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Quiet Force Behind Bush Policies

"Torture memo," spying, Guantanamo can all be traced to Cheney's top aide.

Ron Hutcheson
Philadelphia Inquirer
March 20, 2006

WASHINGTON -- Most people have never heard of David Addington, but he has been at the center of nearly every controversy shaking the White House.

President Bush's eavesdropping program, the so-called torture memo, the Guantanamo Bay detention center, the administration's penchant for secrecy - all bear his fingerprints. Addington's influence is especially remarkable because he works not for Bush, but rather for Vice President Cheney.

He's known as "Cheney's Cheney." Like his boss, he believes that the Constitution gives the President virtually unlimited power to deal with terrorists and other national security threats. Addington's mission is to provide the legal foundation for the unfettered use of presidential power and quash any internal dissent over it.

He is Cheney's chief of staff, but his clout far exceeds his job title.

"He's really kind of Cheney's attack dog on legal and intelligence issues," said Vincent Cannistraro, a top intelligence adviser in President Ronald Reagan's administration.

Tom Malinowski of Human Rights Watch calls Addington "the most aggressive and effective proponent within the administration" for broad presidential power.

"David has always been one of those quietly influential staffers that has an impact all of out proportion to their public profile," said Bradford Berenson, who spent two years as a lawyer in the Bush White House. "He knows how to get things done, and when he talks, people listen, because they know he has the authority of the vice president behind him."

Addington's advocacy of far-reaching presidential power underlies several of Bush's most controversial acts, including his decision to authorize a domestic surveillance program without approval from Congress or the courts.

It also provided the foundation for the treatment of detainees captured in antiterrorism effort. Addington helped draft the strategy for keeping suspected terrorists outside the reach of U.S. courts by sending them to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

Some of the harshest criticism of Addington stems from his role in a fierce debate within the administration over interrogation techniques. A 2002 Justice Department memo - now known as the "torture memo" - said interrogators should have wide latitude in their efforts to pry information from terror suspects.

The memo defined torture narrowly, leaving open the possible use of "cruel, inhuman or degrading" tactics. It also concluded that Bush could authorize such tactics without interference from Congress.

Addington didn't write the memo but became its chief advocate in battles with officials from the Justice and Defense Departments and other agencies that challenged the tactics. Although the

memo was rewritten two years later, Addington kept up the push for flexibility in dealing with terror suspects.

Addington has also led administration efforts to withhold information from Congress, starting in 2001 with the fight over internal documents from Cheney's energy task force. His view prevailed in court.

Admirers say Addington, 49, is driven by noble goals, not a lust for power.

"He believes what he believes and he does what he does because he is genuinely and sincerely committed to trying to save American lives from events like 9/11," Berenson said. "He advocates his views as forcefully as he does because he sincerely believes they're in the public interest."

But critics say Addington has swept aside important checks on presidential power and done more harm than good.

"The problem and the danger of the Bush administration is that they know no limits," said Bruce Fein, a conservative legal scholar who served in the Justice Department under Reagan. "It's a total lack of understanding of separation of power and checks and balances."

Malinowski, the human-rights advocate and a National Security Council aide in the Clinton White House, said Addington had turned the traditional lawyer's role on its head.

"The lawyer is the guy in the room whose job it is to say, 'No, you can't do that,' " Malinowski said. "David Addington is the guy who never said no. And he worked very hard to shut down any lawyer who dared to say, 'Mr. President, you can't do that.' In doing so, I think he did a great disservice to this President."

Although Addington can come across as mild-mannered and easygoing, he's known as a ferocious combatant in internal disputes. Berenson, an Addington admirer who generally shares his views, said his friend follows "the law of the jungle" in dealing with colleagues who disagree with him.

"Nobody who gets hit by a bus has warm feelings about the bus," Berenson said. "People who have tangled with David over the years and come out on the wrong end of those fights harbor some bad feelings."

Addington got to know Cheney in the mid-1980s, when Cheney was in Congress and Addington worked for a series of congressional committees.

When Cheney became defense secretary for President George H.W. Bush, Addington joined him at the Pentagon. He rejoined Cheney as the vice president's counsel, then moved up to chief of staff last fall after I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby resigned amid his indictment in the CIA leak scandal.

For all of Addington's influence, admirers and detractors agree that he wouldn't have the clout he does if Cheney and Bush didn't share his views.

"They have a point of view and they've advanced it across the board," Malinowski said. "If Addington has won a lot of the battles, it's because the President has ultimately agreed with him."