

# Unresolved questions in the Cheney shooting incident

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16 February 2006

*Last Saturday, Vice President Dick Cheney, an experienced hunter, was hunting quail with several well-heeled Republican acquaintances, including Texas lawyer Harry Whittington. The two men had been drinking throughout the afternoon, and at one point began to quarrel about a business venture of mutual interest which had gone awry. The argument became heated. Whittington sneered at Cheney's declining public standing and the most recent disclosure, by Cheney's former chief of staff Lewis Libby, that Libby had leaked classified information to the press at Cheney's direction. When Cheney responded with an obscenity-laced remark, Whittington, a man who knows where many bodies are buried in Texas politics and business, suggested he might arrange for certain facts of a sensitive nature to become public knowledge. Cheney, enraged, stormed away, then turned, lowered his shotgun and discharged it, hitting Whittington's face and upper body.*

Is that what happened on February 14 at the Armstrong Ranch in southern Texas? We have no idea, but it is no less likely than the official explanation. And the "angry drunk" scenario would more plausibly explain both the long delay in reporting the event—which made it conveniently impossible to perform the blood alcohol test that would otherwise be routine in such an incident—and the obvious disarray in the White House for days afterwards.

For all the media attention to the Cheney affair, it is remarkable that with virtual unanimity the official claim that the shooting was accidental has been uncritically accepted and reported as though it were established fact, despite the lack of any serious investigation or public presentation of the actual circumstances in which the vice president of the United States shot and seriously wounded another man.

Until the migration of one of the shotgun pellets lodged in Whittington's body triggered a heart attack on Tuesday, the incident was largely dismissed with joking references to the "gang that couldn't shoot straight" or criticism of a poor White House communications strategy. Even after the shift to a more serious tone, the major daily newspapers and the television networks continue to refer to the incident as an "accidental shooting," without either interviewing eyewitnesses or investigating any alternative theory of what took place.

With Cheney's interview Wednesday evening on Fox

television, two conflicting accounts of the shooting have now been given. Kathleen Armstrong, daughter of multimillionaire ranch owner Anne Armstrong, a former ambassador in the Reagan administration, contacted a Corpus Christi, Texas newspaper Sunday to report Whittington had been shot accidentally. She put the responsibility for the incident on Whittington, indicating that he had wandered off the line maintained by his hunting partners and failed to announce himself when he returned from retrieving a quail.

Three days later, Cheney abandoned the "blame the victim" story and told Fox interviewer Britt Hume that he was the one responsible because he had pulled the trigger.

Cheney also admitted to having a drink earlier that day, although he said it was only a single beer at lunch, five hours before the shooting. He denied that any alcohol was being consumed on the hunt.

Cheney made an even more damaging admission, remarking that he "didn't know until Sunday morning that Harry was going to be all right." This throws a different light on the decision not to make public any information about the shooting for nearly a full day.

During that period, when Cheney and his aides could not be sure whether the vice president might be facing involuntary manslaughter charges, there were undoubtedly discussions about how to handle the story—perhaps even consideration of whether someone else might have to take the fall for the shooting. Only after Whittington was out of immediate danger was the press contacted with the news that Cheney had been the shooter.

The police were also kept away during the first critical half-day. Secret Service agents contacted the local sheriff's department immediately to report a shooting accident, but there is no indication that they supplied any details or identified the shooter.

A captain in the sheriff's department went to the ranch Saturday evening but was told the victim had been transported to a hospital in Corpus Christi. He left without interviewing any eyewitness.

Two local policemen also arrived at the ranch, after learning of the shooting, but they were denied admission by ranch security guards, and went their way. Finally, at 8 a.m.

Sunday—after Cheney had been assured that Whittington would survive—the vice president was interviewed by a sheriff's deputy and made his first declaration that he had pulled the trigger.

What is known about the circumstances of the shooting cast some doubt on the accident theory, especially given Cheney's long experience as a hunter and the relative rarity of such incidents—only a handful during the most recent Texas hunting season.

According to the account Cheney gave to Fox, Whittington was partially obscured because he was standing in a gully lower than the ground on which Cheney was standing. This suggests that Cheney, in order to hit Whittington, would have had to fire his blast either level or slightly downwards—a strange angle for shooting at a flushed quail rising into the sky.

Press accounts suggest that Whittington was hit by as many as 150 to 200 pellets, meaning that he received nearly the full charge of birdshot from a single blast. This fact and the nature of the wounds seem to confirm the reports that Whittington was standing about 30 yards from Cheney when the vice president opened fire: any closer, and the wounds would have been far more serious; much further away, and dispersion would have caused many of the shot pellets to miss.

There are other aspects of the incident which appear to undercut the “pure accident” theory. How could such an accident occur when the vice president was accompanied by his normal entourage of Secret Service and medical personnel?

The role of the Secret Service is particularly puzzling: if Whittington was in range of Cheney's gun, then Cheney was likewise in range of Whittington's. How could the Secret Service have been unaware that a man armed with a loaded shotgun was approaching the vice president from an unexpected direction? If they were aware of Whittington's movements, how could they have allowed the vice president to open fire on him?

Whittington's turn for the worse on Tuesday morning raises the possibility that he could suffer long-term physical consequences from the shooting, or even death. In either event, Cheney could be liable for criminal charges involving at least negligence and recklessness, or even involuntary manslaughter, a felony charge never before brought against so high-ranking a public official. His continuation in office under such circumstances would be in question.

The press, however, has been virtually silent on this possibility. It has focused almost entirely on the subsequent handling of the public relations fallout, not on the underlying event in which a man was nearly killed by the vice president.

In a rare exception, *Washington Post* columnist David Ignatius, in a commentary Wednesday devoted to the exposure of illegal NSA spying, remarked in passing: “Nobody died at Armstrong Ranch, but this incident reminds me a bit of Sen. Edward Kennedy's delay in informing Massachusetts authorities about his role in the fatal automobile accident at

Chappaquiddick in 1969. That story, and dozens of others about the Kennedy family, illustrates how wealthy, powerful people can behave as if they are above the law.”

The comparison is an apt one, not only in its implicit questioning of the credibility of the account given by Cheney, but in its reference to the seeming immunity of the top echelons of American society from all normal legal and social constraints. There is indeed one law for the masses of ordinary people and quite another for the financial and political elite. If anything, this is more the case in the far more socially polarized America of 2006 than it was nearly four decades ago.

Cheney's four-day silence demonstrated the vice president's arrogant indifference to public opinion. His eventual decision to give an interview with Fox News expresses both contempt for the public's right to know and personal cowardice—Cheney is willing to be questioned only by a network which has repeatedly demonstrated a slavish political loyalty to the Bush administration and its ultra-right policies.

The rejection of accountability—for the 9/11 attacks, for the lies which were used to engineer the war with Iraq, for the failures in the response to Hurricane Katrina, for the devastating social and fiscal impact of Bush's tax cuts for the wealthy—is the hallmark not only of an administration, but of the ruling elite as a whole.

In that sense, Cheney's conduct at the Armstrong Ranch and its presentation by the media provide a vivid example of the social relations that prevail in contemporary America, ruled by a financial oligarchy that feels itself as far above the common people as the Russian Tsar or the French aristocracy before 1789. There is one set of laws, one set of prerogatives for the modern equivalent of the ruling estates of the feudal past, and another for the rabble.



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