

The Cheneyizing of the Vice Presidency

September 10, 2008

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Its precursor was Harry Truman, it reached full stride with Richard Nixon, achieved its peak with Walter Mondale, and may have ended with Al Gore. Thus, one might eulogize the modern vice presidency's long running role as "heir presumptive" to the presidency.

Its end was sudden. For more than 40 years, becoming vice president had been the single most important predictor that someone would later be nominated to run for president. Indeed from 1960 to 2000, the vice presidency had been the high road to a presidential nomination. Party nominees from Nixon to Gore came routinely from the ranks of sitting vice presidents or former vice presidents. The list is a long one: Nixon in 1960, Johnson in 1964, Nixon and Humphrey in 1968, Ford in 1976, Mondale in 1984, George Bush in 1988, and Gore in 2000.

But that era may be ending. Since Gore no vice president or nominee for that office has had any political traction beyond the vice presidency itself. The vice presidency has been "Cheneysized," by which we mean to draw attention to two emerging trends that may transform American electoral politics. The first is the downsizing of the vice presidency's importance as the wellspring of future presidents, and the second is the simultaneous and paradoxical strengthening of the office's power.

Cheneysized nominees are named to the ticket with little prospect to succeed to the presidency in their own right. If defeated, their future electoral prospects dim quickly; if elected, they come to be viewed as irrelevant to their party's future by the end of their term(s)—albeit they may exercise significant power in office as does Dick Cheney now.

Cheneysizing can be viewed as a kind of Darwinian evolution of political specialization. During the 40 year Nixon-Gore era, vice presidents were assigned ever increasing responsibilities. At the same time, they were groomed as viable candidates for the presidency in their own right. But beginning with Cheney, we may be seeing the evolution of a new, more specialized adaptation within the institution of the vice presidency. The core function of Cheneysized vice presidents is to shore up the ticket and perform in office rather than to play a role in later politics.

The shift begins with Joe Lieberman, Gore's 2000 nominee. He barely hung onto his Senate seat after his national defeat, having to leave his party to win reelection. Kerry's 2004 nominee, John Edwards, has suffered both political and personal reversals that have probably ended his political career. And Bush's two-time nominee, Dick Cheney, has become so unpopular that GOP convention planners must have been pleased when he chose not to attend the St. Paul gathering.

Similarly the current vice presidential nominees seem poised to be Cheneysized. The Democratic nominee, Joe Biden, is a perennial presidential candidate who has never been able to establish on his own a national presidential constituency. Were Obama to lose, Biden is unlikely to have any presidential future.

Were Obama to win and serve two terms, Biden would be 74 years old before he could be inaugurated president in his own right. Bottom line: If Obama loses, Biden's shelf life doesn't extend to 2012. If Obama wins, Biden will be Cheneysized by the end of his term(s)—not necessarily as unpopular as the current vice president, but like Cheney now, seen as totally irrelevant to the electoral future of the party.

The Republican nominee Sarah Palin takes her party to the same place along a different trail. If McCain loses, Governor Palin goes back to Alaska, the losing junior partner of a losing ticket that handed the country back to the Democrats. Media darling she certainly is now, but losing turns a rising star into a shooting star. Little demand for a curtain call should be expected for her if the ticket loses.

If McCain wins, the picture is more complicated. Some believe McCain would be a transitional president who might serve only a single term. If so, Palin as vice president is unlikely to benefit from it. A political neophyte with no national organization and few party connections, she is unlikely to be positioned to run for the presidency in 2012. A second four-year term might help her, but by then the GOP would have been in power for 16 years—a feat accomplished only once in modern American politics and that took Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman to pull off.

Summing up the recent history of both parties—the trend seems clear. Selecting nominees who are ready to be president now and would one day succeed in their own right is no longer a controlling motivation of either party.

What are the implications for American politics if the vice presidency has been Cheneysized? One thing seems likely. We are not regressing to the days in which the office was seen as having no relevance. Future incumbents are not likely to find the office to be powerless, demeaning, or subservient—as did vice presidents from Jefferson to Humphrey. In fact one of the hallmarks of Cheneysization is a powerful vice presidency, albeit one without much political future.

Other political effects may be more subtle but not less important. The locus of political competition for the presidency may shift from established national political figures to a more diverse field. Little known or even unknown candidates may compete in national politics. That happened in both parties this year and led to more competition for the nominations than we had seen in a political generation. In fact 2008 is the first election in 52 years that no incumbent president, vice president, or former vice president is running for the presidency.

Finally, it is well to remember that we describe here an emerging pattern in our politics exemplified by just three election cycles. Politics is still more art than science. And the art of politics anticipates the unanticipated. Few had any appreciation of the enduring changes to national politics augured in 1952 when Dwight Eisenhower agreed to name to the ticket a controversial senator from California. Few could imagine in 2000 the consequential changes brought to the vice presidency by the Cheney tenure. And few today can predict what twists and turns in our politics must be navigated—as we adjust to the profound electoral changes now transforming the vice presidency.

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