

A Change for the Better

"Choosing the Vice President" by Michael Nelson, in *PS: Political Science and Politics* (Fall 1988), 1527 New Hampshire Ave. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

Nineteenth-century Americans would have been astonished by last summer's uproar over Dan Quayle's nomination for vice president. Ironically, says Nelson, a Vanderbilt political scientist, the Quayle controversy highlights a dramatic improvement in the way vice presidential candidates are chosen.

Early in the nation's history, when, by law, the runner-up in every presidential election got the No. 2 spot, the office had two distinguished occupants, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. In 1804, the Twelfth Amendment created the present system; it was all downhill for the rest of the 19th century.

Party officials, not the presidential candidate, chose the running mate, and raw political expediency (e.g., healing intraparty divisions, "balancing" the ticket) reigned. Except for Martin Van Buren in 1836, no 19th-century vice president was nominated for the White House by a major political party convention. Indeed, none was even invited to run for a second term as vice president.

The office became a steppingstone to political oblivion, attracting only mediocre men. ("I do not propose to be buried until I am dead," said Daniel Webster when asked to be Zachary Taylor's running mate on the 1848 Whig ticket.) The four vice presidents who were brought to the White House by the death of a president—John Tyler, Millard Fillmore, Andrew Johnson, and Chester A. Arthur—did not enjoy distinguished tenures.

Then, in 1904, the GOP broke precedent and nominated the popular Theodore Roosevelt, who had succeeded to the White House after the assassination of President William L. McKinley in 1901, for a full term. In 1912, the GOP chose James S. Sherman to run for a second vice-presidential term under President William Howard Taft, breaking another tradition. Finally, in 1940, Franklin D. Roosevelt made the selection of his running mate the prerogative of the presidential nominee by

threatening to refuse the Democratic nomination if the party did not endorse Henry A. Wallace.

The realities of the nuclear age accelerated the shift away from political expediency. (Three vice presidents have been thrust into the White House prematurely since 1945.) As Jimmy Carter's top election strategist advised him in 1976: "The best politics is to select a person who is accurately perceived [as] qualified and able to serve as president." In fact, the office now attracts very able poli-

ticians. Historians, says Nelson, "rate the 20th century's five successor presidents higher on average than the 11 elected presidents."

Today, most presidential nominees conduct exhaustive searches for running mates. Mistakes are still made, writes Nelson. But they are the exception rather than the rule. Twentieth century vice presidential candidates, whatever their flaws, are nothing like the 19th century's "rogues' gallery of personal and political failures."



DEMOCRATIC TICKET.

FOR PRESIDENT.

MARTIN VAN BUREN.

FOR VICE PRESIDENT,

Richard M. Johnson.

Since Vice President Martin Van Buren triumphed in the 1836 election, only one incumbent vice president (George Bush) has repeated his success. After the 1836 election, Van Buren's own vice president, Richard M. Johnson, moved back to Kentucky to open a tavern.