Rick Santorum for Vice President: Stranger Things Have Happened
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It’s an old political proverb: no one runs for vice president except everyone running for president. Okay, we made up that last part.

The actual adage is shorter: no one runs for vice president. But that is patent nonsense. Although they’ll deny it to the bitter end, presidential candidates often end up hoping their party’s nominee will pick them to run as vice president. In fact, many of them are selected as running mates by their former presidential rivals. Recent examples include Joe Biden, Al Gore, George H. W. Bush, and Lyndon Johnson.

All of this brings us to a question. Exactly why is Rick Santorum running for president in 2012? It can’t be to win it. Santorum is virtually unknown outside Pennsylvania, suffered one of the worst defeats in modern state history defending his Senate seat in 2006, has relatively little money, and possesses a penchant for making people mad at him for things he says—sometimes very mad.

One recent poll shows him in the low 4 percent range, just ahead of Gary Johnson. Who is Gary Johnson, you might say? That’s exactly the point.

Let’s put it this way. If one were to construct a list of the 10,000 or so most eligible, most likely, and most promising people to run for president, Santorum wouldn’t be on it. It’s very unlikely Santorum could even win statewide office in Pennsylvania again, maybe not even a congressional seat. It’s possible his time might come around again. Few, however, believe that time is now.

Yet despite all the reasons he shouldn’t be running for president, he is running.

Or is he?

Maybe instead, Santorum is actually running for vice president. There are some pretty compelling reasons to suspect that’s so. First of all, Rick Santorum is no dummy. Yes, he says and sometimes does dumb things. But he is one of the shrewdest, most tenacious, and ambitious politicians of his generation. He may tilt at the odd windmill once in a while, but he’s always known it’s really a windmill.

Second, Santorum can’t possibly win the GOP nomination. His base is too narrow, his funding is too fragile, and his message is too polarizing. In presidential terms, he is a fringe candidate.

Finally, Santorum, looking to the history of the GOP, knows well the overwhelming probability is that the eventual nominee will be an establishment figure—perhaps Romney, Pawlenty, or Huntsman—running on a jobs and economic growth platform. And such a choice leaves the social conservatives out in the cold. Not good for social conservatives and very bad for the Republican Party.
Except Santorum will be there to make sure that won’t happen. Most social conservatives like him or at least tolerate him well. He’s a true believer, strong on the hot button social issues, and the perfect balance to a ticket likely to need a lot of balancing. True, there are other social conservatives who could do the job beside Santorum. But Palin isn’t going to run for vice president again, and Michelle Bachmann seems unlikely to give up her base to be second banana to a Romney, Pawlenty, or Huntsman.

That leaves Santorum, who could become the Dick Cheney of 2012—someone few really like but everyone understands to be necessary.

Santorum becomes the vice presidential choice if—and it’s a serious if—he can successfully negotiate the early primaries and caucuses. The ideal game plan for him is to draw a respectable vote in Iowa, survive New Hampshire, and maybe get through South Carolina. Then he can drop out, play loyal Republican, and even endorse the frontrunner after leaving the race himself.

After that, events will be in the saddle, as they say. Santorum could become the default choice, and then it’s game time for the fall contest.

Is Santorum thinking about all this? Absolutely! Can he actually pull it off? That’s another question.

Staying in all the way to South Carolina is going to be challenging for him. And then there are other social conservatives who could take his place. Bachmann and Palin have already been mentioned. In addition, Mike Huckabee, Mike Pence, and John Thune would probably satisfy conservatives. All three, however, have removed themselves from the 2012 race.

If Santorum did run and the Republicans did win, what kind of vice president would he be? Comparisons will be made to Cheney, but actually the incumbent Joe Biden is a better model. Santorum is the conservative counterpart to Biden. He is as conservative as Biden is liberal, experienced in the Senate, and equally as voluble—meaning prone to saying almost anything at almost any time.

It would be an interesting four years.