Taking a Second Look at Rendell for Second Place

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Time Magazine, in what may be another sign that the Democratic presidential race is becoming a rout, has recently published a speculative listing of prospective candidates for the vice-presidential nomination. Notably absent from Time’s list is Pennsylvania’s two-term Governor, Ed Rendell.

At first blush, the omission of Rendell seems gratuitous. A politician of almost legendary political skills, Rendell has been a leading figure in the National Democratic Party, a high profile mayor of Philadelphia, and someone routinely mentioned for national tickets in past elections.

But Rendell’s absence from Time’s list is actually understandable. He has repeatedly said that he will not seek public office again after his final term as Governor. Furthermore, he has gained something of a reputation for impolitic candor. Rendell says what he means far more often than most modern American politicians and sometimes can’t or won’t stay on message. Both traits have hurt him at times.

Nor has his sometimes prickly temperament always been an asset to him. On occasion, he can react to criticism with mocking derision. He once, in an apparent allusion to Hannibal Lecter, described a pesky state activist as someone who was “about as mentally stable as that guy who ate all those people.” He recently referred to an opposing politician as “certifiable” and characterized staffers of a leading state think tank as “imbeciles.”

Not least, perhaps, of Rendell’s liabilities for a national ticket, there are persistent questions about the ability of his Lt. Governor to take over the final two years of his term.

But all of these potential barriers to Rendell being placed on a national ticket have been unconvincing to many political observers who believe that Rendell is and should be a “horse” in the VP race.

There is, first of all, considerable skepticism that Rendell, someone of outsized ambitions and driving energy, will serve out his second term. Most of his predecessors in Pennsylvania’s Governor’s Office developed wanderlust in their final term. One of them, Dick Thornburgh, missed the vice-presidential nomination by a hair’s breadth, ruled out by uber-consultant Lee Atwater. Another, Tom Ridge, was on Bush’s short list in 2000 before taking himself out of the running.

Moreover, Rendell has given no indication that he plans to spend much time soon shopping for a comfortable rocking chair to wile away his retirement years. In fact, Rendell has served up an agenda that may be the most ambitious second term agenda of any governor in modern Pennsylvania history. He has campaigned vigorously for it and has shown no sign he has tired of the job or that it has taken a toll on him.

The modern selection process for vice-president also augurs a Rendell candidacy. Once controlled by party leaders who slotted candidates to heal sectional or ideological wounds or to appease the losing faction in the presidential nomination battle, the vice-presidential selection is nowadays controlled by the presidential nominee and his advisors.
The critical benchmarks for that choice are well established: vice-presidential candidates are vetted for their ideological and personal compatibility with the presidential candidate. They must also pass some minimal test for presidential succession, and they must carry with them the electoral votes of their own states.

On all of these grounds, Rendell is a strong contender for the vice-presidential nomination. He is, first of all, a successful two-term governor in a year that virtually all observers believe the number two spot will go to a governor. As Governor, Rendell achieved a substantial portion of his policy agenda in his first term despite having to work with a Republican majority in the legislature.

Equally important, Rendell has great appeal to suburban voters who are now the key electorate in presidential elections. Rendell’s strength in the suburbs has been largely responsible for his decisive Pennsylvania victories. In 2006, he won 70 percent of the vote in the Philadelphia suburbs. And in state politics, Rendell’s suburban popularity has become a catalyst shifting Pennsylvania away from the GOP.

Then, too, Rendell’s extraordinary Philadelphia mayoral tenure provides him with a success story in salvaging the City from fiscal insolvency and resuscitating center city development. Tagged "America’s Mayor" by Al Gore, Rendell’s urban policy bona fides are impressive by any measure.

Finally, he is a brilliant campaigner, as even his opponents will attest, who has raised more campaign money than any other politician in Pennsylvania history.

This is an impressive array of political assets, but Rendell brings to the race something even more important: he puts Pennsylvania solidly in the Democratic column. The State is a key in the Electoral College sweepstakes--arguably one of three along with Ohio and Florida that could make the difference in 2008. With Rendell on the ticket, the Keystone State is a slam dunk for Democrats--without Rendell on the ballot it could be dicey.

Alas, for all this, Rendell is not the dream nominee from central casting some are looking for. Attractive political package that Rendell may be, he is a package that arrives with some rough edges. Playing Avis to someone’s Hertz may be a rough role for him. Sometimes unpredictable, even volatile, he is neither a safe nor uncomplicated choice. Indeed, Democrats seeking a safe, uncomplicated choice will look elsewhere.

But, perhaps this is not the year for Democrats to play it safe. The 2008 contest is going to be much more of a close election than many now believe. It may be the Democrats’ to lose, but they have shown they know how to do that. A party that has won only three of the last ten presidential elections might need to roll the dice a little. Democrats are desperate for a win. Rendell, warts and all, might help give it to them.

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