Take Me Out to the Vice Presidential Nomination

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I try not to be a myopic New Yorker who sees the world entirely through the lens of New York City, but when I saw Rudy Giuliani and John McCain together at Yankee Stadium on Sunday, it occurred to me that McCain could make a lot worse choices for running mate than our former mayor. Giuliani, is a compelling mixture of positives and negatives and would be a risky pick as vice-president. However, lost in all the obvious negatives is that there is a potentially very large upside to putting Giuliani on the ticket.

Additionally, there is clearly a chemistry between McCain and Giuliani and everything I have seen about McCain suggests that kind of thing is important to him. The two got along very well when they were both seeking their party's nomination, have never really attacked each other and seem to respect and like each other.

At first glance, Giuliani could bring several valuable assets to the ticket. First, as an Italian-American and a Catholic, he would appeal to the millions of white Catholic voters who are essential to Republican success and who do not seem excited by McCain this year. Second, Giuliani is a northerner whose biggest strength has always been among suburban voters. As mayor, he was always most popular among those white suburbanites who either worked in the city or visited it from time to time and viewed him as the tough guy who cleaned up New York. The suburban vote is massive and appears to be a good part of the vote that while disgruntled with the Bush administration is not yet sold on Obama. Additionally, a moderate northern Republican with few ties to the Washington establishment or the Bush White House would help reinforce McCain's somewhat battered image as a party outside and maverick.

While Giuliani is, of course, best known nationally for his actions on September 11th and the days following, he is also able to discuss an array of domestic issues such as crime, education, service delivery and the like with a fluency that continues to elude Senator McCain. This would bring some needed depth to McCain's candidacy.

On domestic issues more broadly, Giuliani is viewed as tough but not fanatical. His record on abortion and gay rights, for example, while a far cry from progressive, are not those of evangelical Christians or other far right conservatives which have been alienating northern Republicans for over a decade. A McCain-Giuliani ticket, focusing on security and moderately conservative social policies, could compete in the Northeast far more than any recent ticket. This is not where the Republican Party is yet, but it could get there.

Choosing Giuliani as a running mate would be a particularly gutsy move by McCain because of the clear downsides as well. Giuliani would, at least at first, push the party's socially conservative base further away. The same record and demographic background that would
strengthen the ticket among independents in the north could prove to be anathema to some elements of the party's base in the south and elsewhere.

More troublingly, Giuliani was unimpressive as a national candidate during his own presidential campaign. A year ago, Giuliani was viewed as a front runner for the Republican nomination but of the seven primaries he contested, he didn't even win one. His best state was Florida where he came in a not very close 3rd with 15% of the vote. Giuliani proved himself unable, and at times seemed unwilling, to connect with voters and win their support. Perhaps ironically, running for president actually weakened Giuliani's appeal as a vice-presidential candidate.

A McCain-Giuliani ticket may also simply be too mean for many voters. Americans seem to have had enough with blustery, tough talking leaders and may be looking for something different in 2008. If this is the case, McCain may be better off seeking to soften his image rather than by choosing a gruff and occasionally nasty running mate.

For McCain, the most intriguing aspect to picking Giuliani is that it would help the Republican Party pivot away from what has become an electoral dead end. A McCain-Giuliani ticket could restore the Republican brand name, particularly among independents in the north, who, while not yet sold Obama are certainly unlikely, at this moment, to vote Republican for Congress. Showing these voters that the party has not been captured by the far right social conservatives would put the Republican Party on stronger footing after 2008 as well. This strategy would probably hurt McCain in the South, but it is not clear how much. Southern conservatives still have nowhere else to go and could be swayed by the enormous amount of bluster on security issues which a McCain/Giuliani ticket would produce.