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Content: VP

March 5

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THE TOPIC THAT SENATOR HUMPHREY AND I ARE DISCUSSING TODAY -- VICE PRESIDENTIAL SELECTION -- IS ONE OF THE FEW REMAINING FEATURES OF THE ELECTORAL SYSTEM THAT IS NOT TOTALLY ABOVE BOARD AND VISIBLE FOR ALL TO SEE. ALMOST ALWAYS, A CERTAIN AMOUNT OF SUSPENSE AND MYSTERY SHROUDS THE SELECTION OF THE VICE PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES. RUNNING MATES CUSTOMARILY EMERGE FROM THE BRAIN OF THE NEWLY ACCLAIMED PRESIDENTIAL NOMINEE -- USUALLY ON RATHER SHORT ORDER WITHOUT ANY MEANINGFUL CHANCE FOR THE CONVENTION DELEGATES TO WORK THEIR WILL.

THERE IS CONSIDERABLE MYTHOLOGY THAT HAS BUILT UP AROUND THE PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING OF HOW THIS PROCESS WORKS, HOWEVER, AS SENATOR HUMPHREY AND I CAN BOTH TESTIFY.

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FIRST OF THE MYTHS

THE FIRST OF THESE MYTHS 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. LONG BEFORE THE CONVENTION, THE WHITE HOUSE BEGAN CONTACTING PARTY LEADERS, FUTURE DELEGATES, GOVERNORS, MEMBERS OF CONGRESS, AND SO FORTH.

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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.

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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.

THE ADVANTAGE OF SUCH AN ARRANGEMENT -- AND I THINK IT IS AN IMPORTANT ONE -- IS THAT THE PRESIDENTIAL NOMINEE WILL NOT BE IN A POSITION TO PULL THE NAME OF A COMPARATIVE UNKNOWN OUT OF A HAT WITHOUT ADEQUATE TIME FOR PUBLIC SCRUTINY. AFTER RECENT EXPERIENCE, I BELIEVE THE VOTERS WOULD REACT UNKINDLY TO THE LAST-MINUTE CHOICE OF A RUNNING MATE WHOSE PUBLIC RECORD WAS NOT WELL KNOWN.

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HISTORIC BACKGROUND

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."

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NEVERTHELESS, IT IS PROBABLY UNREALISTIC TO THINK OF DEPRIVING THE PRESIDENTIAL NOMINEE OF HIS TRADITIONAL OPPORTUNITY TO "HANDPICK" HIS RUNNING MATE. LEAVING THE DECISION TO THE CONVENTION, OR WAITING UNTIL LATER WHEN THE DELEGATES WOULD EITHER RECONVENE OR ELSE THE NATIONAL COMMITTEES WOULD MAKE THE CHOICE, ARE SUGGESTIONS THAT WOULD ONLY ADD TO PARTY FACTIONALISM -- SOMETHING THE REPUBLICAN PARTY CAN DO WITHOUT RIGHT NOW.

SOME OF THE OTHER SUGGESTIONS HAVE MORE MERIT. AUTHORIZING CONFIDENTIAL FBI CHECKS OF NAMES SUBMITTED BY PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES IN BOTH PARTIES IS ONE. ANOTHER IS REQUIRING AFTER THE PRIMARIES HAVE BEEN COMPLETED THAT THE CANDIDATES MAKE PUBLIC A LIST OF NAMES FROM WHICH THE RECOMMENDED RUNNING MATE MUST BE CHOSEN. 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 -- AND MUCH SIMPLER FOR AN INCUMBENT PRESIDENT, OR SOMEONE WHO HAS THE NOMINATION LOCKED UP, THAN FOR A DARKHORSE CANDIDATE. THERE ALWAYS HAVE 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.

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NO DRASTIC CHANGES YET

IT IS PROBABLY MEANINGFUL THAT BOTH PARTIES HAVE DONE A GREAT DEAL OF THINKING ABOUT CHANGING THE SELECTION PROCEDURES RECENTLY, YET HAVE AGREED ON NO DRASTIC CHANGES.

I WOULD BE IN FAVOR OF CONVENTION RULES THAT GIVE THE PRESIDENTIAL NOMINEE A LITTLE MORE TIME TO CONSIDER HIS RECOMMENDATION; AND THEN REQUIRING A REASONABLE WAIT BETWEEN THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF HIS DECISION AND THE BALLOTING FOR VICE PRESIDENT. IF THERE IS SUBSTANTIAL OPPOSITION TO THE RUNNING MATE, THIS WOULD ALLOW TIME FOR THE OPPOSITION TO ORGANIZE. IT MIGHT BE ADVISABLE FOR THE RULES TO PROVIDE FOR AN AUTOMATIC FIRST-BALLOT UP-OR-DOWN VOTE ON THE PRESIDENT'S CHOICE, WITHOUT THE NECESSITY OF PITTING HIM OR HER AGAINST OTHER NAMES OFFERED IN NOMINATION. IF THE TICKET FAILED OF CONVENTION ENDORSEMENT, THEN VICE PRESIDENTIAL NOMINATIONS COULD BE OPENED UP.

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BY FOCUSING ATTENTION ON THIS VERY IMPORTANT SUBJECT,
NBC IS PERFORMING A USEFUL PUBLIC SERVICE. RECENT HISTORY
UNDERLINES THE IMPORTANCE OF THE NOMINATIONS FOR THIS OFFICE.
THEODORE ROOSEVELT THOUGHT IT WOULD BE A STEPPING STONE TO
NOTHING BUT OBLIVION FOR HIM. HE WAS WRONG, OF COURSE. THE
VICE PRESIDENCY IS NOW WORTH CONSIDERABLY MORE THAN THE
WARM PITCHER OF SPIT JOHN NANCE GARNER TALKED ABOUT . . .
AND BOTH OUR PARTIES OUGHT TO DO EVERYTHING THEY REASONABLY
CAN TO BRING THE SELECTION PROCEDURES MORE IN TUNE WITH
THE TIMES.

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