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The incredible growing VP

A Biden run for president in 2016 shouldn't be laughed off

BY JOSHUA SPIVAK

Vice President Joe Biden is known as a veritable gaffe machine. His latest statement — that he is considering running for the presidency in 2016 — has drawn derisive comments. There are solid reasons for the quips. Biden has already run two very poor races for the presidency, dropping out before any votes were even cast. Additionally, on Election Day 2016 he would be a few days short of 74, which would make him the oldest president to ever be elected.

But despite these hurdles, there is a big reason not to discount Biden's presidential hopes. And that reason is recent history. Since 1952, seven of the past 11 vice presidents have gained their parties' presidential nomination. All but the disgraced Spiro Agnew, the deceased Nelson Rockefeller, the ridiculed Dan Quayle and the quintuple heart-attack sufferer Dick Cheney were chosen to serve as standard-bearers for their party in a presidential race.

This fact is a reversal of a long-standing political norm. From 1836 until 1960, when Richard Nixon broke the streak, the only vice presidents who succeeded in garnering their party's nomination were Theodore Roosevelt, Calvin Coolidge and Harry Truman, all of whom had first become president following their bosses' death.

There are several very strong factors that explain the rise of the vice president to the role of heir apparent. Probably the most important is the downfall of the political convention and the rise of the primary system as the method for selecting presidents. Previously, state leaders and machine bosses played the major role in selecting presidents. The vice presidential choice was a bargaining chip and an obvious sop to the losing team. The vast majority of these consolation prizes were handed out to men who were rarely prominent or powerful individuals.

But now presidential candidates are selected by the voters. Without the need to bargain for convention votes, they personally choose their running mates after they've already won the nomination. Their vice presidential choices are not designed to mollify a disgruntled faction — instead they are used to improve the ticket's chances of success in November. Hence, most of the recent VP candidates (with a few glaring exceptions) have been prominent political figures. In fact, every single first-choice Democratic vice presidential nominee since 1940, with the exception of Congresswoman Geraldine Ferraro, was a sitting U.S. senator.

This has resulted in much higher name recognition for vice presidents, which helps with getting voter support, fundraising and forming a nationwide political organization.

Recent vice presidents have also done much to expand the office's role. Starting with Truman's decision to make the VP a member of the National Security Council, presidents have added to their running mate's portfolio, giving them key political and policy roles to play. Cheney was known as the most powerful vice president in history, but it is also clear that Biden and Gore were vastly more important than many of their predecessors.

The vice president also usually inherits the mantle of the president he has served under, allowing the vice president to run almost as an incumbent. The president himself, with enormous power and patronage opportunities inside the party, may want their VP to succeed them as it provides an electoral

validation to their last term. This forces other primary candidates to run a de facto insurgent's campaign, which is especially difficult to win if your party controls the White House. Bill Bradley in 2000 and Bob Dole in 1988 can attest to the problems facing challengers of sitting VPs.

Age is a negative factor for Biden, but perhaps not as much as it once was. Alben Barkley, Truman's vice president, was also 74 when he tried and failed to win the presidential nomination. But life expectancy has radically increased since then, and a good portion of the baby boomer generation will be collecting Social Security by the time Biden would be running.

As a two-time loser of the Democratic presidential nomination and a man with a reputation for saying the wrong thing at the wrong time, Biden would certainly have plenty of hurdles to clear. But as recent history shows, you can never discount a sitting vice president in a presidential primary battle.