

Cheney Is the Albatross Around George Bush's Neck

by Jeffrey Steinberg

Vice President Dick Cheney lost a decisive White House policy battle on Dec. 15, when President George W. Bush staged a photo opportunity with Republican Senators John McCain (Ariz.) and John Warner (Va.)—two of Cheney's biggest Republican Party critics—to announce Administration capitulation to bipartisan, bicameral Congressional demands that the United States repudiate torture. The White House session, where it was announced that the President supported the McCain amendment banning any American violation of anti-torture conventions, came just hours after the U.S. House of Representatives, by a veto-proof 308-112 vote, passed a resolution, instructing House conferees, hammering out a final defense budget, to support the McCain language.

Cheney ally and House Armed Services Committee chair Rep. Duncan Hunter (R-Calif.) denounced the Bush-McCain deal and said he would seek to block it, but the message coming from the White House was clear.

Adding insult to Cheney's injury, the House resolution was sponsored by Rep. John Murtha (D-Pa.), whose Nov. 17 call for a U.S. military withdrawal from Iraq on a six-month timetable, triggered a national debate on a viable exit strategy. Murtha became the target of a Cheney-orchestrated smear campaign, which backfired against the Bush White House, and in effect, broke the Administration's nearly five-year vise-grip on the lower house. A core group of moderate Senate Republicans has already broken with the Cheney-led White House, after the failed "nuclear option" showdown in May.

The flight-forward against Representative Murtha also put Cheney in the unenviable position of being at war with the entire uniformed U.S. military command, which moved preemptively, through the Congressman-war hero, to force an end to the Iraq quagmire, while the U.S. Armed Forces are still barely intact.

According to well-placed Washington sources, the Bush decision to cave in to McCain, Warner, and other Congressional leaders aligned with the uniformed military, marked the fourth time in the last six months, that the President has broken with Cheney on a substantive policy issue, and sided with other Cabinet officials.

However, senior Washington policymakers cautioned that so long as Cheney is still in office, the United States is in serious trouble. The President and the Vice President still hold weekly private lunches, through which Cheney exerts extraordinary power over the malleable Mr. Bush.

It's Not Only Torture

Some leading Republicans, however, are trying to convince the President, and his closest confidants, that Cheney has finally become such a liability that he has to be dumped. Developments over the U.S.A. Patriot Act and the related issue of domestic spying by the National Security Agency, which broke dramatically immediately after the Administration agreement with McCain, drove that point home. Cheney was the individual who took the point, both on violating the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA), and on demanding the expanded police-state measures of the Patriot Act. On both issues, a bipartisan grouping in the Senate is refusing to kowtow, with the Patriot Act now put in limbo, and investigations into the President's violation of the FISA law being put on the table.

It's not hard to see that removing Cheney would remove a good number of the President's problems.

Adding to the complex White House picture, former President George H.W. Bush has let it be known to GOP intimates that he wishes to "contain" Cheney's influence over his son, rather than force the Vice President's ouster, and pave the

way for a new policy team to guide G.W. through the final three years of his Presidency. This is the same senior Bush whose own egotistical blunder led him to allow Cheney and George Shultz to mold the entire “Bush 43” Presidency, with disastrous consequences.

Cheney spent the better part of the last month twisting arms and pitching fits over the McCain amendment, which, he argued, would undermine U.S. efforts in the war on terrorism. Cheney argued for a loophole, exempting the CIA from the torture ban.

Cheney’s efforts only triggered a new revolt by a group of 33 leading intelligence community veterans, led by former CIA Director Adm. Stansfield Turner (ret.), who explicitly opposed the CIA exemption.

Firestorm Over ‘Rendition’

When Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice travelled to Europe for a series of meetings in early December, she was ambushed at every stop, over the issue of secret U.S. torture prisons in secret locations in Poland and other eastern European countries. The *Washington Post* had triggered a firestorm in the European Union by leaking details about the secret torture prisons last month, as well as several hundred unauthorized CIA and military flights, carrying suspected “terrorists” who had been captured through “extraordinary renditions”—Cheney-speak for kidnappings.

During her meeting with the new German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, Rice, in effect, changed Bush Administration policy, by vowing that there would be no more U.S. violations of international conventions and treaties banning torture. Merkel infuriated Bush Administration officials, particularly Cheney, when she publicly reported that Rice had “admitted” that the U.S. policy had been wrong. Rice reportedly had authorization from President Bush to alter the policy, in the event of a diplomatic fiasco, but her action caught Cheney and his top staffers by surprise.

Cheney’s new chief of staff and general counsel, David Addington, was the principal author of the White House memos arguing that the events of 9/11 justified violating the Geneva Conventions, other international agreements, and U.S. laws barring torture.

Even before Rice’s plane touched down on U.S. soil, following the disastrous European trip, the “Cheney-Rumsfeld Cabal” launched an information-warfare campaign against the European governments, leaking a story to London’s *Sunday Telegraph*, claiming that a January 2003 meeting of American and European Justice and Interior Ministry officials had agreed to cooperate on “extraordinary renditions.”

The real question, however, was what would happen back in Washington when Rice returned. Would Bush side with Cheney and buck Congressional Republicans and world opinion, or would he slap down the “Vice President for Torture”? The Dec. 15 White House Bush-McCain photo-op signalled that Bush was forced to break with Cheney’s tortured logic.

Further adding to the fiasco was a story, published in the British weekly *The Observer* on Dec. 11, detailing another case of “extraordinary rendition” and torture. Binyam Mohammed, a 27-year-old Ethiopian living in England, was kidnapped while visiting Pakistan in April 2002, and held in several U.S. and British secret prisons, including in Morocco. Under torture, he “confessed” to being part of the al-Qaeda cell that was plotting to smuggle a “dirty bomb” into the United States, in league with Jose Padilla, another alleged al-Qaeda terrorist arrested in the United States shortly after 9/11.

Mohammed later told his lawyer that he never heard of Padilla, had no al-Qaeda ties, and did not even speak Arabic, but had succumbed to the torture and signed the prefab “confession” provided by his interrogators. When the Mohammed case came to light, the Padilla case blew up. Nevertheless, Mohammed was “rendered” to Guantanamo Bay, where he is currently being held, and is scheduled to be tried by a military tribunal as a member of al-Qaeda.

The *Observer* story quoted senior CIA sources that the Agency is in “deep crisis” over the torture/kidnapping policy, and many senior case officers are quitting, rather than stand trial later for serious crimes.

Rumsfeld Out?

The Washington rumor mill has been buzzing with talk about the breakup of the “Cheney-Rumsfeld Cabal,” a term coined by Col. Lawrence Wilkerson (ret.), former chief of staff to former Secretary of State Powell. Several senior intelligence-community sources have stated that Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld will be leaving next year—by no later than the Summer.

One sure signal that the “vacancy” sign is being prepared at the Pentagon is the manic behavior of nominal Democrat, Sen. Joseph Lieberman (Conn.), who raced off to Iraq on a “fact-finding” mission. His findings: Bush’s policy is succeeding, and “mission accomplished.” All that was missing was the jump-suit and the *USS Lincoln*.

While Lieberman’s name has been floated as a replacement for Rumsfeld, more attention has been focussed on a replacement for Cheney himself.

Senior Republican Party sources have confirmed that a group of anti-Cheney GOP “bigwigs” are touting Senator McCain as the “clean-hands war hero” to replace Cheney as Vice President and reinvent the Bush Presidency. While the McCain fever has not yet hit the White House, the fight inside the Republican Party is intensifying by the hour, as GOP members of the House and Senate contemplate a midterm election earthquake if Cheney remains in office.

Meanwhile, Cheney’s impolitic decision to stage a high-visibility fundraiser in Houston on Dec. 5 for the embattled Rep. Tom DeLay (R-Texas), has suddenly put the spotlight on the Vice President himself, in the scandal surrounding Jack Abramoff, the indicted lobbyist-moneybags for the DeLay, Inc. political-thug machine.