

The relationship that rules the world: Modern presidents and their vice presidents

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INTRODUCTION



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I first began to appreciate the relationship between the two most powerful men in the world while standing in a hotel kitchen in downtown Washington. For security reasons, the president and his entourage routinely travel through the most unglamorous passageways—alleys, basements, underground garages—and on this day in the fall of 1993, I walked briskly through the industrial kitchen, trying to keep up with the small army that precedes an American president. But unlike the Secret Service, President Clinton didn't concentrate on efficiently navigating the maze of sinks and stoves, pots and pans. The president dawdled, looking for the people who had momentarily stopped their cooking and cleaning. He went slowly enough so that he could locate every person in that room, and he approached each one in order to shake their hands. Before we left the kitchen he had talked to everyone in there; including a terrified looking man in a white dishwasher's jacket and cap who was trying to hide in the corner as the entourage invaded. But Clinton found him, went up to him and said something that made the man break into a huge (and somewhat relieved) smile.

Clinton's vice president, Al Gore, who was following behind, watched as this scene unfolded. Once through the kitchen and situated back stage at the event, I commented to Gore (who I was working for at that time) that Clinton never left a hand untouched. As far as I could tell he seemed to ignore me. Thus I was not entirely surprised when, the next time we went through a hotel kitchen, Vice President Gore found every damn dishwasher in the place and shook his hand—something that, during my tenure with him, he never stopped doing.

Not long after the kitchen episode, I found myself again observing these two men, this time in a more exalted setting, the Oval Office. A meeting had just ended, and about fifteen people filed out, leaving President Clinton and Vice President Al Gore behind. The informal protocol of the White House dictated that—besides the First Lady—the only person who could linger around and talk to the president uninvited was the vice president. I had intended to leave with everyone else but Vice President Gore motioned for me to wait for him as he said one last thing to the president. I tried to move outside into Betty Currie's office (the president's secretary) but the staffers who had been in

the meeting were laughing about something with Betty and there was gridlock at the door. So, I stood awkwardly in the doorway pretending to be invisible. The vice president went up to the president, and said, with a great deal of force and some finger wagging, “When the press asks you about Bosnia you say this ... no more and no less.”

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Although the details of the Bosnia press statement are lost to the fog of history, Gore’s lesson in diplomacy to Clinton was about the importance of precision in language. Clinton could riff intelligently on just about any policy topic in the world, but that talent could be counterproductive in the buttoned down world of diplomacy where precision of language, especially when it had been carefully negotiated, mattered more than creative thinking. Al Gore knew this and he taught it to Clinton.

Clinton taught Gore and Gore taught Clinton. Clinton was a natural politician: warm, outgoing and with the great politician’s knack for making you feel like you were the only person in the room. Under his tutelage, Gore, a more naturally reticent person, would become a much better politician—warmer and less reticent. And while he always suffered from the comparison to Clinton, when he went out on his own—against Ross Perot, Bill Bradley, and eventually George W. Bush—he was a much more gifted politician than he was before he met Clinton.

Clinton and Gore’s relationship resembled a good marriage: they were better together than they were apart. In Cabinet meetings, the two chubby Southern boys would vie for the doughnuts in the middle of the table, and in other large meetings, they passed notes like schoolboys. Gore’s seldom-seen sense of humor, almost British in its dryness, would crack Clinton up, and Clinton’s ability to talk into a television camera as if it were his mother was something Gore never ceased to admire. They liked each other and they admired each other until—as in a marriage—the trust was broken by an affair (Monica Lewinsky), and then all of a sudden they didn’t.

THE RELATIONSHIP THAT RULES THE WORLD

Until recently, the relationship between presidents and their vice presidents was not of very much interest—and for good reason. Historically, vice presidents have been understudies; often disliked or even despised by the president they served, used by political parties, derided by journalists, and ridiculed by the public. The job of vice president was so peripheral that vice presidents even made fun of the office themselves.

That changed dramatically when candidate Bill Clinton selected Senator Al Gore as his running mate. From the beginning of the 19th century until the very end of the 20th century, most vice presidents were chosen to “balance” the ticket. The balance in question could be geographic—a northern presidential candidate like John F. Kennedy of Massachusetts picks a southerner like Lyndon B. Johnson—or it could be ideological—Governor Jimmy Carter, a Southern conservative, picked Walter Mondale, a Northern liberal; Senator Bob Dole picked conservative Congressman Jack Kemp in order to woo the tax-cutting supply side faction of the Republican Party.

Sometimes, as with Carter and Mondale, these marriages of convenience worked. But often they did not. All too often the dynamic between the president and vice president ran the gamut from cold and distantly cordial,

to outright hostile. The result was vice presidents who were cut out of the action, relegated to trivial chores, or dispatched to attend funerals in foreign countries or take part in other, largely ceremonial roles. If the criteria for selection were “balance” it all but guaranteed that the office itself would be pretty lame. Formerly powerful senators suffered. Harry Truman was kept so out of the loop that he didn’t even know about the project to build the atom bomb until President Roosevelt died and he became president. Majority Leader Lyndon Johnson found himself suffering one slight after another at the hands of Bobby Kennedy, kid brother of the president.

Consequently, throughout history, the vice president has been a pretty forlorn character not unlike the fictional vice president Julia Louis-Dreyfus plays in the HBO series VEEP. In it, Vice President Selina Meyer keeps asking her secretary whether or not the president has called. He hasn’t. In the first episode she walks into a United States senator’s office and asks of her old colleague, “What am I missing?” The senator responds without looking up from her computer, “Power.”

In the modern era, however, the office has developed its own importance and influence beginning with Walter Mondale and increasing with Al Gore and Dick Cheney. It is not an exaggeration to say that Al Gore and Dick Cheney probably exerted more influence on policy than all prior vice presidents combined. Unlike the fictional Selina Meyer, Presidents Clinton and Bush *did call*, they delegated substantial power and they tended to treat vice presidential projects as their own. Recent vice presidents have reshaped the office and the expectations Americans have for the office. What made this possible was not so much the personal characteristics of Mondale, Gore, or Cheney. As we will see, the office has been held by many accomplished and once powerful former governors and legislators.

What changed the relationship between presidents and their vice presidents has its roots in the nomination system which, in the modern era has diminished the importance of “balance” on the ticket and increased the importance of “partnership.”

“BALANCING THE TICKET” OR “THE ARRANGED MARRIAGE”

Arranged marriages are not always all bad.

Sometimes they grow into love. At other times, they evolve into a relationship of warm civility kept alive by mutual concern over the children and respect for the social system that set them up in the first place.

The same is true of the traditional vice presidency. Sometimes a close and personal relationship developed between the two heads of the executive branch. But more often than not, the relationship was cool and distant if not downright hostile. That’s because “balancing” the ticket by definition means that the two are not only not compatible, they actually disagree on things. Take the case of “the Hot Tamale and the Indiana Icicle”—one wit’s description of the Republican presidential ticket of 1904. In order to please the Republican Party’s conservative wing, which was not at all happy with the radical reformist politics of Teddy Roosevelt, the party Convention forced his running mate upon him. Senator Charles Fairbanks of Indiana was as different from Roosevelt as possible. He was cold and distant, in marked contrast to Roosevelt’s famous ebullience; he was heir to the old guard McKinley faction within the Republican

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Party, in contrast to Teddy Roosevelt's more modern aspirations for his party; he was from the Midwest, Roosevelt was from New York City. Roosevelt's true love was a Congressman named Robert R. Hitt of Illinois. In those days, the public had little or nothing to say about who ran for president. The Convention settled both the nomination and the vice presidency. Getting Hitt on the ticket would have meant a fight between Roosevelt and the Convention bosses. But the vice presidency was not significant enough for Roosevelt to fight over, and he accepted Fairbanks.

Hence one of many loveless matches. Fairbanks was relegated to obscurity almost immediately—perhaps because he publicly opposed many of Roosevelt's more progressive programs like the "square deal." He was so out of the loop that when Roosevelt left town important tasks were given to William Howard Taft, Roosevelt's secretary of war and anointed successor. Having nothing to do in the executive branch, Fairbanks, a former senator, took seriously his job of presiding over the Senate where he occupied himself by leading convoluted schemes against Roosevelt's initiatives. Fairbanks spent much of his vice presidency running for president. Not surprisingly, when Roosevelt's term ended the president threw his popularity behind Taft. Taft beat Fairbanks at the 1908 convention by a comfortable margin.

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It is well known that Theodore Roosevelt's cousin Franklin had a less than passionate marriage to his wife Eleanor. As it turned out, his "arranged" vice presidency—which was chosen for purely political reasons—ended up being his second loveless marriage.

John Nance Garner, a speaker of the house from Texas, ran for president against Roosevelt in 1932. On the first ballot at the Chicago convention he came in third with a mere 90 votes to Roosevelt's 666 votes—less than the two-thirds of the vote needed (in those days) to nominate. In spite of Roosevelt's impressive first ballot, the expected stampede to Roosevelt was so slow to materialize that it caused panic among his floor leaders. Finally, after much bargaining, Texas moved to Roosevelt and the nomination was his—but at a cost. In the deal, John Nance Garner was placed on the ticket as vice president. The choice did nothing to help the ticket since at that time Texas was a safe Democratic state and so placing a popular Texan on the ticket was sort of a waste.

But the convention deal was just the beginning of this ultimately failed relationship. While Garner started out as a loyal member of the team, by the second term he came to disagree with just about everything Roosevelt did. Moreover, he let people know it. By the end of Roosevelt's second term, Garner was openly running for president, expecting that Roosevelt would abide by the then unwritten rule that presidents only serve two terms. And yet, even when Roosevelt made it clear that he would go for a third term, Garner stayed in the race. Not surprisingly he was replaced as vice president and retired from politics in 1941 after serving two not-very-happy terms. Perhaps Garner's most significant contribution to the vice-presidency was to declare that the office was "not worth a warm bucket of piss." The quote has been cleaned up from time to time to read "not worth a warm bucket of spit," but the essential meaning has lived on.

These unhappy marriages continued throughout the twentieth century. Even when presidents were publicly respectful of their vice presidents (many of whom represented some important faction of their party), the same rules didn't apply to their staffs. Kennedy's staff, especially his brother and Attorney General Bobby Kennedy, was well known for derisive comments about Vice President Lyndon Johnson. To many on the Kennedy staff, Johnson was an affront

to Camelot, someone they tried to ignore as much as possible. In the White House, real estate is everything and the closer to the Oval Office, the better the real estate. Johnson's vice presidential office was in the Old Executive Office building—outdoors and across the driveway from the Oval Office. About as far away as one can get and still be in the compound.

Because of his closeness to Carter and the cordial relationship between the two, Walter Mondale is regarded by many as the first modern vice president; many of the innovations in the office itself, such as the office in the West Wing and the weekly, private lunches, were pioneered by Carter and Mondale and remain a part of the office to this day. But while Mondale's vice presidency evolved and defined the partnership model, it began in the classic "balancing" mode—Mondale balanced out Carter both geographically (he was from Minnesota) and ideologically (he was a classic New Deal liberal).

Given that the dominant rule for selecting the vice president was that he be from a different place and/or with a different philosophy, it's almost a miracle that these relationships functioned at all, and that the office itself continued to be held in some esteem by the public. After all, when vice presidents were chosen for their *differences not their similarities* to the president, they usually didn't have very important roles. Vice President John Adams' lament has echoed down through the ages. "My country has contrived for me the most insignificant office that ever the invention of man contrived or his imagination conceived ... I can do neither good nor evil."

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While some modern vice presidents were given important things to do, others were given tasks to stay busy and out of trouble. In a pattern that psychologists will recognize from case histories of family abuse, where the abused child becomes an abusing parent, Lyndon Johnson, an abused and neutered vice president, did the same to his own vice president, Hubert Humphrey. Humphrey's list of assignments included chairing the President's Council on Youth and Opportunity, Native American opportunity, recreation and natural beauty, a cabinet-level task force on tourism, and the Council on Marine Resources and Engineering.

When Johnson decided not to run for president again in 1968, the Vietnam War protests were at their peak and Humphrey was under pressure to break with Johnson. But he stayed loyal. Early on in his vice-presidency he had argued in a cabinet meeting and in a private memo against the bombing of North Vietnam in response to the bombing of an American base in Pleiku. The result was that he was frozen out of all subsequent discussions on the topic. Johnson and his staff took their revenge on Humphrey. "After their public disagreement, Humphrey was frozen out of all discussion of Vietnam. Johnson cut off his privileges, reduced his staff, censored his speeches, tapped his phones and ordered his own staff not to speak to him."¹ Later on, Humphrey was quoted as saying "Anyone who thinks that the vice president can take a position independent of the president of his administration simply has no knowledge of politics or government. You are his choice in a political marriage, and he expects your absolute loyalty."²

To his dismay, Hubert Humphrey ended up, like so many others, a loyal vice president in an old fashioned arranged marriage.

BREAKING THE MOLD: FROM ARRANGED MARRIAGES TO LOVE MATCHES

No one doubts that the institution of the vice presidency has changed substantially in our lifetime. In his new, comprehensive book on the topic, Joel K. Goldstein argues that the transformation began with Jimmy Carter's selection of Walter Mondale to be his running mate.³ Mondale was the first vice president to go through a thorough "vetting" process, no doubt a reaction to the "haphazard" process that had produced candidate George McGovern's selection, and then rejection, of Tom Eagleton as his running mate in 1972. In addition, Carter had wrapped up the nomination before the convention, so the choice of Mondale was not part of any convention deal.

But the selection of Mondale did offer Carter both geographic—he was from Minnesota—and ideological—he was an old school liberal—balance. Thus, the second stage in the transformation of the role of the vice president occurred on July 9, 1992 when Bill Clinton called Al Gore at his home in Tennessee and proposed. Clinton had interrupted a late-night fried chicken snack, but Gore said yes anyway and yet another crucial step in the creation of the modern vice presidency was taken.

The astonishing thing about the choice of Gore was how firmly it broke the mold. There wasn't even a whiff of balance about the Clinton/Gore ticket. Like Clinton, Gore was young. Like Clinton, Gore was a Southerner with an Ivy League pedigree. Like Clinton, Gore came from the more conservative wing of the Democratic Party that had recently morphed into the "new Democrat" movement. Some headlines from July of 1992 tell the story: "Gore is a smart echo of the guy who chose him,"⁴ "Demos Draw 2 Of A Kind: Clinton, Gore Both Southern Moderates,"⁵ and "Clinton and Gore: Separated at Birth?"⁶

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All through Clinton's long and drama-filled race for the nomination, the assumption of the political class had been that, if he won the nomination, Clinton would choose New York Governor Mario Cuomo as his VP. Known as the "Hamlet on the Hudson" for his on-again off-again flirtation with a presidential run, Cuomo had bowed out of the race and instantly became the presumptive VP pick. The reason for the pre-occupation with Cuomo was

obvious—he fit the traditional bill. He was an Easterner and an enthusiastic liberal; balancing out both Clinton's Southern roots and his "new democrat" ideology that, in many ways, was a challenge to the traditional liberal base of the party. (The other frequently mentioned vice presidential choice was Senator Bill Bradley of New Jersey who was also a balancer with a liberal persona similar to Cuomo's.) In the old style of vice presidents Cuomo was a shoe-in; so much so that in the summer of 1992 sitting Vice President Dan Quayle publicly claimed to be ready to do combat with Cuomo.

Clinton's choice of Gore stemmed from how he envisioned the presidential race. Reinforcing his message was more important than balancing his ticket. In Clinton's biography he states, "His selection defied the conventional wisdom that the vice-presidential candidates should provide political and geographic balance: We were from neighboring states. He was even younger than I was. And he, too, was identified with the New Democrat wing of the party. I believed his selection would work precisely because it didn't have the traditional kind of balance."⁷

Ever since Clinton's selection of Gore in 1992, the "balancing" model has proven unsuccessful in general elections. The winning candidates have chosen to follow the partnership model thus giving way to a radically different relationship between modern presidents and vice presidents.

In 1992, George Bush put Dan Quayle on his ticket— seeking to add some youthful imagery to his candidacy. But the idea backfired under criticism of Quayle's intellect, character, and youth. In 1996, Bob Dole put Congressman Jack Kemp on his ticket in an ideological balancing act—Kemp represented the new supply side, anti-tax wing of the Republican Party.

In 2000, the closest election in U.S. history, both party's nominees went for the new model. Gore, who had learned a valuable lesson in the Clinton White House, passed up Senator John Edwards of North Carolina in favor of Senator Joe Lieberman. Lieberman came from the solidly Democratic state of Connecticut and echoed Gore's intensely pro-Israel foreign policy and his moderate Democratic approach to domestic policy. Referring to Edwards, who his political advisors had pushed, Gore later said to me, "Can you imagine that guy being ready to be president?"

In 2004, the Democratic nominee John Kerry did choose the glamorous North Carolina Senator John Edwards as his running mate. It was a classic "balancing" choice: the New England aristocrat and the Southerner who had pulled himself up from his bootstraps. But it was soon clear that Edwards brought little to the ticket. He did not add gravitas—his experience, as Gore had realized back in 2000, was simply too thin to be taken seriously—and by 2004, and the trauma of the 9/11 attacks, gravitas was beginning to be an important part of the equation. The American public expected and wanted more.

Unlike earlier "arranged" pairs, Kerry and Edwards didn't wait until they were in office to let their relationship disintegrate. Instead it degenerated during their very first interview, where the two wives took an instant dislike to each other and Edwards found the old fashioned, white-gloved dinner service at Kerry's Georgetown mansion a scene right out of the cartoon *Richie Rich*. Nonetheless, Edwards ended up on the ticket and then the relationship disintegrated even more during the campaign itself. The Kerry staff treated the Edwards staff with disdain. They made it clear that they didn't even expect Edwards to deliver his home state of North Carolina. To Edwards' great disappointment, he was relegated to lesser duties in what surely would have been a harbinger of things to come had the ticket been successful.

In contrast to Kerry, Bill Clinton had chosen a running mate who he believed was both ready and able to be president. In 2000, Governor George W. Bush had done the same, picking both a seasoned partner and a father surrogate. In one of the most amazing episodes in modern politics, the elder consigliere is placed in charge of the vice presidential search, looks around at the potential field, and ends up picking—himself! Of course the official story is that Bush chose Cheney, but when the chooser becomes the chosen, it raises eyebrows. Cheney went on to be perhaps the most powerful vice president of all time—so much so that for a large part of the Bush administration, people wondered who was really in charge.

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In 2008, Barack Obama opted for the “partner” approach over the balancing model. Joe Biden was a senator from Delaware—a safe Democratic state and a state so small that with its three electoral votes it would hardly matter in any event. But Biden brought considerable foreign policy expertise to the ticket. And since Obama would be inheriting two foreign wars (thanks in large part to the previous vice president), foreign policy would be a big part of the next president’s job. Also, like Bush, Obama chose a man older than himself, one who would not likely be lured into running his own political operation in the future. Biden, it was thought, would be a full-time partner.

The other vice presidential choice in 2008 ended up illustrating how important the partner model had become in modern politics—especially the perceived competence of the running mate. Senator John McCain’s choice of Sarah Palin was an ideological “balancing” act. Palin, the conservative governor of Alaska, could speak to a part of the Republican coalition that wasn’t exactly wild about some of McCain’s more unorthodox positions on issues like campaign finance. At first the choice looked like a wise one: at the Republican convention, Palin proved herself to be a great political performer. But as the campaign wore on, it became clear that whatever she brought to the table in terms of ideological balance was overwhelmed by the perception that she was not up to the job. The American public had come to expect a partner from the vice presidency, and McCain’s age (then 72) also highlighted how important it would be for the vice president to be ready to serve.

In 2012, Republican nominee Mitt Romney chose Paul Ryan, a young congressman from Wisconsin and one of the intellectual leaders of the conservative party to be his running mate. Even though Ryan was young, his reputation as an intellectual erased Palin-like doubts about his ability to serve. Romney was able to pick a partner (Ryan was an expert on the federal budget) and also add some balance to the ticket since Ryan’s conservative credentials helped erase doubts in the base of the party about the Republican from Massachusetts.

THE RELATIONSHIP: PORTRAITS OF THE MODERN VICE PRESIDENT

The modern vice-presidency is not your grandfather’s vice-presidency. The office now matters. Once the criteria for selection moved from “balance” to “partner,” the office was bound to change. Moreover, the partners who have inhabited the office recently—Gore, Cheney, and Biden—have reinforced traditions begun by Walter Mondale, such as the weekly private lunch, that manage to give the vice president a leg up on access to the president. Given these precedents, future vice presidents will continue to negotiate their role in government when they join the ticket. They will look for and seek to be part of the institutional touch points that will make them part of the decision loop. And future presidents will continue to look for experienced partners who can help them navigate the increasingly complex job of being President of the United States.

All vice presidents struggle to be “in the loop.” The loop is wherever the president is. And recent vice presidents have made their mark in a variety of ways.

GORE

The easiest place for Al Gore to gain the President’s trust was in foreign policy. Clinton, having been a governor, had little first-hand experience. Gore achieved access by smoothly integrating one of his right hand men, Leon Fuerth, into the foreign policy team. Fuerth was an experienced former Foreign Service officer who had served as Gore’s most senior foreign policy aid in the Senate. Gore negotiated for Leon to have a seat on the powerful “Deputies Committee.” The Deputies Committee was established in 1989 by George H.W. Bush and consists of deputies to

the senior cabinet members of the National Security Council. In short, it runs the day-to-day foreign policy of the United States. A vice presidential representative on the committee was unprecedented but also immensely valuable to Al Gore.

Gore also reached an agreement with Tony Lake, Clinton's first National Security Advisor, that granted Leon access to the highly classified information that the rest of the foreign policy team had, and Gore began the administration by bringing Leon to the president's daily intelligence briefings. By the second term of the administration, Fuerth was a full member of the Principals Committee—the cabinet level committee that includes the Secretaries of State and Defense and the Joint Chiefs of Staff of the military, among others. They are responsible for all major foreign policy decisions.

Fuerth's job was to keep Gore aware of what was happening but, crucially, he was instructed not to approach these meetings with a "vice-presidential" perspective. Gore's insight was to assiduously avoid the idea that the vice president had interests that were separate from the interests of the president. As Fuerth put it in an interview with me, these arrangements, put in place early on in the administration, kept the two men from having to run internal "espionage" nets on each other. Their staffs trusted one another and it allowed for an integrated decision making process. The result was a process that, very often, resulted in foreign policy options memos coming back from the president with "What does Al think?" crawled in the margins in Clinton's unique rounded penmanship.

The careful and methodical diplomacy that Gore undertook on Clinton's behalf built strong ties between the Clinton administration and the Yeltsin government.

In April of 1993, Clinton hosted the new Russian President Boris Yeltsin for the first summit between the new U.S. President and the Russian President. At that Summit they announced that the ongoing work between the two countries would be conducted via the U.S. – Russian Joint Commission on Economic and Technological Cooperation with Vice President Al Gore chairing the summit for the American side and Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin chairing the Russian side. In more than twenty meetings over the course of the Clinton administration, the Commission became the critical diplomatic path for working out a large array of issues, the most important of which dealt with space, technology and nuclear proliferation, between the United States and post-Soviet Russia. The careful and methodical diplomacy that Gore undertook on Clinton's behalf built strong ties between the Clinton administration and the Yeltsin government. Like many of the chores delegated to the Vice President, meetings of the Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission rarely made front-page headlines but they were often critical to the overall objectives of the President.

This was a major delegation of authority from the president to the vice president. Even in the post-cold-war world, managing the Russian evolution with their huge stockpile of nuclear weapons was not the second-class assignment that had humiliated previous vice presidents. Gore's careful cultivation of Chernomyrdin bore fruit a few years later. In 1999, Clinton's air war against the Serbian dictator Slobodan Milosevic was having little impact on the dictator's campaign of ethnic cleansing in Kosovo. Clinton, having initially indicated that he would not put troops into the Balkans, began to hint that he might need to change strategy. Tensions rose as the U.S. prepared to put "boots on the ground." In May, Moscow sent Viktor Chernomyrdin to Washington to see if the Clinton administration would "... cut Milosovic some slack." It fell to Gore to convince Chernomyrdin that this was not in the cards and that the United States was serious about forcing Milosovic out. As the United States was drawing up plans for the deployment of

100,000 troops in the Balkans, Chernomyrdin, under orders from President Boris Yeltsin, negotiated the details of an ultimatum that was presented to Serbia. The withdrawal of Russian support was the last straw for Milosovic who buckled to NATO demands and kept the United States from a potentially costly ground war in the Balkans.

This was partnership at its best. The president knew he could trust the vice president to cultivate a relationship that he could not see to himself -- together the two men conveyed a united front and a powerful foreign policy message.

In domestic policy the partnership continued. Gore was given leadership on important topics from the space station, to the rewrite of the 1996 Telecommunications Act, to the environment, to government reform. For an activist president with a large agenda, choosing a vice president who shares your philosophy is a huge advantage. Trust allows you to delegate entire policy portfolios to him, which in turn hugely expands your own power and influence. This is what Clinton did with Gore. He delegated large pieces of policy to Gore and remarkably, not once in eight years did he override his vice president's decisions in those areas.

Many Washington operatives accustomed to weak vice presidents tried to go around Gore to the president. A large number of powerful interests had stakes in the outcome of what became the 1996 Telecommunications Act. It was the first major overhaul of telecommunications policy in sixty years and there were billions and billions of dollars at stake as the administration and Congress set out to modernize the law. Whenever there are billions at stake in Washington, there are also hordes of high priced lobbyists on the prowl. As Greg Simon, the vice president's lead on this issue recalls, "They were always trying to get around us, thinking if only they could get to the president he would overrule us."⁸ But Greg was always called into the meeting. Those who sought to go around the vice president found that, on this issue, as on others, the decision-making had been delegated. When the evolving bill failed to contain the e-rate and some other items the vice president wanted, the president issued a veto threat upon Gore's request—and the bill got back on track.

The many specific delegations of responsibility added enormously to the workload of the vice president, who also had his own political future in mind and thus kept up the normal vice presidential workload of cheering on the party faithful, raising money, and casting tie breaking votes in the Senate. But for the president it was a valuable innovation: through delegation to his vice president, he had not two hands, but four.

CHENEY

Dick Cheney came into office with a long history of wielding power in the executive branch. And boy did he—so much so that many thought that he was more powerful than the president he served. Because Cheney had no intention of running for president on his own, he was free to focus completely on the job of governing.

What is clear from the histories written so far is that Cheney used his deep knowledge of policymaking to "reach down" into the executive branch and shape the alternatives that came to Bush. Time after time, especially in the first term and especially in the run up to the Iraq War, the options presented to the president for consideration had been shaped (or manipulated, according to some) by the vice president's office. Cheney managed to achieve this control by understanding, as only a former chief of staff to a president could, how the policy process and the paper flow in the White House works.

In addition, Cheney was always in the room. That's one of the reasons he was and remains, the most powerful vice president the United States has ever known. Vice President Al Gore had his own projects and his own spheres of influence. Within those spheres of influence he had considerable power. He worked hard, as all White House employees do, to be "in the room" when the big decisions were made. But he was running for president himself and therefore his time spent on government was constantly being cut into by his time spent on politics.

Not so with Dick Cheney. Unlike almost every other vice president in history, Cheney came into office with no intention of running for president. And ironically, that freedom allowed him to take on so many roles that, in the first term at least, many people suspected that the presidency of George Bush was really run by the vice presidency of Dick Cheney. Early on, former Vice President Dan Quayle went to visit Cheney, to help him understand the job he was about to take on. Quayle warned that there would be a lot of travel. Cheney listened politely and then told Quayle that he and the president had "a different understanding" of the job. There would be no foreign trips and no special projects—neither insignificant ones like prior vice presidents nor significant ones like Gore's projects. This allowed Cheney to devote himself full time to the central issues of the government. Only someone who had been a White House Chief of Staff, as Cheney had been, could so thoroughly understand the elaborate staffing structure that creates the options for an American president's decision making. Cheney got it.

The Bush-Cheney transition was shorter than most, given that the formal transition didn't begin until the Supreme Court had ruled on the contested Bush-Gore race. But that didn't stop Cheney who, unlike Clinton and Gore in '92 and the president-elect in 2000, understood the points of access he wanted to dominate.

Unlike Gore, Cheney was not content to put his top staff person on the Deputies Committee of the NSC. In an unprecedented move, and one that was deeply disturbing to National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice, Cheney placed *himself* on the Principals' Committee and was thereafter the first among equals in the creation of all foreign policy options. He also went to the Wednesday lunches held by the economic team in the White House mess. He was a regular participant in the Republican caucus meetings in the Senate. And, since tax legislation originates in the House and not the Senate, he even went so far as to get himself a hideaway office in the House of Representatives (in addition to his Senate office) so that he could be close to the action on the tax bill. In other words, wherever the president's options were formulated, Cheney was there.

Cheney had no aversion to "reaching down" into the bureaucracy in order to place his people and to influence the options that came up from it. Cheney's vision was of an expansive presidency with enormous latitude in the powers that could be used in the name of national security. It was reinforced by a network of like-minded operatives, spread strategically throughout the bureaucracy.

John C. Yoo, for example, was just a thirty-four-year-old law professor from the University of California Berkeley. But Cheney was especially eager to have him in the government because Yoo's legal philosophy, especially his expansive view of the powers of the presidency, matched his own. He was placed at the Justice Department's office of Legal Counsel where Cheney could be sure that when the questions "Is it legal?" or "Can we do it?" were asked, the answer would be yes. Yoo was to write the famous (or infamous, depending on your politics) memos that

Cheney used his deep knowledge of policymaking to "reach down" into the executive branch and shape the alternatives that came to Bush.

created the legal framework for the post 9/11 world and the justifications to move to war in Iraq. Among these were the memos providing the legal background for torture.

Unlike almost every other vice president in history, Cheney came into office with no intention of running for president. And ironically, that freedom allowed him to take on many roles.

Cheney may have started out in the mold of Al Gore but there were two critical differences between his relationship with Bush and Gore's relationship with Clinton. Neither Clinton nor Gore had had any prior experience with the vast and complex federal government they were about to lead but together they had a great deal of experience in the policy issues they were to deal with. In contrast, Cheney had, by virtue of having been President Gerald Ford's Chief of Staff and Secretary of Defense, vast executive branch experience. His time in the post-Watergate Ford administration had left him convinced of the need

for a strong presidency and 9/11 only confirmed that belief. Cheney also served a President whose only experience had been state government and whose policy credentials (with the exception of education and immigration, two issues he'd taken an interest in as Governor of Texas,) were weak. Add to that was the fact that Bush had a "hands off" management style and a certain lack of curiosity that allowed Cheney free reign to craft the choices that the president would make.

These were the factors that allowed Dick Cheney to transcend the new partnership model and become, for a time at least, the most powerful vice president ever.

With 20-20 hindsight it is tempting to speculate what this relationship would have been without the dramatic attacks on the U.S. homeland that took place on Tuesday, September 11, 2001. We tend to forget that by August of 2001 the Bush presidency had taken on a fairly unfocused and lethargic air noticed and commented on even by their supposed friends in the op-ed pages of the *Wall Street Journal*. By taking the unprecedented step of moving into an office in the House of Representatives, it was clear that Cheney had carved out the tax debate for himself. But the 9/11 attacks rearranged the priorities of the new administration and played right to Cheney's strengths and Bush's weaknesses. Three days later, on Friday, September 14, 2001, President Bush went to the still-burning site of the World Trade Center in New York, took a bullhorn in hand and spoke to the nation. Less noticed was the fact that five days later, on Sunday, September 16, 2001, the vice president of the United States went on *Meet the Press* and in an hour long, nearly uninterrupted interview, laid out the United States' response to the attacks. At the time, the vice president's appearance passed without much comment. The nation was shell-shocked and not in a mood to question its leaders. But, in retrospect, the interview showed a vice president who was exercising presidential leadership. Not only did he introduce the nation to the heretofore shadowy group known as al-Qaida and its leader Osama bin Laden, he described who they were and what they believed.

The *Meet the Press* interview took place weeks before the United States launched cruise missiles against Afghanistan (October 7, 2001). But in it, the vice president of the United States, not the president, offered the first full articulation of U.S. policy in the post 9/11 world.

“IF YOU’VE GOT A NATION OUT THERE NOW THAT HAS PROVIDED A BASE, TRAINING FACILITIES, A SANCTUARY, AS HAS BEEN TRUE, FOR EXAMPLE, IN THIS CASE, PROBABLY WITH AFGHANISTAN, THEN THEY HAVE TO UNDERSTAND, AND OTHERS LIKE THEM AROUND THE WORLD HAVE TO UNDERSTAND, THAT IF YOU PROVIDE SANCTUARY TO TERRORISTS, YOU FACE THE FULL WRATH OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA. AND THAT WE WILL, IN FACT, AGGRESSIVELY GO AFTER THESE NATIONS TO MAKE CERTAIN THAT THEY CEASE AND DESIST FROM PROVIDING SUPPORT FOR THESE KINDS OF ORGANIZATIONS.”

Nearly a year later, on August 26, 2002 Cheney went to a Veterans of Foreign Wars convention in Nashville, Tennessee and talked about the links between Saddam Hussein in Iraq and nuclear weapons. Again, the vice president, not the president, seemed to have the job of articulating foreign policy on issues of paramount importance such as war and peace.

But he was not just the spokesman. When it came to the most important issues of the day, it often seemed that Cheney—a former Chief of Staff to a president, a former congressman, and a former secretary of defense—was driving the ship of state. In the harried days immediately after 9/11 Cheney often contradicted the president and steered the conversation in meetings. According to Ron Suskind, in the spring of 2002, Bush “asked Cheney to pull back a little at big meetings, to give the president more room to move, to take charge. Bush asked Cheney not to offer him advice in crowded rooms. Do that privately. Cheney did.”⁹

Cheney’s power waned in Bush’s second term, as the war in Iraq became an albatross around the administration’s neck and as Condi Rice moved to dismantle much of the Cheney empire. Nonetheless, the first term of Cheney’s vice presidency will go down in history as one of the most powerful and influential ever.

BIDEN

By the time Joe Biden became Barack Obama’s vice president the partnership model was well established, along with the routines that buttressed it. Biden and Obama have a private, no aides in attendance, weekly lunch. Biden, following in Cheney’s footsteps, is now a regular at the all-important foreign policy meeting of “the Principals.” Biden’s roots in Scranton, Pennsylvania have made him, over the years, one of the more able Democrats when it comes to appealing to working class whites and so there was, in this relationship, some of the old-fashioned “balancing” that was absent in the Clinton-Gore and in the Bush-Cheney partnerships.

Unlike Clinton and Gore, who were so alike that Cabinet meetings often took on the air of a Southern fraternity that recruited only policy wonks, Obama and Biden could not be more different. They are nearly two decades apart in age, and Biden represented a Washington, D.C. that Obama never knew and one in which he doesn’t seem to be especially comfortable. Obama is famously reserved. Biden is a “tactile” politician, always shaking hands, complimenting grandmothers and kissing babies. Initially there was little evidence that they enjoyed each other’s company, as did Clinton and Gore; nor was there evidence that the president felt he needed the vice president as Bush needed Cheney especially in the difficult days following 9/11.

The Obama-Biden relationship has had its bumps in the road. Biden has had to learn to control what Obama’s staff dubbed “Joe bombs”—off the cuff remarks that invariably get him into trouble. One of these occurred during a May 6, 2012 appearance on *Meet the Press*, when Biden announced his support of gay marriage ahead of the

president. This forced Obama to scramble and announce his own support and it also resulted in an apology from the vice president to the president.

However, while the Clinton–Gore and Bush–Cheney relationships frayed over time, the Obama–Biden relationship seems to have improved and strengthened during their eight years in office.

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Part of this was due to Biden’s unflinching loyalty to Obama and to the closeness between their two families. In addition, unlike Gore, Biden did not want to have a portfolio that was uniquely and always his. But, like Gore, he took on specific tasks for the President. In the first term, Biden was handed responsibility for Iraq and for implementation of the Recovery Act. The jury is still out on the wisdom of Biden’s influence on Iraq, particularly his support for the ill-fated presidency of Prime Minister Nuri Maliki. But on implementation of the Recovery Act he is given an A+ by most observers who fully expected that the money needed to recover from the recession would be lost in reams of red tape and/or corruption.¹⁰

Biden’s role in dealing with a dysfunctional Congress has been especially important to a president who seems to dislike the rough and tumble of congressional relations. In late 2010 and again in 2012, Biden’s role negotiating budgets and the “fiscal cliff” deal with Republicans proved his importance to the White House. Biden could do what Obama could not— negotiate with Congress.

When Biden became vice president he was 65 years old. According to *Newsweek* magazine, he told Obama, “I’m sixty-five and you’re not going to have to worry about my positioning myself to be president.”¹¹ His age and statements like this led many to believe that he’d be a vice president in the Cheney mold; concerned only with government and not distracted by racing off to shake hands in Iowa and New Hampshire, the early presidential primary states. And yet, Biden or his aides kept presidential aspirations alive from time to time. As 2016 approached, it became clear that Biden, in spite of his age (he turns 74 in November of 2016) was considering a run for president. But in October, 2015, after the tragic death of his son, Biden pulled out of a race that he was never really in.

CONCLUSION

The modern American presidency is an enormous job, involving everything from world leadership to domestic prosperity. Changes in the nomination system have led to changes in how presidential candidates chose their vice presidents and the result is that short term electoral concerns have given way to longer term governing concerns. Ironically, it sometimes seems that more attention is paid to whether or not the potential vice president can govern than is paid to whether the presidential candidate can govern.

In 2016, both presidential candidates chose the partnership model. The Republican nominee Donald Trump, a man with no government experience, chose Governor Mike Pence of Indiana, a man with twelve years of experience in Congress and the current governor of Indiana. Hillary Clinton chose Senator Tim Kaine whose long government resume includes stints as mayor of Richmond and lieutenant governor of Virginia. The partnership model is especially

important to Trump who has recognized his need for government experience in the White House. In fact, a Trump presidency could completely remake the role of vice president especially if Trump himself turns out to be uninterested in the nitty gritty of government. But Hillary Clinton, whose own government experience is extensive, also chose a running mate in the partnership model—passing over exciting young talent such as Julian Castro, former mayor of San Antonio and the current secretary of housing and urban development—in favor of someone who had more experience. The balancing model hasn't entirely evaporated. The choice of Pence was seen by many as an olive branch to the conservative wing of the party that had backed Senator Ted Cruz. And the choice of Kaine, a Southerner, increased Hillary's chances of taking Virginia and perhaps one or two other Southern states that have been difficult wins for Democrats.

Nonetheless, in modern American politics, it is hard to imagine the balancing model prevailing in the absence of the central characteristic of the partnership model: competence. The latter seems to have become a permanent feature in the American presidency, assuming both electoral importance as well as governing importance. For the foreseeable future the partnership model in the vice presidency will prevail, continuing to make the office into much more than it ever was.

ENDNOTES

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