Presidential Lightning Rods

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Long dismissed as an insignificant political office, the vice-presidency has undergone a marked rehabilitation in recent decades. As the vice president’s advisory role has been upgraded, so too has the study of that institution. This increase in scholarly attention to the vice-presidency is consistent with the dominant tendency within presidential studies to examine members of the executive branch in terms of their contribution to the formulation of public policy. Viewed as a policy adviser, the vice-presidency did not become important until Walter Mondale, or perhaps Nelson Rockefeller, occupied the office. Viewed as a presidential spokesman and lightning rod, however, the vice-presidency came into its own with the tenure of Richard Nixon.

Nixon was the first vice president to become a highly visible political spokesman. During Nixon’s first four years in office he received as many entries in the *New York Times Index* as his four predecessors—Alben Barkley, Henry Wallace, John Nance Garner, and Charles Curtis—had received in a combined twenty years in office. Moreover, Nixon’s model of a visible vice president has been emulated by most of his successors. Whereas from 1933 to 1952, the vice president received an average of 109 entries a year, in the twenty years following Nixon’s tenure, the vice president averaged 482 entries a year (see Table 4.1).

The transformation in the public visibility of the vice president thus preceded the development of the vice president as policy adviser. This chapter examines two vice presidents, Nixon and Hubert Humphrey, both of whom assumed highly visible roles as promoters of administration policies even though neither were important policy advisers within the administration. Both were used by their presidents as lightning rods and salesmen for policies they didn’t shape. How did this vice-presidential role affect their ability to act as presidential lightning rods, and how can their success or lack...
TABLE 4.1. Average annual number of entries in the New York Times Index.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Vice President</th>
<th>Entries</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1921–1922</td>
<td>Calvin Coolidge</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1925–1928</td>
<td>Charles Dawes</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1929–1932</td>
<td>Charles Curtis</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1933–1940</td>
<td>John Nance Garner</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941–1944</td>
<td>Henry Wallace</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1949–1952</td>
<td>Alben Barkley</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1953–1959</td>
<td>Richard Nixon</td>
<td>528</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961–1962</td>
<td>Lyndon Johnson</td>
<td>295</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1965–1967</td>
<td>Hubert Humphrey</td>
<td>514</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1969–1972</td>
<td>Spiro Agnew</td>
<td>708</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975–1976</td>
<td>Nelson Rockefeller</td>
<td>582</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977–1980</td>
<td>Walter Mondale</td>
<td>276</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981–1987</td>
<td>George Bush</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Excluded are those years (1960, 1968, and 1988) when the vice president was a presidential candidate, when there was no vice president (1924, 1946–1948, 1964), and when there was a presidential or vice-presidential death or resignation (1923, 1945, 1963, 1973, 1974).

thereof in deflecting blame contribute to our understanding of lightning rods generally?

JOHNSON AND HUMPHREY: COSTS OF A CREDIT-CLAIMING STRATEGY

Vice President Humphrey was a leading spokesman for the Johnson administration's war effort in Vietnam. President Johnson hoped to use Humphrey not only to persuade audiences about the rightness of the administration's course, but also to have someone other than the president carry what was a highly unpopular message in many parts of the nation. Did Humphrey's outspoken defense of the administration's handling of the Vietnam War help to deflect blame for the war away from President Lyndon Johnson? The short answer is no.

Humphrey failed to deflect blame away from Johnson in large part because Humphrey was viewed by many people as little more than an extension of Johnson, a sentiment summed up in a cover picture of *Esquire* magazine portraying a wooden Humphrey puppet being manipulated from behind by President Johnson. As one scholar has put it, "For millions of Americans—protesters and non-protesters alike—Hubert Humphrey appeared to be a stand-in for Lyndon Johnson." Humphrey's "basic problem," comments another scholar, "was that too many Americans regarded him as a Lyndon Johnson without the Texas accent." To more caustic critics, Humphrey was "all too unhappily known as the parrot in Lyndon Johnson's blue room."
Public opinion surveys show that a great majority of the mass public did not distinguish much between Humphrey and Johnson. Asked by Gallup at the end of 1966 to rate Humphrey and Johnson on a ten-point scale, 40 percent of respondents gave Humphrey and Johnson identical scores. Sixty-eight percent placed them within one point or less of each other, and 81 percent placed them within two points or less. Some critics have suggested that "one cannot expect in the nature of the arrangement that the image of a vice president will be too different from that of the president." But this interpretation is belied by a poll conducted at the outset of 1956 showing that only 11 percent of respondents gave Nixon and Eisenhower the same rating, only 28 percent placed them within a point of each other, and only 44 percent placed them within two points.

Even after Johnson had withdrawn from the 1968 race and Humphrey had begun his own campaign for the Democratic nomination, the public perception of Humphrey and Johnson continued to remain strongly joined. In a poll conducted in May 1968, about one month after Johnson had announced his decision not to seek reelection, 30 percent placed Humphrey and Johnson at the same position on the ten-point scale, 60 percent put them within a point, and 76 percent put them within two points. Another survey taken several weeks before the 1968 election arrived at almost identical results: 31 percent gave the two men the same rating, 62 percent placed them within a point of each other, and 80 percent put them within two points.

Why did so many citizens lump Johnson and Humphrey together? People thought they heard Johnson's voice when Humphrey spoke in large part because of the president's close (and well-advertised) control over his vice president's activities. "From the moment he [Humphrey] took office," reports Humphrey's biographer Carl Solberg, "the text of all his prepared speeches had to be sent to the White House in advance, and practically all suffered excisions." A former Humphrey aide confirms that they "had to get every syllable cleared with the White House." Johnson's close supervision of Humphrey's behavior did not go unnoticed by contemporaries. As early as February 1965, *Time* reported that "Johnson keeps him on a close leash, wants to know at all times where he is, what he is doing and, most important, what he is saying or planning to say." The *Reporter* informed its readers that all of "Hubert Humphrey's public statements have to be cleared by the White House."

Johnson's control over Humphrey's behavior descended to trivial, even ridiculous, depths. Johnson insisted, for instance, that Humphrey get presidential clearance before taking out a presidential yacht. The same restrictions applied to Humphrey's use of official planes. A Humphrey aide recalls: "If he had three out-of-town speaking engagements that week, three memos would go from his military aide to Johnson's military aide to Marvin
Watson to Lyndon Baines Johnson's overnight reading file, and he would mark them yes or no. That kept up for three and a half years and there were many cases where the memos came back marked 'no.'

The president made few, if any, efforts to conceal Humphrey's lack of autonomy. Indeed Johnson occasionally went out of his way publicly to put Humphrey in his place. Shortly after the election, for instance, Humphrey gave a speech in New York calling for a "massive investment" to improve American education. Such an investment, Humphrey declared, would be "the single most important step toward building the Great Society." Johnson, David Halberstam recounts, "was furious; this was his terrain and Humphrey was told this in no uncertain terms. Just so there would be no mistake about it, Johnson called in the White House reporters who were with him on the Ranch and told them, 'Boys, I've just reminded Hubert that I've got his balls in my pocket.'"

This incident reveals, among other things, Johnson's obsessive desire to show those in the political stratum who was in charge and his reluctance to let other members of the administration share in the credit for the Great Society. Johnson was particularly fearful that liberals, with whom he had never had particularly close relations, might credit the impetus for the administration's landmark social legislation to Humphrey, a cofounder of Americans for Democratic Action (ADA) and longtime champion of liberal causes. According to Solberg, Johnson "begrudged any shaft of public light that fell on his . . . vice president. He often chided Humphrey when he felt the vice president was getting too much newspaper space. And to make sure that Humphrey did not, Johnson forbade him to take any member of the national press with him on his out-of-town trips." Humphrey himself later complained that "the President not only frustrated ordinary human desire for praise or recognition, he openly clamped down."

A Gallup poll conducted in November of 1965 showed that Johnson's policy of keeping Humphrey out of the limelight was having an impact. The mass public knew little about Humphrey, and what little they did know was not particularly positive. Only 23 percent said they would like to see Humphrey become president sometime in the future. Although this news alarmed Humphrey and his staff, Johnson was undisturbed. "Wrapping a big arm around Humphrey's shoulder," Johnson told Humphrey "that he had never had a press secretary as vice president and Humphrey didn't need one either." The president advised Humphrey "to concentrate on being a good, loyal vice president and not pay attention to his image." Humphrey dutifully fired his press secretary.

Johnson's efforts to deny Humphrey positive publicity in the opening years of the administration retarded Humphrey's effectiveness as a lightning rod when he was later called upon to defend the war in Vietnam. Because Johnson had been unwilling to build Humphrey up and because he had
taken special pains to demonstrate to others how little autonomy the vice president had, it is hardly surprising that Humphrey was unable to provide Johnson with much in the way of political cover.

After spending the opening years of his administration persuading those inside and outside of the Washington community that he was responsible for all the good things that happened, Johnson now found it difficult to duck responsibility for the increasingly negative outcomes. Johnson's credit-claiming style helped his public prestige while things were going well, but when events turned sour there was nothing to insulate him from calamity. By the time the war began to go badly, too many people had already been schooled to believe that, as one White House aide had confidently boasted in earlier, less troublesome days, "there is only one leader of this orchestra." 22

DEFENDING VIETNAM

Although Humphrey was to become one of the administration's most vocal and enthusiastic defenders of the administration's war effort, he did not begin his tenure that way. In a meeting in early February 1965, Humphrey had argued, along with George Ball and Ambassador Llewellyn Thompson, against bombing North Vietnam. A week later, in a lengthy memorandum to the president on "the politics of Vietnam," Humphrey argued that if the war was escalated, "political opposition will mount steadily," particularly among the party's core constituency of "liberals, independents, labor." He warned Johnson that a protracted war would undermine the administration's other cherished policies. "It is always hard to cut losses," Humphrey conceded, "but the Johnson administration is in a stronger position to do so now than any Administration in this century. 1965 is the year of minimum political risk for the Johnson Administration. Indeed it is the first year when we can face the Vietnam problem without being preoccupied with the political repercussions from the Republican right." 23

For his pains, the vice president was frozen out of foreign policy deliberations. Johnson had been upset that Humphrey had expressed his dissent in front of other members of the administration, and the president's anger was compounded when Humphrey committed his opposition to paper. 24 If the contents of the memo were leaked, Johnson had reason to fear that Humphrey would be made into an apostle of peace, leaving Johnson cast as the warmonger. 25

Johnson's freeze-out of Humphrey had the desired effect of modifying Humphrey's behavior. Humphrey worried aloud to his aides about the need to "find a way to convince this man of my loyalty." 26 The quickest way to regain the president's confidence was to bring his public statements and pri-
vate convictions about Vietnam into closer accord with the president’s. Humphrey slowly climbed back into Johnson’s good graces by flattering the president, criticizing opponents of the war, and sounding an increasingly optimistic note about the prospects for success in Vietnam.

Abandoning his previous reservations, Humphrey now became among the administration’s most outspoken defenders of the war. Humphrey’s change of heart about the wisdom of the war can be dated from his trip to Southeast Asia in February 1965. Upon his return, Humphrey announced to the press, “The tide of battle has turned in Vietnam in our favor.” From this point on, the vice president was seen (in the words of Newsweek) as “the scrappiest warrior in the White House phalanx.”

Humphrey was widely portrayed in the media as a “salesman” for Johnson’s policies. Those who wanted to place a more derogatory spin on Humphrey’s role labeled him a “cheerleader.” Few people, however, are inclined to blame a salesman or cheerleader for the poor performance of a product or team. Rather, their wrath is likely to be reserved for those who are believed to be responsible for creating the product. While liberals might express disgust with Humphrey for selling and applauding a product they believed to be unwise and amoral, this in no way lessened their animosity toward the one man they held responsible for the war in Vietnam—Lyndon Johnson.

Indeed, Humphrey’s “betrayal” seemed only to heighten liberal distrust and criticism of Johnson. To the president’s many sins liberals now added the emasculation and intimidation of one of their staunchest allies and greatest heroes. Many of Humphrey’s old liberal allies continued to believe that the vice president was suppressing his true feelings out of loyalty to the president. ADA cofounder Joseph Rauh, for instance, was convinced that “if Hubert were president, his visceral liberalism, which I believe is there, would get us out of the war.” In a similar vein, The Nation editorialized that defending the war was “a wretched assignment for any politician—even one of Hubert’s gifts. If he makes one misstep Lyndon will be on his back. And Hubert is apt to step wrong in his new assignment, precisely because a residue of liberalism remains in his bosom.” When Humphrey came to deliver the main address at the ADA convention in April 1966, the word went out to “be kind to Hubert” because he was “locked in” by Johnson. In the summer of 1967, the Atlantic Monthly reported that “disenchanted liberals . . . have already written him off as a prisoner of Johnson.”

The overriding reason why Humphrey could not serve as a presidential lightning rod was that he had no hand in making the war he was called on to defend. From the early days of the administration, he had been banished from the decision-making process. Even after he assumed a highly visible public profile on Vietnam, Humphrey was still excluded from the Tuesday luncheon sessions where Johnson, Rusk, McNamara, Bundy (and later Ros-
tow) discussed high-level Vietnam strategy. People might be persuaded or angered by Humphrey, but they were unlikely to hold him responsible for decisions over which they knew he had no influence. As long as Humphrey was seen only as a “mouthpiece” for Johnson, the vice president could not deflect blame away from the president.

The Johnson/Humphrey relationship illustrates in an extreme form the importance of an adviser being at least perceived as responsible for a policy if he is to function as a lightning rod. Humphrey’s limited utility as a lightning rod stemmed from both his role as vice president and Johnson’s leadership style. Johnson’s domineering style of leadership created a presumption among many people within the political stratum that if a member of the administration (whether staff, cabinet member, or vice president) took some action he must be carrying out the president’s wishes. Minimizing both the appearance and reality of subordinates’ discretion makes it difficult for a leader to avoid blame when things go wrong. For if a subordinate is only following presidential orders, then it is the president and not the subordinate who deserves blame.

Humphrey’s ineffectiveness as a lightning rod was also compounded by the limitations of the vice-presidential role, particularly as it existed at that time. Because the vice-presidency is often caricatured as a do-nothing role, vice presidents find it more difficult to deflect blame than do cabinet members or top presidential staff. In contrast to a chief of staff, who is placed at the vortex of the decision-making process, or to a department secretary, who is expected to have significant discretion in making public policy, vice presidents are always at risk of being presumed to be simply carrying out a president’s orders, defending a policy they had no part in making.

One must be careful, however, not to overstate the inherent limitations of the vice-presidential role, even as that role existed in the 1960s. After all, the Gallup surveys cited earlier suggest that in contrast to the Humphrey/Johnson relationship, people did tend to distinguish sharply between Nixon and Eisenhower. Despite the widespread expectation that the first duty of a vice president is to be loyal to the president, Nixon was not seen as Eisenhower’s tool, as simply an extension of the president. How did Eisenhower counteract the weakness of the vice-presidential role and build his vice president into a plausible lightning rod?

NIXON AS A POLITICAL LIGHTNING ROD

Presidential scholars have long recognized that all presidents must wrestle with the conflict between their roles as chief of state and chief of party. The expectation that a president assumes the leadership of his party becomes
particularly problematic in a context in which the president's party is in the minority.

Eisenhower's behavior as president was constrained by the fact that he was a Republican president in a preponderantly Democratic nation. An Andrew Jackson or a Harry Truman could hope to get elected and even govern by rallying the party faithful, but Eisenhower required the support of a significant number of the opposition party in order to succeed. Eisenhower was well aware of this, acknowledging in his memoirs that "I have never enjoyed the luxury of being head of a majority party. Perhaps the leader of such a party can be uniformly partisan. But the leader of a minority party has a different set of references. To win, he . . . must merit the support of hundreds of thousands of independents and members of the opposition party. Attitudes, speeches, programs, and techniques cannot be inflexibly partisan."

Avoiding the appearance of inflexible partisanship helped Eisenhower run almost six million votes (or 10 percent) ahead of his party in 1952 and again in 1956. Eisenhower's success in projecting a nonpartisan image is evident from a Gallup survey conducted in July 1955 which found that 57 percent of the people felt Eisenhower was "at heart" somewhere in between the Republican and Democratic parties.

In part, of course, Eisenhower's nonpartisan image was a result of his nonpartisan past. Before assenting to be a candidate in 1952, he had refrained from professing an allegiance to either political party. But it is not enough to suggest, as one former administration official does, that the people thought: "Here is a man who's above partisan politics. He's the kind of man I like in the White House." For this leaves unanswered the question of how Eisenhower managed to sustain a nonpartisan hero image throughout his eight years as president of the United States. Public images are not set in stone. They can change with incredible speed, as Nancy Reagan's turnaround from frivolous clotheshorse to respected first lady or George Bush's transformation from wimp to winner during the 1988 presidential campaign attest.

Eisenhower sustained his nonpartisan public image by delegating partisan responsibilities to other administration officials, the most prominent of whom was his vice president, Richard Nixon. Since Eisenhower could not afford (nor was he particularly comfortable with) public expressions of partisanship, Nixon was assigned the task of slugging it out with the Democrats, particularly during election years. As a result, the vice president became a target for Democratic attacks.

Eisenhower's intention to use Nixon as a partisan lightning rod was conveyed to Nixon immediately after he was selected as the vice-presidential nominee. After being informed of Eisenhower's choice by Brownell, Nixon was immediately rushed over to talk to the general. From this meeting,
Nixon concluded that "it was clear that he [Eisenhower] envisaged taking an above-the-battle position, and that whatever hard partisan campaigning was required would be pretty much left to me." Eisenhower instructed Nixon that he "should be able not only to flail the Democrats on the corruption issue but also to personify the remedy for it." As the campaign was set to begin in earnest in mid-September, Nixon went to see Eisenhower at his Denver headquarters to review campaign strategy. The plan, Nixon recalled, was "for General Eisenhower to stress the positive aspects of his 'Crusade to Clean Up the Mess in Washington' . . . [while] I was to hammer away at our opponents on the record of the Truman administration, with particular emphasis on Communist subversion."

Nixon did not disappoint. He kept up a steady barrage of hard-hitting attacks on the Democrats and their presidential nominee, Adlai Stevenson. Nixon characterized Stevenson as "a weakling, a waster, and a small-caliber Truman." "Adlai the appeaser," he told a partisan audience in southern California shortly before the election, "got a Ph.D. from Dean Acheson's College of Cowardly Communist Containment." On another occasion, Nixon accused Stevenson, Acheson, and Truman of all being "traitors to the high principles in which many of the nation's Democrats believe." Meanwhile Eisenhower, who rarely met up with Nixon on the campaign trail, carefully cultivated an apolitical image.

Subsequent campaigns followed a roughly similar script. While the president would tell audiences that "no party has a monopoly on brains or idealism or statesmanship," Nixon would accuse Democrats of secretly wanting to "socialize basic American institutions" and harboring "diseased ideas . . . from the Marxist virus." Nixon was assigned the role of answering Democratic criticisms of the administration, enabling Eisenhower to avoid replying to the Democrats. While the vice president repeatedly criticized Stevenson, Eisenhower rarely if ever mentioned his opponent.

While out on the campaign trail, Nixon had a large degree of discretion about what attacks to answer and how to answer them. On occasion, however, Eisenhower would give Nixon specific instructions on what needed saying. At the formal kickoff for the 1956 campaign at Eisenhower's farm in Gettysburg, for instance, the president enlisted Nixon to rebut Stevenson's charges of administration corruption and heartlessness. On the morning of the picnic, Eisenhower called Nixon with instructions:

Everybody is now noting that you are taking the new high level. However, I think today you ought to take notice of some of these attacks that have been made on the administration and on me. . . . I think that when Stevenson calls this administration racketeers and rascals, when they say we are heartless in dealing with the problems of the people and the problems of the farmers, when they say we have no peace and no
prosperity, I want them to be called on it. I would like for you to do so, and if you have to praise me that will be okay. . . . I suggest something along the lines: Do you want to go back to war in order to have prosperity under the Democrats. . . . Of course, it isn’t necessary to attack [Stevenson] personally but we should point out that he is wrong. 51

Just in case Nixon had missed the message, Brownell got on the phone and advised Nixon: “I don’t think we could win with a so-called high level campaign. It has to be fair but you have to take the opposition on. It has to be hard-hitting.” 52

Nixon’s speech closely followed Eisenhower’s outline. One by one, Nixon refuted the Democratic charges enumerated by Eisenhower. The vice president also went on the offensive, charging that for Stevenson “to suggest one day that ‘we’re losing the cold war’ and the next day that we might get rid of the draft . . . is the height of political fakery and irresponsibility.” While vowing that communism at home should not be an issue in the upcoming campaign, Nixon nevertheless called on Stevenson to repudiate Truman’s comment that Alger Hiss was not a Communist. After Nixon had finished answering Democratic charges as well as making a few of his own, Eisenhower then gave a talk that completely ignored the Democratic campaign. The president gave an informal pep talk on the virtues of increasing voter registration (“If you find it necessary to vote against us, all right, we would rather have you do that than not vote at all”), the nature of leadership, and the defining principles of the Republican party. 53

Stevenson followed a similar script when he launched the 1954 campaign by criticizing Eisenhower in a nationally televised speech for his handling of McCarthy and the “New Look” defense policy that downgraded conventional forces in favor of deterrence through the threat of massive atomic retaliation. The president immediately turned to Nixon to make the formal reply. At a strategy meeting with Republican leaders, Eisenhower suggested that “we probably ought to use Dick more than we have been. . . . He can sometimes take positions which are more political than it would be expected that I take.” 54

The day before Nixon was to deliver the televised speech, Eisenhower summoned his vice president to the White House. The president prefaced his remarks by allowing that Nixon did not need advice on “a political speech” but then went on to give him detailed advice anyway. Eisenhower laid particular stress on the need to get across to people that he had “a progressive, dynamic program which benefited all the people.” Evidently worried that Nixon might come across as mean-spirited, Eisenhower suggested that he “might work [in] a smile with regard to . . . comments on Stevenson.” Nixon told Eisenhower that he “planned to stick a few barbs into him [Stevenson].” The president was “perfectly content” that Nixon do so but
“thought it was best to laugh at him rather than to hit him meanly.” He also advised his vice president to remind the audience that he had commanded five million troops in Europe. “What qualification,” the president demanded, “does Stevenson have on this subject? Who is he?”

Nixon took the hint. In his speech, he built his defense of the administration’s “New Look” policy upon President Eisenhower’s position as “one of the greatest military leaders in the world today.” In contrast, the vice president pointed out, Stevenson, like a great many of the rest of us, was no military strategist. Because Eisenhower was a military expert, Nixon believed that “we can and . . . should have confidence in his . . . policy, particularly when the nonexpert who criticizes it offers nothing but a return to a policy which failed and . . . was rejected overwhelmingly by the American people in the election of November 1952.” Immediately afterward, Eisenhower called to congratulate Nixon on a “magnificent” speech, but many in the press were considerably less laudatory. The liberal Catholic weekly, Commonweal, characterized Nixon’s reply to Stevenson as “low-key demagoguery.” The editors were particularly critical of Nixon’s “condescending” suggestion that Eisenhower’s military experience was reason enough for the citizenry to place confidence in the president’s policy. Were it possible to locate Eisenhower “behind the phalanx of advertising men and merchandising experts,” the editors were certain that the general “would agree with us.”

In actual fact, however, as Eisenhower’s chat with Nixon the day before the speech indicates, the “condescension” (if that is what it is to suggest that the opinion of experts deserves greater weight than that of nonexperts) was Eisenhower’s, not Nixon’s.

That Nixon was sometimes explicitly instructed by Eisenhower to go after Stevenson and the Democrats should not obscure Nixon’s relish for the role of partisan hit man. When Dulles was being criticized by congressional Democrats for his Middle East policies in 1956, for instance, the vice president called Dulles and told him to “let me know if you want anyone attacked.” Nixon the partisan, as he himself admitted, enjoyed “sticking a few barbs” into the likes of Stevenson, Acheson, and Truman.

Hard-hitting partisanship came naturally to Nixon, and he found these instincts difficult to repress. In his memoirs, Nixon recalls Eisenhower coming out to the Washington National Airport to see him off on the first campaign swing of 1956 and warning the vice president against indulging in “the exaggerations of partisan political talk.” The president’s parting admonition was “Give ’em heaven.” Nixon followed Eisenhower’s advice for the first few days but found it difficult to inspire his partisan audiences without exaggerated partisan rhetoric. After adding some “hard-hitting additions” to his basic speech, Nixon recounts feeling that “suddenly I felt as if a great weight had been lifted from me. I had not realized how frustrating it had been to suppress the normal partisan instincts.”
Nixon's attacks on the Democrats sometimes went beyond what Eisenhower regarded as proper or wise. Early in the summer of 1954, for instance, in McCarthy's home state of Wisconsin, Nixon accused "the Acheson policy" of being "directly responsible for the loss of China." Worried that such attacks would jeopardize Democratic support for administration policies, Eisenhower promptly instructed Nixon to cease such inflammatory attacks. Such accusations, Ike told Nixon, not only threatened to undermine his foreign policy but were inaccurate. "The reason we lost China," Eisenhower explained, "was because the U.S. insisted upon Chiang Kai-shek taking Communists into his government." And it was George Marshall, he pointed out, not Acheson, who had recommended this policy.

Another presidential reprimand came during the 1958 campaign after Nixon attacked the Democratic party's "sorry record of retreat and appeasement," and the "defensive, defeatist fuzzy-headed thinking which contributed to the loss of China and led to the Korean war." This time Eisenhower made public his displeasure with Nixon's rhetorical excesses. At his weekly press conference, Eisenhower stated his belief that "foreign policy ought to be kept out of a partisan debate... America's best interests in the world will be served if we do not indulge in this kind of thing."

The occasional reprimand notwithstanding, Nixon's attacks on the Democrats largely met with Eisenhower's approval, for they satisfied the president's and the Republican party's need for effective counterpunching against the opposition. When Democratic leaders in Congress protested that Nixon's attacks during the 1954 campaign had reflected on their patriotism, Eisenhower's private response, as reported by Samuel Lubell, was that "Nixon must have done a good job if the Democrats complain so much." Sherman Adams confirmed that Eisenhower did not, "as some Republicans seemed to think, ... [want] his spokesmen to be kind to Democrats in their campaign oratory. He told Nixon and others, including myself, that he was well aware that somebody had to do the hard-hitting infighting, and he had no objections to it as long as no one expected him to do it."

Nixon's hard-hitting attacks upon the opposition earned him praise from the president and Republican politicians but also secured him the undying enmity of Democrats. The Democratic party, declared one Democratic representative, has announced "open season on the Vice President." Nixon was denounced by another Democrat as an "inept, naive, Pilstdown statesman, ... a broken-down, maladjusted, purblind Throttlebottom." "So far as we're concerned," Speaker Sam Rayburn concluded, "his name is mud."

According to one interpretation, Democratic attacks upon Nixon were purely strategic. Nixon himself advances this thesis in Six Crises, in which he argues that as vice president he had "been the whipping boy for those who chose not to direct their political attacks against Dwight D. Eisenhower, the most popular president in recent history." Others concurred that "Nixon is
being shot at now because he appears the obvious candidate and the attacks are directed at him instead of a popular Eisenhower. Were Nixon to step out and another appear . . . he’d get the same treatment." Time magazine echoed this view, arguing that “Nixon was a favorite target of Democrats who felt it unprofitable to criticize Dwight Eisenhower.”

There is substantial truth in this view, but it underestimates the genuine antipathy that Nixon aroused among many Democrats. Truman, who never forgave Nixon for his “traitor” remark, later told Merle Miller that Nixon was “a shifty-eyed goddamn liar. . . . All the time I’ve been in politics, there’s only two people I hate, and he’s one.” Stevenson, too, is reported to have said that Nixon was the only man in public life he ever “really loathed.” Nixon was attacked not only for strategic reasons, but because his role (and the way he played that role) of answering and making partisan charges generated a deep-seated dislike for the vice president.

At the level of the mass public, Nixon-haters often liked Ike. Public opinion surveys show that citizens commonly combined an intense dislike for Nixon with great admiration for President Eisenhower. A poll conducted in February 1956, for instance, found that of those who gave Nixon the lowest possible rating of minus five (about one in seven of those who had formed an opinion of Nixon), only 7 percent gave that same low rating to Eisenhower. Better than three in ten of the people who felt most negatively toward the vice president actually gave Eisenhower the highest possible rating of plus five, and eight in ten evaluated Eisenhower positively (i.e., gave him a rating of between plus one and plus five).

This divorce between the public perception of Nixon and Eisenhower is all the more remarkable when contrasted with the Johnson/Humphrey pattern. A Gallup poll conducted in December 1966 shows that extreme dislike (i.e., a minus five rating) of Humphrey was about as common as that uncovered for Nixon in the February 1956 survey. The difference is that while only 7 percent of those who gave Nixon a rating of minus five also gave President Eisenhower the lowest rating, 61 percent of those who gave Humphrey the lowest possible score also gave Johnson a minus five rating. Moreover, less than 3 percent of those who felt highly negative toward Vice President Humphrey gave Johnson the highest possible rating of plus five, and only one in ten even gave Johnson a positive rating.

People had little difficulty reconciling a deep dislike for Nixon with a high regard for Eisenhower, because they did not view Eisenhower as in any way responsible for Nixon’s partisanship. Most people did not see a vice president fulfilling a role assigned by the president, but simply Nixon being Nixon. Nixon, not Eisenhower, appeared to be the political mastermind behind Republican campaigns. Writing during the fall of 1954 in the New York Times, Cabell Phillips described Nixon as “the chief strategist” of the GOP. In January 1955, U.S. News & World Report informed its readers
that Richard Nixon is "the man at the helm of the Republican Party, busily shaping policy and strategy for the 1956 presidential contest." The vice president, the magazine concluded, "has become the President's political mentor."14

Eisenhower did little to discourage such notions, however inaccurate. In private, he would occasionally acknowledge that he considered himself "a better politician than most so-called professionals,"15 but in public he took any number of occasions to build up the perception of himself as a political neophyte needing the guidance of more sophisticated professional politicians. Asked how he felt about politics in a news conference during the spring of 1955, Eisenhower confessed to "having no great liking for . . . politics . . . in the general derogatory sense."16 And at the outset of his second year in office, he announced to the assembled press that he was "not very much of a partisan."17 Eisenhower sensed that the perception of him as a political innocent served him well with an electorate that regarded politicians and politics as dirty words18 and understood that his nonpartisan stance helped him to win the support of Democrats and Independents.

Part of what made Eisenhower's nonpolitical, nonpartisan image believable, however, is that it was grounded in reality. It was not all dissembling. Eisenhower did distrust party professionals, whom he viewed as too shortsighted to serve the national interest.19 Patronage, he confided in his diary, "is almost a wicked word—by itself it could well-nigh defeat democracy."20 In private "thinking-aloud sessions," Eisenhower occasionally discussed the possibility of forming a new party that would better reflect his views.21

But the nonpolitical, nonpartisan Eisenhower was only part of the story. If Ike did not share the fervent commitment to the Republican party qua party that animated Nixon, he disliked Stevenson, Truman, and Kefauver as intensely as the most partisan of Republicans.22 If patronage-seekers were distasteful to Eisenhower, he had few qualms about throwing out New Deal and Fair Deal Democrats,23 and he always encouraged cabinet members to cooperate with the party chair on appointments.24 If Eisenhower showed disdain for party professionals who talked only about how an issue would play in the next election, it was he, Eisenhower, who had advised his cabinet on the need to promote the administration's accomplishments as if they were selling a product.25

Eisenhower's ambivalence toward politicians was mirrored in his ambivalence toward Nixon.26 On the one hand, he recognized that Nixon played a valuable role by answering Democratic charges and rallying the party faithful. Moreover, he agreed with much of what Nixon said about Stevenson and the liberal wing of the Democratic party. On the other hand, Eisenhower's conception of a good president was one who lifts himself above the partisan fray, thereby becoming a leader of the whole people rather than of only a part. (His dislike for Truman stemmed in large part from what he saw
as his predecessor’s unseemly partisanship.) Eisenhower felt that Nixon was perhaps “too political” to be president. In the spring of 1956, he acknowledged to Emmet Hughes that “I’ve watched Dick a long time, and he just hasn’t grown. So I just haven’t honestly been able to believe that he is presidential timber.” Those whom Eisenhower regarded as “presidential timber” tended to be men, like himself, who were relatively nonpartisan in orientation, such as Robert Anderson, a Democrat from Texas, or his own brother Milton Eisenhower. Nixon was thus caught in a double bind, for Eisenhower (as well as local and national party officials) asked him to play a role that required behaving in ways that seemed to disqualify him, at least in Eisenhower’s eyes, from the office of the presidency.

THE ART OF CASTING

Historian Stephen Ambrose, who has written definitive biographies of both Nixon and Eisenhower, has argued that President Eisenhower “used Nixon in the most cynical fashion.” In this respect, Eisenhower is little different from any other president, because, as Ambrose also notes, “to be used is what a Vice-President is for.” But the comparison with the Johnson/Humphrey relationship suggests that it is potentially misleading to place undue stress upon Eisenhower’s manipulation of his vice president. For President Eisenhower’s use of Nixon pales in comparison to Johnson’s ruthless manipulation of Humphrey.

The key to Eisenhower’s success was not just that he used Nixon but that he cast Nixon in a role in which he needed minimal prodding or monitoring. Partisan attack and counterattack came naturally to Nixon. Indeed, so suited was Nixon to the role of partisan hit man that it was difficult even to tell that he was playing a role. In contrast, it was painfully obvious that Humphrey (who was defending a policy he had had no part in making and had initially opposed, and was criticizing longtime friends and allies) was playing a part that had been foisted upon him by the president. Not surprisingly, people who disapproved of the performance blamed the director in the case of Johnson and Humphrey and the actor in the case of Nixon and Eisenhower.

The Humphrey/Johnson relationship alerts us to a crucial point that is sometimes lost sight of in Eisenhower revisionism, at least in its popularized forms. It is true, as revisionists claim, that Eisenhower tried to conceal the strings by which he controlled his vice president while Johnson advertised his control. But it is also true (to continue the metaphor) that Eisenhower used many fewer and much thinner strings than did Johnson. Not only was Humphrey more tightly controlled than Nixon, it was much easier for outsiders to witness that control. Eisenhower’s aim as a political leader was
both to conceal the ways in which he controlled others and to select performers who could act with a minimum of presidential control.

THE CHANGING VICE-PRESIDENTIAL ROLE

Since Nixon and Humphrey’s time, the vice president’s advisory role has become substantially upgraded and even institutionalized. Where Nixon occupied an office on Capitol Hill and was strictly a visitor at the White House, every vice president since Walter Mondale has occupied an office in the West Wing of the White House. Where Nixon and Humphrey had only infrequent access to the president, Mondale, Bush, Quayle, and Gore have all had a regular, weekly slot in the president’s schedule. Starting with Mondale, moreover, the vice president has received the president’s daily briefing on foreign policy. Nixon’s office budget was not to exceed that of a senator from a one-district state, and his staff numbered only a handful of people; today the vice president has a budget well over two million dollars and employs about a hundred people. Indeed, as Paul Light observes, “the Vice-President’s office is now a replica of the President’s office, with a national security adviser, press secretary, domestic issues staff, scheduling team, advance, appointments, administration, chief of staff, and counsel’s office.”

What does this transformation in the institutional capacity and advisory role of the vice-presidency mean for the job’s availability as presidential lightning rod? With increased policy-making power one might expect that vice presidents would be better positioned to provide presidents with political cover. But Light suggests that there may actually be a trade-off for vice presidents between “external visibility” and “internal impact.” Mondale’s influence on policy, Light suggests, rested on his “hidden-hand” approach. He “kept his advice to Carter private. He was reluctant to speak at cabinet meetings and did not want his staff taking highly visible stands.” Bush followed much the same low-profile strategy in gaining the trust of President Reagan and those around him.

Neither Mondale nor Bush could be described as lightning rods on any policy issue. Mondale avoided the role of policy advocate in public and did not allow himself to become identified with any one policy area, preferring instead to remain a generalist. As one Carter official remarked: “He couldn’t be hit because he never made a clean target. He was moving in and out of issue areas, and didn’t stay long enough to get hurt. He was a genius at staying out of the line of fire.” George Bush emulated the Mondale model only more so, publicly downplaying his influence in policy making, staying out of the public eye, avoiding controversial assignments, and shunning long-term duties that might make him a target for critics.

Of the post-Mondale vice presidents only Dan Quayle, in his capacity as
chair of the President's Council on Competitiveness, has translated the institutional changes in the vice president's policy-making role into something resembling lightning rod status. By the third year into the Bush administration, Quayle began to be portrayed by the environmentalists as an influential administration advocate of loosening environmental regulations. In the summer of 1991, for instance, *The Nation* could describe Quayle's "preemptive power [as] so considerable that he can overrule heads of agencies like E.P.A. Administrator William Reilly." California Democrat Henry Waxman described Quayle's Competitiveness Council as a sinister "shadow government" and said that on clean air, "Quayle seems to have made the transition from irrelevant to dangerous." As head of the Competitiveness Council, Quayle has shown that by sticking to an issue a vice president can assume the role of policy lightning rod. Yet, as Waxman's comment also indicates, before this point few Washingtonians had seen Quayle as an important player in White House policy making.

Indeed, for all the changes in the office that political scientists have documented, the media and public image of the office seem to remain little changed. Recent news stories have dismissed the vice-presidency as a "high office without power," as "the least exciting job in national politics," as a job in which "traditionally, the role . . . is to do essentially nothing." "The vice president," we are told, "is in charge of very little"; the job amounts to little more than being "the president's understudy and [showing] as little independence as possible." With these popular stereotypes of the office still firmly engrained, a stereotype that the "hidden-hand" vice-presidencies of Mondale and Bush have done little to dispel, it remains difficult for vice presidents to act as policy lightning rods.

Moreover, the emergence of what Light calls "the policy vice presidency" in the mid-1970s may have made vice presidents more reluctant to be used as political lightning rods in quite the same way that Eisenhower used Nixon or Nixon used Agnew. When a vice president's choice was largely between the ceremonial vice-presidency (attending funerals, symbolic participation in task forces and councils, and the like) and the political vice-presidency (presidential spokesman, promoter, hit man, and campaigner), the ambitious vice president would prefer the controversial role of partisan hit man to the demeaning role of professional mourner. Taking the partisan low road while the president takes the presidential high road not only gained the vice president presidential gratitude but also earned the vice president the loyalty of local party officials and fund-raisers. Now that vice presidents have access to the administration's innermost policy-making circles, however, they may be less inclined to play the divisive role of partisan hit man—a role that, as Nixon found out in 1960 and Humphrey discovered in 1968, is a reliable route to the nomination but can create a less than presidential image that may be a liability in the general election. The policy vice president will never
displace the political vice president—vice presidents as well as presidents need the political/partisan function performed—but future vice presidents will be reluctant to act in ways that might jeopardize their new-found role as trusted adviser to the president. As a result, future vice presidents will most likely be reluctant to emulate the Nixonian model of vice president as slashing partisan. What future presidents would do well to emulate, though, is Eisenhower's skill at casting subordinates—vice presidents included—in roles that they can play convincingly with a minimum of presidential direction.