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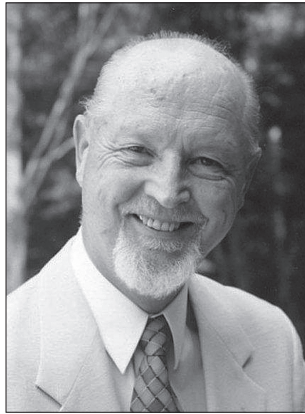
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Aspiring to an Odd Job: The American Vice Presidency



by Jack Van Der Slik

We Reformed Christians affirm that “because of the depravity of the human race our good God has ordained...civil officers. God wants the world to be governed by laws and policies so that human lawlessness may be restrained and that everything may be conducted in good order among human beings” (Belgic Confession, Art. 36). In our day civil government functions with citizen participation in elections and oversight over those who exercise authority. Whether we like it or not, we have parts to play in the democratic processes of (ugh) *politics*. It is 2016, a year notable in particular as a presidential election year. But there is more to the presidential election than the election of a president. There is also that peculiar appendage, the vice presidency. I am about to suggest why conscientious citizens

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should pay careful attention to that selection as well.

We begin simply to note the VP’s perquisites—quite impressive. To begin with, the annual salary is \$230,700, an odd number due to the most recent cost of living increase. Add to that, no house payments. The VP resides in a beautiful mansion near the White House on the grounds of the US Naval Observatory and has prime office space in the White House West Wing. The job includes a wonderful expense account with paid travel not only within the United States but all around the world. For ordinary Americans, striving to keep up payments on a mortgage, a car and three credit cards, those benefits look pretty attractive.

What is the nature of this peculiar position “a heart beat away” from the presidency? The Constitution says almost nothing about the job in the Executive Article. It does, however, provide in the Legislative Article that “the vice president ... shall be President of the Senate, but shall have no Vote, unless they [the whole Senate membership] be equally divided.” Actually there are more details about the vice president in amendments 12, 20 and 25. The 25th significantly upped the potential power of the person in the office by providing procedures and authority to the VP to become the “Acting President” in case a living president is disabled. Also, a vice president who succeeds to the presidency can fill the vacancy in his former office by appointment with confirmation from both houses of Congress. Gerald Ford, the first appointed vice president, succeeded to the presidency when Richard Nixon resigned in 1973, then appointed Nelson Rockefeller to the job, but more about that later.

Despite little in the way of a constitutional job description, vice presidents have obtained increasing responsibilities by assignment from the presidents with whom they served. Since Harry Truman came to the presidency upon the death of Franklin Roosevelt in 1945 uninformed about the atom bomb and out of touch with FDR's executive administration, he and later presidents have kept vice presidents much more closely engaged in national operations. Unquestionably, Al Gore and Dick Cheney were closely involved with Presidents Clinton and Bush. So too is Joe Biden in the Obama administration. And what about that job as president of the Senate? Mostly that is a ceremonial matter. The VP is always in the Senate president's chair when the president addresses joint meetings of the House and Senate. Also every once in a while when the Senate leaders anticipate the need for a tiebreaker on an important roll call vote, the VP takes the chair he is entitled to and delivers his vote.

My focus here is mostly upon the political potential that goes with the vice presidency. Look at what it has done for our current VP, Joe Biden. Despite his six-term veteran status in the US Senate and two whirls at seeking the Democratic presidential nomination, Biden was a familiar figure only in tiny Delaware and among political insiders. Nationally his polling support never got above five percentage points in 2007, and he bowed out of his quest for the presidency on January 3, 2008. But, picked for the VP nomination by Obama, elected, installed in the job, and pictured often as a key advisor to Obama on a wide range of issues over seven years, he was touted as a possible Democratic candidate for president in 2016. A Gallup poll at the end of August 2015 revealed a balance of favorable and unfavorable impressions about Biden, with 46% favorable and 46% unfavorable, while the rest were undecided. Biden bowed out of the presidential contest.

Paul Ryan, who went down to defeat with Mitt Romney in 2012, was allowed by Wisconsin law also to run as an incumbent for the US House seat he occupied before he was chosen as Romney's running mate. Reelected then and in 2014, he has since been chosen by his House Republican colleagues to become the Speaker of the US House. Remarkably, he is the youngest Speaker since James G. Blaine in

1875. Compared to an unpopular predecessor, John Boehner, in June 2015, Ryan appeared favorable, in the Gallup poll, among Republican respondents: 57% favorable, only 6% unfavorable and 37% expressed no opinion. Peculiar as the job of vice president is, the visibility that even the nomination to it brings can vault a relative political unknown into a familiar figure and potential media star.

Despite reasons to think the job of VP has many rewards, the problem for ordinary American strivers is that they are just not in the zone of consideration to get the position. To be a promising prospect, one must already have been in Congress, elected as a state governor, served as a cabinet member or something close to that. Below, I will examine the attributes of recent nominees. More importantly, is the quest for the vice presidency worth taking seriously?

A Dab of History

For more than half of American history the office of vice president and the people who served in it were of little significance. Daniel Webster, a noted leading Senator, said, when offered the nomination in 1848, "I do not propose to be buried until I am dead" (Nelson 859).¹ About the only remembered vice presidents were those who ascended to the presidency upon the death of the incumbent. Perhaps you vaguely recall John Tyler, Millard Fillmore, Andrew Johnson, and Chester Arthur. Historians regard them among the least accomplished of the American Presidents. As president, Andrew Johnson barely escaped conviction on impeachment charges by just one vote in the Senate. None of these at the end of their terms as president were even nominated to be their party's presidential candidate, much less won reelection on their records.

Just one exception among 19th-century vice presidents made good. That was James Van Buren. Elected to be governor of New York, he accepted an appointment by newly elected president Andrew Jackson to be Secretary of State. At the end of Jackson's first term, "Old Hickory" pressed his party to make Van Buren his running mate in 1832. Following one term as vice president, Van Buren had Jackson's support to be his successor, so Van Buren won both the nomination and election to

the presidency in 1836. Following the severe Panic of 1837, he lost his bid for reelection in 1840.

The first conspicuously successful vice president gained office early in the 20th century. The famed Rough Rider, Teddy Roosevelt, won the New York governorship in 1898 and was pushed onto the vice-presidential nomination by party leaders in 1900 along with the incumbent president,

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William McKinley. During Roosevelt's first year in office, McKinley was assassinated. As president, Roosevelt pursued a progressive agenda and easily won the nomination and election on his own in 1904. In 1923 Calvin Coolidge succeeded from the vice presidency to the presidency upon the death of Warren Harding. Coolidge, too, gained his party's nomination and won the presidency in his own right. One of the last party leader picks for the vice presidency was John Garner, chosen to give regional and ideological balance to the Democratic ticket with Franklin Roosevelt in 1932. Garner was a conservative Texan who, by 1937, became publicly critical about Roosevelt and the New Deal. His remembered quote about his office was to say that it was "not worth a pitcher of warm piss" (Nathan Miller 276).²

Increasingly, presidential campaigns became more candidate oriented than party dominated, in part perhaps because of FDR's long tenure in the presidency. In 1940 and 1944 Franklin Roosevelt insisted on control over who would be his running mates. He picked Henry Wallace in 1940 and discarded him for Harry Truman in 1944. After FDR's passing, Harry Truman called on a former Senate colleague, Alben Barkley, for the vice presidency in 1948.

The two presidential nominees during the

1950s were ambivalent about picking vice-presidential candidates. Eisenhower, a political outsider, let his top party allies narrow down the choices, and he accepted their preference for Richard Nixon in 1952. Despite dissatisfaction with Nixon in 1956 by Republican leaders, Eisenhower chose to keep Nixon on the Republican ticket. Adlai Stevenson likewise accepted party leaders' choice of Senator John Sparkman from Alabama to give a southern balance to the Democratic ticket in 1952. In 1956 Stevenson insisted that the Democratic convention choose his running mate. The delegates chose Senator Estes Kefauver, who had been an early frontrunner for the presidential nomination, favoring him over John F. Kennedy, a freshman senator from Massachusetts. Four years later as the Democratic presidential nominee, Kennedy hand-picked Lyndon Johnson for the Democratic ticket in 1960. Since then, presidential nominees of both parties have actively chosen their vice-presidential running mates, who are ratified at the national party convention by a majority vote of the seated delegates. The politics of positioning one's self to be picked are rather murky.

Increasingly, as presidential nominees took control of vice-presidential selections, they decided what kind of balance they judged necessary for a successful ticket. What recent presidential nominees have favored is a different kind of political experience from their own. Relatively fresh-face nominees picked older, experienced Washington hands as their running mates. Kennedy picked Johnson, a long-time Senate leader. Jimmy Carter, a one-term Georgia governor, chose Walter Mondale, an eight-year Senate veteran. Gerald Ford, the accidental president who came from legislative career in the US House, chose as his own replacement Nelson Rockefeller, who brought big-time executive experience as a long-time governor of New York. George H.W. Bush, experienced as a former congressman, ambassador, and head of the CIA, was picked by actor-turned-governor, Ronald Reagan, as his ticket mate. Bill Clinton, from the Arkansas governorship, chose Gore, a two-term Tennessee senator who previously spent eight years in the House. Michael Dukakis, a Massachusetts governor, brought a third-term Texas senator, Lloyd Bentsen, onto his ticket. George W. Bush, from the Texas

governorship, selected Dick Cheney, a Washington insider with both congressional and executive experience. Barack Obama, himself a senator for less than a term, chose Joe Biden, serving in his 36th year as a US senator. Mitt Romney, a well-known presidential aspirant, chose Ryan, a young, rising star from the Midwest as his running mate.

However, well-known insiders who won the presidential nomination have tended to bring in fresh faces that projected vitality and an outsider perspective. Nixon brought on Spiro Agnew, a Maryland governor. Mondale, a former VP and senator, selected Geraldine Ferraro, a relatively unknown US House member who became the first woman nominee on a presidential ticket. George H.W. Bush, formerly the vice president with lots of previous experience in political positions, linked himself with a youthful senator from Indiana, Dan Quayle. A veteran of 20 years in the Senate, John Kerry named a first-term senator, John Edwards, as his running mate. Most recently, a long-serving senator, John McCain, paired himself with a youthful and perky upstart first-term governor of Alaska, Sarah Palin, only the second woman ever on a presidential ticket. Although recognized as a promising insider among US House Republicans, Paul Ryan was a fresh face for the voters in 2012.

When such strategies paid off with electoral victory, the winners added responsibilities to the job of their vice president. Lyndon Johnson counted on Hubert Humphrey to advance domestic policies such as the Voting Rights Act and Medicare legislation. Humphrey took on foreign relations assignments to the Philippines and Vietnam. He spoke out for LBJ's war policies while LBJ hunkered down in the White House. More recently George H. W. Bush was an active and visible vice president included in major policy decisions and as a presidential spokesman for Ronald Reagan. Al Gore was a central player in proposing environmental policies, administrative reorganization and information technology during the Clinton Administration. Richard Cheney was a principal advisor to George W. Bush on both foreign and domestic policy, engineering much of the strategy and operations by American forces in Iraq. Like Cheney, Joe Biden has been a visible part of Obama's inner circle of advisers, particularly regarding foreign affairs issues.

A Closer Look at Recent Vice-Presidential Nominees

It is fair to say that since World War II the nature of the vice presidency has changed markedly, and its value has increased. Several VPs—Johnson, Nixon, Ford and G. H. W. Bush—did succeed to the presidency, America's top political prize. But what about the losing nominees? Let's look more closely at all those who have taken the role of running mate and observe what has been their political reward. What does recent history suggest may lie ahead for recent or coming VPs?

In Table 1 all the post-war major party running mates appear in two columns, one for the Democrats and one for the Republicans (italics indicate winners). Thirteen vice presidents have held office, and the losers number 18. Six of the winners were elected to two terms in office—Nixon, Agnew, G. H. W. Bush, Gore, Cheney and Biden. Three vice presidents became winners, then losers. Walter Mondale rode to victory with Jimmy Carter in 1976, and together they went down to defeat in 1980. Gerald Ford was unique. Appointed to the vice presidency, he ascended to the presidency upon Nixon's resignation, but he lost his single presidential election in 1976. Dan Quayle experienced a fate similar to Mondale's, winning with George H.W. Bush in 1988 but losing in 1992 against Clinton and Gore. Of the eight vice presidents available for a second term, there was wide speculation in the press and among the pundits that the presidents who initially picked them would replace four of them before seeking reelection. They include Nixon, Agnew, George H.W. Bush, and Quayle, all Republicans. Nevertheless, all four did survive to gain reelection. Mondale, Gore, Cheney and Biden did not suffer that indignity.

With noteworthy consistency, vice-presidential candidates come from political office. None came from an external career, as Eisenhower did to gain the presidency in 1952. Most VP candidates, 16 in fact, were in incumbent senators. Four, all Republicans, were governors—Earl Warren, Spiro Agnew, Nelson Rockefeller and Sarah Palin. Four were House members: Republicans William Miller, Gerald Ford and Paul Ryan, along with Democrat Geraldine Ferraro. Four other Republicans—Henry Cabot Lodge, George H.W. Bush, Jack

Kemp, and Dick Cheney—had “other” careers, congressional experience followed by presidential appointments. Democrat Sargent Shriver, also with an “other” career, was a former presidential appointee and ambassador to France (and brother-in-law to John, Robert and Ted Kennedy). He filled a crisis-induced vacancy on the ticket with George McGovern in 1972.

The parties differ substantially in the kinds of experience they preferred in their candidates. With but only two exceptions, Democrats always chose incumbent senators. Apart from Shriver, all the Democrats came from Congress and just one of those, Ferraro, from the House. Republicans mostly came with some executive experience although several had congressional service besides.

Notice the disorder regarding the vice presidency during the early 1970s. Trouble began for the Democrats in 1972, when George McGovern picked a Senate colleague, Thomas Eagleton, to be his running mate. Within two weeks Eagleton revealed he had been treated for clinical depression with electroshock therapy. Under a firestorm of criticism, McGovern replaced Eagleton with Sargent Shriver after Senator Ted Kennedy turned that nomination down.

Life for Republican VPs was even more complicated. Shortly after the reelection of Spiro Agnew along with Richard Nixon, Agnew was threatened with prosecution for kick backs received during his gubernatorial term in Maryland. He accepted a plea deal that included probation, a fine, and an unprecedented resignation from the vice presidency, a first in American history. It triggered the first use ever of provisions in the 25th amendment. Gerald Ford, the Republican minority leader in the House who enjoyed the trust of both Republicans and Democrats, was President Nixon’s pick for vice president. He was quickly confirmed by the Democrat controlled Congress.

Shortly thereafter, revelations about the Watergate break-ins and a looming impeachment process caused Nixon to resign the presidency on August 8, 1974. That was another unprecedented event. Ford assumed the presidency. Then he nominated and Congress confirmed the appointment of former New York governor Nelson Rockefeller, as vice president in December 1974. The drama of

these swift changes clearly demonstrated the nation’s need for an experientially qualified vice president in case of an immediate need to fill a presidential vacancy.

One other point is worth noting: neither political party has a firm grip on the presidency. Over 17 elections in 64 years, Republicans had nine administrations and Democrats eight. The longest consecutive hold for either party was three terms by the Republicans, with Reagan and G.H.W. Bush at the top of their ticket, but Bush failed to gain reelection. Except for Clinton-Gore and Obama-Biden, Democrats had only single-term winners. The American electorate has alternated the partisan control of the presidency in the postwar era with much more frequency than was true in previous history.

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**Vice-presidential nominations:
what is the political payoff?**

What is the afterlife for vice-presidential nominees? Is there a payoff for vice-presidential nominees when it comes to ascending the greasy pole of electoral success? Of the 29 individuals who contested for the vice presidency, only four moved up to win the presidency: Johnson, Nixon, Ford and G.H.W. Bush. In addition, Earl Warren, nominee on a losing ticket with Thomas Dewey, won later appointment to the Supreme Court for a lengthy term as its chief justice. Ryan returned to the House, gaining the Speaker’s gavel. These six are the big political winners among vice-presidential nominees.

Four vice-presidential candidates eventually won their party’s presidential nomination but failed to gain election as president. Hubert Humphrey lost to Nixon in 1968. Mondale, having both won and lost on the ticket with Jimmy Carter, fell short in leading his ticket in a bid for the presidency in 1984. After two vice-presidential terms Al Gore all

TABLE 1*

Year	Democrat Ticket and VP's previous office	Republican Ticket and VP's previous office
1948	<i>Truman and A. Barkley</i> , Senator	Dewey and E. Warren, Governor
1952	Stevenson and J. Sparkman, Senator	<i>Eisenhower and R. Nixon</i> , Senator
1956	Stevenson and E. Kefauver, Senator	<i>Eisenhower and R. Nixon</i>
1960	<i>Kennedy and L. Johnson</i> , Senator	Nixon and H. Lodge, other
1964	<i>Johnson and H. Humphrey</i> , Senator	Goldwater and W. Miller, Representative
1968	Humphrey and E. Muskie, Senator	<i>Nixon and S. Agnew</i> , Governor
1972	McGovern and T. Eagleton, Senator and S. Shriver, other	<i>Nixon and S. Agnew and G. Ford</i> , Representative
1976	<i>Carter and W. Mondale</i> , Senator	<i>Ford and N. Rockefeller</i> , Governor
1980	Carter and W. Mondale	Ford and R. Dole, Senator
1984	Mondale and G. Ferraro, Representative	<i>Reagan and G. Bush</i> , other
1988	Dukakis and L. Bentsen, Senator	<i>Reagan and G. Bush</i>
1992	<i>Clinton and A. Gore</i> , Senator	<i>Bush and J.D. Quayle</i> , Senator
1996	<i>Clinton and A. Gore</i>	Bush and J. D. Quayle
2000	Gore and Lieberman, Senator	Dole and J. Kemp, other
2004	Kerry and J. Edwards, Senator	<i>Bush and R. Cheney</i> , other
2008	<i>Obama and J. Biden</i> , Senator	<i>Bush and R. Cheney</i>
2012	<i>Obama and J. Biden</i>	McCain and S. Palin, Governor
		Romney and P. Ryan, Representative

*Italics indicate those who gained office.

TABLE 2
Vice-Presidential Nominees' Subsequent Political Careers*

Gained higher office: Warren, *Johnson*, *Nixon*, *Ford*, *G.H.W. Bush*.

Gained presidential nomination but lost election: *Humphrey*, *Mondale*, Dole, *Gore*.

Returned to previous office: *Barkley*, Lodge, Kefauver, *Humphrey*, Muskie, Eagleton, Bentsen, Lieberman, Palin.

Returned to private life: Sparkman, Miller, *Agnew*, Shriver, *Rockefeller*, Ferraro, *Quayle*, Kemp, Edwards, *Cheney*.

*Italics indicate those 14 who attained the vice presidency.

but won the presidency in 2000 in the closest presidential election in 124 years. Robert Dole won neither the vice presidency with Ford in 1976 nor the presidency as the Republican ticket leader in 1996.

Aside from Humphrey (see below), all three of these presidential losers did continue to be spoken of regarding elected or appointed positions after their loss as presidential candidates. Mondale accepted an appointment as ambassador to Japan from 1993

to 1997. Upon the accidental death of Minnesota Democratic incumbent Senator Paul Wellstone eleven days before the 2002 election, Mondale was hastily made the Democratic Senate candidate and then lost the election. Bob Dole, now in his 90s and no longer residing in his former Kansas constituency, has concluded his political career. Al Gore, now 67 and an Academy Award winner for the movie *An Inconvenient Truth*, has repeatedly said, "I'm not

planning on being a candidate again.”

Perhaps it is surprising to recognize that nine of the losing vice-presidential nominees were able to regain the political office from which they had stepped up to seek the vice presidency. More than half were prudent enough to accept the vice-presidential nomination during their term in a lower office. Senators Kefauver, Muskie, and Eagleton took their losses and returned to serve out the rest of their remaining terms as US senators. Moreover, all of them won subsequent re-elections to the Senate. Similarly, Sarah Palin, the incumbent governor of Alaska, resumed her office responsibilities after the McCain-Palin ticket suffered defeat in 2008. It is true, of course, that only months after that defeat she resigned her governorship to become a private citizen again and, promptly, a best-selling author.

Lloyd Bentsen's experience followed a Texas precedent. At the same time that he ran unsuccessfully for the vice presidency with Michael Dukakis in 1988, he was allowed by Texas law to run simultaneously for reelection to the office of US Senator. The Texas law passed to give Lyndon Johnson that

The initial test for a vice president in his first term is to retain the confidence of the president, who in all likelihood will run for a second term in office.

privilege in 1960, allowed Bentsen reelection to the Senate at the same time that the Dukakis – Bentsen ticket lost the presidential election. Bentsen remained in the Senate until Democrats regained the presidency. President Clinton appointed Bentsen to be his Secretary of the Treasury, after which Bentsen retired from public office.

More recently Connecticut law provided Joe Lieberman the same privilege Bentsen got from Texas. While losing nationally with Gore, Lieberman simultaneously won a third Senate term from Connecticut voters. Like Bentsen, Lieberman's political career was uninterrupted. Similarly Wisconsin allowed Paul Ryan a simulta-

neous run for the House while he was a VP candidate, and, as noted, he has risen in the House to the top position of Speaker.

Following their vice-presidential terms, Barkley and Humphrey, previously senators, went back to their home states, Kentucky and Minnesota. There each one gained election to the Senate again. Barkley defeated a one-term incumbent. Humphrey, two years after a losing presidential campaign, won an open seat upon the retirement of Eugene McCarthy in 1970. Henry Cabot Lodge, a former senator and ambassador to the United Nations under Eisenhower, ran and lost with Nixon in 1960. Surprisingly, he later received and accepted ambassadorial assignments from both succeeding Democratic presidents, John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson, and then from Richard Nixon after 1968.

The biggest portion of the one-time vice-presidential candidates retired to private life after their candidacies. Sparkman, Miller and Rockefeller went to quiet retirement. Farraro, Quayle and Kemp were politically active but never again held public office. Agnew was disbarred in Maryland and paid a substantial fine. He wrote a couple of books but kept a low political profile. Shriver returned to the practice of law and gave leadership to the Special Olympics. John Edwards resumed a legal practice and became a serious candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2008, but subsequent notoriety for business and marital unfaithfulness makes him an unlikely prospect for future public office. Our most recent former vice president, Richard Cheney, has gone off to private life, but not quietly.

The future prospects of the current vice president, Joe Biden, cannot be forecast with any certainty. As Biden has chosen not to run for the presidency in 2016, Biden's future prospects likely depend upon whether the 2016 winner is a Democrat or Republican. Though Biden has often been criticized as a windy orator and one to make thoughtless, offhand remarks, the buzz about Biden has improved. Contemporary commentators assert that he has been a responsible counselor to a much less experienced President Obama. The initial test for a vice president in his first term is to retain the confidence of the president, who in all likelihood will

run for a second term in office. It was Obama's call to retain Biden for a second term. Biden, now 73, experienced a flurry of interest in a possible candidacy for president during the late summer of 2015. However Biden chose not to enter the Democratic primaries. Further elective office is highly unlikely unless something untoward eliminates President Obama from the political scene before the end of his term.

Two more former VP candidates remain for comment. What does the future hold for Sarah Palin and Paul Ryan? Palin's critics dismissed her as a joke, but she enjoys the affection of many fellow partisans in the Republican Party. Her vice-presidential candidacy in 2008 vaulted her into public attention. It exposed her to wide doubt about the depth of her competence for the highest office in the land. Now that Palin is free from public office and apparently well-funded, her endorsement of Donald Trump could link her future success to his. Paul Ryan's prospects are open, but his interests in public policy are likely to best be met in his House leadership activities. His success there will largely depend upon the iffy prospects of the Republican Party with regard both to the presidency and majorities in the House and Senate. The presidency, at the top of the greasy pole of ambition, could be within Ryan's reach. It remains to be seen whether or not he will respond to people in his party who doubtless will encourage him to run for the presidency.

Advice to the parents of children who want to become the president? Tell them to aim first for the vice presidency. Four of the last thirteen made it to the top. No other penultimate political office offers a higher likelihood for success. Lots of senators try, but only a tiny proportion succeed. Still, it pays to be a presidential running mate on a winning ticket. None of the losing VP candidates made it to the top. In fact, none of those losers was ever again re-nominated for the vice presidency, although two, Dole and Mondale, did gain presidential nominations. History suggests then that Palin still has a shot at the presidency. But I can with some certainty say she will not again be nominated for the vice

presidency.

What is the last word? Despite its potency as a steppingstone office to gain the presidency, the vice presidency does not offer a dependable electoral route. Only two vice presidents have ever moved directly to the presidency via election. During the 19th century it was Martin Van Buren, succeeding Andrew Jackson. In the 20th it was G.H.W. Bush, a winning successor to Ronald Reagan. Richard Nixon was a loser in 1960 but made a comeback eight years after his vice presidency. Lyndon Johnson succeeded to the presidency only after John Kennedy's assassination. Gerald Ford rose to the presidency following Nixon's resignation. Four of the vice presidents who immediately got their presidential nomination went on to electoral defeat: Richard Nixon, Hubert Humphrey, Walter Mondale and, most recently, Al Gore.

The last word then is that there is no single or sure path to the American presidency, but surprises do occur. President Obama rose from near obscurity to the top of that greasy pole of political opportunity with just four years of Senate experience. All recent presidents except Eisenhower came via previous elective political office, mostly the Senate or a state governorship. Despite a broadly held disregard for politicians among Americans, those we do choose for both president and vice president typically come out of previous elective office. Vice presidents have good prospects for gaining the presidency. Every four years America needs a winner. Who will prevail next is an open question. The good thing to say is the people will have their say at the ballot box. Recall too that the Belgic Confession enjoins us to pray for our leaders "that the Lord may be willing to lead them in all their ways and that we may live a peaceful and quiet life in all piety and decency."

Endnotes

1. Michael Nelson, "Choosing the Vice President," *PS: Political Science and Politics* (Fall 1988): 858-868.
2. Nathan Miller, *FDR: An Intimate History* (Lanham MD: Madison Books), 1983.