

STI COMMENTS ON PUBLIC AFFAIRS

OF CABBAGES, KINGS AND VICE PRESIDENTS

by

Clinton H. Whitehurst, Jr.
Senior Fellow

The Strom Thurmond Institute of Government and Public Affairs
Clemson University, Clemson, South Carolina

November 2008

OF CABBAGES, KINGS AND VICE PRESIDENTS

While the old adage—the Vice President of the United States is only a heartbeat away from becoming President—is factually correct, if the past is any guide, that consideration is a number of notches down the list. Rather, a vice presidential running mate must bring a tangible benefit to the campaign such as geographically balancing the ticket, adding an important voting constituency, be from a swing state with a relatively large electoral vote, or add expertise in an area of national concern. e.g. experience in matters of national security or foreign affairs.

In the past, the Office of Vice President was considered unimportant, if considered at all. A well-known Mark Twain quote about a man with two sons is illustrative. “One son went to sea, the other became Vice President and neither was heard of again.” Or the statement by John Adams when Vice President. “My country has in its wisdom contrived for me the most insignificant office that ever the invention of man contrived or his imagination conceived.” Or in the case of Vice President Harry Truman who became President on the death of President Franklin Roosevelt but knew almost nothing of the administration’s wartime policies and commitments, in particular the existence of the Manhattan (atomic weapon) Project.

Over time, with several exceptions, the importance and assigned responsibilities of the Vice President have substantially increased. Vice President Richard Nixon was a surrogate for President Eisenhower on many occasions and also made a number of solo trips to several continents in furtherance of U.S. diplomatic initiatives. Vice President George Herbert Walker Bush as a former Ambassador to the UN, Head of U.S. Liaison Office in Beijing, and Director of the Central Intelligence Agency contributed needed foreign policy experience to the Reagan

Presidency. More recently, Vice President Dick Cheney brought unparalleled national security experience to President George Bush's administration and was an active participant in developing defense policies.

Like Harry Truman before him, Vice President Lyndon Johnson was ignored in matters of national importance once the election was won even though he is generally credited with adding the electoral votes of Texas and several southern states to the Kennedy-Johnson ticket. This emasculation of the once powerful Senate Majority Leader was not due to a policy of benign neglect of the Office of the Vice President but due to a mutual dislike and distrust between Attorney General Robert Kennedy and the Vice President. When Johnson became President after the assassination of President Kennedy he had no choice but to initially rely on a cabinet in which he had no part in appointing.

Two national commissions have considered "Presidential Transition and Foreign Policy" (1986) and "Choosing and Using a Vice President" (1992) Unfortunately, like the son who became Vice President in Mark Twain's anecdote about the office, these reports, for the most part, were never heard of again.

As in previous years, Vice Presidential running mates in 2008 were picked to bring tangible benefits to their respective tickets. In part, Joe Biden for his experience in foreign policy; Governor Sarah Palin for her executive experience and adding to an important voting constituency. But is this enough? What happens after the election when cabinet members are selected, national security and chief economic advisors chosen, and dozens of deputies and undersecretaries appointed? In this respect, how many past Vice Presidents have been accorded real, not token, input into these decisions? But it is these appointees that will determine the success of a transition should such occur. I suggest that Senators Obama and McCain make it perfectly clear, and before the

election, that the opinion of their running mates in forming an administration will be given due consideration. In a time when the American President is the number one target of terrorists, this is not asking too much