

Whose Dream? Whose Ticket?

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Assuming Hillary Clinton survives the fallout from her poorly conceived remark about Bobby Kennedy last week, Barack Obama has essentially two options for choosing a running mate -- either Clinton or someone else. If Obama decides to run with someone besides Clinton, a major story, at least initially, will not be about the particular running mate, but about Obama's decision not to tap Clinton for this position.

Obama-Clinton may not be a dream ticket for everyone, but it would certainly be exciting and historic. However, before we get too focused on the excitement and history, two very conventional questions need to be addressed. First, will Clinton's presence on the ticket add more value than that of any other candidate and second, will an Obama presidency be strengthened by having Clinton as vice president. However, Hillary Clinton would not be just any vice-presidential nominee, so there are other issues to be considered as well.

First, it would be damaging to Obama if he is forced, or seen to be forced, into this decision. Not only would this make Obama look weak, but it would make it difficult for the two running mates to establish a good working relationship. This concern may still be overcome, but it would require immediately stopping all comments by Clinton and her surrogates that somehow Obama can only win with Clinton on the ticket. These comments, in addition to being false, push Obama into a corner and make it harder for him to select Clinton. This problem is exacerbated by any attacks from Clinton or efforts to drag out a campaign that is already over.

Clinton's nomination as vice president needs to be the result of a public process where Obama considers numerous candidates before choosing Clinton. This would show voters that Obama was not pushed into this decision by anybody, but that he made this decision on his own because he felt that Clinton truly was the best candidate for the position. Additionally, if Obama decides not to choose Clinton, this process will help reduce some of the inevitable criticism that will come his way from hard line Clinton supporters.

For Obama, the most difficult aspects of an Obama-Clinton ticket remain the unspoken ones. With Clinton on the ticket, will it ever really be his presidency? Would anybody be able to rein in Bill Clinton, who is not accustomed to being part of anybody else's administration? How can Obama be sure that his presidency wouldn't be brought down by the scandal-prone Clintons? These are serious questions, not the kind that can be safely ignored in hopes that things will somehow work out. Obama can only nominate Clinton if he gets satisfactory answers to these questions. Direct discussions between Obama and the Clintons, the only two people in the world who can raise Obama's comfort level on these issues, during which Obama addresses these questions directly, and makes it clear that the Obama campaign and presidency represent a new chapter for the Democratic Party, and the country, are the only way Obama can safely move

forward with Hillary Clinton on the ticket. If this doesn't happen the dream ticket should, and probably will, remain just that -- a dream.

Is it worth it for Obama to work through these difficult issues to have Hillary Clinton on the ticket? The answer is maybe. Hillary Clinton, like every other potential running mate, would bring both positives and negatives to the ticket. She is clearly prepared and qualified to run for, and serve as, vice president. As Howard Wolfson might put it, she has passed the vice presidency threshold. Clinton has demonstrated her ability to win votes from key Democratic and potential swing constituencies. She is hard-working, tireless and brings with her the once legendary, but somewhat tarnished, Clinton network and operation.

One of the biggest positives Clinton brings to the ticket is that it would send a message that the party is unified. Accordingly, Clinton and her supporters would no longer be able to threaten to dampen turnout or enthusiasm among key voter groups who have, thus far, supported Clinton.

There is an additional positive which is worth considering as well. A victory for a Obama-Clinton ticket would be a uniquely strong and unambiguous repudiation of the Bush era. Hillary Clinton has been a rhetorical target of the far right for 16 years. Obama himself represents a stark change from the Bush years. A victory for these two would be a powerful defeat of the policies of the last eight years, which would give the new president a clear mandate for his agenda of progressive change.

There are, of course, negatives associated with a Obama-Clinton ticket. Some of these, primarily the contentious relationship between Senators Clinton and Obama, have received attention in the media, but there some generally overlooked downsides to this ticket as well. First, an Obama-Clinton ticket would lack any significant ideological diversity. Although both Obama and Clinton have demonstrated an ability to appeal to voters outside of their base -- Obama to independents and Republicans, particularly in the west, and Clinton to lower income whites in parts of the southeast and midwest, they are both still viewed as liberal Democrats with no strong ties to the more centrist wing of the party.

Related to this would be the absence of any regional diversity on the ticket. Both Obama and Clinton represent solid Democratic states in either the upper Midwest or the Northeast. Most Democratic nominees from one of these regions feel the need to balance the ticket with a running mate from the west, a border states or the south. The last two Democratic tickets without anybody from one of these regions, Mondale-Ferraro in 1984 and Humphrey-Muskie, in 1968, both lost. The last winning Democratic ticket without a candidate from one of these regions was either 1916 or 1892, depending on whether or not Woodrow Wilson is considered a southerner. It is still likely that an Obama-Clinton ticket would win, but these geographic realities should at least factor into Obama's decision.

Nominating Clinton for vice president could also make it harder for Obama to continue to run on a post-partisan agenda of change. Clinton has demonstrated an impressive ability to reinvent herself throughout this campaign, but she is too much part of the Democratic establishment, and too tied to the recent hyper-partisan past, to plausibly present herself as an agent of post-partisan change.

The last, and most counterintuitive, drawback of putting Senator Clinton on the ticket is that she, campaign rhetoric aside, she has not really been, to use her word, "vetted". Clinton was the target of vicious, often unfounded, and ongoing attacks for more than a decade, but during many of these years, she was not in elected office. She has never really confronted these attacks in the context of a competitive political campaign. Once Rudy Giuliani dropped out of the race for the US Senate in 2000, Clinton won relatively easily against a mediocre Republican foe in a heavily Democratic state and year. When she ran for reelection in 2006, she did not face any serious opposition.

While this primary has been, in its own way, nasty at times, it has not been characterized by two candidates attacking each other in a conventional sense. Among the issues that have barely come to the surface in this campaign, due largely to the potential for these issues to backfire in a Democratic Primary, are Whitewater, Vincent Foster, Clinton's role in the failed health care reform of 1993, the ongoing ethics issues during the Clinton presidency, Bill Clinton's fundraising and business dealings since leaving the White House, and Hillary Clinton's own radical past. This is only the beginning, but it is safe to say that while these issues have not been part of the primary campaign, it is possible that a Republican campaign might raise some of these issues and that might have an effect on swing voters in swing states. Obama will have a difficult enough time against the Republican attack machine without this additional baggage.

There are numerous possible running mates, in addition to Clinton, who would help Obama get elected and who are also prepared to serve as vice-president. All of them bring positives and negatives of their own. Nonetheless, for now, and the immediate future, the veepstakes will be dominated by the Clinton angle. Working through this successfully, regardless of who Obama actually chooses as his running mate may be the key to his campaign, and his presidency.