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Nation needs intervention to get Cheney out of office

By Roscoe C. Born

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Seriously, now is the time for a real intervention.

Those close to President Bush, people whose faith and loyalty he cannot doubt - first lady Laura Bush, his parents, perhaps an elder statesman or two, his preacher - need to assemble in his White House quarters one night soon, lock the door and sit the president down for a serious, forever-secret talk. Unlike the YouTube "intervention" parody on the Internet, the subject would not be the Iraq war, at least not primarily. The focus needs to be on Vice President Dick Cheney.

Mr. Bush's confidants need to gently but frankly tell him this:

With the detailed record that The Washington Post has compiled of Mr. Cheney's extremism, his contempt for the law and constitutional democracy, and his thirst for aggression, the nation no longer can run the risk that he could become president. And Mr. Bush, who seems to care about his place in history, no longer can allow his name to be associated with that of Mr. Cheney, who may be the most reviled vice president since Aaron Burr.

The president's interveners might try to impress on him the reality of the situation: According to a consensus of public opinion polls, more than 8 in 10 Americans disapprove of Mr. Cheney. Seven in 10 disapprove of Mr. Bush.

His administration is condemned for the catastrophe in Iraq, for the threat of a new war with Iran, for environmental damage, for wiretaps of American citizens, for their opened mail, for torture and hopeless imprisonment, for assertions of a right to ignore the law. Even stalwart Republican leaders are deserting.

In short, they could tell the president that, justly or not, the Bush-Cheney administration is widely perceived as a disaster. It has zero credibility. No single act by Mr. Bush, no legislative proposal, no earnest plea on television could change all this.

And worst of all, this is not the worst of all. The president's interveners could point out the possibility - tragically, we've learned this must be considered - that within the next 18 months, the unseen engineer of much of Mr. Bush's authoritarian policy, Dick Cheney, could become president of the United States, unfettered. Preventing that possibility could be the salvation of the Bush legacy, the interveners could tell him. Congressional Democrats feel the pressure for a power showdown with the president. The feeling is growing that somebody will have to answer for all this. Therein, the Bush interveners could point out, lies the answer.

With Mr. Bush's nod of assent, agents of the interveners would communicate with Mr. Cheney's people, and two-person teams from each side would arrive separately one night at a home in the Washington exurbs.

Mr. Bush's representatives would paint the picture and offer the deal:

1. Mr. Cheney's reputation, they would say, has been mortally wounded. He is a severe handicap to the administration and its hope of achievement in the remaining 18 months. Mr. Cheney must go.

2. The vice president's poor health is well known. It would be entirely plausible if Mr. Cheney were to announce that he has deliberated carefully, and for health reasons, he has decided he must resign the vice presidency, effective at once. His resignation, the Bush representatives say, would take pressure off the White House and, in the bargain, perhaps permit some legislative progress on important programs. Mr. Bush would come on television to praise the vice president's selflessness and dedication, and to wish him well - maybe give him a medal.

3. If Mr. Cheney refuses to resign gracefully, the Bush agents could explain, the president would have no choice but to bargain secretly with Democratic leaders. The offer: If they began impeachment proceedings against Mr. Cheney, the president and his administration would not come to his defense, and might even provide backstage support for the impeachers, such as documentation, memos, meeting notes, witnesses. Mr. Cheney would be disgraced.

In this scenario, if Mr. Cheney were thus induced to resign, President Bush would, in accordance with law, nominate a new vice president: Colin L. Powell. Both houses of Congress would immediately approve him; the American public would acclaim him.

Vice President Powell could devote his time in office to repairing some of the damage done to our image abroad and to America's vital institutions of freedom. President Bush's approval ratings might even start to rise again. And the GOP would, overnight, gain a potential front-running candidate for president with widespread appeal.

As for Mr. Cheney, he could retire to field and stream, and the devil take the hindmost. The nation would have been rescued from the worst of what has truly become, in the words of Gerald R. Ford after Watergate, our long national nightmare.

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