

# Dick Cheney, Fiscal Conservative?

By Robert S. McIntyre

**A** WASHINGTON sked this week why he voted against Head Start when he was in Congress in the 1980's, Dick Cheney said he was "motivated by a concern for fiscal responsibility in an era when the nation did not have the projected surpluses it now has."

"I would not vote against Head Start today," Mr. Cheney, the expected Republican vice presidential candidate, said this week. When later pressed about some of his votes in Congress, he underlined the point that the Reagan era of the 1980's was a time "when we had huge budget deficits, no money and when we really had to be concerned about federal spending."

One can easily understand why Mr. Cheney might have worried about fiscal responsibility as a congressman in the deficit-ridden 1980's. But it's pretty hard to swallow his claim that such concerns were why he was one of only a handful of legislators to oppose improving education opportunities for poor children.

In the early 80's, the Head Start program cost about \$1 billion a year. That's small potatoes compared with Ronald Reagan's 1981 tax reduction act, which cost \$870 billion over its first five years. Yet while Mr. Cheney says he saw the tiny Head Start program as unaffordable, he was able to put aside any fiscal doubts he may have harbored and enthusiastically support President Reagan's budget-busting tax plan. He voiced no objection to the measure's hundreds of billions of dollars in tax subsidies for oil

companies, utilities, railroads and other corporate interests.

Mr. Cheney also happily voted for Mr. Reagan's big increases in defense spending, which grew from \$134 billion in 1980 to \$273 billion by 1986 — almost a 50 percent increase adjusted for inflation.

The upshot of these Cheney-supported policies was to triple the budget deficit between 1980 and 1986, bringing it to its highest level as a share of the economy since the end of World War II. We've only recently climbed our way out of the enormous deficit hole that Mr. Cheney helped dig.

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## A backer of the tax cuts that created the 80's deficits.

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It wasn't blind loyalty to President Reagan that caused him to vote the way he did as a congressman. After all, Mr. Reagan supported the Head Start program. And in 1986, when Mr. Reagan pushed to undo some of the damage his earlier tax bills had wrought, Mr. Cheney worked hard to try to defeat the president. In opposing the 1986 tax reform act, widely considered to be Mr. Reagan's finest accomplishment, Mr. Cheney once again allied himself with an array of special interests — tax shelter promoters, oil and timber companies, tax-avoiding defense contractors and so on — that fought to defeat the reforms.

So, despite his revisionist concern about fiscal discipline in the 80's, Mr. Cheney's record shows that he is pretty much a big-deficit,

tax-loophole-loving kind of guy. That, of course, makes him an ideal running mate for Gov. George W. Bush, whose \$1.9 trillion upper-income tax cut plan would use up almost the entire projected non-Social Security surplus over the next decade — even before Mr. Bush gets to his various expensive spending plans, from the dubious missile defense system to the voter-friendly drug coverage for senior citizens.

True, Mr. Bush touts the fact that some of his proposed tax cuts would go to low- and moderate-income working families. Never mind that only about 2 percent of those tax cuts are so targeted, compared with 62 percent of the breaks that would go to the best-off tenth of all taxpayers.

**A**s Mr. Bush's running mate, Mr. Cheney seems to be trying to avoid the hardhearted image that voters might see in his congressional votes. But Newt Gingrich was right to note this week that when he and Mr. Cheney served together in the House, "Cheney's voting record was slightly more conservative than mine."

Or put another way, if the choice is between welfare for the rich and opportunities for the needy, Dick Cheney's record makes it pretty clear where he stands. By choosing him, Mr. Bush may have clarified his own stance as well.

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