



THE MAKING OF THE MODERN VICE PRESIDENCY

A Personal Reflection

RICHARD MOE

PUBLISHER'S NOTE: *Thirty years ago this fall, Walter Mondale became the second Minnesotan ever elected to the office of vice president. What he did in the first months after the election profoundly recast that office. For an inside perspective of this transformation, Minnesota History invited Mondale's then chief of staff, Richard Moe, to tell this story that continues to have national import today.*

In an otherwise masterful document, the Founding Fathers created the vice presidency with almost no thought as to how it would fit into the structure of the new federal government. The office was, in fact, a constitutional afterthought designed solely to provide a president-in-reserve, and for 200 years it languished in obscurity, derision, and irrelevance. This is the story of how Jimmy Carter and Walter Mondale changed all that.

By 1976 I had known Walter Mondale for 15 years. Although we were separated in age by nearly a decade, we shared a Norwegian heritage, a love of politics in the progressive Minnesota tradition, and an appreciation for dry humor. In 1972 Mondale had sensed that I was ready to move on after three years

as chairman of the Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party. He asked me to come to Washington to head his Senate office and, not incidentally, help him prepare for a possible run for the presidency. I gladly accepted, and it turned out to be a good fit. We worked together well, and I became more convinced than ever that he had, and deserved, a future in national politics.

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*Walter Mondale after receiving the vice-presidential nomination,
New York City, 1976; photo by Jerome Liebling.*

In the late spring of 1976, I was not alone in concluding that he might be well positioned to become that year's Democratic vice-presidential nominee. Jimmy Carter had just come from nowhere to the brink of securing the party's presidential nomination. Hubert H. Humphrey, Minnesota's other U.S. senator who had narrowly lost the presidency in 1968 but never fully lost his presidential ambitions, had just announced that he would not enter the late 1976 primaries, as he had been sorely tempted to do. Humphrey's decision meant that Mondale, his close friend and protégé, was now free to think about a position on the ticket for himself. It was not an implausible idea. Carter was a pro-civil rights, moderate governor from the South who had never served in Washington; Mondale was a northern liberal who had spent more than a decade in the U.S. Senate. National tickets had traditionally been constructed to "balance" such

factors, so if Carter wanted to continue that practice, he would be hard pressed to find a better balance than Mondale could provide.

There was only one problem with this seemingly compelling idea: Mondale was totally uninterested. In fact, he wanted no part of it. He had recently concluded an unhappy, year-long presidential "exploratory" effort, which he ended for a variety of personal and political reasons, including, famously, his lack of affection for Holiday Inns. He was well into the process of re-engaging in the business of the Senate, and he was finding particular satisfaction in the work of the Select Committee on Intelligence, which was then immersed in an unprecedented examination of the FBI and the CIA.

Why, he argued, should he consider giving up an institution he loved (and, he didn't need to add, a very safe seat in that institution) for an office that had been

the subject of derision and bad jokes for nearly two centuries? Most pointedly, he noted the slights, humiliations, and generally bad treatment that Humphrey had suffered in the Johnson White House, the same kind of treatment then being visited on Vice President Nelson Rockefeller in Gerald Ford's White House. Why, he asked me, should he trade his independence as a senator for an office of total dependency and no prescribed duties except presiding over the Senate, where he could only vote to break ties?

A good deal of history in addition to this logic was on Mondale's side of the argument. Going all the way back to John Adams, the nation's first vice president, it was difficult, if not impossible, to come up with an occupant of the office who had anything approaching a happy experience. After many hours of discussion, it was fair to say that Mondale's position on the matter was becoming entrenched and showed no visible signs of softening.

Unable to persuade him of the merits of an idea that were so obvious to me, I decided to seek help. "Let's go see what Hubert thinks," I suggested. I had no idea what Humphrey would say, but I did know that whatever he said, Mondale would pay attention. The two of them went way back and were very close. Humphrey had been a mentor to Mondale in the early days of the DFL Party, much as he went on to mentor me and another generation of Minnesotans coming behind. But the Humphrey-Mondale relationship was unlike any other, shaped as it was by the shared experience of building the DFL into one of the most formidable political instruments of its time. Humphrey had supported Mondale's appointments as Minnesota attorney general in 1960 and senator in 1964, and Mondale, in turn, had helped broker a critical civil rights compromise at the 1964 Atlantic City convention that greatly enhanced Humphrey's chances of being selected as Lyndon Johnson's running mate that year. Most important, the relationship



Friends and colleagues: Walter Mondale and Hubert Humphrey visiting the Minnesota House of Representatives, 1975

was rooted in deep mutual respect and genuine affection. So it would matter what Hubert said.

The three of us met for coffee in the Senate dining room on a quiet May afternoon. The conversation went something like this: Dick thinks I should be interested in the vice presidency, Mondale began, but I love the Senate, I cherish my independence, and I saw up close what the experience did to you. Why should I be interested? Humphrey reflected thoughtfully before he responded. Fritz, he said, if you have the chance to be vice president, you shouldn't hesitate to take it. For all that I went through, I would gladly do it again. Because, my friend, if you care about influencing public policy, and I know that you do, you can get more done down there in a single day as vice president than you can up here in the Senate in an entire year. What's more, he went on, being vice president allowed me to learn about this country, and the world, in ways that I never could have otherwise. It was the most broadening experience of my life.

After this measured beginning, Humphrey expounded on these themes and became voluble as only he could. For his part, Mondale was transfixed by this man he admired so much. His eyes wide open and his attention rapt, he heard the words he was not particularly eager—or expecting—to hear. "Thank you, Hubert," I mumbled to myself.

There is no question that this was a seminal moment—indeed, the critical moment—when Mondale changed his mind about the vice presidency. After hearing his friend make such an impassioned and yet reasoned case, he was now open to the idea. And being open to the idea, he decided to prepare himself for the possibility that Carter might consider it as well.

Mondale asked his staff for everything we could find written on the vice presidency (amazingly, there was then and still is very little serious literature on the office) as well as background on Carter and his views. He had met Carter briefly but didn't know him. It was essential that he determine whether they could be compatible, both personally and politically. So he voraciously read everything he could put his hands on regarding the man and the office. As events were to prove, it was worth the effort.

Carter was looking for a “partner” on whom he could confer real authority.

Once Carter had secured the presidential nomination, he began the formal process of selecting a running mate. Mondale made it onto the short list of six finalists largely on the basis of his record and reputation in the Senate. It wasn't until his personal interview with Carter in the latter's hometown of Plains, Georgia, that, by all accounts, the two concluded they were not only comfortable with each other's policy positions but, even more important, they were comfortable with each other. The chemistry appeared to work.

Perhaps the most significant revelation in the Plains meeting was the very pleasant surprise that each of them had thought a great deal about the potential of the vice presidency. Carter talked at length about how he saw the office as a wasted national asset. He was determined to use his vice president in a way that no president had done previously. He realized that the importance of the office depended entirely on the degree of empowerment and authority that the president was willing to delegate to its

occupant. Carter was looking for a “partner” on whom he could confer real authority in order to help him pursue the goals of his presidency.

Mondale, not surprisingly, had come to see the potential of the office in much the same way. He simply wasn't interested in a “traditional” vice presidency, a “fifth wheel” model that had no real purpose except to check occasionally on the health of the president. He made it clear to Carter that he did not want to be considered if it was to be a strictly ceremonial office; he was only interested in a truly substantive role.

Only Carter, of course, knows precisely why he selected Mondale, but it is clear that their conversation on the vice presidency had much to do with it. The president said later that he was impressed with the homework Mondale had done on him and the campaign, and added, “More important, he had excellent ideas about how to make the Vice Presidency a full-time and productive job. He was from a small town, as I was, a preacher's son, and shared a lot of my concerns about our nation. We were personally com-



Hanging a portrait of Mondale at the Democratic National Convention, 1976

patible, and laughed a lot even as we discussed some of the most serious issues of the time.”¹

In any case, Mondale was selected and his friends were euphoric. The Carter people said we could run our vice-presidential campaign from wherever we wanted—Minneapolis, Washington, or Atlanta, where the Carter campaign was ensconced. Being relatively new to national politics but not total fools, we opted for Atlanta. And a wise decision it was, because it not only allowed us to run a more coordinated campaign but also allowed us to get to know the Carter staff with whom we were destined to spend four years in the White House.

Mondale performed effectively as the vice-presidential nominee, faithfully supporting Carter’s positions but confident enough to carve out his own, as when he severely criticized President Ford’s pardon of Richard Nixon, which Carter himself had declined to do. He campaigned tirelessly, especially in the battleground states of Ohio and Wisconsin, where he had important followings and which, together with Minnesota, fell onto Carter’s column on election day. His strong performance in the first-ever vice-presidential debate, against Senator Bob Dole of Kansas, and the reassurance he gave to northern liberals in the Democratic Party, some of whom were skeptical of Carter, contributed importantly to the ticket’s close victory in November.

It wasn’t until after the election that the two men spent large amounts of time together. Virtually every week, and usually several times a week, Mondale would fly to Plains—not an easy place to reach—to talk policy with Carter and to shuttle potential cabinet choices to interviews with the

president-elect. Although at times running this “bus service,” as he came to call it, proved tiresome, Carter’s inclusion of his vice president-elect in the early decision-making processes of his administration was, as far as we could tell, unprecedented. It was a very promising indicator of the relationship that we hoped would ensue.

More than a month after the election, the two men began their first conversations about Mondale’s specific responsibilities as vice president. There had been some early discussion that he might be the de facto White House chief of staff, but Mondale’s reaction to that idea was so negative that it quickly died. About the same time someone floated the notion of a “shared” staff between the president and vice president. Mondale, very much a traditionalist when it came to staff, effectively killed that idea as well.

In December I was again privileged to participate in a meeting that played a defining role in Mondale’s vice presidency. On a cold winter evening, he and I met with Carter in his suite at the Blair House, the historic residence across the street from the White House. Having given the matter a great deal of thought by this time and having heard the views and experiences of others who had been in or close to other White Houses, Mondale outlined, at Carter’s invitation, his concept of the duties of the office he was about to occupy.

The days of the “fifth wheel” vice presidency were about to end.

His core recommendation was that he be an across-the-board advisor to the president on whatever issues were current or on whatever issues the president wanted advice. The vice president, Mondale observed, was the only senior member of the administration who did not have a departmental responsibility, and thus he was free to advise without institutional baggage or bias. His only responsibility would be to give the president his very best advice, unencumbered.

In order for this advisory role to be truly workable, Mondale said, he would need unfettered access to both the president and to the White House paper flow, particularly in the area of national security. This constituted a very bold request; no vice president had ever had this kind of access. On the contrary, virtually every vice president throughout American history had been kept, to one degree or another, at arms length from the Oval Office and its secrets.



Mondale also proposed that he could be an all-purpose troubleshooter for the president, whether in the Congress where he had good relationships, in foreign policy where he had a growing interest, or in working out disputes between cabinet or other officials within the administration. He could also serve as the president's liaison to important political constituencies such as governors and mayors, organized labor, and key elements of the Democratic Party. He made it clear that he did not want operational authority in any area, as he saw that route as a clear invitation to conflict with department or agency heads on whose turf he would be treading.

Carter agreed to all of this. Mondale's ideas coincided perfectly with his own. It was apparent that the days of the "fifth wheel" vice presidency were about to end.

At the close of the meeting, Carter asked Mondale to write a memorandum incorporating his suggestions for the duties of the office. As we left Blair House, Mondale asked me to begin drafting the document that would proscribe his role for the next four years.

We didn't realize it at the time, but the 11-page, double-spaced memo that followed would define what has become the modern vice presidency. Mondale began it by quoting historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr.'s conclusion that "history has shown the American Vice Presidency to be a job of spectacular and, I believe, incurable frustration." Mondale said his research had revealed that the "particular problems" of the office appeared to be "competition with the President, conflict with White House staff, lack of meaningful assignments, lack of authority, and inadequate access to vital information."²

The memorandum's recommendations focused heavily on the across-the-board advisor role that Mondale saw as the centerpiece of his vice presidency and the need for access to information as well as to the president himself. It also fleshed out the troubleshooting, liaison, and political functions that both men agreed could be useful, as well as several policy areas in which Mondale had a special interest, such

Blueprint for the Modern Vice Presidency

On December 9, 1976, Walter Mondale sent President-Elect Jimmy Carter the memorandum he had requested, "The Role of the Vice President in the Carter Administration." This 11-page document recapped and fleshed out points the two had already discussed.

"Defining an appropriate and meaningful role for the Vice President has been a problem throughout the history of this country," the memo began. "While custom and statute have changed the office gradually over 200 years, generally speaking, the Vice President has performed a role characterized by ambiguity, disappointment, and even antagonism. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. concludes 'history has shown the American Vice Presidency to be a job of spectacular and, I believe, incurable frustration.'"

Mondale went on to spell out the resources he would need to transform the office into an active and involved part of the executive branch. "I believe the most important contribution I can make is to serve as a general adviser to you," he stated. "The biggest single problem of our recent administrations has been the failure of the President to be exposed to independent analysis not conditioned by what it is thought he wants to hear or often what others want him to hear. I hope to offer impartial advice and help assure that you are not shielded from points of view that you should hear. . . . I think my position enables me to help maintain the free flow of ideas and information which is indispensable to a healthy and productive administration."

A copy of this path-breaking document is in the Walter F. Mondale Papers at the Minnesota Historical Society. To read the full memo, visit Collections Up Close: www.mnhs.org/mondalememo.

as campaign reform. He also specifically requested a role in the arts for his wife, Joan, who had devoted a lifetime to the subject, particularly public art.

It didn't take long to get the memo to Carter, nor did it take long for Carter to respond. He agreed



Joan Mondale showing art to the press, vice-presidential residence, 1977

unequivocally to everything Mondale suggested. Whatever else happened in the next four years, it was clear that we were going to break very new ground in the nation's second-highest office.

But Carter wasn't content simply to react to Mondale's suggestions. He had a few ideas of his own to make this new

relationship work. The first, and one that proved to be enormously important, was to offer Mondale an office in the West Wing of the White House. Previous vice presidents had been housed next door in the Old Executive Office Building (which Mondale came to refer to as Baltimore—"If you're over there, you might as well be in Baltimore"). Not being familiar with the physical layout of the West Wing, it hadn't occurred to us to request an office there. Even if it had occurred to us, it undoubtedly would have seemed presumptuous to ask. But Carter clearly saw the value of physical proximity to the Oval Office and to senior White House staff, and this turned out to have been a fortuitous insight. To be just a few steps down the hall from the president and in the traffic pattern of the West Wing was to have profound consequences, putting Mondale "in the loop" of the Carter White House. "Nothing propinques like propinquity," Mondale would say after a few weeks in his new office.

Carter's other idea was to integrate staffs as closely as possible. If the president and vice president were not to share staff, he wanted them to be closely coordinated. Thus, after Mondale asked me to be his chief of staff, Carter made me a member of his own senior staff, the first vice-presidential aide ever so designated. Unexpectedly but happily, with that designation came, over the next four years, a number of special assignments directly from Carter, as well as senior-staff privileges such as the use of Camp

David. Other senior members of Mondale's staff, including Mike Berman, Jim Johnson, Al Eisele, Dennis Clift, and Gail Harrison, were similarly integrated with their counterparts on Carter's staff. Significantly, Carter had agreed to Mondale's request in the memo that he be given senior-staff positions on both the National Security Council and the Domestic Policy Council. As a result, David Aaron and Bert Carp, Mondale's top national security and domestic policy advisors in the Senate, were appointed to deputy positions on the two councils.

But perhaps the most significant thing Carter did to make it absolutely clear that he wanted this relationship to work was based on historical observation. Both he and Mondale had concluded that the primary reason previous vice presidencies had floundered was that strong, assertive vice presidents tended to threaten senior White House staff, or at least so it appeared in the cases of Humphrey and Rockefeller. Some previous senior staffers had effectively used their ability, with or without the knowledge of the president, to keep the vice president in his traditional place—out of the loop.

To forestall this from happening in his own administration, Carter made very clear to his staff and cabinet at the outset that he wanted them to respond to a request from the vice president as if it had come from the president, and anyone attempting to undercut the vice president in any way could not expect a long tenure in his administration. The effect of these two admonitions was immediate and profound. They went farther toward cementing Mondale's role in the administration than the memorandum, the West Wing office, and everything else combined. Carter was serious about the matter of his vice president, and no one doubted it.³



Chief of staff Richard Moe, 1977



Mondale and Carter face each other across the center of the table at the vice president's first cabinet meeting, February 1977

The first public manifestation of Carter's seriousness came on January 21, 1977, the day after the inauguration, when he saw Mondale off from the South Lawn of the White House for an extended visit to the world's major capitals to introduce the new administration and its policies. Mondale had first suggested this trip in his December memo. To send the vice president on a mission of this importance was unprecedented, and Mondale threw himself into it with typically thorough preparation and gusto. But for the president to allow his vice president's helicopter to take off from the South Lawn, which had never happened before, sent an unmistakable message to the world, as Carter had intended, that this man spoke for him.

Humphrey, who had come down from the Senate to see his friend off on this trip around the world, could not believe it. He recalled how as vice president he had to beg for an airplane and, if he was lucky enough to get it, he would have to take off in the dark of night. It was apparent that Humphrey, who by now had discovered the bladder cancer that would take his life within a year, was enormously proud of and pleased for Mondale.⁴

This was the first of many important trips Mondale would take for Carter, including ones to the People's Republic of China after Carter normalized

relations with that country, South Africa, Southeast Asia, and elsewhere. One of his most consequential missions abroad was to the Middle East, where he helped persuade Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin to participate in the Camp David talks that led to a formal peace treaty between Israel and Egypt. Mondale immersed himself in meetings with the president and others in the administration leading up to and at Camp David; there were few issues during the four years that energized him as much or that gave him greater satisfaction.

During the transition of administrations, Mondale had learned from Rockefeller that he and President Ford had initiated a practice of having lunch privately—just the two of them—once a week. The idea appealed greatly to Mondale, who was reluctant to speak out forcefully in cabinet or other meetings where policy was being debated because he feared that doing so might signal to others where the president might stand on the issue and thus inhibit candid discussion. At the same time, he very much wanted to be totally open and frank with the president on a host of policy, political, and even personnel issues. Thus, he had requested in the December memo that the two of them meet weekly for up to an hour.

Carter proposed that they have a private lunch every Monday that they were both in town. This



*Moe (back to the window) and other staff at a working lunch
with the vice president, 1977*

meeting quickly became a sacrosanct event in their schedules, and during the entire four years it served as the primary vehicle for Mondale to perform his role as the president's principal advisor. It was also an opportunity for Carter to give his vice president special assignments and to try out ideas on someone who had no agenda other than trying to help the president succeed. Here was the place where the two could talk about literally anything, where they could let their hair down in complete confidence.

Mondale asked me to prepare a suggested agenda for each of these Monday lunches. After surveying our staff for ideas and issues, I drafted a single page of bullet points for him, which, it was understood, he might or might not choose to use. A few of us would usually chat with him immediately before the lunch to expand on the agenda's points, and Mondale would typically scribble a few notes of his own regarding other matters that he wanted to discuss. Following the lunches we were eager to get debriefed, and Mondale would share with us matters that he wanted us to follow up or that we otherwise needed to know. But there were many instances when he would not disclose the substance of the conversation, particularly when it related to sensitive national security matters. It was clear that Carter expected Mondale to respect the confidentiality of their con-

versations, and of course we respected Mondale's commitment to the president. To my knowledge, nothing of a sensitive nature ever leaked from these lunches, and they remained the most valued means of communication between the two men.

After six months in the White House we undertook a staff review of Mondale's vice presidency. Happily, we were able to conclude that the most important original goals—access, the advisor role, full participation in the decision-making process, establishing good relationships in the White House and throughout the administration—had been achieved. But we urged Mondale to reconsider how he was using his time. We determined that when in Washington Mondale was spending one-third of his time with the president. While that was probably desirable in the first months of the administration, we suggested it might not be as necessary going forward. We also discovered that he was spending twice as much time on foreign policy as on domestic policy and recommended a more even allocation. We had other suggestions of specific issues for him to concentrate on but, essentially, this amounted to fine-tuning a model that was working. Mondale's vice presidency was already different from anything that preceded it, and

that fact was increasingly recognized in the press and throughout the political community.

As Mondale's role was taking form, I was struggling to shape my own. Being both Mondale's chief of staff and a member of Carter's senior staff, I had no job description or prior experience to guide me and so, just as Mondale himself was doing, I did my best to make it up as I went along. I obviously had loyalties and obligations to both men, and I worked hard to sort them through and make them coincide. I was constantly attending meetings with Hamilton Jordan, Carter's chief of staff, press secretary Jody Powell, and other senior White House staff to facilitate communication and coordination between the two principals. Halfway through the first year, Jordan asked me to help him draft a memo for the president assessing the early months of the administration and suggesting an agenda for a Camp David retreat, for cabinet members and senior staff, on the subject. One way or another, I figured I was spending up to 80 percent of my time helping to make the Carter-Mondale relationship work. It was by far my most important responsibility, and I found it both exciting and fulfilling.

Eventually Carter and his staff asked me to take on tasks that had less to do with the relationship and more to do with the specific goals of the administration. The first of these was leading an effort to prevent the required number of states from calling for a federal constitutional convention for the purpose of adopting a balanced-budget amendment. The problem was that once such a convention was convened, anything could happen; it was an invitation to serious constitutional mischief, and we were successful in preventing it from occurring. On another occasion I was asked to head a task force aimed at sustaining Carter's unprecedented and controversial veto of a defense-appropriations bill. It, too, was successful and was typical of other special assignments that would occasionally come my way.⁵

Remarkably, the Carter-Mondale relationship during the entire four years worked very much as the two men had designed it to work. There were

Carter and Mondale came to share a deep respect and affection for each other.

bumps in the road, to be sure, and even occasionally some serious tensions, but there was always an opportunity and an eagerness to work them out. Mondale had a standing invitation to attend any meeting on the president's schedule, as well as the right to walk down the hall and see him privately any time he wanted. Mondale used these privileges judiciously but effectively. Usually working with Carter's chief domestic policy advisor, Stuart Eizenstat, Mondale would weigh in with the president on issues he felt strongly about, ranging from education funding to the administration's Supreme Court brief in the Bakke affirmative action case. He would similarly work closely with Frank Moore and his congressional relations team to help push Carter's programs in Congress, where he retained



President and vice president arriving at Camp David to meet about the Iran hostage crisis, November 1979

considerable goodwill and credibility, on such matters as energy policy and the Panama Canal treaties.

Carter put Mondale in the chain of command, and the vice president religiously attended the Friday morning breakfasts of the president's top national security advisors. He used his Senate experience in these sessions to press for reforms in the intelligence agencies, and on one occasion he was successful in reversing the policy of the U.S. Navy, which had refused to pick up Vietnamese "boat people" on the high seas.

The White House staff was fully respectful of Mondale and frequently sought him out for advice on political or policy matters or simply on the ways of Washington. He spent a great deal of time, for example, in rallying traditional Democrats in the successful effort to thwart Senator Edward M. Kennedy's bid for the 1980 Democratic presidential nomination.

Most important in cementing the relationship, Carter and Mondale came to share a deep respect and affection for each other. Those mutual feelings have only deepened in the quarter-century since they left office.⁶

Carter made it clear in his memoirs that he was fully satisfied with his vice president: "From our first meeting, Fritz Mondale had impressed me as a good and decent man, honest and intelligent, and I have always been thankful that we formed this partnership. He has sound judgment and strong beliefs and has never been timid about presenting them forcefully to me. But whenever I made a final decision, even when it was contrary to his own original recommendation, he gave me his full support. He never abused his position by overstepping the appropriate bounds of advocacy when he pursued his own ideas. Our staffs cooperated without dissension, even in the most difficult times. During our four and a half years together, I never had reason to doubt his competence, his loyalty, or his friendship."⁷

For his part, Mondale told me recently, he believes that he and Carter "helped shape a relationship of trust and partnership that was unique, productive and lasting."⁸ He rightly gives Carter primary credit for it, but it was clear at the time and even clearer today that it took both of them to conceive of this new vice presidency and then make it happen.



Handshake in the Rose Garden, 1977

From an institutional perspective, the Mondale vice presidency represented the culmination of a transition that had begun long before. Since the Founding Fathers had given the vice president only the single duty of presiding over the Senate, the office was viewed for most of its history as part of the legislative, not the executive, branch of government. The vice president's office was originally located in the Senate, not in the White House complex, and the vice president himself was seldom seen downtown. It wasn't until well into the twentieth century, after presidential nominees supplanted party conventions in selecting running mates, that the vice president had a presence at the other end of Pennsylvania Avenue. Even then, however, the office was seen as having a foot in both branches of government, and neither seemed to want it very much.

Carter's decision to make his vice president an integral part of his administration completed the "executivization" of the office. No one today seriously doubts that the office is an adjunct of the presidency itself and not of the Senate. Nor does anyone doubt

that the institutional changes Carter and Mondale made possible in the office are as permanent as any can be in our form of government. Every vice president since Mondale—George H. W. Bush, Dan Quayle, Al Gore, and Dick Cheney—has had an office in the West Wing, and it is hard to imagine that a future vice president would be relegated to “Baltimore.” Every subsequent vice president has had a working relationship with his president based roughly on the Mondale model and sometimes has been given more specific responsibilities, as was Gore, or even broader authority, as with Cheney, than Mondale had. The key point about the office is that every relationship has to be designed for the needs, interests, and capabilities of the two principals. There’s not a one-size-fits-all model, but rather a general model that needs to be modified every four or eight years.

Given that the change is permanent and that its

effect is so consequential, it is astounding that little academic or other interest has been paid to the office. It is also unfortunate that Carter has never received the great credit he is due for transforming a poorly conceived and neglected office into a national asset that not only serves the president better but that also serves the country better by assuring that a vice president is prepared to assume the duties of the presidency if called upon.

Mondale was fond of saying that what Carter did for him was the most generous act of any president in American history. That it was, but it was also a gift to the nation. □



Notes

1. Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President* (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), 37.

2. Walter F. Mondale to Jimmy Carter, “The Role of the Vice President in the Carter Administration,” Dec. 9, 1976, p. 1, memorandum, Walter F. Mondale Papers, Minnesota Historical Society.

3. At a celebratory Washington dinner following the 1992 presidential election, I took the opportunity to tell vice president-elect Al Gore what a difference these two admonitions had made in the success of Mondale’s vice presidency.

Without saying a word, Gore took a firm grip on my arm, marched me across the room where president-elect Bill Clinton was engaged in a conversation, and told him: Governor, Dick has something you should hear. As I dutifully repeated what I had told Gore, Clinton listened with a bemused smile, saying nothing but clearly taking it all in. Gore later main-

tained that the incident helped shape his own vice presidency.

4. Later that year, Mondale casually mentioned to Humphrey that he had spent the weekend at Camp David. Humphrey couldn’t believe this, either, and exclaimed: I’ve never been there. What’s it like? Mondale repeated the conversation to Carter, who graciously invited Humphrey and his wife, Muriel, to spend a weekend with him at Camp David. Humphrey talked about it for weeks afterwards.

5. There was only one incident, early in the administration, that I can recall created a serious problem for me. Toward the end of the first year, Jordan asked me to assume the chairmanship of the Democratic National Committee. Having been a state chairman, I knew what would be involved, and I knew that I was not suited for the job. While I loved politics, campaigns were not my thing; I much pre-

ferred the interaction of politics with policy and with the process of governing. So I strongly resisted Jordan’s increasingly persistent importunings, more and more worried that he would have the president ask me, in which case I would have no choice but to accept. To forestall this likelihood, I told Jordan I would find someone better for the job. Happily for everyone, John White of Texas, then deputy secretary of agriculture and a natural politician, enthusiastically agreed to take it on.

6. On May 23, 2006, Carter and Mondale surpassed the record of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson as the president and vice president who have lived the longest since leaving office; Jimmy Carter Library and Museum, news release, Apr. 11, 2006, www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/newsreleases/2006/.

7. Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 39.

8. Mondale, interview by the author, June 16, 2006.

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