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## Cheney Unbound

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By David S. Broder  
Thursday, June 28, 2007; A25

Years ago [Lamar Alexander](#), the senator from [Tennessee](#), told me of a lesson he had learned as a young man on the White House staff: It is always useful for the president to have at least one aide who has had a successful career already, who does not need the job, and who therefore can offer candid advice. When he was governor of Tennessee, Alexander made sure he had such a person on his staff.

Later, when presidential candidate [George W. Bush](#) chose [Dick Cheney](#) as his running mate, I applauded the choice, thinking that Cheney would fill the role Alexander had outlined. Boy, was I wrong.

The role model for Alexander was [Bryce Harlow](#), the diminutive, modest and universally trusted White House player in the Eisenhower and [Nixon](#) years. Cheney, as described in a breathtakingly detailed [series in The Post](#) this week by reporters Barton Gellman and Jo Becker, is something else.

What they discovered, in a year of work that reveals more about the inner workings of this White House than any previous reporting, is a vice president who used the broad authority given him by a complaisant chief executive to bend the decision-making process to his own ends and purposes, often overriding Cabinet officers and other executive branch officials along the way.

Cheney used his [years of experience](#), as a former White House chief of staff, as the secretary of defense and as the [House Republican](#) whip -- and all the savvy that moved him into those positions -- to amass power and use it in the Bush administration. He was more than a match for the newcomers to the White House, and he outfoxed even the veterans of past administrations when it came to the bureaucratic wars.

He was not the ultimate decision-maker. Bush retained that authority, and he used it to decide on war in [Iraq](#), the final numbers in the [budget](#) and who got to sit on the [Supreme Court](#). But Cheney shaped all of those decisions with his recommendations to the president -- often in ways that were unknown to the other players and unseen by Congress and the public.

[Secrecy](#) was one of his tools and weapons, and his lawyers -- [Scooter Libby](#) first and now [David Addington](#) -- frustrated other policymakers by their willingness to shape or reshape the law to suit Cheney's arguments.

It is easy to see why former Treasury secretary Paul O'Neill, who had been recommended for the job by Cheney, complained afterward that "there is no policy process," because the decision-making was often short-circuited by the vice president's private access to the Oval Office.

O'Neill was not alone in feeling that way. The secretary of state, the national security adviser and the chairman of the [Federal Reserve Board](#) also discovered to their surprise that Cheney had gone behind their backs to get his way with the president.

What Gellman and Becker have described is a decision-making process in which Bush has allowed Cheney to play a bureaucratic role inside the White House that Cheney never permitted anyone to employ when he was guarding the door as [Gerald Ford](#)'s chief of staff.

He could exercise this power only with the compliance of the president and only because he often could bypass the [procedures](#) he had put in place in the Ford administration, procedures meant to protect the president's interests. He used his intelligence and his grasp on the levers of power -- and most of all he

used secrecy -- to outflank and outwit others and thereby shape the Bush administration's agenda.

It was not illegal, and it was not unconstitutional, but it could not have happened unless the president permitted it and enabled it. And ultimately the president is responsible for what has become, in very large respect, the resulting wreckage of foreign policy, national security policy, budget policy, energy policy and environmental policy under Cheney's direction and on Cheney's watch.

Where I thought, mistakenly, that it would be a great advantage to Bush to have a [White House](#) partner without political succession in mind, it has turned out to be altogether too liberating an environment for a political entrepreneur of surpassing skill operating under an exceptional cloak of secrecy.

Thanks to Gellman and Becker, some of that secrecy has been removed.

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