

# Who Helped Cheney?

By John D. Dingell

WASHINGTON

Last February, President Bush announced the formation of a task force, led by Vice President Dick Cheney, to develop energy legislation. While task forces are not new — Hillary Clinton headed one to develop health-care legislation — they are uncommon, and they raise questions when they work in secret. In the case of Mr. Cheney's energy task force, these con-

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## The records of an energy task force should be opened.

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cerns are heightened because of both his and the president's strong ties to the energy industry, as former oil executives and as recipients of large campaign support from the industry.

As Congress prepared to consider administration energy proposals, it seemed appropriate to have a full accounting of who served on and staffed the vice president's task force, who spoke to its members and what these people told the task force. On April 19, Representative Henry Waxman and I sent a letter to the task force asking just those questions. We also asked the nonpartisan investigative arm of Congress, the General Accounting Office, to follow up.

Unfortunately, all we received in reply to our requests were letters from the vice president's lawyer telling us that we had no authority to ask these questions. To date, with the exception of a letter this month listing five meetings between the vice presi-

dent's office and Enron officials, we have yet to receive even the most basic information about the energy task force, like whom it met with and what documents it received.

Why are these questions important? For starters, the energy policy that the president submitted to the Congress last May, after the task force had made its public report, gave hundreds of millions of dollars in tax benefits to energy companies and suggested relaxing various regulations. Energy companies appear to have had special access to the members of the task force, while groups concerned with environmental issues were virtually ignored. The Federal Advisory Committee Act requires that meetings of nongovernmental advisers be conducted in public, just to avoid the appearance of secret favoritism.

The G.A.O. had rarely met such stonewalling from the executive branch and was prepared to sue the vice president. This action was put on hold after Sept. 11, but the G.A.O. is now about to decide about proceeding.

The recent admission of meetings between Enron executives and administration officials once again remind us of the importance of disclosure. We are scheduled to take up electricity deregulation legislation soon in the House Committee on Energy and Commerce. The vice president's task force called upon the president to propose legislation to deregulate electricity markets further, a course advocated by Enron. The vice president is certainly allowed to agree with a position of one of the president's largest donors, but shouldn't we in Congress and the American public be allowed to know how these proposals were formulated?

I do not favor lawsuits and subpoenas when simple cooperation between the branches of government will serve the purpose, but Congress should not shy away from seeking the facts. The administration must get over the notion that the public will tolerate secrecy in the way this government makes policy decisions. □

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