

## Introduction

THROUGHOUT NOVEMBER 2000, the nation and world awaited a final decision as America's two presidential candidates, Al Gore and George W. Bush, battled past election day for the coveted prize of the Oval Office. One hundred million votes were cast, without a clear winner, in the most controversial and hotly contested election in over a hundred years. This is the part of the story that we know.

There is another part of the story, however, that did not receive media attention, which remained under the public radar. This story has only recently begun to trickle out, in bits and pieces that may no longer shock, but should certainly infuriate us. While the candidates, their lawyers, and the state of Florida itself were in the spotlight between November and December, Dick Cheney was hard at work in the quiet of his McLean, Virginia, office. And he was up to nothing less than crafting his future role as the most powerful vice president in history. As transition director for a Bush-Cheney administration, Cheney spent hours assembling personnel, creating governing strategies, and effectively beginning his tenure as what I call a co-president, weeks before the Supreme Court announced its decision.<sup>1</sup> The shared presidency of George W. Bush and Dick Cheney began on election night, November 7, 2000, and continued for the next eight years.

Cheney, with his lengthy service in both the executive and legislative branches of government, exerted more influence than any vice president in history—and more than any vice president will have in future administrations. He and Bush created the first co-presidency in America's history: a division of labor, based on their separate spheres of interest and influence. Bush managed his faith-based agenda, moved forward his compassionate conservatism, and served as the public face of the administration. Cheney managed the larger portfolio of economic, energy, and national security policy and worked to expand the power of the presidency.

Cheney's ascendancy did not involve the stealing or hijacking of power, as some have suggested. Rather, Bush handed his vice president a significant role in the administration. This extraordinary delegation of power stemmed in part from the experience of his father, George H. W. Bush, who had served as Ronald Reagan's vice president. Reagan's staff never trusted George H. W. Bush, a Reagan rival in the 1980 Republican Party primaries, and permitted him little influence over White House policy making.

Not surprisingly, George W. Bush wanted to ensure that his own vice president would play a significant role in his administration—although co-president was not the one he originally envisioned. That role emerged during the course of the transition, which Cheney managed, and Bush quickly became comfortable with the division of labor. Dick Cheney, in fact, was one of the few people in the political world with the depth of experience to plan and execute such an expansion of power for the vice president. Cheney had breadth and depth across the federal government, in both the executive and legislative branches. **His career in the executive branch spanned four administrations: under Richard Nixon, he had worked for Donald Rumsfeld in the Office of Economic Opportunity; under Gerald Ford, he had served initially as deputy chief of staff and later as chief of staff; under George H. W. Bush, he was secretary of defense; and under Reagan, he had held the position of special envoy, with the mission of developing a secret, shadow government in case of an attack on Washington, D.C.**

Cheney's legislative experience was equally deep. From 1979 to 1989, he had served in Congress as the sole member of the House of Representatives from Wyoming. By the time he joined George W. Bush's presidential campaign, he had already been White House chief of staff and secretary of defense, as well as serving five terms as a member of Congress. His resume was unmatched in the Bush campaign and the world of high-stakes Washington politics.

In contrast to the depth of Cheney's resume, George W. Bush's experience in public service was limited to five years as governor of Texas—a state with a strong legislature that gave its governor relatively little responsibility for policy making. His tenure as governor had been

his only foray into public life, although he had had some previous exposure to national politics while working in his father's presidential campaigns and, to some extent, in his father's White House.

Once George W. Bush had captured the White House in turn, he selected his advisors and presidential staff primarily from his staff in Austin. He filled the White House with Texas loyalists—including Karl Rove, Karen Hughes, Margaret Spellings, and Dan Bartlett—whose resumes lacked substantive policy or Beltway experience. They were no match for Cheney, who easily captured Bush's ear as an expert on policy and legislation.

Although Cheney brought Beltway and policy experience to the ticket, his greatest appeal to Bush was considerably simpler: he posed no threat. It was understood that, because Cheney purportedly had no interest in seeking the Republican nomination in 2008, he would make policy recommendations that were in the best interests of the Bush administration, not a future Cheney administration. Bush saw him as a policy enforcer with no political reasons to champion his own agenda and redirect the Bush administration's priorities.

There was also another important point in Cheney's favor. He was not a young man. At nearly sixty, as he told all who would listen, he had no intention of staying in public life and fully planned to return to his home in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, at the end of the administration. Retirement, rather than another political office, would be Cheney's next challenge. He had run for president once, in 1994, and swore that he would never run again. His heart condition also guaranteed that his service as vice president would be his last engagement as a public official. Having suffered two massive heart attacks, Cheney would not endanger his health further.

Since Cheney had no future political aspirations, Bush was comfortable relying on his vice president for information and policy advice. And Cheney's advice always meshed with Bush's own broad goals for his administration. When Cheney wanted to develop a national energy strategy, Bush agreed. When Cheney wanted to restructure regulatory policy to reduce what he saw as burdensome regulations on business and industry, Bush consented. When Cheney made

recommendations for departmental and agency personnel, Bush went along. When Cheney urged regime change in Iraq, or made recommendations for dealing with detainees and prisoners of war, Bush always agreed. Bush routinely endorsed the strategies that Cheney created and the policy recommendations that he offered, often with little or no discussion—he essentially rubber-stamped the recommendations his vice president made.

What is perhaps most interesting about Cheney's policy role was the lack of policy-making expertise or control by the White House staff. In recent administrations, particularly since that of John F. Kennedy, White House policy offices had played the dominant role in making policy recommendations to the president. This was true both in foreign policy, overseen by the National Security Council (NSC) staff, and in domestic policy, led by White House experts in domestic and economic policy. But the Bush administration was different. Led by Karl Rove and Karen Hughes, the White House staff under George W. Bush was a political, not a policy, apparatus, and, as the former White House staffer John DiIulio lamented, politics, not policy, was the focus of White House staff meetings. The vice president and his staff moved quickly to fill the policy vacuum.

Even the frequently disparaged signing statements—through which Bush told Congress that he would not enforce certain parts of a bill because he deemed them unconstitutional—were drafted in the vice president's office by Cheney's legal counsel, David Addington. Addington reviewed every bill Congress sent to the president to determine whether any parts overstepped what he perceived as legislative authority. The real power of the co-presidency can be seen in this seemingly small role Cheney's office played. It was Cheney and Addington who decided whether Congress had overstepped its legislative authority—not George W. Bush or the White House staff. In Cheney's view, Congress had eroded presidential power in the years after the Watergate scandal—and Cheney, as vice president, intended to reassert the power lost under previous administrations. Signing statements—managed by the vice president's office, not the president's office—were a key part of Cheney's drive to check what he saw as the burgeoning power of Congress.

While the term “co-presidency” was never discussed nor used by either Bush or Cheney, it aptly describes their shared power, and both men implicitly understood the concept. The co-presidency they operated allowed Bush more time to focus on the campaign issues that were important to him: standards and accountability in education; a tax package that reduced income and capital gains taxes and increased the threshold for inheritance taxes; allowing faith-based organizations to receive federal funding (which prior administrations had opposed on the basis that it violated the First Amendment protection of the separation of church and state); and reinforcing certain moral precepts. These issues were the focus of the president—leaving Dick Cheney to oversee the areas in which Bush had less interest and less experience.

Cheney was happy to oblige. In this division of labor, he pursued his own agenda: building a pro-business administration, protecting presidential power, and commanding the national security agenda. For Bush, this was a win-win situation, since it allowed him to focus on issues that he had mastered in his brief tenure in public life as governor of Texas. And it allowed Cheney to focus on issues that he had mastered in his nearly thirty years in public life, followed by five years as chief executive officer of the energy conglomerate Halliburton.

Dick Cheney planned the path to the co-presidency, but George W. Bush became a willing partner. And no aspect was more central to Cheney’s plan than integrating the vice president’s staff with the White House staff. Vice presidents had never before been significantly integrated into the White House or given wide-ranging policy-making authority. Cheney, with the full support of the president, created what he called a “single executive office.” Cheney had domestic and national security policy staffs and a press secretary, legislative staff, legal counsel, and a chief of staff, as well as other extensive staff support—in essence, an organization that paralleled the president’s. Cheney’s staff was present at all meetings and included on the circulation list for all interoffice memoranda within the White House. As a result, Cheney and his staff became omnipresent in White House meetings, with the full encouragement of President Bush. No template existed

for the role that Cheney wanted to play as a partner in presidential decision making. Cheney crafted his own.

In the eight years of the Bush presidency, Cheney's power permeated the administration. As transition director, he had chosen nearly all the cabinet members and their deputies. The only two cabinet members that Cheney did not bring into the administration were Secretary of State Colin Powell and Attorney General John Ashcroft. Not surprisingly, both men became thorns in Cheney's side, challenging his decisions—and often blocking their implementation—on weapons of mass destruction, regime change, torture, and wireless surveillance without court-approved warrants. The resignations of both Powell and Ashcroft at the end of George W. Bush's first term ended the early challenges Cheney faced in his control over national security policy.

The vice president's influence on personnel selection extended to the judicial branch, where he became the most important voice in recommending appointments to the U.S. Supreme Court and the federal judiciary, particularly the appeals court. The recommendations of John Roberts and Samuel Alito for the Supreme Court, for example, emerged from Cheney's office rather than from the White House counsel's office or the Department of Justice. The Senate confirmation hearings for Roberts and Alito were also managed from Cheney's office by his staffer Steve Schmidt, and White House counsel Harriet Miers took her orders from Cheney's office, through Schmidt, during the Senate hearings.<sup>2</sup>

Cheney insisted on controlling judicial nominations to ensure that nominees were ideologically committed to expanding presidential power, especially presidential war powers. Each of the two Supreme Court appointments—and nearly all appointments to the federal appeals court—were vetted on this issue by David Addington. They were chosen from the ranks of the Federalist Society, a conservative legal group that championed conservative constitutional interpretation and expansive presidential power. By controlling the federal judiciary, Cheney believed, he would have the support he needed whenever challenges arose to the administration's view of presidential power.

For the same reason, Cheney also controlled appointments to

key positions in the Justice Department, particularly the Office of Legal Counsel, whose opinions were legally binding on the executive branch. Addington, who was instrumental in these recommendations, ensured that Federalist Society members dominated all of these key positions. Within months of taking office, through his careful appointments across the administration, Cheney had built the framework for the most powerful imperial presidency—and vice presidency—in thirty years.

Cheney's power extended across the administration. He master-minded energy policy, economic policy, regulatory policy, environmental policy, and the drive to outsource federal jobs, while Bush managed his faith-based agenda and devoted ample time to the public presidency of hosting dignitaries and traveling the nation and the world. When their relatively clear division of labor was shattered by the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and Bush suddenly became interested in national security policy, Cheney's role in the co-presidency gained further stature due to his experience on the House Intelligence Committee and as secretary of defense. Without Dick Cheney and his network of neoconservatives, whom he strategically placed throughout the defense establishment, the United States would most likely have limited its war on terrorism to crushing al-Qa'ida in Afghanistan. The justification for toppling Saddam Hussein in Iraq was championed by Cheney and his allies Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz, and Richard Perle—not by George Tenet, Condoleezza Rice, or Colin Powell.

The lines were drawn on national security policy early in the administration, and Cheney's network won by convincing George W. Bush of the necessity for regime change in Iraq. As the final days of the administration drew to a close in 2008, Cheney and his allies in the Pentagon took aim at Iran, choosing targets for military special operations teams.<sup>3</sup>

In spite of the significant power that the vice presidency accumulated during Cheney's tenure, however, it seems unlikely that future vice presidents will become co-presidents or even major players in policy making. The balance of power will shift back to the White House. Future presidents will ensure that their staffs have a wealth of policy

talent, the ability to manage the full range of the president's agenda, and the capacity for crisis management. Responsibility for policy making will return to the Oval Office and White House, where it has resided since Franklin Delano Roosevelt built the first policy-making White House staff in U.S. history. Vice presidents will once again hold specific and limited job assignments. George W. Bush lost control of too many issues to Dick Cheney, from energy policy to national security policy, as well as too many management decisions, from signing statements to outsourcing.

Most regrettable are the destructive policy consequences of the Bush-Cheney co-presidency. By the end of the administration, the nation was spiraling into the worst recession since the stock market crash of 1929. Oil prices had escalated to record highs, the falling dollar led to record trade deficits, jobs were slashed in every sector, a war continued on two fronts, international distrust lowered America's standing, record numbers of home foreclosures mounted daily, and the financial system descended into crisis.

Cheney is largely to blame. Economic, energy, and national security policy had been his responsibilities. He asked for this portfolio, and Bush gave it to him, but Cheney failed in each and every area—perhaps because he operated in total secrecy. His policy recommendations were never refined through the electoral process nor subjected to the normal vetting process of the White House and federal bureaucracy. Cheney crafted his policy proposals in secret, with few participants. They were dictates to the agencies, not political compromises reached through the normal policy process of give-and-take. The result was failed policy after failed policy—all driven by Dick Cheney.

Not surprisingly, by the time that Bush and Cheney left office, talk of impeaching the president and vice president was common in the halls of Congress. Their co-presidency had been a disaster for the nation, ending with public approval ratings lower than those of Richard Nixon during Watergate or Harry Truman during the Korean War. Theirs was widely viewed as the worst administration of modern times, eclipsing even that of Herbert Hoover, who presided over the start of the Great Depression.



## INTRODUCTION

This book is an effort to explain how the Bush-Cheney administration was dominated by its vice president, Dick Cheney. It was essentially a co-presidency. There was no takeover by the second-in-command, no hijacking of the Oval Office, only an understanding, an accommodation, in which labor and responsibility were divided.