

Vice Presidents on My Mind

By Mel Lavine

Special to the Times

“Have you ever been unfaithful?” That’s a leading question Mitt Romney is asking of those who would be his No. 2. There are scores of others covering the financial and the personal. But the questions don’t stop there. The candidate’s style of speaking is important. How does he/she sound, look, handle pressure? The main thing is to save the person at the top from embarrassment.

When the post was created in 1787, Benjamin Franklin was said to have described the office as “his superfluous majesty.” Bartlett’s Familiar Quotations attributes the following figure of speech to John Nance Garner who served as Franklin Roosevelt’s vice president for eight years and spoke as the voice of experience: “The vice presidency isn’t worth a pitcher of warm piss.”

Thirteen presidents were once vice presidents, but, so far as I know, no one has gone to great

trouble to grade their performances in the lesser job. Maybe that's because there's not much to add to what Benjamin Franklin and John Nance Garner have said.

The New York Times on Tuesday recalled a disastrous Democratic pick for No. 2 in 1972. Those were the days when journalists and politicians were generally unwilling to delve into the personal lives of public figures. As the Times recalled, Sen. George McGovern of South Dakota, the presidential nominee, picked Sen. Thomas Eagleton, of Missouri, for his running mate. It's said McGovern made up his mind after a conversation with the senator that lasted 67 seconds.

As word leaked and then spread of Eagleton's treatments for depression and electric shock therapy, McGovern came under mounting pressure to drop his man. At first he refused, famously declaring that he was "1,000 percent" behind him, but Eagleton was dumped in the ensuing outcry. Richard Nixon won re-election to the White House that November by the largest margin in history.

Nixon had been Dwight Eisenhower's vice president (1953-61). He got into trouble during the 1960 campaign against John Kennedy for keeping a slush fund, the gift of private contributors, to defray expenses. Nixon saved his candidacy with a brilliant TV speech. But after he was elected president eight years later, his own vice president, Spiro Agnew – a former governor of Maryland and spiteful critic of the news media and liberals – was forced to step down.

Agnew pleaded no contest to one charge of income tax evasion. He was fined \$10,000 and

placed on three years' probation. In 1983 he also paid \$268,000 to the state of Maryland "as reimbursement and penalty for his misdeeds as governor," according to the Complete Book of U. S. Presidents.

After Agnew was gone, and only two years after his triumph over McGovern, Nixon became the only president in history to resign the office in the Watergate scandal.

Pick well, Mitt Romney. Obama did with Joe Biden.

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