

December 9, 1976

TO: JIMMY CARTER
FROM: WALTER F. MONDALE
RE: THE ROLE OF THE VICE PRESIDENT IN THE CARTER ADMINISTRATION

I. Background

Defining an appropriate and meaningful role for the Vice President has been a problem throughout the history of this country. 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."

Other commentators as well as former Vice Presidents have focused on particular problems of the office. Competition with the President, conflict with the White House staff, lack of meaningful assignments, lack of authority, and inadequate access to vital information are most frequently mentioned.

I have spoken at length with Vice President Rockefeller, former Vice President Humphrey, and their staffs to try to understand more fully the many dimensions of the position. Further, through other conversations and reading what literature is available, I have tried to supplement my understanding. Finally, my staff prepared a Constitutional history of the office and a comparison of the duties and staffing of the Humphrey and Rockefeller Vice Presidencies.

It is my hope in this memorandum that I can outline a set of relationships, functions and assignments that will be workable and productive for the administration. I am committed to do everything possible to make this administration a success. I fully realize that my personal and political success is totally tied to yours and the achievements of your administration.

II. Our Basic Relationship – General Adviser

I believe the most important contribution I can make is to serve as a general adviser to you. I would hope my experience in government and politics would assist me in giving you advice on the major questions facing you.

The position of being the only other public official elected nationwide, not affected by specific obligations or institutional interests of either the Congressional or Executive branch, and able to look at the government as a whole, does put me in a unique position to advise. Further, my political role around the country as well as my established relationships in Washington should allow me to keep in close touch with many different groups and viewpoints.

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 will not be the only source of such advice. Yet, 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.

In order to fulfill the role of a general advisor satisfactorily, I think the following are necessary:

1. Frequent and comprehensive intelligence briefings from the CIA and other intelligence agencies of similar depth to those you receive. Advance warning of major issues to be discussed at meetings of the NSC and other significant groups is necessary as well as the ability to request additional briefings and responses on areas of special concern.

Senator Humphrey emphasized the importance of this point to me repeatedly. He was not given adequate briefings and was, therefore, unable to participate effectively on the NSC or in this general arena of foreign and defense policy.

2. A special relationship with other members of the Executive branch. I would hope that I could expect the same or nearly the same level of responsiveness from key administration officials in seeking information that you would receive. Providing sound advice to you requires from them complete candor and cooperation in providing information. I do not believe I could evaluate and/or assess key problems without this relationship. I think it would be important to make this point to the Cabinet and other key officials at the very beginning of the administration.

3. Participation in Meetings of Key Groups.

Participation in Cabinet meetings, discussions with the Congressional leadership, meetings of the National Security Council, Domestic Council and the economic policy group (whatever form it takes) would be extremely valuable in fulfilling the advisory role.

4. A seasoned, experienced staff representative on the NSC and Domestic Council who I can call on to meet my needs. I think it is terribly important that I have a staff capability on these two Councils whose priority is to assist me in performing my functions. Humphrey was not given staff support which combined with the lack of briefings made his role on the NSC almost insignificant.

5. Relationship with White House Staff. I think it is critical that my office be well informed on the activities of the White House. I believe it would be helpful if representatives of my office could participate in appropriate White House staff meetings. I hope we can maintain the excellent relationship our two staffs developed during the campaign and have maintained during the transition. Also, my staff is available to you or the White House staff for any assignments or tasks for which they may be needed.

6. Access to you.* I suggest that we plan to meet once per week at a minimum of 30 minutes to an hour. Rockefeller currently has this arrangement with President Ford and recommends it highly. This would be a time for me to report on my activities, offer advice and get assignments from you. We, of course, could cancel the meeting if we did not need the time. In addition to our regular meeting, I would hope I could depend on having access whenever necessary. Of course, I would be available whenever you might want to meet.

*Historically, there has been substantial variation in access and proximity. It was not until President Kennedy that the Vice President had an office in proximity to the White House (EOB). On one occasion (Agnew) the office of the Vice President was actually in the White House. I prefer to think of access in the terms expressed here and would prefer to maintain the space with adequate staff offices in the Executive Office Building.

III. General Functions

A. Trouble-Shooting. As problems arise, I would like to be available to respond to your direction and help solve them as quickly as possible. Within this general category, two areas emerge.

1. Investigation. I believe I could perform a very valuable function in attempting to provide background and analysis for you in special areas of concern. This function could range from gathering information on an issue or area of government about which you are restless or uncomfortable to conducting a full-scale, formal investigation such as Rockefeller did in the case of the CIA. An example of one area well suited for this approach is that of task force on hard crime and official lawlessness suggested in the campaign.

2. Arbitration. The sometimes conflicting and sometimes parallel assignments of governmental functions to different departments and agencies produces inefficiency and interdepartmental disputes, as you well know. With your support, I think I could play an important role in resolving such problems. This would probably be done in an assignment-by-assignment basis.*

B. Foreign Representation. Nearly everyone, most notably the former Vice Presidents I have spoken with, agrees that the Vice President can play a very significant role through foreign travel. The foreign travel I do can be used to express your interest in selected foreign policy areas, give us an additional presence abroad, and provide you with a first-hand assessment of foreign leaders and situations.

I would tentatively suggest (subject to conversations with the Secretary of State) that in the early weeks of the administration we consider the advantages of short trips to the industrialized nations (Canada, Western Europe and Japan). Such trips would enable me to reassure our allies, discuss the objectives of a possible economic summit, and assess the internal economic prospects of our leading economic partners. I am advised that travel in the early days can be very productive in part because it is too soon for the host countries to expect specific responses to their problems.

*Humphrey felt he could be very effective in this area. He noted that the President did not have sufficient time to consider many of the problems that arose between departments and agencies.

It would be made clear, both publicly and privately, that such a trip was an information gathering mission, not a negotiating mission. The itinerary would be worked out with your senior Cabinet officials and advisors. It would be conducted with minimum publicity from the standpoint of the United States but with appropriate attention to dramatizing the Vice President's visit as a gesture of your interest in the countries concerned.

IV. Specific Function

The Constitution mandates that I serve as President of the Senate. The duties are ceremonial with the exception of casting tie-breaking votes. I assume this responsibility will take a minimum amount of time.

V. Possible Additional Functions

Based on my analysis of the history of the office, the following are functions which are the most promising or in this situation seem to merit serious exploration.

A. Congressional Relations. I think I can be helpful to you in your relations with the Congress in two important respects:

1. I think I can advise you on what to expect from the Congress on significant issues, how to interpret their actions, and what approaches will be most productive. Twelve years in the Senate gives me a substantial background for analysis and interpretation.

2. I can advise and assist your Congressional liaison office. This should be done on an informal basis so that my role is not thought of as a lobbyist. Yet, on major initiatives, I could conduct key conversations and become more operational.

B. Political Action. Every Vice President in recent history has played a significant political role for the President. I assume I would do the same. I can be helpful through keeping our administration on the offensive politically and representing us around the country, with the Party, and with special constituencies such as labor. I would assume this would be a continuing role, meshed with the off-year election campaigns and the re-election campaign of 1980.

On an allied point, an immediate assessment of election laws, together with recommendations for Congressional action, is very much needed before the next election. Campaign finance, primary laws, voter registration, and other critical areas are much in need of review. I would be interested in conducting such a review and recommending a legislative package if you would find it valuable.

C. Liaison with Special Groups. The Vice President has served in the past as a special liaison to elected officials (particularly Mayors and Governors). Agnew established an office of intergovernmental relations for a time which was disbanded. Humphrey served as a point of contact and advocate for the elected officials.

The key danger in regard to this function is that the Vice President's office is devoted to doing agency work for local and state government which could be handled better through direct contact between the elected official and the agency concerned.

I suggest maintaining the Vice President's office as a key contact point for Mayors and Governors with adequate safeguards against the danger noted above. The proper execution of this possible function will require additional discussion.

D. Special Role with Domestic Council. Depending on the functions of the Domestic Council, a leadership role with the Council might be considered. The Council is currently the only group concerned with a long-range policy planning function and with the integration of domestic policy recommendations. These functions would be consistent with the domestic overview required as an adviser to the President and with the possible role as an arbitrator in interdepartmental conflicts. Your determination of the functions of the Council will bear directly on what role would be appropriate for me to play.

E. Special Role with Economic Policy Board. The coordination of domestic and international economic policy will be extremely important. A special role with the Economic Policy Board could be considered.

VI. Additional Commitments

A. Minnesota. I would like very much to be able to continue to devote some time and attention to my special relationship to the people of Minnesota. Special projects, some liaison work, concern about appointments, and regular contacts in Minnesota and Washington would be included. That time would not be substantial, but this private commitment to be able to continue to serve the people of my state would be very meaningful to me.

B. A Role for Joan with the National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities. I would like to assist Joan in structuring a useful and rewarding role with the National Foundation as the primary vehicle for her continued involvement in the arts. She is extremely effective in this area. In the early stages, this might involve my showing a special interest in this agency.

VIII. Conclusion

I am optimistic that we can develop a relationship and a set of functions which will allow me to contribute to the administration in a substantial way. That optimism has been maintained and nourished from our first conversation in Plains through the campaign and further reinforced in the past month of working together. I look forward to a productive working relationship and a close friendship throughout the administration and beyond.

The role outlined above would, in my judgment, clearly fulfill the most important constitutional obligation of the office--that is, being prepared to take over the Presidency should that be required. The relationship and assignments suggested were not focused on that obligation, but I think they do meet the test.

Walter F. Mondale Papers
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