

Why Joe Biden was a most unusual — and effective — vice president

By Joel Goldstein January 18

In two unprecedented acts in 48 hours, President Barack Obama confirmed yet again the essential role Vice President Joe Biden has played in his administration. Obama's shout-out to Biden during [his Farewell Address](#) was unique enough, but the President's surprise award to Biden of the Presidential Medal of Freedom with Distinction and his [effusive accompanying remarks](#) were even more unprecedented.

Even for those who reject the President's view that Biden is "the best Vice President America has ever had," he has shaped the second office in ways beyond his contributions to the Obama administration.

Biden, like all recent vice presidents, benefited from the tenure of [Walter Mondale \(1977-81\)](#). Mondale proposed a new vision of the vice president as a central part of the presidency and President Jimmy Carter provided resources for him to perform as a high-level presidential advisor and agent. That model became entrenched as the next five vice presidents, George H.W. Bush, Dan Quayle, Al Gore, Dick Cheney and Biden, applied, developed and sometimes expanded it.

Of course, the specific activities and influence of these six vice presidents [varied](#) based on their compatibility with the president, their skills and relationships, and the administration's needs. But compared to previous vice presidents, all participated more directly in presidential decision-making and implementation.

Yet Biden's service was extraordinary in his ability to sustain a high level of influence for [two full terms](#). Biden consistently drew significant assignments, such as implementing the economic stimulus plan, negotiating various budget deals with Republican congressional leaders, and leading numerous missions to international trouble spots. In contrast, Cheney was consequential but his influence [declined](#) in George W. Bush's second term, and George H.W. Bush and Al Gore became distracted by their presidential campaigns.

Clearly, Biden's experience in Congress and in foreign policy and his relationships were part of what he brought to the Obama administration. But a vice president's continuing influence rests on [job performance](#), not on prior years of experience or a Rolodex. Biden's consequence depended heavily on the perception of Obama and others that he was a wise counselor and effective operator. Obama's tributes confirm their unusually close relationship and suggest Biden's unprecedented vice-presidential clout, as Professor Karine Premont wrote in an interesting paper at the last week's meeting of the Southern Political Science Association.

Biden's contribution, however, went beyond his influence in the Obama administration. He also advanced the development of the vice presidency by further entrenching the basic model Carter and Mondale created. That institution rests on the repetition of practices that have generally worked well across the last six administrations. Still, Biden's two-term success adds a lot for such a relatively new innovation.

Biden's service affirmed the old idea that the President sets policy for the executive branch, a point Biden underscored in his remarks at the award ceremony. Whereas a vice president like Cheney had occasionally operated more independently, Biden followed the President's course, even after he disagreed with the President in private.

Biden's experience in office also provides some support for the relatively new idea that having a vice president who is not intent on seeking the presidency can sometimes work well. Cheney had been the first recent vice president credibly to disclaim presidential ambitions and both Bush and Cheney celebrated that as critical to Cheney's influence and the smooth functioning of their respective staffs. But others, myself included, have argued that Cheney's attitude diminished his political sensitivity and weakened his connection to the American people at a cost to the administration.

Biden was different: his intentions were more ambiguous than other recent vice presidents but his ultimate decision not to seek the presidency did not render him oblivious to political currents. On the contrary, he participated in public events around the country throughout his terms.

Biden's example does not mean "unambitious" vice-presidents should be preferred, even assuming that term applies to him. Insisting on a lack of ambition would exclude many able running mates. And an unambitious vice president will not necessarily be more loyal. But Biden's service demonstrates that a vice president who decides not to seek the presidency can be effective if they understand that their office is a political one and continue to engage with American voters.

Finally, Biden demonstrated that a vice president can be loyal without surrendering his public identity and becoming lost in the president's shadow. Many of his predecessors, even those who spoke candidly and forcefully to presidents in private, were seen by the public as followers. Biden preserved his separate identity largely by using public events to address issues and communicate values important to him but consistent with administration policy.

For example, Biden championed policies to help the middle class and spoke against violence against women including sexual assault. The "cancer moonshot" engaged him in an issue that affected him personally, because of the death of his son Beau, but also affects countless others.

He modeled bipartisanship in his outreach to Republicans, including during Senate swearing-in ceremonies which he converted from a mechanical ritual to personal celebrations. He found occasions to compliment political adversaries.

Obama's political aides were upset when Biden publicly supported same sex marriage before the President announced that view. But Obama's forgiving reaction spoke to the relationship between them. Biden's offense was in anticipating, not contradicting, administration policy.

For Biden, like some other recent vice presidents, it cannot have been easy to defer to another politician. His ability to serve loyally while preserving a public identity required discipline but protected his value as a public spokesperson, to the administration's benefit.

Biden leaves the vice presidency a stronger office, with more possibilities to contribute to governing, than he found it. That is a very big deal.

Joel K. Goldstein, the Vincent C. Immel professor of law at Saint Louis University School of Law, is the author most recently of "The White House Vice Presidency: The Path to Significance, Mondale to Biden."