

In Memoriam

Remembrance of and Tribute to Walter F. Mondale

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Last year, we lost my friend and mentor, Walter Mondale. He made me believe anything and everything was possible. He inspired me to think about a future in politics and encouraged me to believe that, someday, I could actually run for office.

A son of a minister who grew up in Ceylon, Minnesota, Fritz's decades of public service were marked by a strong moral core that defined his every action. As Minnesota's attorney general, and as a U.S. senator, vice president, ambassador, and presidential candidate, he made us all proud.

Leaders across the world respected him as a diplomat and a statesman—capable of bringing foreign dignitaries to the table even when common ground seemed unreachable. Those across the country recognized him for his fights for justice in everything from housing policy to child care. And in our state, we were lucky enough to see a different side of him as well. He was the husband and father who lovingly took care of his wife, Joan, and daughter, Eleanor, through heart-breaking illnesses. He was a model for anyone who wonders what life would be like if the job ends or life takes a bad turn.

Walter Mondale first caught our country's attention as a young state attorney general from the heartland, championing the right to counsel in the landmark case, *Gideon v. Wainwright*.¹ In a unanimous decision, the Supreme Court held that the Constitution guarantees the right to counsel in all criminal cases, helping to make our justice system more fair and more equitable.²

Fritz then followed in the footsteps of his mentor, Hubert

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1. *Gideon v. Wainwright*, 372 U.S. 335 (1963).

2. *Id.* at 344 (“The right of one charged with crime to counsel may not be deemed fundamental and essential to fair trials in some countries, but it is in ours.”).

Humphrey, to the U.S. Senate, but he quickly forged his own path, leading civil rights and housing legislation and—way ahead of his time—warning of the need for intelligence oversight and privacy protections. He was an advocate and a pioneer thinker on family policy and child development.

He also reshaped the vice presidency, serving as a true partner to President Jimmy Carter. He was not just a ceremonial figurehead, but instead a worthy advisor and confidant, deserving of a place in “the room where it happens.” One major example? Mideast peace discussions. In 1978, President Carter sent Vice President Mondale to salvage stalled peace talks between Israel and Egypt.³ His work during this trip and discussions with Israel’s officials, including Minister of Defense Ezer Weizman, helped break through the impasse, laid the groundwork for the successful talks at Camp David, led to the signing of the accords, and set a precedent for future peace agreements in the Middle East.⁴

It was during Mondale’s time as vice president that our paths first crossed. My first job in politics was as a college intern during his last year in office. I arrived in Washington all bright-eyed and ready to write policy papers. Instead, I was assigned to do a furniture inventory. I literally crawled under every table and chair, lifted up every lamp, and checked every number against the serial numbers.

I learned two things from that job: One, Walter Mondale was scrupulously honest. Nothing was missing. Second, take your first jobs seriously, even when they aren’t exactly what you planned. Thanks to him, that internship was my first government job in Washington. And, again thanks to him, U.S. Senator was my second.

I came away from that summer with enormous admiration for Vice President Mondale: I looked up to him then, and I’ve looked up to him ever since. He did things for the right reasons, and he treated everybody with respect.

It was not just the decency he displayed on the local and national political stage that made him stand out. It was the dignity he brought home with him in the wake of defeat. He didn’t crawl under a desk or complain about his losses. Instead, with his humility and wit still fully intact, he brushed himself off and came home—animated by his

3. *Walter Mondale, Carter VP Who Played Key Role in Israel-Egypt Peace, Dies at 93*, TIMES OF ISRAEL (Apr. 20, 2021), <https://www.timesofisrael.com/walter-mondale-who-had-key-role-in-israel-egypt-peace-as-carter-vp-dies-at-93> [<https://perma.cc/MG4Z-DMJJ>].

4. *Id.*

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renewed mission to prepare the next generation of leaders.

I was there when he started up a leadership fellow program at the Humphrey Institute at the University of Minnesota.⁵ He gave me and so many others the chance to meet and engage with inspirational figures in government and journalism while laying the groundwork for our own futures in public service. He taught us that leadership isn't only about soaring speeches and punchy sound bites—but is instead about getting things done for people.

On the wall in the Carter Museum in Atlanta are Vice President Mondale's words describing their administration's principles and accomplishments. Mondale shared these thoughts shortly after their 1980 defeat: "We told the truth. We obeyed the law. We kept the peace."⁶ That is the standard he held himself to—and that we must all hold ourselves to every day. Tell the truth. Obey the law. Keep the peace.

Walter Mondale set a high bar for himself and kept passing it and raising it, passing it and raising it—a true public servant in every sense of the phrase. We miss him.

5. *Policy Fellows*, UNIV. OF MINN. HUBERT H. HUMPHREY SCH. OF PUB. AFFS., <https://www.hhh.umn.edu/fellowships-and-professional-development/policy-fellows> [<https://perma.cc/2VW8-PUJV>].

6. See Wesley G. Pippert, "We Told the Truth, Obeyed the Law and Kept the Peace", UNITED PRESS INT'L (June 3, 1982), <https://www.upi.com/Archives/1982/06/03/We-told-the-truth-obeyed-the-law-and-kept-the-peace/4395391924800> [<https://perma.cc/RQ3A-UQ3P>].