



The American Vice Presidency: From Irrelevance to Power

Jules Witcover

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The American Vice Presidency is an all-inclusive examination of the vice presidency throughout American history. Acclaimed political journalist and author Jules Witcover chronicles each of the 47 vice presidents, including their personal biographies and their achievements--or lack thereof--during their vice presidential tenures. He explores how the roles and responsibilities were first subject to the whims of the presidents under whom they served, but came in time to be expanded by enlightened chief executives and the initiatives of the vice presidents themselves. Constitutionally assigned only to preside over the Senate as they stand by to fill a presidential vacancy, early vice presidents were left to languish in irrelevance and ineffectiveness; only in recent decades have vice presidents received--or taken--more power. In particular, Walter Mondale, Al Gore, Dick Cheney, and Joe Biden have undertaken greater and more significant responsibilities. Witcover reports the political maneuvering and manipulation that transformed the vice presidency from mere consolation prize to de facto assistant presidency. *The American Vice Presidency*, an insightful, revealing look at this oft-dismissed office, is a must-have for lovers of behind-the-scenes political history.

The American Vice Presidency: From Irrelevance to Power Details

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Jim Blessing says

I have always been interested in presidential politics. Over the past several decades, I visited all of the Presidents graves. I then decided, why not also visit all of the Vice-Presidents graves. I completed that in 2012. Although I have read some books on Vice Presidents, the amount of information was limited. This was a great book and very informative on all Vice Presidents, especially the lesser known ones who never became Presidents. Great Book!

JQAdams says

This book is somewhat hilariously typo-plagued, but if you need a compendium of capsule biographies of Vice Presidents (and who doesn't?), it will serve. Since Witcover's day job is as a journalist, coverage is more extensive for the recent incumbents, whom Witcover often interviewed and covered at the time, than the earlier ones. Indeed, the chapters on any given Vice President do not seem to have much correlation with significance or interestingness; people who held the office for longer generally get longer chapters, as fits the book's purpose, but that relationship isn't very strong.

To be fair, the greater emphasis on recent decades fits with the book's thesis and subtitle, that the office has become less of a joke and more important, both having real influence and not being a total career dead end. Each biography culminates in a paragraph or (occasionally) two talking about how the chapter's subject shaped the powers of the Vice Presidency. For about the first 80% of the book, with only very rare exceptions -- Martin Van Buren, represent -- that boils down to "nope, this guy sure didn't have much to do." Witcover does not have a lot to say as to why people suddenly realized the position could be more than a parking space for nonentities; this book is about describing the history, leaving deeper explanations for someone else.

Kate says

A little dry, and far too many typos for my liking.

Lee says

A pretty good book which tells of the evolution of the Vice President from the early days when the VP was basically sitting around doing nothing to more recent VP's who have an active role in the administration. It has a short biography of all the Vice Presidents and this is the best part of the book telling of some of the obscure and well known individuals who occupied the second spot. It does focus a little more on the recent VP's, Bush, Quayle, Gore, Cheney and Biden.

Valarie says

very interesting to look at US History through the lens of the vice presidency. Each VP gets his own chapter with a complete biography, birth to death, with most focus on his time in government. Well done.

John Bohnert says

I thoroughly enjoyed reading this book.
I learned a lot about various vice-presidents.

Jill says

What has always amazed me is the extent to which potential presidents give little thought outside of political considerations to the nature of the person filling the role of vice-president. Yet that person would of course become president if the president himself died; became disabled; resigned; or was removed from office. [And yes, I am using male pronouns because thus far, no females have occupied either office.] Even Lincoln, who had numerous assassination threats as well as regular dreams that he would die in office, selected someone who would help him get reelected rather than considering what kind of political leader his choice for vice president might be.

(One of the saddest anecdotes about the vice presidency, which Witcover includes in this book, was the response to Lincoln's emissary when Benjamin Butler entertained an overture from Lincoln about running for Vice President for Lincoln's second term. Butler replied in part:

"Please say to Mr. Lincoln, that while I appreciate with the fullest sensibility this act of friendship and the compliment he pays me, yet I must decline. Tell him with the prospects of the campaign, I would not quit the field to be Vice-President, even with himself as President, unless he will give me bond with sureties, that he will die or resign within three months of his inauguration."

Of course, Lincoln went on to do just exactly that.)

In a similar vein, less than twenty years later, Mark Hanna, chief political advisor to William McKinley, and concerned that McKinley's vice presidential candidate Theodore Roosevelt was a "madman," wrote to McKinley: "Your duty to the country is to live for four years from next March." Unfortunately for Hanna at least, McKinley served only 200 days before being struck down by an assassin, and Theodore Roosevelt went on to become the 21st president.

One of the more interesting portraits is that of Henry Wilson, President Grant's second term vice-president. Wilson was an advocate of protecting blacks in the South, and for an end to school segregation. He also railed against the "money power" of corporate America. He campaigned heavily for Grant, but it took a toll on his health, and he suffered a stroke barely two months after being inaugurated. For the remaining three years of his life, he was mostly incapacitated, and disregarded by Grant in any event.

William Wheeler, who served as Vice-President to Rutherford B. Hayes, is another intriguing man. (When Wheeler was nominated, Hayes reportedly turned to his wife and said, "Who is Wheeler?") While in

Congress, Wheeler stood apart for his apparent lack of greed, turning down offers of bribes and even returning his Congressional salary raise to the US. treasury. But like other presidents, Hayes rarely consulting Wheeler on anything.

Of Thomas Marshall, Vice President under Woodrow Wilson, Witcover writes: "Perhaps no previous vice president was more poorly treated up to this time than Thomas Riley Marshall of Indiana." Marshall was not even told when Wilson suffered a stroke and became incapacitated! Wilson's true second-in-command (besides his first and second wives) was Colonel Edward House, who, according to some, was the real power behind the throne. But even Colonel House couldn't stand up to the second Mrs. Wilson. When Wilson was incapacitated, it was Edith Wilson who decided if official papers should be seen or signed by Wilson, and some of the signatures looked like her writing rather than his. Meanwhile, Marshall wasn't even admitted to Wilson's sickroom. Wilson did, however, survive his term of office however (in some form or other). When rival Republicans nominated Warren G. Harding for president and Calvin Coolidge for vice president, Marshall sent Coolidge a telegram: "Please accept my sincere sympathy."

Spiro "Ted" Agnew was totally shut out by Richard Nixon's tight-knit staff, but was sent instead around the country to make inflammatory speeches railing against unrest on campus. Aided by Nixon speechwriters Pat Buchanan and William Safire, he called Vietnam War protesters "a small group of misfits," "a minority of pushy youngsters and middle-aged malcontents...", "an effete corps of impudent snobs..." and "nattering nabobs of negativism," *inter alia*. He was also told to target the press and Democratic liberals, saying all the things Nixon wanted to but could not. Agnew was all too happy to comply. In spare moments, he lobbied Nixon's team to be appointed to the U.S. Supreme Court. But nine months into their second terms, Agnew had to resign after he was exposed on multiple charges of taking bribes not only while he was Governor of Maryland, but even as the Vice President. Agnew admitted to taking the money but claimed it had not influenced his official actions. He was sentenced to three years of unsupervised probation and a fine. When a bust of him as Vice President was dedicated in the Senate chambers, he observed: "I am not blind or deaf to the fact that some people feel that this is a ceremony that should not take place."

The author contends that it was only with the presidency of Jimmy Carter that the vice president (in that case, Walter Mondale), was given tasks to perform beyond the usual ceremonial and political chores. (When nominated, given Mondale's previous statements about reluctance to campaign, Mondale felt obliged to clarify to reporters: "What I said at the time was that I did not want to spend most of my life in Holiday Inns. But I've checked and found they've all been redecorated.")

Ever since Mondale's time, the author reports that vice presidents "have become genuine partners in governance with their presidents."

This book seeks to redress some of the injustice that doomed most vice presidents to obscurity, in spite of the impressive careers that led them to garner their party's nominations in the first place. There are so many interesting anecdotes in this book; these men played important parts in our history, and are worth getting to know.

Evaluation: Even many history buffs will be astounded by the extent to which they do not know the names of some of the men in this examination of the 47 vice-presidents who have served thus far in American history. The author includes a chapter on every single one of them, and the stories and personalities depicted are absolutely fascinating. If you love history and politics, as I do, you will really appreciate this book!

Dave Hoff says

Best part of book is, you can select which VP you'd like to learn more of. Each VP a standalone chapter. Jerry Ford my favorite VP, and run up to Ike as the best Pres. Ford reminded the public when sworn in, they were getting a Ford, not a Lincoln. A humble man who had turned down both the Greenbay Packers & Detroit Lions to play professional football. And Spiro Agnew, "Lay some rhetoric on me" a Dane asked him. All I remember is the Mickey Mouse watch with his face on the dial.

John-Paul says

I guess I should have known that a book about vice-presidents dedicated to Walter Mondale, and the fact that the author has written another book about Joe Biden, would have a particular political bent to it. But I found it in the "Hot Books" section of my library and thought that learning about this set of often little-known politicians would be interesting. The book was almost broken into two sections: from about the beginning all the way up to around Teddy Roosevelt, the book was mostly apolitical, content to discuss the situation in the country at the time and the vice-presidents themselves in a mostly neutral manner. I was impressed with the information given about some truly obscure men and the discussion as to how Reconstruction would have gone if Lincoln hadn't tossed Hannibal Hamlin aside for an obviously political choice in Andrew Johnson was excellent. However, once we got to FDR and his vice-presidents (and thus to the roots of modern day Democratic liberalism) the true colors of the author started to come out. Not that anything the author said at this point surprised me, because it was the general fare: FDR and his agenda was akin to Moses coming off the mountaintop with the Ten Commandments (little was made of his all-encompassing desire to expand the power of the executive, which was particularly amusing considering his treatment of another Republican vice-president later in the book), JFK was an immortalized martyr (no mention of any impropriety), LBJ was gregarious and got things done (only a begrudging mention of his heavy-handed ways and of the Vietnam quagmire he only made worse during his presidency) and Humphrey was a poor, unfortunate puppet of LBJ (well, that might have been right). Meanwhile, he actually treated Nixon with a bit of fairness (though with the kind of guarded deference a Democrat might give to Satan, Darth Vader or Dick Cheney) while essentially patting Gerald Ford on the head. The reader would have thought that the combination of Carter and Mondale could have cured cancer and founded a colony on Mars (all before lunch) based on the Mondale chapter...too bad they couldn't successfully govern the country either from a foreign or domestic viewpoint. Much in the Bush Sr. chapter was made of some hare-brained scheme of Republican operatives of making Reagan and Ford "co-presidents" so the actual topic of Bush Sr.'s vice presidency was largely glossed over. The reader could tell that Witcover couldn't wait to get to the Quayle chapter, peppering it as he did with malapropisms throughout (though I will give him a modicum of credit for not including the "potatoe" incident). Gore's chapter began with his humble upbringing by a "genius" of a father (why he was a "genius" is unsurprisingly never mentioned) and ended with his heralding as a Nobel Peace Prize recipient (better that than the presidency, says I) and the victim of "perhaps the single-most significant political decision ever handed down by the highest judicial body in the land." (Roe v. Wade or Obergefell v Hodges anyone?). Again, the author was licking his chops for the next Republican, as he tore into Cheney's vice-presidency both during that chapter as well as the next one on Biden and even the final epilogue. Speaking of Biden, the only negative he can find to say is that he can be loquacious at times, though kudos to him for including a Robert Gates quote that that "[Biden] has been wrong on nearly every major foreign policy and national security policy issue over the past four decades." Considering the fact that by the author's admission Biden was constantly against military advisors' thoughts on the Iraqi surge (which were eventually proven to have been successful), it appears this quote has some merit.

All in all, this book is a good source of information on early vice-presidents and a wonderful source of liberal talking points on the vice-presidents from John Nance Garner forward. One more point to mention: it was truly shocking to see so many typographical errors in a single book. At just over 500 pages, I estimate that I found at least 20-30 errors in this book, ranging from the relatively minor inclusion of an unnecessary word in a sentence to the ridiculous indication that a particular vice-president, though said to have been born in the early 20th century, died in the late 19th century! I've read book nearly twice this length with a fraction of the errors this book has, so hopefully that will be a focus point for a future edition.

Bryan Woerner says

This was a really fascinating book especially after having read biographies of the presidents. Only complaint are there errors in the edition I read that could be corrected with better editing.

David Bales says

This interesting book has brief, chapter-length biographies of all of America's 47 vice presidents. Many were obscure political bosses used to balance tickets, some were after-thoughts but many others were rather interesting political figures in their own right, and Witcover traces how the office changed from being barely acknowledged in the early days, (John Tyler set the standard for a vice president assuming the office upon the death or otherwise removal of the president) to being a major political position. The first printing of this book is marred by numerous typos and small errors in numbers and dates, and it is badly in need of editing.

Adam says

To be elected vice-president of the United States is to acquire a thankless and almost foreordained task. Of the 47 men who've held the office, only four have gone on to be elected president in their own right after their predecessors' term ended--and the results were decidedly mixed.* Nine more succeeded a president who died of natural causes, was assassinated, or--in the case of Richard Nixon--was forced to resign.** And, perhaps most tragically, when seven of these men died in office themselves, not a single one was replaced until the president himself faced reelection and was able--or perhaps forced--to fill the post, a testament to the office's historically low opinion among not only the majority of Americans, who didn't seem to notice the vacant posts, but also the nation's own federal government, which didn't seem to care. (The situation is even more tragic when you add to this total the number of vice presidents who passed away within a few years of leaving office, many of them having served their final months or years in declining health to no one's apparent alarm.)

In fact, of these 47 men, only one was able to achieve a level of true dignity, grace, and equality in his role as vice president. He did so on level footing with his president, based on an agreement reached amiably between the two men before their party's convention, while also avoiding any deep and lasting rifts between himself and the Oval Office. He presided over the Senate with skill, making sure his firsthand knowledge of the institution's ways didn't imbue him with either arrogance or deference, and he took on legislative and diplomatic responsibilities beyond the Senate without ever neglecting his Constitutional duties there. And yet, after spending four years as the nation's second-most-powerful public figure--only "a heartbeat away from the presidency," as they say--there are few if any Americans who would be able to identify Walter

Mondale from this description. Such is the fate of those who choose to seek--or are foolish enough to accept--the office.

Today, the vice president is seen as less of a stand-by commander in chief--a person ready and able to take control in case of a presidential vacancy or national emergency--and more of a path to scoring political points and possibly influencing the outcome of an election. Barack Obama's selection of Joe Biden did much to reassure voters who were concerned over the freshman senator's inexperience with the culture of Washington, D.C. and the United States' near incomprehensible foreign policy, both of which Biden--a Senate veteran and chairman of the Committee on Foreign Relations--offered in spades. Obama's opponent in the 2012 election, Mitt Romney, chose as his running mate Paul Ryan, a nationally recognized congressman whose staunch conservative ideals overshadowed Romney's damaging record as a moderate. Four years earlier, John McCain chose Sarah Palin, the relatively unknown first-term governor of Alaska, as a way to counteract Obama's historical significance while also invigorating his campaign with some much-needed personality; unfortunately, the decision backfired, transforming the election into a referendum on Palin's preparedness and intelligence rather than a contest between candidates and their ideas.

Then again, Obama and his opponents were in good company: very rarely has a president's running mate been chosen simply to guarantee a fluid transition should the nation's highest office be suddenly and unexpectedly vacated, as the Constitution prescribes. Instead, many of the nation's vice presidents were chosen to offset--or complement--the leading name on the ticket rather than to ensure the continuation of the federal government in times of crisis or tragedy. As might be expected, this often put our country at great risk. John Breckinridge, the vice president under James Buchanan, would later join the Confederacy during the Civil War, causing the Senate--which he had joined after leaving office--to declare him a traitor and unanimously expel him from its body. Had Breckinridge found himself president at any point, the fate of the entire country, not to mention the Civil War and the end of slavery, might have changed dramatically. There is also the more recent example of Spiro Agnew, Richard Nixon's vice president, who was forced to resign from office a full ten months before Nixon himself on charges of corruption, for which he plead "no contest." Had Agnew been able to hold onto his office for another year, he would have become the most powerful man in the world; instead, he is today considered one of--if not the--worst vice president in American history.

Unfortunately, in the long history of the American vice presidency--which, in the hands of Jules Witcover, comes in at just over 500 pages in an abridged and heavily summarized form--not a single one of those 47 men could claim to have had a lasting influence on the nation while in office. Even the most bombastic, progressive, or controversial of these men--Walter Mondale, John Nance Garner, Dick Cheney--today recede into history only as footnotes rather than interesting chapters all their own. Most Americans, if not all but the most astute students of history, have little knowledge of any of the vice presidents who served outside of their own lifetimes. As our nation continues to grow older, that fact becomes increasingly true.

The subtitle of Witcover's book is "From Irrelevance to Power," and the most striking example of this shift is Dick Cheney, George W. Bush's vice president, who seemed at times to be the more influential of the two men. And while Cheney's legacy will be debated for decades, at least until there is enough distance from the emotions of the moment, just as all presidents and vice presidents are judged, he seems to have been the driving force behind Witcover's lengthy and largely impartial--if not entirely exhaustive--study of the office and the men who have held it. As the next presidential election approaches, one in which we will see two new nominees choosing two more candidates for the vice presidency, we must remind ourselves that the vice presidency has a greater role to play in our lives and government than any of us recognize. After all, it's been forty years since a vice president was forced to succeed a president; the youngest voters at that time of Gerald Ford's swearing in would now be fast approaching retirement age. As history demonstrates, fate has little interest in what we choose to remember from the past and what we choose to forget, and our actions--

not to mention the actions of the next president, his party, and his supporters--can determine the entire future of the country in unexpected and irreversible ways.

*John Adams succeeded George Washington and was a failure, whereas Thomas Jefferson succeeded Adams and was a success. Martin Van Buren followed his president, Andrew Jackson, into the White House but only served one term, just as George H.W. Bush followed Ronald Reagan in 1988 and was voted out four years later, and for almost the same exact reason--a tumultuous economy.

**These nine men were John Tyler, Millard Fillmore, Andrew Johnson, Chester A. Arthur, Theodore Roosevelt, Calvin Coolidge, Harry S. Truman, Lyndon B. Johnson, and Gerald Ford. Surprisingly, the forty years since Ford ascended to the presidency marks the second-longest span of time in which there has been no presidential vacancies, second only to the fifty-two years between George Washington's inauguration and William Henry Harrison's tragic--but entirely avoidable--death one month into his first term.

This review was originally published at There Will Be Books Galore.

Carrie-Anne O'Driscoll says

Fascinatingly factual and not at all dry as some nonfiction writing tends to be. Highly informative about the more obscure Vice Presidents from days past. I was surprised how many issues that we are dealing with in the present administration that have already been dealt with in regards to constitutionality.

If you care about US history or have ever doubted the words, "Those who do not know the past are condemned to repeat it," needs to get a copy. I'm tempted to send one to D.C. They could learn some things. Highly recommended.

I won this book through a Goodreads Giveaway.

Stacey says

Essential Reading

This book came along at the right time, as I needed a history of all Vice Presidents. There is a pragmatic approach to telling these stories of largely forgotten men.

The intriguing part is imagining any of these succeeding to the Presidency. They were, after all, just a heartbeat away.

The task at hand is formidable, since each Vice President could have warranted their own book, but the author does them all justice.

Definitely recommended.

Robert Sparrenberger says

This was an excellent book. All 47 Vice Presidents are examined with a brief bio on everyone and then a recap of what happened during their tenure as vp. Some of these guys no one has ever heard of before and some are quite famous.

A few interesting tidbits:

Only five Vice Presidents have been elected to the presidency. 9 became president via death or resignation of the president. And only one was never elected to either the vice presidency or the presidency.

Also I found interesting the quote from Ross Perot talking about how nafta would send American jobs to Mexico. Ross got it right.

Several typos and missed dates in this book which are obvious and should have been caught.

Overall, if you love American politics and factoids, this is a must read.
