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The old VP switcheroo

Dumping Biden would hark back to tradition that was abandoned for a reason

by JOSHUA SPIVAK

As Barack Obama's poll numbers continue to suffer, and with the economy not looking to pick up all that much before the election, some Democrats searching for an electoral edge have hit upon one of the oldest moves in the book — dumping the VP. Get rid of Vice President (and human gaffe machine) Joseph Biden, the argument runs, replace him with popular but potentially divisive Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, switch Biden over to Clinton's old spot, and presto — you beef up the 2012 ticket enough to compensate for the bad economy.

Obama has not bothered to acknowledge the idea — and with good reason. Despite the increase in importance of the vice president over the last half-century, there are very few examples of a vice presidential choice mattering to voters. Studies have found voters do not cast their ballots based on running mates. Yes, it's true that a few VPs have provided an energy boost for the ticket. But consider Sarah Palin's star turn in 2008, which polls show may have had a serious negative effect on John McCain's run. Yes, Palin's emergence may signal a change in the importance of the vice presidential pick, but it is too soon to tell. And Palin, remember, ran with a candidate seeking a first term.

Obama's decision comes under much different circumstances. He is no longer a policy mystery to voters, and he is running for re-election. In such instances, the president's record is what's being looked at, not his choice of running mates. Furthermore, a vice presidential change can seem both desperate and disloyal. It might well appear in the same vein as presidential cabinet firings of the past: George H.W. Bush's announcement that he would replace Treasury Secretary Nicholas Brady and Budget Director Dick Darman if he won a second term. There's a reason VP-dumping has gone out of fashion.

At one point, though, it was very popular. Changing vice presidents was almost an integral part of 19th-century election cycles. Thomas Jefferson started the tradition, replacing the disloyal Aaron Burr with George Clinton in his 1804 re-election campaign; with the exception of James Monroe and Daniel Tompkins, no president/VP duo was elected to two terms in the 19th century. (It took Woodrow Wilson to break the streak, with Thomas Marshall.) Many of our most noteworthy presidents, including Andrew Jackson, Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Roosevelt, followed this path, replacing their vice president during their re-election campaigns.

However, since FDR tossed Henry Wallace overboard in favor of Harry Truman in 1944, veep-dumping has all but stopped. The main reason? Most likely the end of the party conventions, where the vice presidency was used as a bargaining chip to win enough delegates to get the nomination. The president now more or less personally selects the vice president — which makes any veep replacement a sharp personal criticism.

That being said, many post-war presidents have at least considered dumping their veep. Numerous top Republicans fruitlessly worked to drop Richard Nixon from the Eisenhower ticket. As with Biden, there was a suggestion that Nixon could be put in a Cabinet role. And

despite being credited with helping Kennedy win the presidency, Lyndon Johnson was allegedly facing removal before fate intervened.

That's not all. Nixon himself thought of dumping Spiro Agnew; George H.W. Bush ignored calls to replace Dan Quayle, much as his son turned down suggestions that he get rid of Dick Cheney. In fact, the only VP to be replaced post-Wallace was Nelson Rockefeller. The unelected Gerald Ford was facing a conservative primary challenge from Ronald Reagan, and needed to move to his right. He did this by dumping the liberal Rockefeller in favor of Sen. Bob Dole. The fact that neither Ford nor Rockefeller had been elected might have helped stave off charges of disloyalty.

The addition of Hillary Clinton to the ticket could give Obama's presidential campaign a shot in the arm. And it is a risk that numerous other presidents have taken. However, it would come at a heavy cost. No president wants to be perceived as disloyal or desperate; none wants to be seen as a buck-passer. Replacing Biden, despite his habit of opening his mouth and inserting his foot, might smack of desperation. Ignoring one of the oldest tricks in the book may be the best move for the president.

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