

Vice Presidents of the United States John Nance Garner (1933-1941)

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Introduction by Mark O. Hatfield.



My belief has always been in Executive leadership, not Executive rulership.

—John Nance Garner

"There is hardly any limitation upon the ways in which the Vice President might be of service to the President," wrote Franklin Delano Roosevelt in a 1920 issue of the *Saturday Evening Post* when he was the Democratic vice-presidential candidate. The vice president, Roosevelt suggested, should be entrusted with "carrying the large burden of interpreting administration policies to Congress and to the public." Like the vice president in a modern corporation, he should be a "super handy man," handling various matters of detail and "leaving the president free to deal mainly with matters of policy."¹

Upon becoming president a dozen years later, however, Roosevelt had adjusted his image of the vice-presidency to more closely match the predispositions of the man that the Democratic National Convention nominated to be his running mate, John Nance Garner. As vice president, Garner would indeed work extensively at "interpreting administration policies to Congress," as the White House's chief liaison to Capitol Hill, but he did little to communicate these policies to the public because he refused to be a spokesman or campaigner. He did provide the administration with expertise on "matters of detail" but limited this advice mostly to the intricacies of maneuvering legislation through Congress.

Garner's long career in the House of Representatives had prepared him for the vice-presidency. He had rarely originated innovative ideas to answer the problems of the country, yet once someone else conceived an idea for legislation, Garner was often called upon to serve as a parliamentary midwife. He would expertly guide the plan through the House, from negotiations in smoky back rooms to a debate and vote on the floor.

On the surface, there appears to be little mystery about John Nance Garner. Plainspoken and refreshingly unpretentious, "Cactus Jack" from the tiny back-country town of Uvalde, Texas, was by all accounts a man of common words, simple tastes, a frugal lifestyle, and an unswerving pragmatism that prompted Roosevelt to dub him "Mr. Common Sense." Yet, for all his uncomplicated personality, Garner remains an enigmatic presence in history. For thirty-eight years in Washington, from 1903 to 1941, Garner continued to be a secretive back-room operator. Because nearly all of his most important political activities took place out of the public eye and off the record, his personal motivations or convictions remain unclear. It is particularly difficult to gauge the degree to which, in his role as vice president, Garner should be credited for the legislative successes of the first Roosevelt administration or be blamed for the failures of the second.²

Youth

Garner was born on November 22, 1868, in Red River County, Texas. Although political promoters later romanticized his modest upbringing in a mud-chinked log cabin, his mother, Rebecca Walpole Garner, was the daughter of the town banker and a descendent of English aristocracy. At age eighteen, young Garner set off to enroll at the University of Tennessee, the state in which both sides of his family had roots. Finding himself handicapped by an insufficient preparatory education and various respiratory problems, however, the young man soon returned home and found work in a law office. By studying in his spare time, Garner gained entrance to the bar in 1890. He then failed in his first bid for political office as a twenty-one-year-old candidate for city attorney.

A Back-Room Politician

Garner moved to Uvalde, Texas, for the health benefits of its dry climate. During his successful campaign for judge of Uvalde County, he met Ettie Rheiner, who soon became his cherished partner as both beloved wife and career-long personal secretary.³ Garner served as county judge from 1893 to 1896, followed by a tenure in the Texas state legislature from 1898 to 1902. When Texas gained an additional congressional seat after the 1900 census, Garner managed to secure the chairmanship of a special redistricting committee. He used this position to carve out an advantageous congressional district, from which he ran successfully in 1902 for the U.S. House of Representatives. During his first several years in the House, Garner was a silent backbencher who ingratiated himself with his colleagues by cultivating friendships and by his record of party loyalty. He was eventually rewarded with coveted committee appointments, and by the 1920s his seniority had made him the ranking Democrat on the Ways and Means Committee and chairman of the Democrats' Committee on Committees, which chose that party's members for all House committees. His vociferous attacks on Treasury Secretary Andrew Mellon's economic programs earned him a national reputation as "a Jefferson/Jackson Democrat—egalitarian, rural, states' rights oriented, and populist."⁴

In 1929, Garner was elected the floor leader of a House Democratic party whose morale and representation had suffered a crushing blow in the 1928 elections. As minority leader, Garner relied upon informal methods to strengthen the party's influence. He enjoyed a close rapport with Republican Speaker Nicholas Longworth, his debonair alter ego. Said Garner, "I was the heathen and Nick was the aristocrat." This congressional odd couple cohosted a daily bipartisan gathering of lawmakers in a small room, deep in the bowels of the Capitol, which became known as the "Bureau of Education." Like The Boar's Head Club, the site of Speaker Joe Cannon's drinking and gambling congregations that Garner had attended decades earlier, the bureau provided a place for politicians to relax and get to know one another over a cordial drink, ignoring the Eighteenth Amendment's ban on alcoholic beverages. The bureau also served as an informal forum for constructive, off-the-record communications and negotiations between the two parties. In this setting, Longworth said that Garner operated as "a one man cabal"⁵ Garner presented only four major bills to Congress under his own name in his entire three decades in the House, a fact a longtime House colleague, James F. Byrnes of South Carolina, attributed to Garner's collaborative parliamentary style: "It was his policy, whenever he had an idea . . . to induce a prospective opponent or a doubtful supporter to sponsor the legislation. When he achieved that, he knew his purpose was accomplished." As a result, Byrnes noted, "*The Congressional Record* will not show the remarkable influence he exercised upon the members of the House and Senate during his long service." Garner himself later asserted that he had "no more useful years than those in the ranks of or as the leader of the opposition to the majority."⁶

Between the 1930 congressional elections and the opening of the Seventy-second Congress on December 7, 1931, fourteen members-elect, including Longworth, died.⁷ After special elections were held to replace the deceased, the Democrats emerged with a 219 to 214 advantage, enabling Garner to become Speaker and the titular head of his party as its highest national officeholder. Garner did not share the same close personal friendship with the new Republican minority leader, New York's Bertrand Small, that he had enjoyed with Longworth. The two parties were becoming increasingly polarized in their approaches to solving the crisis that gripped the national economy. In addition, a decade in the minority had permitted many House Democrats to lapse into habits of frequent absenteeism and maverick voting patterns, which the party with its slim majority could now ill afford.

The new Speaker enforced party discipline with a severity that inspired Sam Rayburn to call him, "a terrible, table-thumping Democrat." Under the slogan, "You've got to bloody your knuckles!," Garner regularly summoned House Democrats to caucus or bureau meetings, where they wrangled out consensus policies to which he would then "bind" all of their votes. "And if they didn't stay bound," he recalled, "I'd put 'em down in my book and they'd never get through paying for it." Of his overriding concern for party solidarity, Garner once declared, "I have always done what I thought was best for my country, never varying unless I was advised that two-thirds of the Democrats were for a bill and then I voted for it."⁸

In his response to the Great Depression, this dedication to maintaining a governing consensus eventually outweighed Garner's normally conservative principles, and he grew increasingly supportive of federal intervention in economic affairs. At first, the Speaker attempted to forge bipartisan cooperation in support of Herbert Hoover's economic programs, such as the Reconstruction Finance Corporation and the Glass-Steagall banking bills. This conciliatory approach meant reversing his previous opposition to such measures as a manufacturers' sales tax designed to increase government revenue in the face of mounting deficits—favored by business groups for more than a decade—and establishment of a moratorium on foreign debts in order to relieve some of the financial burden on the nation's European trading partners.⁹

By 1932, however, the overwhelming consensus among congressional Democrats and the public against the sales tax and in favor of additional relief measures convinced Garner to repudiate Hoover's program. He proposed his own federal relief spending bill through a massive public works program. This action was highly uncharacteristic, given his reluctance to offer his own proposals and his long record of opposition to increased government spending. Hoover vetoed the bill, condemning it as "the most gigantic pork barrel raid ever proposed to an American Congress!" Relations between the two men never recovered.¹⁰

The Election of 1932

A "Garner for President" movement emerged in January 1932. Instigated by an editorial campaign in the newspapers of William Randolph Hearst, it was independent of any initiative or encouragement by Garner. Over such other prospective nominees as Franklin Roosevelt, Al Smith, and former Secretary of War Newton Baker, Hearst endorsed Garner as the candidate he considered most likely to adhere to his own agenda, which included instituting a national sales tax and keeping the United States out of the League of Nations.¹¹ The Garner bandwagon included many conservative southern and western politicians who felt ideologically and personally comfortable with Garner. A contemporary journalist attributed the attraction of the Garner candidacy to the desire of "the rank and file Democrats to get away from everything the East implies and to find a good, safe politician with an innocuous record, what they want is a Democratic Coolidge." Others supported Garner only as a stalking-horse for another candidate or as one of a variety of candidates whose delegates could collectively block Roosevelt.¹²

Garner himself was less interested in becoming president than in ensuring his tenure as Speaker by nominating a candidate who could capture the White House with long enough coattails to solidify the party's majority in Congress. Roosevelt's candidacy, he concluded, was the best bet to unite and strengthen the party enough to achieve this goal. Garner therefore ignored the efforts of his promoters and refused to proclaim himself a candidate, although he never actually ordered them to desist. As a consequence, Garner found himself holding a tiger by the tail at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, where he placed third on the first ballot behind Roosevelt and Smith. After three ballots, during which Garner's numbers increased marginally, Roosevelt's strategists realized that without Garner's support they would never achieve the necessary two-thirds vote that the party's century-old rule mandated

for nomination. They feared they were about to lose the Mississippi delegation, which operated under a rule that gave all twenty of its votes to the candidate favored by a simple majority of its members. To break the impasse, Roosevelt campaign manager James Farley called Garner's campaign manager, Representative Sam Rayburn, to a meeting in Mississippi Senator Pat Harrison's hotel room. They agreed to ask Garner to transfer his delegates to Roosevelt in return for the vice-presidential nomination. Garner reluctantly agreed in order to avoid the type of deadlocked convention that in 1924 had produced the unsatisfying compromise candidacy of John W. Davis and his losing campaign. Garner consoled himself with the thought that the apparently less demanding office "might be a nice way for me to taper off my career."¹³

Roosevelt wanted to use Garner's homespun appeal in extensive campaigning as a sort of "Texas Al Smith." But Garner refused, believing that such efforts would be irrelevant, since he regarded elections as merely a referendum on the incumbent's performance. He made only two speeches and was briefly employed as Roosevelt's peacemaking mediator to Smith before being dismissed to go home to Uvalde. There he was reelected to his House seat on the same day he was elected vice president of the United States.¹⁴

Between the November 1932 election and the March 1933 inauguration, Roosevelt frequently phoned Garner in Uvalde to solicit his opinions about proposals for legislation and organizing the new government. Although Garner offered relatively few legislative proposals, he did advocate government guarantees of banking deposits, an idea he promoted in Congress despite the objections of the president-elect. Eventually, the groundswell of congressional support for the plan won Roosevelt over, and he endorsed the Vandenberg Amendment to the Glass-Steagall Banking Act, creating the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation. In this case, Garner appeared to be ahead of the "New Deal" curve, belying his later reputation as an inflexible reactionary.

Inauguration Day in 1933 marked an ceremonial demonstration of mutual affection and gratitude between the outgoing Speaker and his House colleagues as the procession of 400 House members and another 150 members-elect escorted Garner through the Capitol to the Senate chamber, where he thanked them with an emotional farewell speech in which he grieved, "my heart will always be in the House."¹⁵

First Term—Supporting the President's Program

In many respects, Garner's new job was a step down. He called the vice-presidency "the spare tire on the automobile of government," "a no man's land somewhere between the legislative and the executive branch," and "not worth a bucket of warm spit." He bemoaned the fact that the vice president had "no arsenal from which to draw power," believing that only when men "have friendship for him and faith in and respect for his judgement can he be influential."¹⁶

In the Senate, the new vice president renewed political alliances with over twenty of his former colleagues who had moved there from the House, including such influential Democratic senators as Arkansas' Joe Robinson, Mississippi's Pat Harrison, Kentucky's Alben Barkley, Virginia's Carter Glass, South Carolina's James Byrnes, Texas' Morris Sheppard, and Maryland's Millard Tydings. These men were products of the Wilsonian progressive New Freedom movement, but by the 1930s some of them had become the leaders of the party's conservative wing of southern and western Democrats, who held the key committee chairmanships. Garner's vice-presidency enhanced the influence of these men because he often sympathized with them in their efforts to limit the liberalism of the New Deal.¹⁷

Garner's familiarity with the mechanics and personalities of Congress initially proved invaluable to the new Roosevelt administration. Before committing himself to the innovative experiments of his "Brains Trust," Roosevelt asked for Garner's realistic assessment of congressional reaction. After observing Garner in cabinet meetings, Roosevelt's Postmaster General James Farley came "to look upon him as one of the truly great public men of this generation" because of Garner's mastery of "such intricate problems as government financing, taxation, tariffs, and revenue bills." Once Roosevelt decided on a new proposal, Garner acted as his political general, personally leading the White House troops as they stormed Capitol Hill.¹⁸

Most of Garner's political generalship was of the guerilla variety. He continued to host regular Bureau of Education meetings in a room near the Senate floor. Darrell St. Claire, assistant secretary of the Senate, remembered that "the whiskey vapor would come flowing into the chamber from the formal office, along with the laughter." Garner would lure guests there from both the legislative and the executive branches, ambushing them with bombardments of reason and liquor designed to "hypnotize, mesmerize and otherwise to get our friends to approve matters in a helpful way."¹⁹

Garner did not always agree with Roosevelt's policies during the "First One Hundred Days" of the new administration, but he encouraged other reluctant lawmakers to follow him in supporting the president because it was "good politics and good patriotism." "Sometimes conditions in a country justify temporary violations of deep principles of government," he reasoned to one congressman, "if ever there was such a time it is now." To another Democrat who was skeptical of Roosevelt, "It doesn't matter what kind of a fool you think he is; he's your fool just as long as he's President and the leader of your party." In a letter responding to criticism of the administration from a Texas lumberman friend named John Henry Kirby he admitted, "You can't do everything you want to and I can't do half of what I would like to do. You can't control everybody you would like to and I am in a similar fix."²⁰

One historian of the vice-presidency rated Garner as "a combination presiding officer, Cabinet officer, personal counselor, legislative tactician, Cassandra and sounding board" for the administration and "undoubtedly one of the most powerful of the twentieth century Vice-Presidents."²¹ However, there were some tasks that Garner stubbornly avoided, especially those that would involve publicity, which he felt was inappropriate for a vice president. He refused to act as a spokesman for the administration because, he told Roosevelt, "Any speech or statement I made would be searched to find a difference between you and me." Instead, when the press begged him for comments, he declared, "I'm a member of a firm—the junior member. Go to headquarters for the news." Just as he had in 1932, he begged out of campaigning publicly for his party in the national and statewide elections. He also declined a radio station's offer to give weekly fifteen-minute addresses at \$1,500 each, which he thought would be exploitative of his office.²²

Garner further absolved himself of the traditional vice-presidential obligations to represent the administration at a variety of ceremonial and gala affairs. He adamantly protected his privacy and his personal time with his wife, refusing even the accompaniment of the Secret Service. "I don't want those constables protecting me. There is not anybody crazy enough to shoot a Vice-President," he declared.²³

Thanks to the large Democratic majorities, Garner needed to cast a tie-breaking vote in the Senate on only two minor matters, but he still made his presence felt as presiding officer. One of the cagey veteran's favorite parliamentary tricks was to "buggy-whip" bills through debate with an unexpected staccato call of "There-being-no-objections-the-bill-is-passed" and a sudden rap of the gavel. He also descended frequently from the dais to lobby the senators in attendance.²⁴

The cantankerous Garner had little patience with the flamboyant senator from Louisiana, Huey Long. Long once asked Garner to require all of his colleagues to stay and listen to his filibuster on the National Recovery Act, to which Garner retorted: "In the first place the Senator from Louisiana should not ask that. In the second place, it would be cruel and unusual punishment." Another time he remarked to humorist Will Rogers before the convening of a session, "Will, sometimes I think the hearing in my right ear and the vision in my right eye isn't as good as it used to be. Long sits on my right. . . . I may not be able to hear or see Huey this morning."²⁵

Long antagonized Garner on another occasion by drawing: "Mr. President, I rise to make a parliamentary inquiry. How should a Senator who is half in favor of this bill and half against it cast his vote?" Snapped an exasperated Garner: "Get a saw and saw yourself in two. That's what you ought to do anyway!"²⁶

Roosevelt's first term was not without a few points of contention between the president and his vice president, foreshadowing their later problems. Garner had grave misgivings about the National Recovery Act, diplomatic recognition of Russia, and the embargo clause in the Neutrality Act. Roosevelt was somewhat dissatisfied with Garner's choices when the Senate authorized him to select one member to the London Economic Conference in 1933 and three to the Nye munitions industry investigation committee. The president also suspected that Garner had

botched his plan to slip the soldier's bonus bill of 1935 through Congress by leaking the strategy to his congressional friends.²⁷

At the 1936 Democratic National Convention in Pittsburgh, the cumbersome 1832 rule requiring that two-thirds of all delegates approve both the presidential and vice-presidential nominations was overturned in favor of a simple majority. The rules change enabled future Democratic presidential nominees to choose their own running mates, rather than accept the consensus of the convention. Initiated by Roosevelt, this reform was passed largely in deference to his personal prestige. Yet Garner's presence on the ticket also must have made the delegates feel comfortable in doing so. It is difficult to imagine the same rule passing in 1940, when Roosevelt offered as his running mate Henry Wallace, a less popular man within the party, who would not likely have been approved under the former rules.

Second Term—An Obstacle to Roosevelt

The second term of the Roosevelt-Garner administration saw the breakdown of the working relationship between the president and vice president. Garner objected to Roosevelt's determination to escalate the New Deal's centralizing of the federal government, expanding government regulation and spending programs, and "revolutionizing" the Democratic party.

The first issue over which the two men had a truly acrimonious dispute was Roosevelt's labor agenda. Garner objected to such New Deal pro-labor legislation as the Wagner-Connery Act of 1935 and the Black-Connery bill of 1937. He fiercely opposed organized labor's 1936 sit-down strikes, considering them a violation of business owners' property rights. When the president proved reluctant to repudiate these tactics, Garner secretly lobbied Congress in support of efforts by Texas Representative Martin Dies, Jr., and South Carolina Senator James Byrnes to pass congressional resolutions condemning the strikes. When Republican Senator Arthur Vandenberg of Michigan gave a ringing speech on the floor of the Senate in support of Byrnes' amendment, Garner jumped down from his presiding seat to offer his congratulations.²⁸

On February 5, 1937, Roosevelt called Garner and a handful of Democratic congressional leaders to a meeting at the White House, where he stunned them with an audacious plan to reorganize the Supreme Court. Up to six new justices would be chosen by the president in an attempt to ensure many years of judicial approval for his liberal legislative agenda.

Garner himself was not among those critics who considered the proposal to be a threat to the judiciary's independence, believing that "no President can control that court." However, he was deeply concerned about the threat to party unity posed by Roosevelt's somewhat reckless method of handling such a controversial proposal. Garner complained that the president sent the plan to Congress, "without notice after saying he had no legislative program other than outlined . . . it was not in the party platform nor was it taken after consultation with Congressional leaders who would have to put it through. Party policy is not made by one man without consultation with elected officials from another branch of government."²⁹

While never issuing a public statement against the bill, Garner demonstrated his disapproval with two symbolic gestures. First, he held his nose and gave an emphatic "thumbs-down" sign as the bill was introduced on the floor of the Senate. Then, during the subsequent congressional debate, Garner suddenly departed from the capital in June to return to Texas. It was the first time he had left Washington while Congress was in session. Roosevelt was furious. "Why in hell did Jack have to leave at this time for?" he fumed, "This is a fine time to jump ship." In response to widespread speculation in the press about a rift between the president and himself, Garner issued a public statement from Texas declaring that his departure was in no way meant as a protest. "I asked the Boss," he claimed, "and he told me it was all right for me to go fishing." Garner eventually returned to Washington, but the death of Senate Democratic Majority Leader Joseph Robinson in July 1937 mortally wounded Roosevelt's court proposal. The faithful Robinson had tenaciously led the fight for the bill on the president's behalf. After his passing, Roosevelt assigned that task to the unenthusiastic Garner. Meanwhile, Roosevelt's intervention to help loyal New Dealer Alben Barkley succeed Robinson as majority leader provoked resentment from many senators, as well as the vice president. When the Judiciary Committee reduced Roosevelt's Court packing plan to the point where it became

unrecognizable, Roosevelt was convinced that Garner had collaborated with the opposition. For his part, Garner blamed Roosevelt for antagonizing the Senate by interfering in its internal affairs. Neither man completely trusted the other again.³⁰

Roosevelt and Garner had fundamentally different styles and philosophies of governing. Garner was a strict traditionalist in his attitudes toward party affairs and a strict and unbending constructionist in his literal interpretations of the constitutional doctrine of separation of powers. He was a staunch defender of the sovereignty of the legislature from undue interference by the executive. Citing the low-key approach of Calvin Coolidge as a model, he once stated "My belief has always been in Executive leadership, not Executive rulership."³¹ Roosevelt, in contrast, used the powers of the presidency to set the agenda of his party and the tone of the legislative debate. Under Roosevelt, the White House increasingly issued preemptive public announcements to marshal public support to gain political leverage. Garner objected to Roosevelt that this threatened to "jeopardize the legislative program by giving out premature information." He complained privately that Roosevelt wanted too much power. "He has changed in office. He does not delegate. His nature is [to] want to do everything himself."³²

Purging the Party

By 1938, the president was sufficiently frustrated by the conservative Democrats in Congress to attempt a "purge" of the party. He embarked on a campaign through southern and western states to endorse liberal candidates in primary challenges to such conservative incumbents as Senators Millard Tydings of Maryland, Walter George of Georgia, and Guy Gillette of Iowa. Garner argued to Roosevelt that his intervention in local elections was an unfair invasion of a local politician's "own constituency and his own orbit" and could only provoke resentment from voters who would regard it as "Presidential arrogance." He warned Roosevelt, "You can't defeat the Southern Democrats and if you defeat the Democrats in the North you will get Republicans instead."³³

This prediction proved true, as the November elections resulted in the Republicans gaining eighty-one House and eight Senate seats. Although only one of Roosevelt's primary election targets (Representative John J. O'Connor of New York City) lost, several of Garner's close friends in the Senate, including Connecticut's Augustine Lonergan, New Hampshire's Fred Brown, and Wisconsin's Francis Duffey, were among the Democratic casualties in the general elections. Roosevelt then further insulted conservatives by appointing to key administrative posts several New Dealers who had been defeated in the elections. Garner lamented to Postmaster General James Farley that Roosevelt had "stirred up a hornet's nest" by entering into the primary fights. "There are now twenty men—Democrats—in the Senate who will vote against anything he wants."³⁴ In 1939, Congress denied virtually everything Roosevelt requested, including an undistributed profits tax, government reorganization, increased funding for the Works Progress Administration, and revision of the neutrality laws. Convinced that the crisis of the depression was essentially over and that continued relief programs threatened to create a complacently dependent lower class, Garner considered it time to roll back some of the regulatory legislation and "pump-priming" expenditures that had been passed for emergency relief during the first term.³⁵

Privately, Garner confided his suspicions of several ardent New Dealers in the Roosevelt "Brains Trust." "I am not worried about the Boss. It's the people around him. I have no confidence in them." Another time Garner claimed, "I have more honest affection for him [Roosevelt] in my little finger that they have in their whole bodies." This hostility was mutual. The New Dealers were contemptuous of Garner's conservatism and his occasionally coarse behavior and disdained his somewhat shady style of old-fashioned, back-room horse trading. Identifying Garner as a convenient scapegoat for Roosevelt's frustrations in guiding his agenda through Congress, liberals within the administration launched assaults to discredit his character. Harold Ickes, writing in a June 1939 issue of *Look* magazine, accused Garner of "a traitorous knifing in the back of the commander in chief."³⁶

The coming 1940 presidential election sparked the final break. Garner claimed that at the inauguration ceremony in 1937 he and the president had taken a mutual pledge to retire at the end of that term. As tumultuous events unfolded abroad, however, it became increasingly apparent that Roosevelt intended to run for an unprecedented third term, arguing that the volatility of the international situation made his presence indispensable.³⁷

In December of 1939, Garner announced that, while he would not actively campaign, he would not reject the presidential nomination if he were offered it at the 1940 convention, regardless of whether Roosevelt chose to retire or run again. He thus became the first vice president of the modern era to challenge his own chief executive for the office. Garner admitted that his passive candidacy was hopeless if Roosevelt really wanted to be reelected and that he would be happy to retire to Uvalde. But his opposition to a third term motivated him to join the "Stop Roosevelt" movement. He considered himself the only candidate with a chance of attracting enough support to convince the president to retire.

During the last two years of Roosevelt's second term, Garner was the consistent frontrunner among the possible successors to Roosevelt in public opinion polls. Although the public rarely got to observe Jack Garner's actions directly, what they did know about him—or at least what they thought they knew—captured their imagination. His wheeler-dealer image, self-made wealth, and free-market convictions made him a symbol of the emerging business age. At the same time, as a rugged, individualistic frontiersman, he was a nostalgic throwback to a vanishing age, a reassuringly simple figure in an increasingly complex world. It was obvious to all that "Cactus Jack" had earned his nickname because he was a hardy survivor with a tough hide, stumpy stature, prickly disposition, and deep Texas roots.

Conservative congressmen praised Garner to their favorite reporters. The press, in turn, was usually eager to carry "good copy" about the legendary cowboy vice president who rode herd on Washington and plotted in the cloakrooms. Complained one contemporary critic, "the newspaper men have never lost an opportunity to apotheosize his mediocrity." Despite this build-up, Roosevelt correctly doubted that Garner possessed enough ambition or standing to mount a serious challenge in 1940. Yet Garner believed Roosevelt resented the press attention that was often lavished on his vice president. Postmaster General James Farley noted that Roosevelt sometimes seemed quick to blame Garner for the administration's legislative failures and that the president "did not like to see the trees grow too tall around him."³⁸

Hitler's offensive across Western Europe in 1940 and the patriotic rallying around the president that the crisis inspired effectively precluded any challenge to Roosevelt's nomination. He was renominated on the first ballot at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago with the votes of 946 delegates. Farley and Garner were far behind with 72 and 61 votes, respectively. Not only did Garner not campaign for Roosevelt, he could not even bring himself to vote in the 1940 election. He went home to Uvalde, where he lived in retirement until his death at the age of ninety-eight twenty-seven years later.

Conclusion

Years after his retirement from politics, Garner mused that the country might have benefited more had he retained the speakership and used it to check the growth of Franklin Roosevelt's ambitions and powers in much the way Speaker Cannon had restrained Theodore Roosevelt. "I think I could have talked him out of a lot of things. That could have been my contribution. I would have had no desire to dictate his decisions," Garner told Bascom Timmons, his newspaper correspondent biographer, "but there would have been times when I would have told him what he could not do."³⁹ In a 1957 interview, Garner lamented, "If I hadn't been nominated for Vice President, I might still be speaker today." This claim does not seem farfetched, given Garner's relish for the position, his robust health, and the preservation of a Democratic majority in the House for all but two congresses during the rest of his long life.⁴⁰

The memory of his sour second term with Garner encouraged Roosevelt to redefine drastically what he was looking for in a vice president in 1940. Henry Agard Wallace was in many ways the antithesis of Garner. As vice president, Wallace was without either the inclination or access to make his own clandestine alliances and deals that might undermine the president's authority. While Garner was a parochial thinker with isolationist convictions, Wallace was fascinated with foreign affairs and peoples and entertained ideas about how Americans could help solve their problems. An administrator rather than a politician like Garner, Wallace lacked legislative experience and extensive party ties. To some degree, Wallace resembled the corporate vice president that Roosevelt had advocated in 1920, who could handle "matters of detail."⁴¹

The vice-presidency of John Nance Garner stands as a watershed in the evolution of the office. His first term marked the apex of the parliamentarian as vice president; his second term represented its nadir. Perhaps no other vice president had as much impact, both positive and negative, on the legislative efforts of his administration. Garner was a specialist in an office that would soon require generalists. He was the last vice president whose duties were primarily legislative. Garner was also the last of the largely silent, Washington-based vice presidents before the coming age of modern telecommunications and travel enabled future vice presidents to assume higher profiles as representatives of their administrations, as wide-ranging campaigners, public spokesmen, and foreign emissaries.⁴² During his first term, Garner may have made a more valuable and positive contribution to his administration than any of his predecessors, but his actions in the second term did more to undermine the administration than those of any vice president since John C. Calhoun. Chosen to balance the ticket in 1932, Garner felt obligated to use all of the formal and informal powers of his office to protect the interests of the party's conservative wing that had, against his better judgment, moved him from Speaker to vice president.

Notes:

1. Franklin D. Roosevelt, "Can the Vice President Be Useful?" *Saturday Evening Post* 193 (October 16, 1920): 8. Roosevelt also wrote that the very ambiguity of the office placed its occupant in a unique position to serve as an "additional set of eyes and ears" and as "a kind of roving commission" to study the fundamental structural problems in government, "especially where the jurisdiction or control does not rest in one department but partly in one and partly in others." By the time Roosevelt finally attempted to realize his longtime ambition to radically reorganize the federal government in 1937, however, he chose a commission of academicians rather than his vice president to study the matter and make recommendations. See Richard Polenberg, *Reorganizing Roosevelt's Government, 1936-1939* (Cambridge, MA, 1966).
2. Attempts to solve the mysteries of Garner's career are not helped by the fact that he burned all of his personal papers soon after retiring from Washington. "I didn't want to go through the files myself," he explained. "I needed all my own energies for present activities." Bascom N. Timmons, *Garner of Texas: A Personal History* (New York, 1948), p. 286. An excellent bibliography of sources on Garner can be found in Donald R. Kennon, *The Speakers of the U.S. House of Representatives: A Bibliography, 1789-1984* (Baltimore, 1986), pp. 226-36.
3. See Mrs. John N. [Marietta] Garner, "30 Years of Dictation," *Good Housekeeping* 94 (May 1932): 28.
4. For an account of Garner's maneuvers for position and influence within his party, see Alex Arnett, "Garner versus Kitchin: A Study of Craft and Statecraft" in Vera Largent, ed., *The Walter Clinton Jackson Essays in the Social Sciences* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1942), pp. 133-34; Ronald M. Peters, Jr., *The American Speakership: The Office in Historical Perspective* (Baltimore, 1990), p. 111.
5. D. B. Hardeman and Donald C. Bacon, *Rayburn: A Biography* (Austin, TX, 1987), pp. 114, 303; Timmons, p. 122.
6. Timmons, pp. 110, 293.
7. The 14 House members who died between the November 4, 1930, elections and the December 7, 1931, convening of the 72nd Congress were Ernest Ackerman (R-NJ), James Aswell (D-LA), Henry Cooper (R-WI), Charles Edwards (D-GA), Fletcher Hale (R-NH), George Graham (R-PA), Nicholas Longworth (R-OH), Samuel Major (D-MO), Charles Mooney (D-OH), David O'Connell (D-NY), Matthew O'Malley (D-NY), John Quayle (D-NY), Bird Vincent (R-MI), and Harry Wurzbach (R-TX).
8. Hardeman and Bacon, pp. 116, 346; Allan Andrew Michie, *Dixie Demagogues* (New York, 1939), p. 25.
9. For highly critical views of Garner's speakership see George Milburn, "The Statesmanship of Mr. Garner," *Harper's Magazine* (November 1932), pp. 669-82; Jordan A. Schwarz, "John Nance Garner and the Sales Tax Rebellion of 1932," *Journal of Southern History* 30 (May 1964): 162-80; and Jordan A. Schwarz, *The Interregnum of Despair: Hoover, Congress and the Depression* (Urbana, IL, 1970), chapter 5.
10. Milburn, p. 679.
11. Roosevelt waited until February 2, 1932, to announce his own repudiation of the League of Nations, after Hearst had endorsed Garner. Irving G. Williams, *The Rise of the Vice Presidency* (Washington, DC, 1956), p. 150.
12. Schwarz, "John Nance Garner and the Sales Tax Rebellion of 1932," p. 165; Douglas Craig, *After Wilson: The Struggle for the Democratic Party, 1920-1934* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1992), p. 244.
13. Hardeman and Bacon, pp. 137-38; David Robertson, *Sly and Able: A Political Biography of James F. Byrnes* (New York, 1994), pp. 138-40.
14. Williams, p. 152.
15. Timmons, p. 174.

16. Jules Witcover, *Crapshoot: Rolling the Dice on the Vice Presidency* (New York, 1992), p. 400; Timmons, pp. 176, 178.
17. See James Patterson, *Congressional Conservatism and the New Deal* (Lexington, KY, 1967).
18. James A. Farley, *Jim Farley's Storey: The Roosevelt years* (New York, 1948) pp. 91, 163; James A. Farley, *Behind the Ballots: The Personal History of a Politician* (New York, 1973).
19. Darrell St. Claire, *Assistant Secretary of the Senate*, Oral History Interviews, December 1976-April 1978 (U.S. Senate Historical Office, Washington, DC); John Michael Romano, "The Emergence of John Nance Garner as a Figure in American National Politics, 1924-1941," (Ph.D. dissertation, St. John's University, 1974), p. 231.
20. Timmons, pp. 182, 183; Patterson, p. 40; Michie, p. 39.
21. Williams, pp. 159, 175.
22. timmons, pp. 140, 202; *U. S. News and World Report*, November 21, 1958, p. 107.
23. Timmons, p. 208.
24. Besides presiding regularly over the Senate, he also frequented the Senate Democrats' party conferences. See Romano, pp. 185, 212.
25. Timmons, p. 186. In fact, Garner admitted in an interview in *U.S. News and World Reoport*, November 21, 1958, pp. 101-2, that he had been diagnosed as permanently hard of hearing in his left ear sometime during the Taft administration but had managed to keep the fact a secret throughout his career.
26. Paul Boller, *Congressional Anecdotes* (New York, 1991), p. 255.
27. Romano, pp. 219, 268; Farley, *Jim Farley's Story*, p. 54.
28. Patterson, p. 137.
29. Timmons, pp. 219, 225.
30. Farley, *Jim Farley's Story*, p. 84; Henry M. Hyde, "White House No-Man," *Saturday Evening Post* 25 (June 25, 1938): 23.
31. Timmons, pp. 291-92.
32. *Ibid.*, pp. 228, 255.
33. *Ibid.*, pp. 234-35.
34. Farley, p. 137.
35. Romano, p. 291; Timmons, pp. 291-92.
36. Farley, *Jim Farley's Story*, p. 206; Ickes quoted in Romano, p. 99.
37. See Bernard Donahoe, *Private Plans and Public Dangers* (South Bend, IN, 1965).
38. Milburn, p. 669; Farley, *Jim Farley's Story*, pp. 230, 168, 172, 70.
39. Timmons, p. 279.
40. *U.S. News and World Report*, March 8, 1957, pp. 44-45. Garner's greatest contribution to the office of the Speaker may hav occurred during his vice-presidency, when in 1936 he endorsed his longtime apprentice Sam Rayburn for House majority leader, the stepping stone to his speakership.
41. Garner had a low opinion of his successor, whom he considered "a dangerous character...not because he's bad at heart, but because he doesn't know where he's going." Farley, *Jim Farley's Story*, p. 205.
42. Ironically, the parochial Garner became the first vice president to be sent abroad. In 1935, he led a delegation to the Far East, although he merely silently attended ceremonies as an official representative while Secretary of War George H. Dern spoke for the president. Later that year, Garner went to Mexico as part of the "Good Neighbor" policy and gave a speech on the Laredo Bridge. Williams, p. 162.