



Democratic Vice Presidential Candidate Tim Kaine: A Political Profile

By John Gregory, Congressional Intern
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Timothy Michael “Tim” Kaine was born in St. Paul, Minnesota, on February 26, 1958, but grew up mainly in the suburbs of Kansas City, Missouri. After graduating from the University of Missouri as an economics major, he earned his J.D. from Harvard Law School and moved to Virginia in 1984 to begin his legal career. His devout Catholic faith and previous missionary experiences helped shape his law profession, as he largely focused on civil rights cases, particularly on matters of fair housing practices. These same principles also drew him to the local nonprofit scene, where he was chairman of Freedom House and sat on the board of Housing Opportunities Made Equal (HOME). This penchant for social activism would ultimately steer Kaine toward a career in politics, starting with his election to the Richmond, VA City Council in 1994. He became the city’s mayor four years later. Continuing his quick rise up the Virginia political ranks, he was elected lieutenant governor in 2001, then governor in 2005.

It was during his tenure as governor that he acquired a reputation – perhaps unfairly – for leaning more toward the political center. This stemmed not only from his views against abortion, which are a product of his Catholic faith, but also his perceived alignment with Republicans on certain state-level issues. But religious beliefs aside, he has always supported and upheld female reproductive rights as the constitutionally-enshrined law of the land. And moreover, his reign as governor was counterbalanced by a Republican-dominated state legislature that at times required him to move closer to the right. Otherwise, as Kaine saw it, nothing would have been accomplished. In reality, then, he continues to be a staunch, socially minded Democrat - albeit not of the Bernie Sanders category - that values compromise over obstructionism and inertia, a rare quality in today’s political arena.

In 2008, Kaine made the short-list to be then-Senator Obama’s vice presidential running mate. However, he was ultimately passed over due to his lack of foreign policy experience. Instead, Obama recruited Kaine to take over the Democratic National Committee at the end of his term as governor. In 2013, after four years at the helm of the DNC, Kaine decided to take his wealth of executive, political and legislative experience to the US Senate, where he has since served on the Armed Services and Foreign Relations Committees. This committee experience was very much designed to round out his political résumé. And with this platform at his disposal, he has been rather vocal in his calls for a clearer US strategy in the Middle East and the fight against ISIL, as well as an enhanced humanitarian effort in the increasingly unstable region.

Middle East Policy Positions

Syria/ISIL: Kaine has stated on a number of occasions that it is a mistake for the US to publicly claim that “Assad must go.” Yet, he has acknowledged that a future Syria cannot exist with Bashar al-Assad in power. His point, seemingly, is that the US cannot set the terms for the future leader of Syria; rather, it is a decision that must be reserved for all Syrians, and Syrians alone. That said, he is in favor of multilateral negotiations - and multilateralism in general - and feels Russia and Iran are integral to the peace process, despite their de-stabilizing and antagonistic behavior in the region. According to Kaine, de-escalating the tension that has historically defined these regional relationships requires that all parties be at the table.

At the same time, he has been critical of the Obama Administration for not leading international humanitarian efforts in accordance with United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2139, which calls for cross-border delivery of humanitarian aid to Syrian refugees without the need for Assad’s approval. Kaine admits this would require a coordinated military effort to secure the required safe zones, but the 8 million displaced refugees that are still trapped inside the country merit such an undertaking. According to the Senator, the current refugee crisis emanating from Syria and the surrounding region is the worst global crisis since World War II. On a related subject, Kaine openly dislikes Donald Trump’s proposal to ban all Muslims from entering the US. He has instead praised the effectiveness of the current US immigration system and its stringent vetting process, while admitting that certain policies may need to be re-examined – such as the visa waiver program.

At the heart of Kaine’s criticism, however, is the lack of an overall strategy for the battle against ISIL. In his view, there is a constitutional and fundamental role that Congress needs to play in this process, and this means revisiting the “open-ended” Authorizations for the Use of Military Force (AUMF) that were used in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and that continue to be used to justify attacks against Islamist terrorists on other fronts. Without a formal debate and authorization for the war against ISIL, Kaine says that Congress is both shirking its constitutional responsibilities and showing lack of commitment to the fight.

Iran: Kaine was a supporter of last year’s historic nuclear deal with Iran. The Senator feels it is important for the US to maintain diplomatic engagement with the Shiite government, until military force becomes the last and only option to prevent a nuclear-armed Iran. However, he continues to be skeptical of Iranian motives and acknowledges the challenges presented by the country’s anti-West hardliners. For this reason, Kaine has called for strict enforcement of the sanctions established by last year’s agreement, as well as any others levied by international sanctions regimes or UN resolutions.

While sanctions should certainly be a component of US diplomacy, according to Kaine, they should also be imposed delicately. Otherwise, the US risks weakening what he says is the true driver of change in countries like Iran: internal political opposition. Indeed, the future of Iran and its relationship with the US will hinge on the reformist movement, and it is only prudent, Kaine says, that US strategy be designed to strengthen the political positioning of Iranian reformers.

Israel: Kaine prides himself on being strongly pro-Israel. He agrees with many of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's concerns over the bellicose Iranian government, but he also boycotted Netanyahu's speech to Congress last year, delivered by the Israeli leader as the US and Iran were nearing the end of negotiations over the nuclear agreement. Kaine's stance was more a comment on Netanyahu's timing, and what he saw to be an obvious political maneuver with the looming Israeli elections. In addition, he has expressed suspicions over the Israeli government's intentions to honestly pursue what was agreed upon and envisioned in the 1993 Oslo Accord.

Iraq: For all the shortcomings of the Iraqi military and central government, Kaine still sees a role for the US in a country that is still trying to find its way. He is in favor of US military training programs as long as their focus remains on Iraqi leadership personnel. In addition, he values the ongoing US partnership with the Iraqi Kurds. However, he also believes that the proper avenues for arming and supporting the Kurds remain first and foremost through the Iraqi central government. Thus, Kaine's policies on Iraq are in tune with those of the Obama Administration, the preeminent goal of which is to simply refrain from upsetting the balance of power in the fledgling and ever-fragile "democracy."

Afghanistan: Much like Iraq, Senator Kaine sees the need for a continued US presence in Afghanistan as well. This means equipping and training the Afghan military, but also assisting with the government's economic initiatives and regional relationships; none of which, the Senator believes, should be conditioned upon some arbitrary withdrawal date (as in Iraq). Instead, he says the US should maintain diplomatic and military missions in Afghanistan for as long as circumstances require.

Saudi Arabia: Kaine views the US-Saudi relationship as an important one that is not without serious challenges. He has been especially critical of the Saudi government's reluctance to expand its efforts against ISIL, a war that poses a much greater existential threat to Riyadh than the Houthi rebels it continues to fight – with American weaponry – in Yemen.