



NEWS from U.S. Senator Bob Dole

(R.-Kans.)

New Senate Office Building, Washington, D.C. 20510 (202) 224-6521

THE VICE PRESIDENTIAL SELECTION PROCESS
REMARKS BY SENATOR BOB DOLE
BEFORE THE RNC RULES REVIEW COMMITTEE
MAYFLOWER HOTEL, WASHINGTON, D.C.
JANUARY 19, 1978

First, let me thank the Rules Review Committee for looking into the Vice Presidential selection process and giving me this opportunity to comment on proposals for change. Since my selection as the party's 1976 Vice Presidential nominee, I have cultivated an interest in the process and in proposals to improve it.

Before turning to the various reform proposals let me say that the Rules Review Committee's job is extremely important -- and for a number of reasons. The national nominating convention is one of the few remaining areas where we operate under rules established by the party itself, rather than under rules established by Congress or the Constitution. Therefore, the situation demands an extraordinary degree of responsibility on our part as well as an awareness of the importance of the system which we control.

To preserve this system, we have a responsibility to implement reform where reform is mandated by political developments and increased concern about the Vice Presidency. However, we should be careful to take only those steps which will really improve the system.

The Best Vehicle For Reform

Certainly, the best vehicle for reform of the Vice Presidential selection process are the rules which govern our national conventions. By taking this opportunity to implement meaningful reform, perhaps we can cause favorable comparisons to be made between our rules and the rules which govern the other party. Perhaps we can take the lead making needed reforms in a Vice Presidential selection process that has been the subject of considerable criticism in recent years.

Of course this is not the first committee which has considered changes in the process. Republicans and Democrats alike have considered the matter before and come up with no drastic changes which were actually implemented. The fact that these efforts have produced no major reforms may, by itself, say something about many of the proposals which have been tendered. Despite that, however, this is a matter worthy of your consideration. I hope that some meaningful reforms can be found and implemented.

The Vice Presidency is universally acknowledged as an important position in today's government. But it always takes a back seat to the Presidential race.

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Sometimes, prior to the convention, it is so far back in the seat that it is invisible. In addition, a certain amount of mystery shrouds the selection process and running mates seem to emerge from the brain of the newly acclaimed nominee on short notice.

As a result of this mystery, there is considerable mythology that has built up around the public understanding of how this process works. These myths have fueled some of the reform proposals. Before we change the rules, we should be sure we have the facts straight.

The First Myth

The first myth is that Presidential candidates don't dare even think about possible running mates until after they are safely nominated.

It was not until after the last election that I had time to inquire into the exact details of how I came to be on the ticket with Gerald R. Ford. The prevailing impression left throughout the campaign was that the President happened upon my name in the wee hours of the morning during a conference with his sleepy advisors and after some frantic negotiations with Governor Reagan's representatives. However, the selection process was not nearly so haphazard as it may have been portrayed. Long before the convention, the White House began contacting party leaders, future delegates, Governors, Members of Congress, and others. As the screening process continued, those of us who were still on the list were asked to submit our personal financial records for review. The next step was extensive opinion polling under the direction of Bob Teeter, who was coordinating the White House polling. Then, before going to Kansas City, there were more staff meetings, three of them involving the President himself, all of them two hours or longer in length. In the Convention City, I am told, there were three more meetings, two of them attended by both the President and the Vice President, Nelson Rockefeller. At the end of the third meeting, the list had apparently been narrowed to three -- Ruckelshaus, Baker, and Dole. Following the President's nomination, he reconvened his advisers from 2:30 until 5:30 in the morning, and again at 9:30 the next morning. Twenty minutes later, the President said: "Assume it's Bob Dole -- I am not clear what happens next." Somebody remarked: "Mr. President, you had better call him," and everyone laughed.

The point is that only a fool would select a running mate without a lot of advance thought and research. And not many fools can count on getting nominated for President.

Another Myth

Another myth is that an otherwise astute, methodical politician who had either reached or was within reach of the Presidency would make such an important decision without carefully considering his running mate's standing in the party -- his popularity among the delegates who represent the party -- his strengths and weaknesses in various regions of the country -- and the fact that today voters are conditioned to think of the Vice Presidential candidate as a potential Presidential successor; therefore, they are going to assess the running mate's capacity to be President. Nor, in this scientific age, would any wise candidate make a choice of such importance without "market-testing" various possibilities through public opinion polling. A candidate who deliberately selected a lesser light because he did not want to be out-shone by his running mate would have to be either way out in front or awfully insecure.

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Is there any reason, then, why President Ford could not have made public the field of candidates he was considering a month or so before the convention? None, except for the importance in a close contest of retaining maximum flexibility right up until the last moment. A candidate who does not have the nomination locked up finds it useful for no one to be eliminated from Vice Presidential consideration. Even Mr. Carter's list was so lengthy as to cover all the bases that he had to be concerned about at that late date. How the rejects felt about having all the world know they had fallen short of his standards has not, to my knowledge, been recorded. Publication of an advance list, however, still leaves substantial flexibility.

The advantage of such an arrangement is that the Presidential nominee will not be able to surprise others with his selection by pulling a relative unknown out of the hat. Anyone on the advance list would have received public attention and scrutiny prior to a final decision. In effect, there would be a "comment period" which might be very helpful to a Presidential hopeful picking a running mate.

Historical Development

It is only recently that many people thought twice about the Vice Presidency or much cared who got the job. At first, it was a consolation prize for the runner-up in the Presidential election. But the political rivalries within the Executive Branch proved intolerable. Then there were a series of forgettable non-entities nominated for ticket-balancing reasons. During most of one seven-year period, the office was even left vacant. Nobody seemed to notice. Daniel Webster turned down the nomination on the Whig ticket in 1848. "No, thank you," he said. "I do not propose to be buried until I am really dead and in my coffin." Thomas Marshall, who was Woodrow Wilson's running mate, compared the Vice President to "A man in a cataleptic state: He cannot speak; he cannot move; he suffers no pain; and yet he is perfectly conscious of everything that is going on about him." "It is a doomed office," said the historian Arthur Schlesinger. "No President and Vice President have trusted each other since Jackson and Van Buren."

Recent History

The Presidential nomination remains the main attraction at national conventions. The Vice Presidential nomination is -- in a sense -- still an afterthought, although the position is now being recognized in its own right. Viewed even as "standby equipment", the position has assumed tremendous importance in light of our nation's recent history.

"Handpicking" The Running Mate

Some have recommended taking the power away from the nominee to "handpick" his running mate. This, however, is probably an unrealistic proposal. First of all, leaving the decision up to the Presidential candidate does not mean that we are ignoring the matter or failing to give it proper attention. Besides, throwing open the decision to the convention as a whole would only add to party factionalism -- something the Republican Party can do without.

As we consider the selection process for Vice Presidents, we must keep our eye on the Vice Presidency as an institution.

In order for the Vice Presidency to be worth more than John Nance Garner's proverbial "pitcher of warm spit", the President and Vice President must be able to work together. This is most likely to happen when the Presidential candidate picks his running mate, and least likely to happen when his running mate is picked for him.

As Woodrow Wilson said, "The chief embarrassment in discussing the Vice Presidency is that in explaining how little there is to be said about it, one has evidently said all there is to say." Since the Constitutional duties of the Vice President are so limited, it is important that he participate in the daily affairs of the Executive Branch so that he will be able to assume the duties of the Chief Executive if necessary. In order for him to be included in an active role, he should be someone with the trust and confidence of the President. Therefore, the power of selection should not be taken away from the Presidential nominee.

There is another suggestion which has more merit. Perhaps serious thought should be given to having Presidential and Vice Presidential candidates run as a team in the primaries and come before the convention as a team. Of course, that would be a ticket-balancing exercise of the highest order. Of course, there have always been ticket-balancing considerations in the Presidential candidate's decisions. In my case, I have been told that the pre-convention surveys indicated we had serious troubles in the farm belt and I would help the ticket there and in the South.

More Time For Decision

For my part, I would be in favor of convention rules giving the Presidential nominee more time to consider his decision. Based on my own experience, things happen pretty fast once the Presidential nomination is out of the way. Considering its importance, the decision is made under highly extraordinary circumstances in the present system. We could provide more time by rearranging the order of business and considering the platform after the Presidential balloting - thereby giving more time for the final selection decision. A related proposal would be to extend the length of the convention - although this soon runs into very practical problems of its own.

Another reform which could be implemented is to provide for an up-or-down vote on the President's choice, without the necessity of putting him or her against other names offered in nomination. If the ticket failed of convention endorsement, then Vice Presidential nominations could be opened up.

Conclusion

As someone interested in the Vice Presidential selection process, I thank you for this opportunity to comment on some of the proposals and to suggest some reforms which should be considered.

Recent history underlines the importance of the Vice Presidency. Therefore, we ought to do everything we reasonably can to improve the process by which Vice Presidents are nominated.