligence about Iraq's weapons programs and links to terrorism.

By early summer, the administration decided to roll out its Iraq policy in the autumn. But as the administration debated the best way to challenge Iraq, Senate hearings and a torrent of critical op-ed articles by foreign policy experts, some from previous Republican administrations, threatened to weaken the case for action against Iraq.

The situation was "worse than a vacuum," a senior official said. "The wrong arguments were out there. It was a period when, in the absence of making a case, there was a lot of air time being filled by other people."

Cheney concluded that the administration couldn't wait. He mentioned to Bush that he planned to give a speech on Iraq, and the president contributed a few suggestions, officials recounted. Then, the day before the speech, Cheney laconically mentioned that the speech would be "pretty tough."

"Tough?" Bush asked.

"Yep," Cheney said.

"Okay," Bush replied.

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