

Dick Cheney's Heartless Hypocrisy

Exclusive: Dick Cheney's new book about his life-saving heart transplant has drawn much fawning coverage. But little attention has gone to the hypocrisy of the ex-vice president accepting expensive government-funded surgeries while endorsing the Tea Party's campaign to deny health coverage to millions of Americans, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Former Vice President Dick Cheney, out promoting his new book *Heart* about how his life was saved by very expensive heart-transplant surgery, is simultaneously praising the Tea Party, which is hard at work trying to prevent less fortunate Americans from getting anything close to the government-financed care that spared Cheney.

In an appearance on NBC's "Today" show, Cheney called the Tea Party and its fierce opposition to government spending a "good thing." He also noted how the Tea Party made possible the insurgent Wyoming Senate campaign of his daughter Liz because she was "partly motivated" by the same concerns about high taxes, high national debt and the cost of the Affordable Care Act.

Out of that zeal to repeal Obamacare, the Tea Party and its congressional adherents provoked this month's government shutdown and near credit default. Yet, Cheney declared, "I've got a lot of respect for what the people are doing."

But what the Tea Party has been doing is trying to prevent the federal government from implementing reforms in the health-insurance system that would enable some 30 million Americans, including many with pre-existing conditions, to obtain insurance often at reduced or subsidized prices. The Tea Party is also fighting expansion of Medicaid for poor families in states controlled by Republicans.

In other words, the Tea Party wants to force Americans with pre-existing medical conditions like, say, a diseased heart to remain at the mercy of greedy insurance companies that have made a lucrative business plan out of denying coverage to the people who need it most.

Such a victim of America's perverse health-care system would have been Dick Cheney, who has had at least five heart attacks dating back to when he was 37. But Cheney was lucky enough to qualify for government-funded health care as a federal employee for most of his adult life, including his time in the Nixon administration, his service in Congress, and his eight years as vice president.

As a retired official who is now over 65, he further qualifies for Medicare and other health benefits.

The cost of the heart transplant alone over the first year is estimated at \$1 million, and the 72-year-old Cheney has received a variety of other expensive heart procedures over the decades.

Saving the Cheney Family

But Cheney's personal hypocrisy regarding the federal government's role to "provide for the general Welfare" when it comes to less fortunate Americans did not start with the life-saving gift of a new heart. It traces back to the Cheney family's rise from the hard-scrabble life that confronted many hard-working Americans who were buffeted by the periodic financial crises of unrestrained capitalism, the system idealized by the Tea Party.

In Cheney's 2011 memoir, *In My Time*, he acknowledges that his personal success was made possible by Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal and the fact that Cheney's father managed to land a steady job with the federal government. "I've often reflected on how different was the utterly stable environment he provided for his family and wondered if because of that I have been able to take risks, to change directions, and to leave one career path for another with hardly a second thought," Cheney wrote.

In that sense, Cheney's self-assuredness may be as much a product of the New Deal as the many bridges, dams and other public works that Roosevelt commissioned in the 1930s to get Americans back to work. By contrast, the insecurity that afflicted Cheney's father was a byproduct of the vicissitudes from laissez-faire capitalism.

In sketching his family's history, Cheney depicted the struggles of farmers and small businessmen scratching out a living in the American Midwest and suffering devastating reversals whenever the titans of Wall Street stumbled into a financial crisis and the bankers cut off credit.

After his ancestors would make some modest headway from their hard work, they would find themselves back at square one, again and again, because of some "market" crisis or a negative weather pattern. Whenever there was a financial panic or a drought, everything was lost.

"In 1883, as the country struggled through a long economic depression, the sash and door factory that [Civil War veteran Samuel Fletcher Cheney] co-owned [in Defiance, Ohio] had to be sold to pay its debts," Cheney wrote. "At the age of fifty-four, Samuel Cheney had to start over," moving to Nebraska.

There, Samuel Cheney built a sod house and began a farm, enjoying some success until a drought hit, again forcing him to the edge. Despite a solid credit record, he noted that “the banks will not loan to anyone at present” and, in 1896, he had to watch all his possessions auctioned off at the Kearney County Courthouse. Samuel Cheney started another homestead in 1904 and kept working until he died in 1911 at the age of 82.

His third son, Thomas, who was nicknamed Bert (and who would become Dick Cheney’s grandfather), tried to build a different life as a cashier and part owner of a Sumner, Kansas, bank, named Farmers and Merchants Bank. But he still suffered when the economy crashed.

“Despite all his plans and success, Bert Cheney found that, like his father, he couldn’t escape the terrible power of nature,” Dick Cheney wrote. “When drought struck in the early 1930s, farmers couldn’t pay their debts, storekeepers had to close their doors, and Farmers and Merchants Bank went under. My grandparents lost everything except for the house in which they lived.”

Bert Cheney’s son, Richard, ventured off in a different direction, working his way through Kearney State Teachers College and taking the civil service exam. He landed a job as a typist with the Veterans Administration in Lincoln, Nebraska. “After scraping by for so long, he found the prospect of a \$120 monthly salary and the security of a government job too good to turn down,” his son, Dick Cheney, wrote. “Before long he was offered a job with another federal agency, the Soil Conservation Service.

“The SCS taught farmers about crop rotation, terraced planting, contour plowing, and using ‘shelter belts’ of trees as windbreaks techniques that would prevent the soil from blowing away, as it had in the dust storms of the Great Depression. My dad stayed with the SCS for more than thirty years, doing work of which he was immensely proud. He was also proud of the pension that came with federal employment a pride that I didn’t understand until as an adult I learned about the economic catastrophes that his parents and grandparents had experienced and that had shadowed his own youth.”

Like many Americans, the Cheney family felt it had been pulled from the depths of the Great Depression by the New Deal efforts of Franklin Roosevelt, cementing the family’s support for the Democratic president and his party. “When I was born [on Jan. 30, 1941] my granddad wanted to send a telegram to the president,” Cheney wrote in his memoir. “Both sides of my family were staunch New Deal Democrats, and Granddad was sure that FDR would want to know about the ‘little stranger’ with whom he now had a birthday in common.”

After growing up in the relative comfort of middle-class, post-World War II

America, Dick Cheney would take advantage of the many opportunities that presented themselves, attaching himself to powerful Republican politicians, most notably an ambitious congressman from Illinois named Donald Rumsfeld.

When Rumsfeld left Congress for posts in the Nixon administration, he brought the hard-working Cheney along. Eventually Rumsfeld became White House chief of staff to President Gerald Ford and when Rumsfeld was tapped to become Defense Secretary in 1975 he recommended his young aide, Dick Cheney, to succeed him.

Cheney's career path through the ranks of Republican national politics, with occasional trips through the revolving door into lucrative private-sector jobs, was set. He would become a major player within the GOP Establishment, establishing for himself a reputation as one of the most conservative members of Congress and a foreign policy hawk.

Cheney is now recognized as a right-wing Republican icon, inspiring a new generation of conservatives to dismantle what's left of Roosevelt's New Deal and shrink the federal government so it won't be there to help some other struggling family trying to make it into the middle class and achieve the American Dream.

Indeed, if the father in that struggling family suffers from heart disease and if the family is denied affordable health insurance due to that pre-existing condition Cheney's right-wing Tea Party policies would coldly calculate that the father's life would not be worth saving.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his new book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)). For a limited time, you also can order Robert Parry's trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The trilogy includes *America's Stolen Narrative*. For details on this offer, [click here](#).
