

# The Role of the Modern Vice President

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In recent years, vice presidents have played an increasingly important role in our government. They have served as confidants, envoys, and top advisers and taken on a broad range of vital responsibilities.

**Walter F. Mondale**, who served as vice president from 1977-1981, transformed this office and paved the way for the powerful vice presidents who followed. Heavily engaged in domestic and foreign policy, Mondale was the first vice president to have an office in the White House and had unprecedented, frequent access to the president. On April 26, at a Wilson Center Director's Forum, Mondale led a roundtable discussion on the role of the vice president.

"He really created, along with President Carter, the modern vice presidency," said **Stuart Eizenstat**, who served as chief domestic policy adviser to Carter. "He was the first to recognize the importance of having his office in the West Wing just a few yards away from the Oval Office... That proximity was critically important to make sure that he understood, and was part of, every decision."

While many vice presidential aides had visited the White House just a few times during the course of an administration, "I was back and forth there four times or more every day, which illustrates the way we were treated as equals by the Carter staff," reflected **Al Eisele**, who served as press secretary under Mondale. "That made it enormously more interesting, enjoyable, and productive."

**Craig Fuller**, who served as chief of staff for Vice President George H.W. Bush, said to Mondale, "Had you not conducted yourself in that office and proven it could be done in a way that is a real support to the administration..."

I do not think the following vice presidents would have been able to serve the way they have been able to."

## VPs: Historically Unhappy

"Since the start of our nation, the vice presidency has been an awkward office," said Mondale. "Its occupants have, by and large, been notoriously unhappy." The vice presidency is the only public office in our government that falls under two branches: executive and legislative. "Yet over most of its history, despite that remarkable fact, neither branch wanted to see him."

For example, he said, when the first U.S. Vice President John Adams wanted to preside over the Senate—the one duty, albeit optional, the Constitution assigns the vice president—the Senate shut down his ideas and suggestions. A frustrated Adams reportedly came to call the vice presidency "the most insignificant office that ever the invention of man contrived."

For nearly two centuries, vice presidents were frustrated in their roles. Charles Dawes, President Calvin Coolidge's vice president, had joked about the futility of the office and how his job was to look at the newspapers each morning to check on the president's health.

No law or provision governs the vice president's duties, but Walter Mondale would set a precedent.

## The Carter-Mondale Relationship

Prior to becoming vice president, Mondale had served as state attorney general and senator from Minnesota. His senatorial experience, knowledge of Washington, and relationship with the liberal constituency made him an attractive running mate for Carter, noted Eizenstat.

During their four years in office, Carter and Mondale worked closely as a team. They had weekly one-on-one lunches without a preset agenda, said Eizenstat, and Mondale's staff was invited to all White House staff meetings and interagency meetings. Fuller noted, "Before Mondale, vice presidents had to

get cleared into the White House to see the president."

"We had a good relationship all the way through," said Mondale. "I think it takes some doing to deal that way with someone who reminds him of his mortality, has perhaps conflicting political aspirations, and is a principal in the White House."

From the executive branch to Capitol Hill, Mondale was engaged in international and domestic policy assignments, many of them sensitive in nature. "One of the reasons I was able to be helpful was the word quickly got out that this was different now," recounted Mondale, "that when I spoke I was speaking for the president and I was acting on his behalf, and that when I was doing so they had a right to assume they were hearing from the president."

But times were tough. The latter portion of the Carter-Mondale administration was fraught with crisis: our country faced double digit inflation, high interest rates, and a dire gasoline shortage. On the global front, in 1979, the Iranian hostage crisis and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan demanded constant attention.

"Mondale never, in any of the situations, even privately, in the smallest meetings with some of these group leaders, ever departed from his loyalty," recounted Eizenstat. "He always tried to put the best face on what the administration was doing while trying to turn the president at least a few degrees in the direction of some of their concerns. That showed an enormous amount of internal fortitude. It would've been more convenient politically, because he had a political future, to have winked and nodded at these groups and said 'well, that's Carter's doing. You know where I stand.' Never once did that happen and that, to me, was the true test of this man's character."

#### The Modern Role

"When [Jimmy Carter and I] were first talking about running together, I told him that I loved the Senate...and I thought I could help him more in the Senate than I could in such a thin role in the White House," said Mondale. "He said 'I think we should have a different role for the vice president.'"

That new role put Mondale inside the White House and squarely in the center of all events and decisions, including access to the same classified materials as the president. "I often met two, three, four hours a day with the president when events were intense and I was able, the way he opened up the office for me, to be of significant help."

In fact, Mondale played an integral role in getting major legislation through Congress during the last three years of the Carter administration, recounted Eizenstat. At the end of their first year in office, Carter and Mondale implemented a priority-setting system to help move important legislation, and the vice president directed that process. Furthermore, Mondale had placed his own staff in key places among the president's staff and participated in principals-only foreign policy meetings.

Vice presidents in modern history have been leaders, said Fuller, in business, in Congress, in political life, and after they leave office. "Yet, as vice presidents, they're asked not to lead but to be ready in the event something happens," Fuller said. "The ability to sublimate your own views and attitudes, about some things to some extent, is a remarkable attribute."

Another important factor is unmitigated trust. A vice president is most effective when the president considers him a confidant, said Fuller, "because it gives the administration at the very top the ability to conduct foreign policy and congressional relations in ways that otherwise would not be possible."

#### Looking Ahead

"I believe that whether you're a democrat or a republican in high office, one of your duties is to try to keep the country together," said Mondale. He said the greatest challenge confronting America during the coming years is restoring public trust. Right now, he said, "We're so paralyzed, so divided...and that's got to change or we're not going to solve anything."

As the next presidential campaign gets underway, and with knowledge of the vice president's important role, panelists agreed the public likely will scrutinize running mates much more closely than in the

past. Mondale said the presidential candidate must look not only at qualifications of a potential running mate, but whether a positive, productive relationship is likely, particularly under pressure, and whether the person is honest and trustworthy. In this campaign, added Fuller, the presidential nominee has a duty to explain to the nation the specific roles the vice president would play in the next administration.

Eizenstat remarked, "I think it's a stronger office and we're better off for it as a result of Fritz Mondale and Jimmy Carter."