

Biden to oversee efforts aimed at middle class

By KEVIN FREKING, Associated Press Writer

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WASHINGTON – As vice president, Joe Biden will oversee an Obama administration effort to find ways of building up the ranks of the middle class, that ambiguously defined segment of society most Americans identify with.

The task force will include four Cabinet members as well as other presidential advisers, the Obama transition team announced Sunday.

The goal is to recommend proposals to ensure the middle class is "no longer being left behind," Biden said. The proposals could include executive orders and legislative plans.

"Our charge is to look at existing and future policies across the board and use a yard stick to measure how they are impacting the working and middle-class families," Biden said in a statement released Sunday. "Is the number of these families growing? Are they prospering? President-elect Obama and I know the economic health of working families has eroded, and we intend to turn that around."

Overseeing a task force has become tradition for vice presidents.

Dick Cheney led a task force on energy. Al Gore had the task of reinventing government. George H.W. Bush, while serving as Ronald Reagan's vice president, oversaw a task force charged with reducing government regulation. While all of those efforts resulted in some accomplishments, it's also clear that the issues they confronted were so large and systemic that many could and did question the progress they made.

Biden said the measure of economic success in an Obama administration would be whether the middle class was growing.

The transition team promised the task force's work would be transparent, with annual reports on its findings and recommendations. Also, any submissions from outside groups are to be posted on the Internet. By comparison, Cheney, a former oil man, fought to keep the White House energy task force's deliberations secret.

Task force members will include the secretaries of labor, health and human services, education, and commerce, as well as the directors of the National Economic Council, the Office of Management and Budget, the Domestic Policy Council and the head of the Council of Economic Advisers.

In an interview broadcast Sunday on ABC's "This Week," Biden took care to define his role as vice president as going beyond a particular task. He said that when he discussed the job with Barack Obama

during the campaign, he told Obama he didn't "want to be the guy that goes out and has a specific assignment." Rather, he wanted to have a voice in every matter of importance.

"I said I want a commitment from you that in every important decision you'll make, every critical decision, economic and political as well as foreign policy, I'll get to be in the room," Biden said.

He said that Obama agreed and has adhered to that commitment.

"Every single solitary appointment he has made thus far, I have been in the room," said Biden, who was elected seven times to the Senate. "The recommendations I have made in most cases, coincidentally, have been the recommendations that he's picked, not because I made them, but because we think a lot alike."

Biden also covered topics from the auto bailout to his continued desire to close the Guantanamo prison holding terrorist suspects:

_The loan agreement for automakers will require sacrifices from all segments of the industry. While saying organized labor did not bring the carmakers to the brink of collapse, unions in particular are "going to have to make some additional sacrifices, and they know it and they understand it."

_The economic aid plan being readied by the Obama team will focus on creating a strong energy grid, will pay for thousands of new jobs focusing on making buildings and homes more energy efficient and will help health care providers invest in electronic record keeping for patients. "The end result, though, the money we're spending, we're going to get back three- and four fold."

_The military prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, should close, and the U.S. reputation abroad has suffered as a result of the Bush administration's policies on surveillance and detainees. "To quote from a previous national security report put out by the intelligence community, we have created, not dissuaded, more terrorists as a consequence of this policy," Biden said.

_It's up to the Justice Department to determine if charges should be filed against any member of the Bush administration for prisoner abuse that occurred at Abu Ghraib or Guantanamo. "President-elect Obama and I are not sitting thinking about the past," he said.

On the Net:

Obama transition site: <http://change.gov/>

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