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In New Book, Cheney Recalls 5 Heart Attacks and His Brush With Death

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WASHINGTON — Former Vice President [Dick Cheney](#) was so close to death in 2010 that he said farewell to his family members and instructed them to have his body cremated and the ashes returned to Wyoming, he writes in a new book on his long battle with heart disease.

Mr. Cheney ultimately survived the emergency surgery that night and went on to have a [heart transplant](#) at age 71 that has left him re-energized five years after leaving office. But for the first time, he describes a 35-year medical struggle that he kept generally private in vivid personal detail.

"If this is dying, I remember thinking, it's not all that bad," Mr. Cheney writes in "Heart: An American Medical Odyssey," to be published on Tuesday. His kidneys were starting to fail and doctors were rushing him to emergency surgery to implant a device in his chest. "I believed I was approaching the end of my days, but that didn't frighten me," he recalls. "I was pain free and at peace, and I had led a remarkable life."

He was so convinced of it that he gave his final wishes to his wife, Lynne, and daughters, Liz and Mary. "They weren't eager to discuss it," he writes. "For them, talking about it made an already difficult situation even worse. But I needed them to know. And I needed to say goodbye."

The new book, which Mr. Cheney wrote with his cardiologist, Dr. Jonathan Reiner, represents a rare glimpse into the personal side of a former vice president better known for his tough-minded views of national security and his stoic demeanor. Never an emotive figure, Mr. Cheney has long been reticent to talk in much depth about the five heart attacks and multiple surgeries he has endured.

But with his political career behind him and the transplant a success, he decided to open up in a way he never had before. Mr. Cheney and Dr. Reiner will appear on "60 Minutes" on CBS on Sunday to discuss his health travails with Dr. Sanjay Gupta, and he will also give interviews to NBC's "Today" show and the "Dr. Oz Show."

He also has agreed to participate in an event sponsored by the Smithsonian Institution on Nov. 14 with Dr. Reiner and the historian Michael Beschloss.

The book, published by Scribner, will not be officially released until Tuesday, but a copy was obtained in

advance by The New York Times from someone in the book industry not connected to Mr. Cheney.

Written with the help of Liz Cheney, now a candidate for Senate in Wyoming, it goes far beyond his 2011 memoir, “In My Time,” in chronicling his life of health difficulties.

Among other things, the book discloses that on Sept. 11, 2001, as Mr. Cheney, in President George W. Bush’s absence, was effectively managing the response to the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington from the White House bunker, his doctors had just received indications that he was in serious risk of a heart attack.

A blood test that morning showed Mr. Cheney with a “potentially lethal” level of potassium that suggested [hyperkalemia](#), which could trigger cardiac arrest that even the defibrillator in his chest would not stop.

As Mr. Cheney left the White House by helicopter that night for an undisclosed location, later revealed to be Camp David, a doctor handed him a note asking to take more blood to confirm the result. Mr. Cheney put him off until the morning, when the new test came back with a healthier potassium reading. The doctors concluded that the Sept. 11 test was so high because of the delay in processing it caused by the evacuation of the White House.


Mr. Cheney has struggled with coronary disease since 1978, when as a 37-year-old Congressional candidate in Wyoming he had the first of five heart attacks. He [quit smoking](#) but, he writes, viewed it “as a one-off event” and “was in denial to some extent.” Then he had two more heart attacks while in Congress, in 1984 and 1988.

There were other episodes as well. One day in 1987, he felt bad and headed to the Capitol physician’s office when he suddenly collapsed in front of a Capitol police officer’s desk.

“Member down!” the officer called out as Mr. Cheney lay unconscious, his shirt opened, on the marble floors and fellow House members kept walking by.

He recalls watching the elder George Bush deliver his “read my lips” convention speech in 1988 from a hospital bed as a male nurse shaved off his body hair for bypass surgery.

He suffered his fourth heart attack in November 2000 as he and George W. Bush awaited the Florida recount; he was checked into the hospital under the pseudonym Red Adair.



By the time he left office, Mr. Cheney was having trouble breathing and walking up stairs. In December 2009, he lost consciousness while backing up his car at his Wyoming home. Secret Service agents pounded the windows trying to get in because the car doors were locked.

When they roused him, he found his car “on top of a large boulder in an aspen grove in front of our house.”

Soon he was experiencing nosebleeds so serious that one required emergency surgery. Then came his fifth heart attack. By summer 2010, he was entering end-stage [heart failure](#). His appetite was gone, and he could not even walk out to pick up the newspaper.

“My world was getting smaller and smaller,” he recalls.

Doctors decided to implant a left ventricular assist device, but when he checked into the hospital two days before the operation, his condition was so dire they rushed him into surgery. “Cheney was dying,” Dr. Reiner writes.

He spent nine hours on the operating table and 35 days in the hospital, much of it unconscious, dreaming about living in a villa in Italy. He spent 20 months waiting for a new heart from a donor who has never been publicly identified. Dr. Reiner says the former vice president received no “special accommodation” and in fact waited twice the average time.

Mr. Cheney says his survival was possible only because of medical innovation: “The health care system that produced such rapid development and has driven the dramatic reduction in the incidence of death from heart disease over the past 40 years is a national treasure and deserves to be preserved and protected.”

Peter Baker reported from Washington, and Julie Bosman from New York.