

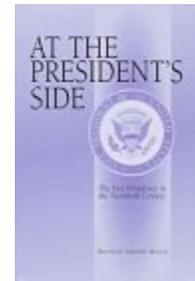
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Timothy Walch, ed. *At the President's Side: The Vice Presidency in the Twentieth Century*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997. xii + 270 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8262-1133-0.

Reviewed by Ralph B. Levering (Davidson College)  
Published on H-Pol (February, 1998)



After hastily agreeing to review this book, I soon realized that I had two serious misgivings. First, in view of such well-known evaluations as the one by John Nance Garner (Franklin Roosevelt's first vice president) that the office was "not worth a pitcher of warm spit," I wondered whether giving a close reading to a book on this subject would be worth my time. Second, given my frequent disappointment with edited collections of conference papers, I feared that I would end up trying to find one or two excellent essays in a mass of mediocrity and redundancy.

Fortunately, these fears were not warranted. The twentieth-century vice presidency—and, especially, the extent to which and the ways in which it has changed and not changed—captured my interest. Moreover, the vast majority of the essays are of high quality. Most were written by well-known scholars (e.g., Richard E. Neustadt); a few, by former officials (e.g., Dan Quayle). Virtually all are based on many years of research on, or experience in working with, particular vice presidents or administrations. And the writing is engaging, concise, and blessedly free of academic jargon and pretension, making it a likely hit with students. Because the book's strengths far outweigh its weaknesses, I commend it to all students of the modern presidency/vice presidency and to those interested more generally in U.S. political history in this remarkable century.

One of the book's great strengths is the way in which it combines historians' traditional focus on the particular (in this case, vice presidents) with political scientists' traditional interest in the general (in this case, the vice presidency). Although most of the authors are historians and thus draw on a wealth of detailed knowledge of particular administrations, all of the authors also deal with the

question of how the office evolved—or failed to evolve—during the years they are analyzing. In writing about the years from 1900 through 1920, for example, John Milton Cooper Jr. argues that President Woodrow Wilson should have taken Colonel Edward M. House's advice and placed the able secretary of war, Newton D. Baker, on the ticket for the vice presidency in 1916. House tried to convince Wilson that, if he replaced the lightly regarded incumbent, Thomas Marshall, with Baker, the latter, in House's words, "might become Vice President in fact as well as in name, and be a co-worker and co-helper of the President" (p. 18). Holding a low opinion of the vice presidency, Wilson refused to "sacrifice" Baker and thus did not have a respected vice president who had worked closely with him and who could be trusted to perform at least some presidential duties effectively when Wilson was largely incapacitated by a stroke in the fall of 1919. Not only was the result unfortunate at the time, Cooper points out, but Wilson's successors in the 1920's and 1930's also failed to learn from this experience. At least until 1933, vice presidents had very little respect or power either in Washington or in the nation as a whole. Warren G. Harding, the successful Republican nominee for president in 1920, did not even meet his running mate, Calvin Coolidge, until after the election. The book contains many fine anecdotes that could be used to arouse student interest; one of them that involves Coolidge's time as vice president (1921-23) illustrates the vice president's relative insignificance in the early 1900's. Robert H. Ferrell tells the story:

The Coolidges had taken up residence at the Willard [hotel] in the suite occupied by their predecessors, Vice President and Mrs. Marshall ... There was a story, apparently true, that a fire alarm one evening brought all the

guests to the lobby, with many of them in less than full dress. With the fire soon under control, Coolidge started upstairs, but the fire marshal halted him. "Who are you?" asked that functionary. "I'm the vice president," Coolidge replied. "All right—go ahead," said the marshal. Coolidge walked a step or two, only to be halted a second time. "What are you vice president of?" the marshal inquired suspiciously. "I'm the vice president of the United States." "Come right down," said the marshal. "I thought you were the vice president of the hotel (pp. 28-29).

How and when did a more important vice presidency develop—that is, a vice presidency in which the incumbent was viewed as a significant figure in Washington, in the country as a whole, or in both? In other words, when did the vice presidency begin to be seen as an important office in its own right and also as a possible stepping stone to the presidency, even when (as usually happened) the president served out his term?

The book offers various answers, usually implicit rather than explicit. In a generally excellent essay, "Vice Presidents as National Leaders: Reflections Past, Present, and Future," Neustadt argues that "[s]ince Truman's brief vice presidency—and in large part because of it—the privileges and duties, staffs and offices, prestige, and even methods for selection of vice presidents have been transformed" (p. 184). Dan Quayle agrees: "The fundamental nature of the vice presidency ... changed after Harry S. Truman assumed the presidency" (p. 169). In the introduction, Timothy Walch notes that "[b]eginning with Richard Nixon, the vice presidency has received increasing measure of attention. Election as vice president .... no longer is seen as the end of a political career; in fact, it has become a springboard to the presidency" (p. 4). Steven M. Gillon argues that a "new framework" for the vice presidency was established by Jimmy Carter and Walter Mondale, in which Mondale and his well-placed staff played a much greater role in day-to-day decision-making than did previous vice presidents and their staffs. When the liberal Mondale and his staff began to disagree sharply with the more moderate Carter and his staff about whether spending on domestic programs should be cut and whether the budget needed to be balanced, Gillon notes, "The irony of the new relationship that Carter created with his vice president was that it institutionalized the division within the administration and prevented the White House from articulating a clear message on the economy" (pp. 144-47). Viewed as a whole, therefore, the authors contend that the vice presidency changed substantially during the years between Truman's brief tenure in 1945 and Mondale's longer service in the late

1970's.

I would argue that the first of the modern vice presidents was Henry Wallace, who served with Franklin Roosevelt from early 1941 through early 1945. The articulate, outspoken liberal had been a major figure in Washington and in the Midwestern farm belt in the 1930's, when he served as Secretary of Agriculture. As vice president, Wallace headed the Board of Economic Warfare, an agency with four thousand employees that gave him clout in U.S. economic policy both at home and abroad. His many speeches around the country, frequently broadcast on national radio hook-ups and widely covered by the news media, made him the nation's leading champion of liberal causes and of what he called the "common man." By 1944, Richard S. Kirkendall observes, Wallace had gained "a substantial following" that included such well-known liberals as Eleanor Roosevelt, Hubert Humphrey, and Claude Pepper (p. 59). Many of Wallace's followers, especially in the powerful labor movement and in the rising civil rights movement, wanted him to be Roosevelt's successor as president. That wish—and Wallace's strong desire to be president—persisted long after Wallace was denied renomination as vice president at the 1944 Democratic convention. Wallace thus used the vice presidency to become a major political figure and prospective president. Similarly, the next modern vice president, Richard Nixon, used the office to become a prospective president, as did such subsequent vice presidents as Hubert Humphrey, Walter Mondale, George Bush, Dan Quayle, and Al Gore. As a possible stepping stone to the presidency and in other ways, the office truly has become more important since 1941.

Yet one should not exaggerate the extent of the change. As the authors repeatedly show, any real power that vice presidents have—at least in Washington—is power that their presidents give to them; and whatever power presidents give with one hand, they can take away with the other. Timothy Walch labels some of Neustadt's thinking on this point as "Neustadt's maxim," which Walch defines as follows: "The power and influence of a vice president are inversely proportional to the political distance between that vice president and his president. The greater the distance the less the power" (p. 4). The president defines that "political distance," thus ensuring the vice president's dependent role.

The book contains many examples of presidents limiting or humiliating their vice presidents in much the same way that ordinary citizens use leashes to exercise control over small dogs. Neither John Kennedy

nor Lyndon Johnson gave their vice presidents much power. Acting in character, Johnson also humiliated Hubert Humphrey by excluding him from important meetings and making him publicly support a policy in Vietnam that he privately doubted. When Spiro Agnew insisted on his right to disagree publicly on policy issues, Nixon threw him out of the loop of decision-making. After arguing with Carter about the administration's priorities, Mondale, too, found himself outside of the loop and strongly considered resigning in the late spring of 1979.

The book's greatest understatement belongs to Dan Quayle: "the vice presidency can be a rather awkward office" (p. 169). And it is likely to remain one for the foreseeable future because, first of all, vice presidents, accustomed to exercising power in their previous political positions, will want influence in their administrations; and second because, as Truman put it succinctly, the nation can have only "one president at a time." My main criticism is that there is not enough discussion of the relationships between vice presidents and the key non-governmental forces at work in society—especially interest groups, the news media, and the general public. What roles have vice presidents played in debating the great issues of their day? And when vice presidents like Wallace and Agnew did speak out, how popular with the general public were they and their views? In other words, why are few if any public opinion polls—or editorials and columns of opinion—analyzed in the book? And what involvement have vice presidents prior to Al Gore had in fund raising and in meeting with representatives of interest groups? There is not a hint of corruption in the discussion of any of the vice presidents. Is American national politics really that pure?

A second criticism is that the perspective of women is almost entirely omitted from the book. There are a few scattered references to famous women (e.g., Eleanor Roosevelt and Hillary Clinton), but no effort is made to discuss women's views of particular vice presidents or

the views of Geraldine Ferraro—the only woman nominated on a major-party ticket—on gender-related advantages and disadvantages in running for one of two offices in America chosen by a national electorate.

There also are intriguing might-have-beens in regard to potential women candidates. For example, my own view during the election of 1976—perhaps wrong but ultimately unprovable—was that Gerald Ford could have won what turned out to be a close election if he had chosen a prominent woman (e.g., Carla Hills or Elizabeth Dole) to be his vice presidential candidate. Not only would such a choice have indicated acceptance by the more conservative party of the changes in the status of women that had occurred in America since World War II; it also would have softened one of the sharpest criticisms of Ford: his alleged lack of imagination. In other words, why aren't women a larger part of the book? Is it partly because all seventeen of the contributors are men?

A smaller criticism is that two of the essays depart somewhat from the book's admirable standard of even-handedness. One is John Robert Greene's essay on Spiro Agnew, which strikes me as overly negative and unsympathetic, even for Agnew. The other is Chase Untermeyer's piece on George Bush, which is overly positive—indeed gushing—at times. Yet both essays are well worth reading.

A final, serious criticism is that books that seek to contribute to scholarship need to be properly documented. The "Notes on Sources" at the end is useful, but there is no substitute for footnotes or endnotes in scholarly writing.

Copyright (c) 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu. [The book review editor for H-Pol is Lex Renda <renlex@csd.uwm.edu>]

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-pol>

**Citation:** Ralph B. Levering. Review of Walch, Timothy, ed., *At the President's Side: The Vice Presidency in the Twentieth Century*. H-Pol, H-Net Reviews. February, 1998.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1720>

Copyright © 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication,

originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).