

Fight for the heir-apparent label

by JOSHUA SPIVAK

After a series of stumbles and a downturn in the polls, Hillary Clinton's praised debate performance has taken some of the air out of the potential Vice President Joe Biden run. The fact that Biden's stock has taken a presumed hit from one debate performance shows the problem that Biden is facing. If Clinton weren't in the race, he would very likely be the prohibitive favorite. But the same reason that he could have a starring role is among the reasons that Clinton is the favorite.

Biden's campaign would be based on wrapping himself in the mantle of the president. There is very good reason to think this type of campaign would be successful, at least for the primary fight. Seven of the past 11 vice presidents have gained their parties' presidential nomination. This is a stark reversal from the historic norm — from 1836 until 1960, when Richard Nixon broke the streak, the only vice presidents who could win a nomination were three who had already moved up due to the death of a president.

Since Nixon broke through, vice presidents have been the first choice. It has only been VPs with very specific problems — the disgraced Spiro Agnew, the deceased Nelson Rockefeller, the ridiculed Dan Quayle, and the triple heart-bypassed Dick Cheney — who have not managed to gain the nomination as standard-bearers for their party in a presidential race.

There are some logical reasons for this reversal. Under the modern presidential system, the president directly chooses the vice president. In the past, when political conventions reigned supreme, the vice presidency was used as a bargaining chip to help push an aspiring presidential nominee over the top or as a consolation prize to the supporters of the losing candidates. It was used to unify the party. Since the primary and caucus system has overthrown the old convention selection process, the presidential candidate does not have to make the same bargains with political leaders to get the nomination. Therefore, he or she is able to choose a vice president directly — and select one that will maximize his or her chances of winning the presidency, as oppose to maximize the chances of winning the nomination. This more personal vice presidential pick is more closely tied to the president than any other selection.

The result is that once the president's term ends, choosing a vice presidential candidate as the new nominee can be viewed as the equivalent of voter ratification of the president's term. The president, who naturally wants to see his platform effectively endorsed once again by voters, effectively backs the VP bid. Since the president is always vastly more popular with his party than with the electorate at large, this support is extremely valuable.

Unfortunately for Biden, Clinton, by virtue of her role as Secretary of State, set out to claim this mantle of the president's standard-bearer very early on, while hoping to avoid the inevitable baggage of a drearier second term. Under normal circumstances, this would likely not have worked against a sitting VP. Cabinet members have an incredibly poor recent history of success. This could seem strange under the full sweep of American history as five of the first eight presidents served in the cabinet — in particular in the very same role as Clinton, Secretary of State. But the ability of cabinet members to get elected president, or even gain their party's

support, has almost completely dried up. The last cabinet member to even be nominated was Herbert Hoover.

But Clinton is by no means a normal candidate. What Clinton has going for her as a primary candidate is the perhaps grudging de facto endorsement of President Obama, and the very enthusiastic endorsement of her husband, former President Bill Clinton, which sucks the air and more importantly the money out of the race. So far Biden's whisper candidacy hasn't raised any money. That may not be an accident. The possible dual endorsement of the last two Democratic presidents may not be enough in and of themselves to get over the top, but it is, at the very least, a very big boost.

Until the primaries take place or until he makes an official announcement, Joe Biden will be closely followed for any sign that he is running. With the track record of recent vice presidential success, it makes a lot of sense that he has not yet abandoned the dream of seeking the top electoral prize. And if it was any candidate but Hillary Clinton standing in his way, history shows that he would more than likely have been the guy to get it.

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