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EXCLUSIVE: Bush, Cheney comforted troops privately

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For much of the past seven years, President Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney have waged a clandestine operation inside the White House. It has involved thousands of military personnel, private presidential letters and meetings that were kept off their public calendars or sometimes left the news media in the dark.

Their mission: to comfort the families of soldiers who died fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks and to lift the spirits of those wounded in the service of their country.

On Monday, the president is set to make a more common public trip - with reporters in tow - to Walter Reed Army Medical Center, home to many of the wounded and a symbol of controversy earlier in his presidency over the quality of care the veterans were receiving.

But the size and scope of Mr. Bush's and Mr. Cheney's private endeavors to meet with wounded soldiers and families of the fallen far exceed anything that has been witnessed publicly, according to interviews with more than a dozen officials familiar with the effort.

"People say, 'Why would you do that?'" the president said in an Oval Office interview with The Washington Times on Friday. "And the answer is: This is my duty. The president is commander in chief, but the president is often comforter in chief, as well. It is my duty to be - to try to comfort as best as I humanly can a loved one who is in anguish."

Mr. Bush, for instance, has sent personal letters to the families of every one of the more than 4,000 troops who have died in the two wars, an enormous personal effort that consumed hours of his time and escaped public notice. The task, along with meeting family members of troops killed in action, has been so wrenching - balancing the anger, grief and pride of families coping with the loss symbolized by a flag-draped coffin - that the president often leaned on his wife, Laura, for emotional support.

"I lean on the Almighty and Laura," Mr. Bush said in the interview. "She has been very reassuring, very calming."

Mr. Bush also has met privately with more than 500 families of troops killed in action and with more than 950 wounded veterans, according to White House spokesman Carlton Carroll. Many of those meetings were outside the presence of the news media at the White House or at private sessions during official travel stops, officials said.

The first lady said those private visits, many of which she also attended, took a heavy emotional toll, not just on the president, but on her as well.

"It is just so unbelievably emotional to be with the families, for everybody involved. I mean for us and for them and for everyone," she said in a telephone interview with The Times on Saturday. "I'm very aware of how emotional it is and how draining it is for the president and for me, too. Both of us. But I think we do support each other, not by saying anything so much, but just by the comfort of each other's presence, both when we are with the families and then afterward when we are alone."

Mr. Cheney similarly has hosted numerous events, even sneaked away from the White House or his Naval Observatory home to meet troops at hospitals or elsewhere without a hint to the news media.

For instance, Mr. Cheney flew to North Carolina late last month and met with 500 special-operations soldiers for three hours on a Saturday night at a golf resort. The event was so secretive that the local newspaper didn't even learn about it until three days after it happened.

Mr. Cheney and his wife, Lynne, also have hosted more than a half-dozen barbecues at their Naval

Observatory home for wounded troops recovering at Bethesda Naval Hospital and Walter Reed and their spouses and children.

The vice president said Mr. Bush "feels a very special obligation to those who he has to send in harm's way on behalf of the nation, and a very special obligation to their families, especially the families of those who don't come home again."

"He, in his travels, spends time with the families of the fallen. If he goes down to Fort Bragg, he'll often times pull together the families of guys who were stationed at Bragg and killed in action, and spend time with the families," Mr. Cheney told The Times in an interview last week.

Mr. Bush did just that when he visited Fort Bragg, N.C., in 2002, rallying 2,000 special-operation soldiers stationed at the base, which would send thousands of men to the two wars, hundreds of whom would never return. "I want their families to know that we pray with them, that we honor them, and they died in a just cause, for defending freedom, and they will not have died in vain," he told the troops, his voice choking with emotion and his eyes welling up with tears.

That same month, in St. Petersburg, Fla., the president broke down in tears as he addressed the parents and family of one of the first soldiers to die in Afghanistan. "I know your heart aches, and we ache for you. But your son and your brother died for a noble and just cause," he said as a tear rolled down his right cheek.

He stopped his speech, overcome by emotion as the crowd stood and cheered. His chin still quivering, he smeared away tears, smiled and shrugged his shoulders. Those were public events, but mirrored the scores of private meetings where emotions also ran deep.

"I do get a little emotional because it's - I'm genuine when I say I'll miss being the commander in chief," the president told The Times. "I am in awe of our military. And I hold these folks in great respect. And I also sincerely appreciate the sacrifices that their families make."

Mr. Bush sees his job as providing comfort to those who have sacrificed so much. "The definition of comfort is very interesting. Comfort means hug, comfort means cry, comfort means smile, comfort means listen. Comfort also means, in many cases, assure the parent or the spouse that any decision made about troops in combat will be made with victory in mind, not made about my personal standing in the polls or partisan politics."

Asked where he gets the strength to meet with the families of soldiers whom he - as commander in chief - sent to their deaths, he turned stern.

"You have to believe in the cause. You have to understand that - and believe we'll be successful. If I didn't believe in the cause, it would be unbelievably terrible. I believe strongly in what we're doing. I believe it's necessary for our security. And I believe history will justify the actions. ...

"The interesting thing is, most of our troops fully understand this. They know we must defeat the enemy there so we don't have to face them here. And in a place like Iraq, they fully understood that Iraq was a front for al Qaeda. And they saw their mission as one of defending America by defeating al Qaeda," he told The Times.

Meeting with the families of the fallen has allowed the president to step out of the bubble that often surrounds him, to meet real people. "I find out a lot about the individuals when the families come and see me, because one thing they want to do is, they want to share. They want to share pictures or letters or moments.

"And I ask them to describe their loved one. What should I know about this person? Or they volunteer - 'You'd like this guy.' And many of them have said - it's amazing, the comforter in chief oftentimes is the comforted person - comforted because of their strength, comforted because of their devotion, comforted because of their love for their family member. And a lot of them said, Mr. President, please know that my child wanted to do this."

Mrs. Bush said she, too, is moved by their private meetings with relatives of the fallen.

"Visiting with the families of the fallen is one of the most touching, moving parts of this job that George has. I remember best the most recent, which was on the Intrepid on Veterans Day, when we met with nine different families. I remember them all very well, but one story that stands out in my mind was this sister who had written a biography of her brother that she lost.

"So she asked if she could read it to us. ... It represents every single family that wanted us to know about their loved ones, and what they were like, what their sense of humor was like, what they liked to do, and what they were good at."

The first lady said that many of the meetings have been kept private because "these are such personal times when people grieve. And we grieve with them. And these are not times when you would want a camera in the room or other people around. They are very emotional, personal times.

"And for all of these families to be in a room with the commander in chief who made the decision to send their loved one in harm's way is, you know, a wrenching time for us and for them. For all of us, the consequences of the choices that a commander in chief makes are clear. It's all about them, and their grief."

Some private meetings with soldiers have been publicized at the request of the soldiers themselves. When Mr. Bush met with Spc. Max Ramsey, who lost his left leg in 2006 while serving in Iraq, and Sgt. Neil Duncan, a double-amputee injured in Afghanistan in 2005, it was Sgt. Duncan who asked for news coverage.

"I wasn't sure my buddies would believe me," Sgt. Duncan said, joking with the president. When Mr. Bush had visited him at Walter Reed, the sergeant had vowed to run again, and did so on the White House South Lawn's jogging track in July 2007.

Although it was a Wednesday, Mr. Bush - who had scheduled a brief run - pulled the two soldiers through the trees to the White House pool after their jog.

"The group of us just sat there for like two hours maybe and chatted. On a whim, he just took two hours out of his schedule. ... We talked about personal things, how he feels about the war, what's been hard, what it's like being the president, some of the most difficult times for him. It was very, very cool - priceless."

Sgt. Duncan said he's glad he got the media to cover what otherwise would have been a private visit. "I thought it would be good for other soldiers to see that. It was a personal accomplishment - I wanted my family and my friends and people that I know and people I've never met to see it."

The vice president, who has been derided in the media as "Darth Vader," also has operated outside of the limelight to support wounded troops and their families even though he could have made political hay if he had made them public. He and his wife have hosted wounded troops and their families at his residence at the Naval Observatory, arranging for big-name country singers, such as Charlie Daniels and Sara Evans, to provide entertainment.

Pressed whether he ever considered allowing rap music at one of his barbecues for the troops, the vice president laughed.

"No rap, no. The country and western is sort of a compromise between old folks - you know, the big band sound of the '50s and the rappers that the younger generation understands," he said.

Actually, Mr. Cheney did manage to connect troops at his home with the "American Idol" television phenomenon in February, when he hosted an event for about 50 wounded troops at the Naval Observatory that showcased Melinda Doolittle, the big-voiced singer who was a finalist on the sixth season of the hit show.

On June 30, the vice president - code-named "Angler" by the Secret Service for his love for fly-fishing - staged a fly-fishing event on his lawn with a group of wounded troops being helped out by the charitable organization Project Healing Waters.

Rather than the usual rubber waders and camouflage fishing hat, the vice president sported a dark

suit, a white shirt, green tie and business shoes but still managed to show off his favorite fly-fishing cast to the troops. Instead of water, he aimed for a bright green patch of grass as the smiling military men and their wives picked up tips and practiced themselves.

- *Jon Ward contributed to this report.*