

Cheney's hunting accident: a bizarre and sinister episode

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In a bizarre episode, Vice President Dick Cheney shot and wounded a companion while quail hunting in Texas on Saturday. Although the injuries inflicted on 78-year-old Harry Whittington, a wealthy lawyer from Austin, Texas, were serious enough to place him in an intensive care unit, neither Cheney nor the White House saw fit to release the information.

Cheney was reportedly wielding a 28-gauge shotgun and his victim was some 30 yards away when struck. Whittington received birdshot to the lower face, neck, shoulder and chest. He was airlifted by helicopter to Christus Spohn Memorial Hospital in nearby Corpus Christi, Texas.

The hospital described Whittington's condition as stable and not at all life threatening. As to why he had been placed in intensive care, hospital administrator Peter Banko told the *Caller-Times*, "It's fairly common procedure for his condition since he was peppered with shotgun spray." Whittington's daughter told the *Dallas Morning News* that his face "looks like it has chicken pox, kind of. He's so lucky, it's a miracle."

Some 18 hours after the accident, on Sunday morning, Katharine Armstrong, the co-owner of the ranch on which Cheney and Whittington were shooting, notified the *Corpus Christi Caller-Times*. When Cheney's office was contacted by one of the newspaper's journalists, almost 22 hours after the episode, his press representative confirmed the story. Asked whether the White House or Cheney's office would ever have released the information had the reporter not contacted them, the vice president's spokeswoman Lea Ann McBride commented, "I'm not going to speculate. When you put the call into me, I was able to confirm that account."

McBride told the media that the vice president's office had not informed reporters about the accident, which occurred at 5:30 p.m. Saturday, because "We deferred to the Armstrongs regarding what had taken place at their ranch." This is an absurd response. Since when do such considerations outweigh the right of the public to immediate and thorough information about a potentially fatal incident involving the vice president, the second most powerful

political official in the United States?

As the *Voice of America* noted, "The White House usually alerts the national media quickly when the president or vice-president is involved in an accident. That was the case when President Bush was riding a mountain bike last July in Scotland and collided with a policeman." When Bush fell off his bike at his Crawford, Texas ranch in May 2004, suffering such minor injuries that they did not prevent him from riding back home, the news media carried the story the same evening.

White House spokesman Scott McClellan's explanation for the delay in informing the public of Cheney's hunting escapade was no more convincing than McBride's. He blamed it on the need to provide medical treatment and get all the facts from those involved. "It's important always to work to make sure you get information out like this as quickly as possible," he said. "But it is also important to make sure the first priority is where it should be, making sure that Mr. Whittington has the care that he needs."

According to *Editor & Publisher*, Beth Francesco of the *Caller-Times* "felt it was a bit odd that her newsroom had not received any information about the shooting since 'we often call law enforcement in the area, even on weekends. We checked in and didn't hear anything about it.'"

The story put out by Cheney's office and the Armstrong ranch is the least plausible explanation for the time gap in informing the press. It seems more likely that the vice president and his hosts hoped that the episode could be hushed up and never reach the media or the public. It is likely, however, that by Sunday mid-morning they must have recognized that too many people at the ranch, at the hospital and elsewhere knew about the accident for a cover-up to be successful. Even then, as though it might set a dangerous precedent, Cheney was unwilling to direct his representatives to contact the media themselves.

The vice president habitually conducts himself in a manner that suggests the worst possible motives. The most secretive high official in the most secretive administration in US history, Cheney functions more in the manner of an interior

minister of a police state than a vice president operating according to the US Constitution. His comings and goings are often kept secret; his holding up during any crisis in a “secure, undisclosed location” is legendary. Cheney successfully withstood demands from the Congress and the General Accounting Office to provide information concerning his closed-door meetings in 2001 with oil and energy executives, including Enron CEO Kenneth Lay, now on trial on a myriad of fraud charges. According to all accounts, he is the administration’s leading champion of unfettered and almost unlimited executive power.

Aside from the element of a possible cover-up, the hunting episode provides a further glimpse into the lives of America’s wealthy and powerful political elite, a reality that the US media is generally obliging enough to keep concealed.

Cheney was quail hunting, as he does at least once a year, on the 50,000-acre Armstrong ranch. Katharine Armstrong’s father, Tobin, a politically powerful rancher, spent 48 years as director of the Texas and Southwest Cattle Raisers Association—an organization formed by wealthy landowners to bring cattle rustlers “to justice.” In 1944, Armstrong’s older brother married an heir of the nearby King Ranch, which claims to be the largest in the world (in the early 1970s, King Ranch holdings worldwide totaled approximately 11.5 million acres), thus linking two of the biggest ranches in Texas. The Armstrong ranch subsequently went global, with properties in Australia and South America.

The ranch has been host to many Republican dignitaries, including the first and second President Bush. The Rockefellers (Tobin Armstrong’s father was an executive of the Standard Oil Co.) and Prince Charles have also been guests. Speaking in 2002 of his outings with Cheney, Tobin Armstrong remarked, “We go out when the dew is still on the grass, and then hunt until we shoot our limit. Then we pick a fine spot and have a wild game picnic lunch.” Armstrong, an elite fundraiser for Bush, died in October 2005; Cheney spoke at his funeral.

His widow, Anne Armstrong, has been even more intimately involved in Republican politics for decades. She served as vice chairman of the Texas Republican Party in the 1960s and co-chairman of the Republican National Committee in the early 1970s. The first woman to hold the cabinet-level post of counselor to the president, she served in that position under Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford. The latter appointed her as US ambassador to Britain. Anne Armstrong approved covert actions on the Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board under Ronald Reagan. A member of various boards of directors, she sat on Halliburton’s board at the time the oil services corporation hired Cheney as chief executive in 1995.

Cheney is an avid hunter. He frequently shoots ducks in Arkansas, Texas and South Dakota; he also hunts in Georgia and South Dakota. In January 2004, Cheney and Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia boarded a private Gulfstream V jet, landing in Morgan City, Louisiana, where they were guests of oilman Wallace Carline. The following day, they shot ducks at Carline’s private hunting preserve. At the time, the Supreme Court was hearing the case involving Cheney’s secret energy task force.

Scalia later arrogantly brushed off demands that he recuse himself, claiming that the case “did not involve a lawsuit against Dick Cheney as a private individual.” He added: “This was a government issue. It’s acceptable practice to socialize with executive branch officials when there are not personal claims against them. That’s all I’m going to say for now. Quack, quack.”

Cheney seems quite obsessed with shooting birds and other creatures. In December 2003 he shot ducks and some 70 pen-raised pheasants at the exclusive Rolling Rock Club in southwestern Pennsylvania. *Time* magazine’s web site notes that “there’s nothing wrong, legally at least, with blasting away at stocked birds. But depending on how and when they are released, it should not be confused with actual hunting, since disoriented birds placed in the field or released in front of the shooters are often neither as wary or elusive as wild quarry.”

Now the vice president has shot a 78-year-old man. Of course, these things happen, though not as frequently as one might suspect. As the *Houston Chronicle* noted, in a state with over one million hunters, Texas registered only 19 hunting accidents involving firearms in all of 2004.

What distinguishes this apparent mishap from the others, however, is that the man who pulled the trigger is the foremost champion of the doctrine that the government of the United States can arrest and jail people without charges and without informing anyone—torture those branded as “enemy combatants” in clandestine overseas prisons and covertly spy upon American citizens.

It is in this context that the incident—and its concealment from the public for nearly 24 hours—represents far more than grist for the mill of late-night television talk show hosts. Hanging over it is the disconcerting knowledge that the hunter is in this case the leading figure in a government that has arrogated to itself the “right” to imprison, torture, shoot and kill with no questions asked.



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