

Despite image, Cheney a GOP rock star



AP Photo: Vice President Dick Cheney, left, shakes the hand of a sailor after speaking aboard the...

By NANCY BENAC, Associated Press Writer

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TAMPA, Fla. - An anticipatory buzz fills the room. Six crisp American flags, erect as soldiers, line the dais. More than an hour before the vice president's arrival, the GOP faithful stand at the ready.

Never mind that [Dick Cheney](#) is favorably regarded by only about a third of Americans. To this crowd, in this place, he is a rock star.

And Gus Bilirakis, a state legislator bidding to succeed his father in Congress, is happy to bask in the vice president's glow, pocketing \$200,000 in campaign contributions from Cheney's two-hour visit to town late last month.

"He's a dynamic leader," Tampa attorney Monica Lothrop gushes after Cheney's standard, hang-tough-against-terror speech. "It was just a thrill to be able to see him in person."

Four days earlier, the scenario was the same in Iowa, where Cheney raised campaign cash for two Republican congressional candidates. Ditto three days later in Alabama and Arkansas, where Cheney was raising money for two gubernatorial candidates.

Five and half years into the Bush presidency, Cheney's image may have taken a beating overall but "he's still Elvis to a lot of the conservatives," says Marshall Wittmann, a Democratic Leadership Council analyst. "When he comes in, money and enthusiasm flow."

Cheney, always a stalwart campaigner for the party, is outpacing his schedule from the 2002 midterm elections. He has logged 80 fundraisers so far this election cycle, bringing in more than \$24 million, with the heaviest campaign travel still to come. By comparison, he logged 106 fundraisers for all of 2001-2002.

Democrats hope the strategy backfires, and they're working harder to use Cheney's visits against the Republicans.

"There's nothing that riles the Democrats up more than Cheney," says Democratic consultant Jenny Backus. Cheney is one of the top two or three "bad guys" that Democrats use in direct

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mail appeals to rally base voters and raise money, she said.

"Just like the Republicans used to use Ted Kennedy," she said, "the Democrats are now using Cheney."

And come this fall, when both parties bid for swing voters in the middle of the political spectrum, look for some Democratic candidates to churn out campaign ads tying their GOP opponents to the vice president in hopes that dissatisfaction with the Bush administration will rub off.

A recent Fox News/Opinion Dynamics poll, for example, found that 55 percent of independents said they were less likely to vote for a candidate for whom [President Bush](#) had campaigned, compared with 7 percent who were more likely to vote for a candidate for whom Bush had campaigned. Cheney's favorability ratings are even lower than Bush's.

Cheney may bring in a lot of cash, says Democratic consultant Dane Strother, but "the problem is that when he races through town, he leaves a stack of headlines. And come mid-October, you tie the Republican candidate to the Bush-Cheney efforts and, boom, there are the headlines and the pictures."

Republican consultant Charlie Black rejects the idea that any GOP candidate will pay a price for "guilt by association" with Cheney.

"Some people would say that outside the base he's not popular but that's true for the president himself, so that's just part of the deal," Black said.

Some GOP candidates are finding ways to put distance between themselves and Cheney, even as they happily gather up the campaign checks that his visits attract. Some Cheney fundraisers are closed to the media, for example.

During a recent visit to upstate New York for GOP congressional hopeful Ray Meier, Cheney urged Republicans to make the war on terror their top issue in the 2006 elections. But Meier later told reporters, "I think the voters in this district are really more interested in issues closer to home."

In March, when Cheney visited New Jersey to raise money for GOP Senate candidate Tom Kean Jr., the candidate didn't arrive until 15 minutes after Cheney left. Kean said he got held up in traffic; Democrats were skeptical.

In Florida, Bilirakis showed no hesitation in allying himself with Cheney, whom he introduced as "a true patriot and a supporter of the Bilirakis family for two decades."

The vice president's tough talk against terrorists was music to Shari Kotsch, treasurer of the Republican Party in Pasco County, who said low poll ratings like the vice president's are inevitable for anyone willing to take strong positions.

"He says what he means and he means what he says and he follows through," she said. "I love that in any man."

Even among Bilirakis' supporters at the Cheney reception, though, there were some doubts about the wisdom of bringing in the vice president. Dave Syraski, a longtime friend of the Bilirakis family and a political independent, said he's "kind of neutral" on Cheney. As for Cheney's fundraising appearance, Syraski said: "Obviously, he has a title that's pretty impressive, but maybe it's not the best thing for a candidate, given the poll ratings."

Bilirakis' Democratic opponent, Phyllis Busansky, calls Cheney "the architect of the policies

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that have led to an increase in Mideast violence and skyrocketing oil prices."

"We thought that it was a gift," Busansky said of Cheney's visit, adding that her campaign already was getting checks in response to a fundraising letter tied to the vice president's appearance.

National GOP officials insist there is no downside for Republican candidates to a Cheney visit.

Brian Nick, a spokesman for the GOP Senate committee, said Cheney has been extremely helpful around the country. He did allow that different candidates must decide whether a particular surrogate would be a "good fit" in their state.

Black, the GOP consultant, added: "Every campaign's different, and the candidates have to make their tactical decisions about how to use him." He added that a visit by the vice president now is "not going to be an issue come the first week in November."

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