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## THEY SAID IT

For five years, Republicans have chanted “trust the president” on national security. They even won elections on the issue. For nearly five years, Democrats have said President Bush should use more carrots and fewer sticks in his diplomacy in the Muslim world. They argued that we need to reward our allies with trade and trust (except when we actually did it in places such as Pakistan and Saudi Arabia). Liberals lectured that equating “Muslim” or “Arab” and “terrorist” is not only bigoted but counterproductive, in that it will feed the “root causes” of terrorism.

But suddenly, virtually all leading Republicans and Democrats — with the laudable exception of Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) — now argue that Bush can’t be trusted on national security, that our Arab ally the UAE should go suck eggs and that racial profiling of foreign firms is just fine. Sen. Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.) now even thinks Halliburton should run the ports. And Jimmy Carter is backing the White House.

At this rate, Barbra Streisand will soon be holding benefit concerts for Pennsylvania’s conservative Sen. Rick Santorum.

--*National Review Online* editor-at-large and syndicated columnist Jonah Goldberg, “Too Much Hysteria on the Ports Deal,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 23, 2006.

## CHENEY’S CO-VEEP.

For an analyst or writer who follows Washington and who is thus expected to cover all the “big” political stories, it’s nice when the planets align and the two big stories from the previous two weeks converge into one *really* big story, allowing two birds to be killed with one stone. It’s even better when no one else appears to see the convergence, making it possible to write without having to worry about stepping all over someone else’s story. So this week, we feel doubly blessed.

In case you hadn’t noticed, the big event from two weeks ago, Vice President Dick Cheney’s accidental shooting of a buddy on a quail hunting trip, and the big event from last week, al Qaeda’s dastardly plan to dominate the world by having Dubai Ports World buy Pacific & Oriental Steam Navigation, are, in many ways, part and parcel of the same story. And much to our surprise, no one in the mainstream press appears to have figured this out yet.

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Now, we know what you're thinking. You're thinking, ummm, *everyone* in the country – mainstream press or otherwise – has figured this out. Everyone has noticed the convergence of these two stories. The common thread between them is the lack of effective communication by the White House. The Bush team communicates *horribly*. It is never out in front of a story and is always playing catch up, usually poorly.

Okay. But that's not what we had in mind.

You see, the connection between Cheney's accident and the Dubai Ports deal goes far beyond the Bush administration's tone-deaf mumbling. We mean, the "communication thing" isn't really news, is it? President Bush's poor communication is not merely the tie that binds the big stories from the last couple of weeks together. It's the tie that binds together every presidential story from time immemorial, or at least since January 20, 2001.

But this is about something more than that, something that is slowly but surely becoming a part of the political reality here in Washington, but which almost no one seems to have recognized. It's about something that can be called the "co-Vice Presidency."

For more than a decade now, we've heard a great deal about the "co-Presidency." First, Hillary was going to be Bill's co-President, and actually behaved as if she thought she was for about a year-and-a-half. After that, we heard about how Cheney was the new co-President, running the show for the less-than-competent Bush, pulling all the levers and allowing George merely to be the smiling (or smirking) public face of the administration. Now, we have the co-Vice Presidency.

The Thursday after "Quailgate," former Reagan speechwriter and occasional GOP operative Peggy Noonan dedicated her weekly *Wall Street Journal/OpinionJournal* column to the idea that George W. Bush and those around him may already be in the process of trying to find a way to ease Cheney out of the administration and replace him with someone

who is not only more energized but who would likely be willing and able to extend the administration by winning the coveted "third term." Specifically, she wrote:

Here's a hunch, based not on any inside knowledge but only on what I know of people who practice politics, and those who practice it within the Bush White House.

I suspect what they're thinking and not saying is, *If Dick Cheney weren't vice president, who'd be a good vice president?* They're thinking, *At some time down the road we may wind up thinking about a new plan.* And one night over drinks at a barbecue in McLean one top guy will turn to another top guy and say, "Under the never permeable and never porous Dome of Silence, tell me . . . wouldn't you like to replace Cheney?"

Although Noonan doesn't actually give the name of the person she believes should replace Cheney, her description of him leaves little doubt about whom she favors for the slot. To wit:

This new vice president would, however, have to be very popular in the party, or the party wouldn't buy it . . . The new veep would have to get through the Senate, which has at this point at least three likely contenders for the nomination, at least two of whom who would not, presumably, be amused . . . It would have to be a man wildly popular in the party and the press.

Let's see. A Senator who is "wildly popular" in the party and the press. Well, I don't know about the party part, but I can only think of one Republican – Senator, Congressman, Governor, or anyone else – who is wildly popular in the press. And whether Ms. Noonan realizes it or not, that man is already the Co-Vice President. And that man, of course, is John McCain.

Last November, when President Bush was struggling to regain his footing and to re-make his case to the American people for the Iraq War, we wrote that the war effort was, in fact, not in any serious jeopardy of losing all public support, despite the administration's dreadful job of communication. The reason for this tempered optimism was John McCain, who was picking up the slack for the ineffective Bush team.

We neither suggested nor believed that McCain would allow himself to be used by the administration, but we argued that the Senator and the President had come to a mutual agreement whereby McCain would leverage his considerable good will among the public and the media and his national security credentials to continue to promote a cause he believed in anyway. And in return, he would get Bush's endorsement for President in '08, an endorsement that would normally go to the incumbent Vice President, but which Cheney neither wants nor needs. We detailed the "arrangement" thusly:

[There] is likely to be a greater reliance [going forward] by the administration on the assets brought to the political debate by Senator McCain. Though Bush and McCain have had their problems over the years and though McCain has been a persistent thorn in the side of the conservatives who have, until recently, been Bush's most loyal supporters, Bush simply needs McCain now (and for the foreseeable future) and therefore must rely on him to continue to be the most eloquent and effective defender of the war in Iraq and the broader war on terror.

If you're looking for the ultimate upshot of last week's Senate vote, then, I believe that it will be John McCain's emergence as the long-awaited unofficial heir-apparent to the Bush presidency. With Dick Cheney having declared his firm intention not to run for president, Bush has been without an obvious successor, and there has been considerable speculation over the years as to who will ultimately fill that spot, with guesses ranging

from brother Jeb to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. I suspect the speculation can now end and that McCain will get the gig.

Some will question whether at this point that's a position McCain would want, and certainly any doubts he might entertain would be understandable. That said, a sitting President, regardless of momentary political travails, can offer innumerable benefits to a successor, particularly in an intra-party contest. Given his own natural constituency, additional backing from the President would make McCain an exceptionally difficult candidate to beat in what is expected to be a bruising primary campaign. Bush may be down, but he's far from out, and if he stages a comeback, his endorsement will carry significant weight.

Fast forward now to two weeks ago. While the Bush administration was busy trying to get medical attention to those members of the White House press corps who had gone apoplectic over the fact that Cheney had shot a civilian and not one of them (or something like that), McCain was going about the business of solidifying his position as Bush's successor, presumably with the President's blessing. Last Saturday (Feb. 18<sup>th</sup>), columnist Robert Novak reported that Team Bush and Team McCain have apparently been working in conjunction to get the latter's 2008 presidential bid off to a flying start. He wrote:

Major political contributors to George W. Bush who have never given a dime to prospective 2008 Republican presidential candidate John McCain received letters, dated Feb. 8, asking for donations to the senator's Straight Talk America political action committee.

Obviously using President Bush's direct mail list, the letter signed by McCain asks for \$1,000 or \$1,500 to support candidates agreeing with McCain on "key issues." It specifically lists "limiting federal spending,

immigration reform, military readiness, global climate change, Social Security reform, reining in lobbyists, reducing the power of the special interests and putting an end to wasteful pork barrel spending by Congress.”

Each recipient received a card to be filled in for McCain’s files. “I’m asking you to update your file card,” requests the letter, though the Bush contributors had no previous card in the senator’s files.

Traditionally, two of the crucial functions of a vice president are to make the media rounds, talking up the positions the administration wants talked up, and to offer voters some semblance of continuity, assuring them that the most important of the administration’s policies will live on beyond the limits imposed by the Twenty-Second Amendment. In the case of the Bush administration, both of these functions are currently being handled by Senator McCain.

Dick Cheney holds the constitutional office of Vice President and will almost certainly continue to do so for the next three years, Ms. Noonan’s conjecture to the contrary notwithstanding. And he is almost certainly still heavily involved in the day-to-day management of the War on Terror, the administration’s energy strategy, and a host of other issues that together constitute the largest and most important policy-related vice presidential portfolio in as long as anyone can remember. But with one exception – the height of the 2004 campaign season – Cheney has been publicly AWOL almost since September 11. In the weeks after the attacks, the Vice President disappeared to the now-infamous “undisclosed location” and never really re-emerged, except to campaign for re-election. And over the last year or so, McCain has quite nicely filled the void left by Cheney’s absence.

What exactly does any of this have to do with the Dubai Ports World deal? Well, if you want to know what the ultimate outcome of the debate will be and

whether, after a 45-day delay, the port deal will be approved, you need simply to follow the signs posted by the co-Vice President.

Right now, the conventional wisdom holds that the deal is dead. The 45-day delay requested for a more thorough investigation is generally considered little more than a smokescreen to give the President a chance to rethink his veto threat, to come to his senses, and to allow this deal to be killed.

Hillary Clinton, Chuck Schumer, Peter King, Lindsey Graham, Bill Frist, and all of the other Congressional miscreants who have disgracefully chosen to demagogue this deal without bothering to learn anything at all about the issues involved are absolutely certain that the American people are too stupid to understand what’s going on here and too unreasonable to make a rational decision based on all the facts. And in the early days of the debate, they have some cause to believe that their crass political opportunism will, indeed, be rewarded.

According to a Rasmussen Research poll released Friday, not only does the public overwhelmingly oppose the deal, but the President’s support for the deal has, at least temporarily, erased the entirety of the Democrats’ public opinion deficit on national security, and then some, thereby making this an enormous election-year concern for both parties. Tom Bevan of RealClear Politics summed up Congressional thinking on the matter thusly:

If the numbers Rasmussen produced on DPW and national security are confirmed by other polls, the political implications are pretty darn big. There’s no way Republicans in Congress – especially those up for reelection this November – are going to stand by and let this single deal (irrespective of the merits) erase a 10-20 point advantage over Democrats on national security. Ain’t gonna happen. Unless the numbers change significantly, there is no way Congress is going to let this deal go through as is.

He's right, of course, though I think he's a little dismissive of the possibility that this initial snapshot is not representative of how the debate will play out. In our estimation, there is every reason to believe that those numbers can, in fact, change. What will determine whether or not they do change is the effectiveness of the campaign to convince the American public that the knee-jerk reaction of the Congressional Democrats and "me-too" opportunism of the Congressional Republicans is not in the nation's best interest. And this brings us back to the co-Vice President.

You will note that while the rest of Congress was running around screaming inanities about how President Bush had suddenly gone soft on terrorism, the one man on Capitol Hill who may have more credibility than the President on national security matters actually kept his head and suggested that most of his colleagues' reactions were overreactions.

Senator McCain's initial statement on Monday was the very picture of probity and responsibility. "We all need to take a moment and not rush to judgment on this matter without knowing all the facts," McCain declared. "The president's leadership has earned our trust in the war on terror," he continued, stating the obvious, "and surely his administration deserves the presumption that it would not sell our security short." By way of follow-up, yesterday on ABC's "This Week with George Stephanopoulos," McCain complained that his fellow legislators and presidential candidates were a little confused about what really matters in the fight to secure the nation. Specifically, he said:

I think our priorities are misplaced. We've got a tremendous crisis in Iraq, that I'm happy to say the religious clerics have stood up against this violence. We've got the Iranian threat. We have got Nigerian oil at stake. We had an attack on a Saudi oil installation. We've got some very, very big issues that I think are perhaps more important than whether a country that's freer than China should have control of some of our terminals.

Does this mean that John McCain will definitely support the Bush administration on the ports deal? And if he does, does that mean the deal is done? No, on both counts. But it does mean that McCain is keeping an open mind, is approaching this far more rationally and cautiously than his colleagues, and may yet choose to defend the deal vociferously. If he does, then those who have declared the deal dead may well end up with egg on their face. And for many of them, it won't be the first time.

Last fall, many of these same folks – including many of the same Republicans who are now trying to distance themselves from President Bush with regard to the ports deal – were trying to distance themselves from President Bush with regard to Iraq. But McCain stood tough, and his efforts, in conjunction with belated efforts on the President's part, helped stabilize public opinion and, in so doing, quite probably salvaged the entire war effort.

All I know is that if the Dubai Ports World deal comes down to Bill Frist and Chuck Schumer arguing national security against John McCain and George Bush, I will put my money on McCain-Bush, irrespective of how poorly the President manages his communications efforts. On matters of war and peace, McCain and Bush make a pretty solid team, which is why Bush et al. were smart enough to make the Senator a *de facto* member of their administration, the Co-Vice President.

## REPUBLICAN SUICIDE.

If you're a big believer in the idea that a president is only as strong as the support he has within his own party, then you have to believe that this past week was a bad one for President Bush. There was, of course, the firestorm that sprang from the Dubai Ports World deal, which featured Congressional Republicans crushing women and children in their mad rush to the microphones to try to sound as "tough" as their Democratic colleagues. But there was also an event called Restoration Weekend, a gathering of 300 or

so conservatives sponsored by David Horowitz and his Center for the Study of Popular Culture, which reportedly featured yet another dose of GOP grouching about the President.

According to Mark Cooper, a contributing editor at *The Nation* and one of the few liberals invited to Restoration Weekend, conservative angst about the midterm elections and about President Bush's potential impact on those elections was in full bloom amongst the conclave's participants. In addition to the usual and understandable grumbling about big government and out-of-control spending, there were some comments about the war and foreign policy that we thought were both interesting and potentially problematic. In particular, comments by Pat Toomey, the head of the "Club for Growth," caught our attention. "We have to acknowledge we have a President who is not popular," Toomey said. "The war in Iraq is the 800 lb. gorilla in the room and a major downturn could drown anything we do."

Toomey's comments plus those by others lamenting the "demoralization of the base" suggest that there may, in fact, be some real problems brewing for Republicans. But they're not the problems most of the "Complaining Conservatives" think they are. These Republicans and others, like Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, who is running away from Bush faster than Jamie Lee Curtis ran from Michael Myers in *Halloween*, appear to believe that President Bush is a big part of their problem and that if they just distinguish themselves from him, they'll be okay. They're wrong. And, in fact, they are very likely to make things worse.

For starters, as we noted last week, picking on Bush is hardly a positive approach to ensuring a GOP electoral victory next November. All the trusted empirical models that have shown any effectiveness in predicting election results strongly suggest that presidential approval plays a key and incontrovertible role in the success of the president's party in Congressional midterms. Additionally, complaining about Bush to fellow conservatives hardly seems like an effective strategy to re-energize an already "demoralized"

base. Hey everybody! We know you're upset already, but doesn't the big guy really suck? Talk about your recipes for electoral disaster.

More to the point, these Republicans are simply reinforcing the negative perceptions that voters – and Republican voters in particular – already hold about them. The general complaint about the Republican Congressional majority is not merely that it has accomplished less over the last 11 years than it set out to do, but that it has actually abandoned those principles that so endeared it to the voters in the first place, leaving its members looking unprincipled and feckless. And these members are certainly not going to change the perception of themselves or assuage any concerns about their steadfastness and dedication to principle by abandoning the president, his foreign policy, and the people of Iraq simply because their pollsters tell them they should.

The only thing worse than backing away from a bold foreign policy program because of a few setbacks is backing away from a bold foreign policy out of fear that those setbacks might affect your political standing. We on the right have had a heyday over the last few years knocking around Democrats who put politics above principle where national security is concerned. Yet many Republicans now appear intent on doing precisely the same thing.

Perhaps the greatest offender here is the aforementioned Bill Frist, who is not only playing with fire with regard to his own political future, but, since he is the leader of the party in the Senate, is playing with fire with regard to his 54 colleagues' political futures as well.

I'm not sure who, exactly, is giving Frist advice these days, but the idea that he can somehow make himself into a *bona fide* presidential candidate by caving in on national security is the dumbest idea since New Coke. Take a guy who is widely considered to be passive and effete, and tell him to go wobbly on foreign policy, and what you're left with is a presidential candidate who won't make it through Iowa, much less New Hampshire.

That's all well and good, of course, since Frist has always had approximately the same chance of winning the GOP nomination as, say, Howard Dean does. But the problem here is that Frist is the Senate Majority Leader, which means that not only does his wavering send a message to the enemy that President Bush is not supported within his own party, but it sends the same message to voters.

The irony is that if the Republican majority is going to be saved this November, it is quite likely that President Bush will be the guy doing the saving. Republicans who are concerned about the sour mood of their base should, of course, run on conservative principles and emphasize their commitment to smaller, less intrusive government and lower taxes. What they shouldn't do is make President Bush the enemy. Running against

Bush rather than in favor of something positive has failed miserably as a strategy for the Democrats in each of the last three elections. Despite his problems, President Bush is still favored overwhelmingly by Republican voters on the issues that matter most to them, including national security and taxes.

If the Republicans take their understandable anxiety and turn it into full-blown panic by adopting a failed Democratic strategy, then count the GOP out come November. President Bush may not be perfect – indeed, he is far from it – but the Republicans who think that salvation can be found exclusively in trashing him are only going to make things worse.

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