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Former Vice President Dick Cheney speaks about national security in Washington, 05/21/09. (photo: Reuters)

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Dick Cheney: Son of the New Deal

By Robert Parry, Consortium News

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Former Vice President Dick Cheney would agree that he is about as right-wing as an American politician can be, openly hostile to the federal government's intervention in society. But one surprise from his memoir, *In My Time*, is that Cheney recognizes 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 writes.

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.

So, it is ironic that as an adult, Cheney has contributed as much as almost anyone to dismantling the New Deal, the social compact that pulled his family into the American middle class and opened extraordinary opportunities for him.

In sketching his family's history, Cheney depicts the hard-scrabble life of farmers and small businessmen

scratching out a living in the American Midwest and suffering financial 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 writes. "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 writes. "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, writes. "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

writes 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.

Now in his 70s, Cheney is widely 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.

It doesn't seem to matter that those were the two social factors that created "the utterly stable environment" which gave Dick Cheney his chance in life.

Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories in the 1980s for the Associated Press and Newsweek. His latest book, "Neck Deep: The Disastrous Presidency of George W. Bush," was written with two of his sons, Sam and Nat, and can be ordered at neckdeepbook.com. His two previous books, "Secrecy & Privilege: The Rise of the Bush Dynasty from Watergate to Iraq" and "Lost History: Contras, Cocaine, the Press & 'Project Truth'" are also available there.