Running Mate Roulette
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The Wall Street Journal, normally no admirer of Barack Obama, nevertheless is proffering some advice for the embattled president. Drop Joe Biden from the 2012 ticket and replace him with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. “Bye Bye Biden?” intones the alliteratively gifted Journal.

The newspaper’s not entirely implausible premise is that Clinton might help Obama in some key states and among some key groups that are critical but questionable for the president’s re-election hopes. Secretary Clinton, the Journal argues, would be a game changer, altering “the thinking of a majority of . . . Democrats”—while not so incidentally attracting the enthusiastic support of the still highly popular former President Clinton.

Political watchers are well advised not to hold their collective breath on this one happening soon. Obama shows no sign he plans to dump Biden. Indeed, the campaign seems to be moving in the opposite direction, preparing to use Biden in critical battleground states like Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Florida.

But if Biden is unlikely to be leaving the ticket, it remains interesting to examine how such presidential estrangements have worked out earlier in our history. What happens when an incumbent president running for re-election decides to replace his running mate?

The answer, it turns out, is both interesting and surprising. Since 1804, seven incumbents running for re-election have replaced their original running mates. The numbers: Jefferson bumped Aaron Burr in 1804; John Quincy Adams was abandoned in 1828 by John C. Calhoun when Calhoun won a second term as vice president while Adams was losing the presidency; Jackson replaced Calhoun in 1832 after the latter resigned his office; Lincoln jettisoned Hannibal Hamlin in 1864; Grant discarded Schuyler Colfax in 1872; Franklin Roosevelt replaced two different running mates, John Nance Garner in 1940 and Henry Wallace in 1944; and finally, Gerald Ford, an “unelected” president, replaced Nelson Rockefeller in 1976.

Several fascinating conclusions are possible from this brief rendition of presidential history. One is that—excepting Adams and Ford—every incumbent president changing running mates won re-election. So superficially at least, it seems profitable to seek a new running mate.

A closer look, however, reveals a more complex picture. In reality, incumbents have dropped running mates for many reasons, not all purely political. Jefferson, for example, had no choice after Burr tried to wrestle the presidency from him following a freak tie in the Electoral College in 1800. And Jackson and Calhoun had an uneasy personal relationship.

These examples notwithstanding, several presidents making the switch were motivated by re-election. These include Lincoln, Grant, Roosevelt, and Ford.

In 1864, Lincoln, facing an uncertain re-election, found a southern running mate who was also a Democrat. In
1872, Grant, beset by scandals in his first term, sought a running mate known for personal integrity, Henry Wilson. In 1940 and 1944, Roosevelt sought new running mates to smooth the way to third and then fourth term victories. In 1976, Ford, weighed down by Watergate, sought a new running mate after Nelson Rockefeller, unpopular with conservatives, indicated he would not run.

Perhaps the most surprising thing produced by running mate switches is the effect it often had on history beyond the election itself. While incumbent presidents change their running mates for a variety of short-term reasons, those changes often produce unanticipated long-term effects.

Jefferson’s replacing Burr is representative. After Burr learned he was to be dropped, he lost the governorship of New York, subsequently fought his infamous duel with Alexander Hamilton, and undertook a series of military adventures many historians believe were designed to set up a domestic dictatorship.

Jackson’s split with Calhoun likewise produced durable consequences, among them the propulsion of Calhoun into perhaps the leading voice for perpetuation of states rights and southern hegemony in the ante bellum period.

Lincoln’s switch from Hannibal Hamlin to Andrew Johnson was designed to get Lincoln through what looked like a tough re-election. Instead, Johnson became president six months later and embroiled the nation in an agonizing political conflict eventually leading to his impeachment and near removal from office.

Roosevelt’s rotating roster of vice presidents probably turned out better than it should have. His 1940 running mate, Henry Wallace, was later shown to have a serious lack of judgment and may have been a communist dupe. Yet Wallace would have been president had Roosevelt died only three months earlier. Roosevelt’s last running mate, Harry Truman, turned out to be among America’s best presidents, yet it is hard to argue that Roosevelt knew or anticipated that. In fact he seems to have paid little attention to Truman’s selection as running mate.

Only Grant’s selection of Wilson over Colfax can be said to have little later historical significance. Wilson suffered a stroke in 1873 and died in 1875 after less than three years in office.

All in all, American-style running mate roulette has produced some mixed results. Presidents who do it usually win, but it’s not at all clear that the switch was responsible. What is clear, though, is that changing running mates is almost always portentous beyond the immediate election. Obama needs to think about that. Maybe the Wall Street Journal does too.

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