

Cheney “takes responsibility”—without accountability or consequences

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“Cheney takes responsibility for shooting . . .” —AP

“Vice President Dick Cheney took responsibility . . .” —CNN News

“Cheney Takes Full Responsibility for Shooting Hunter” —*New York Times*

“Vice-President Dick Cheney took full responsibility . . .” —CTV News

“Cheney Takes Full Responsibility for Shooting” —*Los Angeles Times*

“Deadeye Dick breaks his silence, takes responsibility” —*New York Daily News*

“Cheney takes responsibility for shooting” —*Salt Lake Tribune*

“Cheney Takes Responsibility for Shooting in Interview” —*Bloomberg News*

“The US vice-president tells the media he takes full responsibility” —BBC News

“VP Takes Responsibility” —CBS News

“Cheney takes blame for shooting” —*Chicago Tribune*

The American media has universally agreed that Vice President Dick Cheney, in an interview with Fox News’ Brit Hume, “took responsibility” for the shooting of influential Republican lawyer Harry Whittington in Texas last weekend.

What does this mean? Will the vice president at the very least now hold a press conference and submit himself to journalists’ questions? Will the vice president appear under oath before Congress to answer questions about the inconsistencies in his story and the bizarre delay and confusion in notifying the national media?

Americans and others should be well aware by now what it means for a member of the Bush administration to “take responsibility” for some crime or disaster—it means absolutely nothing. There will be no serious investigation in the Cheney matter or prosecution, and the official story will be repeated in the press for a while, joked about a few times on late-night talk shows, and then the incident will be quietly swept under the rug.

Or, rather, “accepting responsibility” in the language of this administration *does* mean something, it has a positive content. It is intended as a *substitute* for any actual accountability or punishment.

For those of modest means in trouble with the law, “accepting responsibility” means something real. To the unhappy soul who holds up a liquor store, or steals a car, he or she will have years to consider his or her “responsibility” behind bars. For members of the elite, on the other hand, “accepting responsibility” means taking 10 minutes to make a public acknowledgment of one’s misdeeds and then going about one’s business without further delay.

In September 2005 George W. Bush said he “took responsibility” for government failures in dealing with Hurricane Katrina. “Katrina

exposed serious problems in our response capability at all levels of government,” Bush said at a White House news conference.

“To the extent the federal government didn’t fully do its job right, I take responsibility,” he said.

More than one thousand people were dead, hundreds of thousand of lives destroyed, much of an entire major city lay in ruins, property damage in the billions of dollars had been sustained. What did Bush’s statement mean? Would he resign in the face of this almost unprecedented disaster? Would he launch an independent investigation into his own neglect and that of his administration that might lead to criminal charges being laid? Of course not. No one has been held seriously accountable.

Just this week Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff declared that his department’s response to Hurricane Katrina was “woefully inadequate” and caused extra suffering for the people of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. Chertoff told the gathered senators he accepted responsibility for “many lapses” during the catastrophe. Did Chertoff offer to resign? Did any of the senators raise the possibility? No, it apparently occurred to no one in the room.

This is nothing new. In May 2004, after the first horrifying photographs from Abu Ghraib prison made their way into the media, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld accepted full responsibility for “the terrible activities that occurred at Abu Ghraib.” Rumsfeld told the media the alleged abuse of Iraqi prisoners at the prison in Iraq “occurred on my watch, and as secretary of defense I am accountable for them, and I take full responsibility.”

The epidemic is an international one. In July 2004 British Prime Minister Tony Blair announced that he accepted “full responsibility” for the intelligence mistakes made in the run-up to the Iraq war, while insisting that the decision to remove Saddam Hussein was justified.

Back in July 2003 George W. Bush also took responsibility for a discredited passage in his State of the Union address that year asserting that Saddam Hussein was seeking nuclear weapons materials in Africa, a key element of the US case for war. Bush declared, “I take personal responsibility for everything I say, absolutely.” The war, in other words, had been justified on the basis of lies. Has Bush been held accountable? The violence in Iraq continues, unabated.

And so forth.

Cheney’s acceptance of responsibility is meant to end discussion of the incident. The media has been given a signal: enough! And, it seems safe to predict, the media will obey.

Nonetheless, the official story of Cheney’s shooting episode repeated in the media is full of holes. Many questions remain unanswered.

Why did it take so long before the press was notified that the vice

president of the United States was involved in a shooting? Was Cheney waiting to see if Whittington's condition would stabilize, in case someone needed to take the fall if he died? After all, Cheney did admit in his Fox interview that he "didn't know until Sunday morning [before the press was notified] that Harry [Whittington] was going to be all right." If Whittington had died, Cheney might have stood trial on involuntary manslaughter charges, in which case he would have had to resign.

Why was it the owner of the ranch, Katharine Armstrong, and not Cheney's office, who notified the *Corpus Christi Caller-Times*? Armstrong indicated, through White House correspondent Byron York, that she "did not coordinate with the vice president's office before calling" the *Caller-Times*. If she had not called, would Cheney have *ever* notified the press?

Why was this version of events contradicted by Cheney spokeswoman Lea Anne McBride, who said, "The vice president and Mrs. Armstrong agreed that the media should be notified, and Mrs. Armstrong called her local paper"? It was also contradicted by Cheney himself in his Fox interview: "Katharine suggested, and I agreed, that she would go make the announcement," Cheney said.

Why did Armstrong continue to insist to CNN that she did not think that the vice president was aware that she was going to notify the press, even when White House spokesman Scott McClellan told a press conference, "The vice president spoke directly with Mrs. Armstrong, and they agreed that she would make the information public"?

If Whittington did indeed wander in front of Cheney's rifle, why were members of the Secret Service, elite bodyguards charged with defending the vice president's life, unaware that a man with a loaded shotgun was facing the vice president, and was less than 100 feet away from him? If they were aware, why did they do nothing to stop the shooting?

Hunting accidents are quite infrequent, despite the popularity of the sport—30 accidents were recorded among the vast numbers of Texas hunters in 2005. The official Texas Parks and Wildlife accident report indicates that the weather the day Whittington was shot was "sunny" and "clear" with "fair visibility," "flat topography" and "low cover." How then could someone like Cheney, who is by all accounts an experienced hunter with impeccable aim who had hunted at the ranch "for years," fail to see a human being wearing blaze-orange safety gear less than 100 feet from the end of his barrel?

Cheney told Fox that Whittington was down in a ravine, and that that was how Cheney failed to spot him downrange. However, if Cheney was lining up a shot on a flying quail, why was his weapon pointed *downward* into a ravine?

Why were local law enforcement officers barred by Secret Service agents from interviewing Cheney until Sunday morning, two days after the shooting? Was the decision not to notify the authorities made because the vice president had been drinking, and needed time to sober up before the police arrived?

Why is the concentration of pellets on Whittington's body so dense? Ballistic testing by *Caller-Times* journalist George Gongora indicates that at the distance Cheney claims to have shot Whittington, some 30 yards, the spread of pellets from Cheney's Perazzi Brescia 28-gauge shotgun would be 44" in diameter, whereas the medical reports indicate that Whittington was hit by a 12-13" spread, and the vast majority of the pellets (more than 200 out of around 300 in the round) were actually found in Whittington's chest and neck, indicating a much closer range. The wounds did not appear to be a grazing at long

range, but looked like a near *direct hit* at fairly close range.

None of these questions will be asked or addressed by the American press, or by American law enforcement agencies. Even if it is true that Cheney accidentally shot Whittington, there is enough inconsistency in his story to warrant a more thorough investigation. However, because of Cheney's social position—his massive wealth and political influence—no serious inquiry will be conducted.

In his defiant and arrogant interview with his friends at Fox News, Cheney gave the version of events that he knew would be unquestioningly accepted. George W. Bush told reporters in the Oval Office that he thought Cheney handled things "just fine," and twice repeated the phrase, "I'm satisfied with the explanation he gave."

Police as well as journalists need look no further; Cheney "took responsibility" and the president said he was "satisfied"—case closed.

If Cheney were an ordinary American person, and not a multimillionaire politician, he would at least face the possibility of serious criminal charges. If he had been drinking, he could face charges of hunting under the influence resulting in serious injury or death. He could also be charged for failure to report an accident, filing a false police report, reckless shooting, gross negligence, and even poaching, since Cheney failed to obtain the proper hunting authorization. Had Whittington died, Cheney could have faced charges of criminally negligent homicide or involuntary manslaughter.

Fortunately for Cheney, he will face no consequences, and nobody will be held accountable. The Texas authorities have fined him \$7 for hunting without the proper permit, and the local sheriff's office released a statement on Monday indicating that "this department is fully satisfied that this was nothing more than a hunting accident." On Thursday, the same department announced the inquiry was closed and that no charges would be filed.

In the week since the shooting took place, media coverage of the hunting incident has merely repeated and affirmed Cheney's story. Fox News even lamented, "Not one person bothering to ask, in the meantime, how Dick Cheney's feeling about all this." Cheney, reporter Ron Christie insists, "is a very nice guy ... a down-to-earth man, very personable person, and not the person who's often demonized in the media."

Cheney, one of the chief architects of an illegal and brutal war in Iraq, is currently the subject of two investigations, and will in the near future be called to testify in the trial of his own chief of staff, "Scooter" Libby, as well as any probe into the domestic spying leak.

In his interview with Brit Hume, Cheney sighed, "One of the problems we have as a government is our inability to keep secrets."



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