Running Mate Frenzy
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by Dr. G. Terry Madonna and Dr. Michael Young

The speculation seems endless. Democrat John Kerry has now been reported to be considering as many as ten different vice presidential running mates—all on allegedly compelling arguments about how each can help him ensure victory over opponent George Bush.

Meanwhile, incumbent President George Bush is being second-guessed regarding his decision to keep Dick Cheney. Press speculation had been rampant earlier that the president was considering dumping Cheney for a more popular choice.

One doesn't have to look at a calendar to know that we are in that peculiar silly political season—between late Spring and the Summer party conventions—when almost everyone talks and acts as if selecting a vice presidential running mate was going to be decisive in the upcoming presidential election.

It's our quadrennial running mate frenzy. And it's all in good fun. Journalists get to file stories while campaigning is slow and candidates get attention that otherwise might be lagging, and voters are entertained. But almost certainly, none of the frenzy will be remembered or will matter on Election Day.

That's because vice presidents are important, but not because they influence the outcome of presidential races. Almost never does a running mate have anything to do with winning or losing the election itself.

This elementary fact was well known through most of American history. The office of vice president was considered an irrelevancy in the nation's politics, and the selection of the person to run for the vice presidency was not an important decision.

And few thought it should be otherwise. Political leaders assumed that a successful vice presidential nominee would be relegated to the dustbin of American history. Vice presidents mattered only with respect to the contingency that a president would need a successor if he died in office.

In fact, for much of the history of the vice presidency, its inhabitants were considered part of the legislative branch. Vice presidents were not consulted for virtually anything; the prospect of a close vote in the U S Senate was about the only thing that made their day.

The first vice president, John Adams, understood this all too well when he called the office the most insignificant office invented by man, and as late as the 1930's, FDR's vice president, John Nance Garner, referred to the office as not worth a bucket of warm spit (actually he said something else but you get the point).

Many great leaders shunned the office, as did Daniel Webster who rejected it saying, "I do not choose to be buried until I am really dead." Sometimes powerful party leaders dumped problem politicians in the vice presidency where they could do no harm.
At least once this strategy backfired spectacularly. Republican Party leaders pushed then New York Governor Theodore Roosevelt into the vice presidency in 1900 to bury him politically, but he had the last laugh--when he succeeded to the presidency following the assassination of President McKinley.

More typically candidate selections have been used to balance tickets and to heal intra-party wounds. In many cases the selection seems not to have mattered too much to party leaders.

How else could anyone explain how William King, Hannibal Hamlin, Thomas Hendricks, Levi Morton, or Garret Hobart found their way onto winning tickets?

The myth that vice presidential candidates can assist the ticket in winning election is rooted in a single election. In 1960 the selection of Lyndon Johnson was probably essential to the narrow victory of John Kennedy. But other than this instance, one is hard pressed to find a vice presidential nominee who brought about electoral victory for the ticket.

The evidence is clear: voters almost never vote for a presidential candidate because of a running mate. In fact, a questionable selection hurts a ticket more than a good pick helps.

But the vice presidential selection does matter enormously but for other reasons. While the presidential candidate goes through a lengthy trial by combat--running through the primary and caucus gauntlet--vice presidential nominees are literally the selection of the presidential candidate.

The stark fact is that the vice presidency--heir to the most powerful office in the world--is an appointive office. Millions of voters get to decide who the presidential nominee will be. But a single vote, that of the presidential nominee, determines who succeeds to the office, should the president die while in office.

Moreover, since World War II, the modern world is a far more dangerous place. In that dangerous world the prominence of the presidency has dramatically changed perceptions of the qualifications necessary for the vice presidency. A heartbeat away has new meaning for the presidency and the nation.

In fact, recent vice presidents have forged close and influential relationships with their bosses. Walter Mondale, Al Gore, and Dick Cheney have had unparalleled influence over the direction of the nation.

Perhaps, equally important in recent years the vice presidency has become the principal route to the presidency itself. Since 1948 vice presidents have become candidates for the presidency nine times: Truman in 1948, Nixon in 1960, Johnson in 1964, Nixon and Humphrey in 1968, Ford in 1976, Mondale in 1984, Bush in 1988, and Gore in 2000.

And five former vice presidents have served as presidents over that same time period. The odds are high that one or both running mates this year will themselves run for president one day.

Clearly, running mates are important. But we should be reminded why they are important--not for any role they might play on Election Day, but for the role they are far more likely to play after the election.

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