

# The Matter of the VP

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The presidential nomination contests are now winding their way to a conclusion. Shortly, serious attention will turn to the selection of running mates. Already breathless speculation abounds in both parties. For Democrats, will it be Obama-Clinton or Clinton-Obama? For Republicans, will McCain pick Huckabee to assuage the conservative wing of his party?

Soon other names will be added to that list. For months between now and the convention, the press will weigh in with an avalanche of articles deliberating endlessly about vice presidential choices and handicapping the various possibilities. Eventually short listed nominees will be subjected to rigorous background checks and multiple interviews.

Welcome to the Great American Veep-stakes!

It seems like we have always done it this way but we haven't. In fact this modern practice of drawn out and elaborate scrutiny of promising vice presidential candidates would shock earlier generations for which vice presidential nominations were of minor importance. Unlike today the older process was typically accomplished with little fanfare. The selection of the vice president was often casual and unhurried, pursued leisurely if not indifferently. The nominee was usually picked to "balance the ticket," whatever that happened to mean in any presidential election year. Scholars who have studied the process have concluded that running mates were selected primarily on the basis of three criterion: the potential running mate's home state (larger is better), whether the prospective running mate also contested the party nomination (being a rival is better), and whether the proposed running mate provides some age balance (older nominees look for younger running mates).

Not surprisingly such criteria often matched presidential candidates with lackluster and unqualified running mates. Several vice presidential nominees were virtually unknown or without national stature--veritable artifacts in a "museum of anonymity" (in the colorful phrase of historian H.W. Brands). Occasionally, outstanding running mates were chosen, but they were few and far between. And often they became bored or got into other trouble. Aaron Burr, Jefferson's vice president, got into so much mischief he was later brought up on treason charges, and John C. Calhoun, who served under two different presidents, finally resigned to go back to the Senate.

Part of the problem was that the vice presidency was seen as deadly dull by its incumbents and often a career ender. It was literally deadly for seven vice presidents who expired while in office. One of these, William King (1853), actually died after being sworn in but before assuming office and reportedly was not missed for several weeks.

The office's notoriety as a nullity started early. The first vice president, John Adams, called it "the most insignificant office that ever the invention of man contrived." Many prominent politicians shunned the office when offered, believing as Daniel Webster once said about it, "I do not choose to be buried until I am really

dead." And once in office, vice presidents from Jefferson to Humphrey have been an unhappy lot. They found the position powerless, demeaning, and subservient.

Today however we have a different view of the vice presidency. Both voters and politicians take it more seriously. Partly this reflects contemporary experience with the high profile vice presidencies of Dick Cheney and Al Gore as key advisors to the presidents they served. More fundamental; however, is the widespread voter expectation that a vice president must be prepared to assume the presidency in an age of nuclear threat and terrorism.

The other reason vice presidential nominations are given prominence today is that it is widely believed that vice presidential candidates can help win an election. But both these reasons for greater attention to vice presidential selection are less convincing than they seem. The concern that vice presidents might have to step in during a national emergency can be overblown. In reality such calamitous circumstances are an improbable event in American history. Since the Lincoln tragedy, no American vice president has had to assume office under perilous circumstances.

Similarly the notion that vice presidents win presidential elections is a myth, unsupported by historical data. With a single exception, the vice presidential selection has not determined the outcome of a presidential election. That single exception occurred in 1960 when Lyndon Johnson's selection as John Kennedy's running mate probably sealed Kennedy's victory. Johnson brought Texas and possibly three or four other southern states into the Democratic column along with their electoral votes--the needed edge for a Kennedy victory. But that election stands alone with no comparable historical analogue.

Given that vice presidential succession in times of national emergency is the rarest of events, and vice presidents don't actually matter to the outcome of presidential elections, a good case can be made that we have come to highly regard the office without a clear understanding of why we should do so. In truth the great attention we pay to the vice presidency is probably an instance of doing the right thing for the wrong reason.

Certainly vice presidents do matter. But they matter most because vice presidents tend to become presidents in their own right. The statistics are compelling. Since 1789, 42 men have served as president (Grover Cleveland served two nonconsecutive terms). Exactly 14 of them had been vice presidents. This means that one of every three presidencies has been filled by former vice presidents.

Moreover in modern times, the relationship between the two offices is even stronger. Overwhelmingly party nominees since World War II have come from the ranks of sitting vice presidents and former vice presidents. The list is formidable: Truman in 1948, Nixon in 1960, Johnson in 1964, Nixon and Humphrey in 1968, Ford in 1976, Mondale in 1984, H.W. Bush in 1988, and Gore in 2000. Being vice president has become a powerful predictor of a later presidential nomination and the presidency itself.

So picking vice presidents is indeed important and for many reasons. But no reason is more important than the second highest elective office in our democracy is now an appointive office. And it is an appointment fraught with implications for future elections and future presidencies. Today when we select vice presidential candidates, we are also selecting future presidential candidates--and future presidents. That may or may not be a good thing, but it's certainly a good thing to keep in mind as this year's veep-stakes gets underway.

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