

# John Nance Garner on the Vice Presidency: In Search of the Proverbial Bucket

By Patrick Cox, Ph.D.

When it comes to commentary about the office of vice president of the United States, no statement is more repeated than John Nance Garner's observation that "the vice presidency is not worth a bucket of warm spit." Garner's statement is part of the lexicon of studies on the vice presidency. The crusty, sharp-tongued Texan, known during his lifetime as "Cactus Jack," built his reputation on biting commentary and one-liners. But regarding the "bucket" matter, did Garner really say what everyone thinks he said? If so, who first heard the story, and when does it appear in print? And did Garner actually hold this view, or did he have a more analytical view of the office that stood second in line to the presidency?

John Nance Garner, one of the most famous political figures in twentieth-century American history, served as the nation's thirty-second vice president for two terms. As Franklin D. Roosevelt's vice president, he transformed the position from a nonentity and political dustbin into a pinnacle of power in the legislative and executive branches. Prior to his two terms with FDR, Garner built a remarkable career in the House of Representatives. Elected from the sprawling district in the brush country of southern Texas along the border with Mexico, he first went to the House of Representatives in 1902. He rose in seniority and influence until becoming Speaker of the House in 1931. Recognizing his power and influence, FDR selected Garner to join the 1932 Democratic Party ticket. Garner served as vice president from 1933 until 1941 and served as a major force in moving New Deal legislation through Congress. During Roosevelt's second term, Garner and FDR clashed over the direction of the nation during the Depression. Garner also believed Roosevelt should not seek a third term and unsuccessfully challenged FDR for the 1940 Democratic presidential nomination. Roosevelt dropped Garner from the 1940 ticket and Cactus Jack rode off into the sunset in 1941 with a vow never to cross the Potomac again, and he never did.

With Americans reeling under the weight of the Great Depression, Roosevelt won the 1932 Democratic Party nomination and quickly began the search for a vice president. According to news accounts of the 1932 Democratic convention, a number of prominent contenders were under consideration as Roosevelt's running mate. But most of these presidential aspirants believed serving as vice president offered a one-way ticket to political oblivion. Arthur "Bugs" Baer, a *Washington Herald* newsman covering the Democratic convention in Chicago, wrote "It Just Seems Like Nobody Wants to Be Vice President." In a June 30, 1932, story, Baer revealed that any number of Democratic senators, governors, and prominent party members publicly disdained any interest in the number two position. In perhaps his first public comments about the vice presidency, Speaker Garner commented, "I don't

intend to spend the next four years counting the buttons on another man's coat tails." Buttons—but no buckets.

Thanks to some friendly persuasion from his friends and because of his loyalty to the Democratic Party, Garner later conceded to join the Democratic ticket as Roosevelt's running mate. The Roosevelt–Garner team swept the nation in the 1932 general election. After only one term as Speaker of the House, Garner moved across the Capitol to become the presiding officer of the Senate. The earliest reference to the bucket quote came many years later from R. G. Tugwell, a prominent agriculture economist, an FDR supporter, and author of the 1968 book *The Brains Trust*. Tugwell wrote that he first heard the famous version soon after Garner accepted the nomination. "I can still hear Roosevelt's guffaw when he was told the Speaker's opinion of the office. 'It was,' the Texan said, 'not worth a quart of warm spit.'" Tugwell undoubtedly believed the remark could be attributed to Garner, as he described the veteran politician as "shrewd, narrow, vulgar, and philistine."

If Garner delivered the infamous bucket statement in the summer of 1932, the statement never appeared in the news coverage on the nomination through the 1932 election and the nomination of Roosevelt and Garner in March 1933. During the two terms he served as vice president, Garner undoubtedly expressed opinions about being second fiddle to Maestro Roosevelt, but for the most part his comments never appeared in press. In a front page story entitled "Cactus Jack Talks About Poker, Socks," in the *Seattle Daily Times* on October 15, 1935, Garner delivered his official position. "Boys", he said, "I'm deaf, blind, and dumb as far as politics is concerned. I'm like a soldier—I do as I'm told. But since the day I was elected vice president I've said nothing." He maintained his public posture with the press. As the *New York Times* quoted the vice president during the Roosevelt–Garner reelection campaign on June 27, 1936, "Our firm has two members. The senior member does all the talking and I do all the work."

In spite of his self-imposed embargo on public pronouncements, Garner's reputation for earthy language and cryptic remarks remained intact. In an extended feature story in *Country Gentleman* magazine in May 1939, E. H. Taylor noted that the vice president retained his "candor and saltiness of expression." After nearly forty years in Washington, Garner still enjoyed the simple life of a small town banker and Texas rancher. "You don't have to remove any rind to get at the meat of what he says," Taylor stated. The author quoted another journalist who stated that Garner provided "a number of gleeful, disrespectful, unprintable but endearing epithets couched in the rich vernacular of the Southwest."

Garner's political future faded during the second term due to his disagreements and political estrangement with FDR and the New Deal policies. Cementing the break between the two former allies, Garner unsuccessfully challenged Roosevelt in the 1940 Democratic primaries.

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Garner's defeat left no question that his term as vice president had come to an end. After he left Washington in January 1941, Garner retired to his home in Uvalde. Every major daily newspaper in the nation covered his departure from Washington. Many journalists wrote of Garner's political influence, his extensive career, and his controversial personality. No story contained any reference to the vice presidency and the bucket.

Spurning all efforts to write his memoirs and rejecting offers to transfer his papers to the University of Texas, Garner burned nearly all of his correspondence and records. He apparently moved the collection to the yard behind his back porch and used the historic documents for his own personal bonfire. Newspapers throughout the nation carried the sad story of the destruction of irreplaceable records on July 6, 1947. Thus any definitive written correspondence from Garner that may have contained the bucket story went up in smoke.

Nevertheless, on numerous occasions, journalists would make the trek to Texas to take the pulse of Cactus Jack and listen to his views on national affairs. He also provided some commentary about the vice president's job. In an interview with *Collier's Magazine* in the March 20, 1948, edition, Garner said, "there cannot be a great vice president. A great man may occupy the office, but there is no way for him to become a great vice president because the office in itself is almost wholly unimportant." In 1957 Garner told local author Florence Fenley, "When I was elected vice president of the United States, it was the worst thing that ever happened to me."

The reporter and author most closely connected to Garner was fellow Texan Bascom Timmons. Timmons remained one of Garner's closest friends and served as his spokesman at the 1940 Democratic convention. In his 1948 book, *Garner of Texas*, Timmons quoted Garner as stating the vice presidency was "a no man's land somewhere between the legislative and executive branch." He also said that the "vice president has no arsenal from which to draw power." Timmons held numerous interviews with Garner and followed him for years in Washington and in Texas. Garner may have provided the bucket quote to Timmons. But the author wanted his biography to place Garner in the best possible light and to present him as an elder statesman. So Timmons never used the bucket story in his life story of the former vice president. Timmons also avoided some of Garner's other jaded expressions as part of his effort to enhance Garner's legacy.

The bucket of warm spit resurfaces in connection with the 1960 presidential election. In *Sam Johnson's Boy*, Alfred Steinberg's biography of Lyndon Johnson, the author recounted the turmoil surrounding the 1960 Democratic convention and Lyndon Johnson's decision to become John F. Kennedy's running mate. Following JFK's victory as the Democratic presidential nominee, a disconsolate LBJ gathered with Speaker Sam Rayburn and his friends in his hotel suite to ponder the offer of the vice presidency. One phone call went to Garner in Uvalde. Garner reportedly told Johnson, "I'll tell you, Lyndon, the Vice Presidency isn't worth a pitcher of warm spit."

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Presidential historian William H. White noted the same episode in *The Making of the President 1960*. White's 1961 published account also revealed the uncertainty in the Johnson camp over accepting Kennedy's offer to join the ticket. From his suite in the Biltmore Hotel in Los Angeles, Johnson telephoned Garner at his home in Uvalde. White reported Garner's remarks to LBJ. "I'll tell you Lyndon," Garner surmised. "The vice presidency isn't worth a pitcher of warm spit." Any other advice from Garner went unrecorded. Shortly thereafter, bucket or not, LBJ accepted Kennedy's offer.

One of the first newspaper stories that contained the bucket of warm spit anecdote appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* on April 1, 1962. In an article on Richard Nixon's 1962 book, *Six Crises*, Marvin Seid wrote, "'The vice presidency,' John Nance Garner once confided to fellow-Texan Lyndon Johnson, 'isn't worth a pitcher of warm spit.'" White's popular book on the 1960 presidential election undoubtedly helped circulate the bucket episode to a national audience. The story certainly seemed appropriate to Nixon, who served as Eisenhower's vice president, and spent much of his two terms chafing under the war hero president. Nixon's book was his attempt to begin a political comeback after his 1960 presidential loss to the Kennedy-Johnson team.

When Garner passed away on November 7, 1967, a few days short of his ninety-ninth birthday, tributes poured in from across the nation. The *New York Times* of November 8, 1967, carried an extensive story on Garner's record and his influence. They noted one of his comments on the vice presidency in the story: "a spare tire of the government." Garner was also quoted as saying: "worst damn-fool mistake I ever made was letting myself be elected vice president of the United States." But no mention of the bucket quote appeared in print.

In the many tributes given to him on his death, the state's newspaper reporters recounted many personal encounters and humorous quotes from Garner. Texas Congressman O. C. Fisher, who later wrote a biography of Garner, told the *Dallas Morning News* on November 8, 1967, that his fellow Texan was fond of saying "When I switched from speaker to vice president, it was the only demotion I ever had." Representative Fisher delivered the announcement of Garner's death to the House of Representatives on Tuesday, November 7, 1967.

In homage to Garner and his legacy, every major daily newspaper in Texas ran news articles and editorials about Garner. The *Houston Post* (November 8, 1967) related the story that he told to a circus clown: "I am vice president of the United States. You'd better stick around a while—you might pick up some new ideas." *San Antonio Light* reporter Tom McGowan wrote in his farewell that Garner had referred to being elected vice president as "the worst mistake in my life" and repeated the reference to Garner's assertion that the office was the "spare tire of government." Reviewing the

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many and varied stories in the Texas newspapers, the story of the bucket of warm spit never appears in any of the news articles, commentaries, or editorials at the time of Garner's death.

However, the national news magazines began to use the bucket quote after Garner's death. In the *Time* magazine obituary of November 17, 1967, the article stated, "Plain-spoken to the last, he always regretted having given up his Speaker's role for the vice presidency, which he said 'wasn't worth a pitcher of warm spit.'"

In the O. C. Fisher biography published in 1978, the author repeated that Garner had stated that the vice presidency "isn't worth a pitcher of warm spit." In reality, Fisher maintained that Garner had really said that the office "isn't worth a pitcher of warm p-ss." Fisher's fig leaf approach left it clear that Garner probably used more descriptive terms that some would consider profane. Fisher claimed that Garner told him "those pantywaist writers wouldn't print it the way I said it."

With Garner's death in 1967, the bucket of warm spit quote began to appear more frequently in magazines and newspapers. The story appeared with some regularity every four years when one or both of the presidential nominees faced the decision of selecting a vice president. Given Garner's reputation and his oft-quoted remarks about the vice presidency, there is little doubt that he used the bucket of warm spit reference. And as one biographer noted, he probably said warm piss. That would be entirely in character. When he first made the statement is debatable. But he may well have first delivered the comments around the time he accepted the vice presidency in 1932.

As for reasons why the quote seldom appeared before the 1960s, the popular media seldom used language that editors and readers may have found offensive. Sex, offensive language, and explicit violence were excised from the popular press for generations before the 1960s. Garner stated in the O. C. Fisher biography that the "pantywaist" reporters would not use his more graphic quotes. The journalistic standards of the era would not allow for the introduction of some of the earthy language that Garner often employed. Later generations had a broader tolerance of more graphic commentary. Although twenty-first century society is more tolerant of profanity and vulgarity, the news media to this day still avoids using certain four-letter words. A 2004 incident involving Vice President Dick Cheney hurling an expletive at a U.S. Senator became newsworthy but difficult to report by the press. So perhaps Garner's colorful ritual of elocution has remained intact at the U.S. Capitol.

In any event, given the popularity and widespread acceptance of his anecdote, John Nance Garner and the bucket of warm spit will live on in the history of political lexicon.