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## With Their Conventions, Republicans and Democrats Whistle Past the Graveyard

By JOSHUA SPIVAK

With the Democrats already cutting a day off their political convention, and Congress looking to eliminate government funding for the self-congratulatory kick-off party, political conventions are facing a grim future. For most voters – and in most elections – the only thing to say to this development is good riddance to a useless, pointless boring spectacle. Unfortunately, due to complete lack of “worst case scenario” planning by the two political parties, conventions represent something else entirely – a possible dire threat to their electoral prospects.

Up till now, the two parties have ignored any worst case planning for their presidential candidates. So they have basically whistled past the graveyard in looking at the question of what would happen if the presumed presidential nominee had to bow out between the time the candidate garners a majority of the delegates and the convention. This is not an esoteric question. While no presidential candidate has died during the election (the closest was Horace Greeley in 1872, who died at the end of November of his election year), that’s not to say it can’t happen. Whether it is an assassination or a fluke accident, we’ve repeatedly seen elected officials in the U.S. and throughout the world get cut down during their run for office. There’s no reason to think it won’t happen to a presidential contender.

Just as possible is a scandal forcing the presumptive nominee out of the race. We came close enough to witnessing this in 2008, when John Edwards ran third for the Democratic nomination. If he had won the nomination, and the revelations of his affair and out-of-wedlock child came to light, he might have been forced off the ballot.

And what would be the result if one of the party’s had to select a new nominee? Quite likely, chaos and a ruined presidential ticket. It would not likely be a throwback to past political conventions – which themselves were frequently embarrassing affairs. Nor would it be a West Wing type of high level maneuvering. Instead, it’s likely to be a free-for-all mess.

Part of the problem is the selection of the delegates. Before the primary era took hold after 1968, the delegates were effectively chosen by the leader of the state delegation – frequently the Governor – and they were beholden to him. If the leader thought he had a chance to grab the presidential nomination, then they would vote for him. Otherwise, they would be a bargaining chip. Deals were cut by leaders and the delegates accepted them – the delegates’ livelihoods probably depended on their loyalty, and votes were usually by the Unit Rule (the whole state votes as one).

Now, the conventions are made up of delegates who are either other elected officials or individuals being rewarded for supporting the nominee. Once their nominee falls, they can and probably will go their own way.

Of course, voters have no idea who these delegates are. Few voters bother looking at the delegate slate during the primary season, and even if they did, they likely would not know the delegates positions. Yet, these are exactly the people who are going to choose the nominee.

What will likely occur are complaints of corrupt bargains and under-the-table deals against whoever wins the nomination. It will likely dog the nominee for the rest of the race and will be the legacy of the delegates.

The other problem is the lack of obvious replacement candidates for a fallen presidential choice. Frequently, the official second place finisher in the presidential race got there by his or her dogged refusal to drop out of the race. For example, if Romney had stayed in the race to the bitter end in 2008, he would almost certainly have come in second. Instead, Mike Huckabee was the runner up. In an open convention situation, that runner up will now try to claim the mantle. At the same time, unless there is an obvious replacement (like for the Democrats in 2008), we would see a host of other candidates try to jump in. It would be fun for observers, but potentially catastrophic for the party.

Just as bad, if the eventual candidate did not run in the primaries at all, they will now have to face the vetting process, as we've seen with numerous VP candidates, actually being on the top ticket on the national stage is no place for try outs.

It is not clear how the parties could clear up this problem. The Democrats took a highly controversial step in that direction when they adopted the Super Delegates, but that is no answer. At the very least, the two parties should start considering this problem.

Right now the conventions are a channel skipping snooze-fest. There is every chance that they will never be more than a late launch party for already selected candidate. But the Democrats and Republicans should take their potential danger to heart. One day, the conventions may destroy their presidential hopes.

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