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The failed 'dream ticket' plan

Why Romney couldn't pick Santorum as a running mate

By JOSHUA SPIVAK

BERKELEY, Calif. — In an attempt to tarnish Rick Santorum's conservative credentials, Mitt Romney appeared to take off the table the possibility of selecting Santorum as his vice presidential nominee, deeming his main opponent to not have the "fiscal conservative chops."

This shouldn't be a surprise. While every presidential run has similar discussion of a "dream ticket" scenario, it is relatively rare that a presidential contender chooses the runner-up as a vice presidential selection. And for good reason — it would probably hurt more than help.

History tells the tale. Since John F. Kennedy tapped second-place finisher Lyndon Johnson in 1960, there have been only two other runner-ups selected to run as VPs, John Edwards in 2004, and George H.W. Bush in 1980. Edwards did not spend most of his campaign attacking John Kerry. And George H.W. Bush was selected only after Reagan had a high-profile flirtation with former President Gerald Ford. While Joe Biden ran for president in 2008, he finished very far behind and dropped out immediately after the Iowa caucus.

There is basic and obvious reason to not choose a runner-up, one that is very clear in a Romney-Santorum mix. Choosing a runner-up would mean trying to sweep under the rug the many criticisms and negative statements made by both candidates against each other in the bruising primary campaign. This isn't a personal issue — the two candidates can probably get over any bad feelings from the primary — they are professionals, after all. But the TV ads that will run featuring critical comments from Santorum about Romney (and vice-versa) could damage their credibility. This would actually play directly into the criticism of Romney — namely his ability to maintain a consistent position on issues.

We might have seen a similar situation in 2008 when what some saw as the "dream ticket" of Barack Obama-Hillary Clinton never materialized. There, Clinton and Obama would have had to perform an about-face to convince voters that after months of trashing him in the press, Clinton all of a sudden believed that Obama had enough experience to serve as president.

Choosing a running mate whose own words can be used to attack the president would probably be an unnecessary risk for the presidential contender. Generally, the vice presidential choice does not have much of an impact on a presidential race. Studies have found that voters do not cast their ballots based on running mates. The VP choice usually operates as a ticket-balancing act — whether geographical, ideological or even generational. VPs also frequently act as attack dog, making negative claims against the opponent that the presidential contender doesn't want to be seen as saying. Richard Nixon, one of only two men to be involved in five national races as a presidential or vice presidential candidate, believed that a vice president choice could only harm the ticket.

Occasionally, the VP gives a momentum boost to the ticket, though the only running mate choice who is thought to have played a major role in winning a presidential election was Lyndon Johnson in 1960. Even the controversial selections may not have made much of a difference. Dan Quayle did not damage George H.W. Bush successful run in 1988, nor was

George McGovern's aborted selection of Senator Thomas Eagleton responsible for his overwhelming defeat.

The most prominent choice in people's minds, John McCain's contentious choice of Sarah Palin, who seemed to motivate the conservative base and enrage the liberal one in almost equal measure, may not have had a real impact on the 2008 race.

It may be true that the VP choice doesn't have much of impact, but if the selection highlights the perceived negative attributions of the presidential contender, that could be catastrophic to the ticket. In this case, thanks to the almost scorched-earth campaigns being run by both candidates, a Romney-Santorum ticket would prove endless fodder for Democratic ad-makers.

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