

The Choice of John Edwards

July 7. This is the first of a series of commentaries on the 2004 elections that we will provide throughout the election season—and even beyond. In these commentaries we do not intend to duplicate what the news media tell you. You should be reading daily newspapers in order to follow the ebb and flow of Election 2004.

Our purpose is to put some of the events into perspective, to suggest ways in which you could look at the election from a slightly different way than do the commentators on television or in the print media. At times, we will point to particular chapters in our text, to point out to you how the theoretical material we present might be useful in understanding the day-to-day politics you are observing. As we hope you can tell from our text, we do not think that a course on political parties and elections should be taught—or taken—in a vacuum. We wrote this book because we are both political junkies—and we are political scientists. We want to show you how the two work together.

This commentary is being written right after John Kerry announced his choice of North Carolina Senator John Edwards as his running mate. For weeks political journalists have been feverishly speculating about whom John Kerry would tap. Let us tell you a little secret. They did not know. Your guesses—at least your guesses on July 5—were as good as theirs. There was a prevailing conventional wisdom that Senator Kerry would choose among three press-designated top contenders, Edwards, Missouri Congressman Richard Gephardt, or Iowa Governor Tom Vilsak. Other names were mentioned, though less often—the two Florida senators, Bob Graham and Bill Nelson; Indiana Senator Evan Bayh; New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson; former Nebraska Senator Bob Kerrey; and even New York Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton and Republican Arizona Senator John McCain.

The point should not have been to guess whom Kerry would name but rather to understand what the choice means. Presidential nominees always choose a candidate who they claim would be ready to step into the Oval Office in a heartbeat should anything happen to the President. They have had to say that since Harry Truman did just that, upon the death of Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1945, because Truman was so evidently NOT ready to assume office when he was called upon to do so. (Two quick asides: Truman did not even know of the existence of the Manhattan Project, the project that developed the atomic bomb, when he was sworn in as President. But he learned quickly, despite being ill-prepared, and is generally deemed to be one of our great presidents.)

It is important, however, to look at reasons beyond that obvious one—and perhaps to question the candidate's judgment on that issue. Let's look at some examples. Walter Mondale chose Geraldine Ferraro in 1984 because he was thought to be a decided underdog and needed a dramatic gesture to ignite his campaign; naming the first woman major party vice presidential candidate was an effort to do just that. But did anyone really think Ferraro was ready to be a proverbial heartbeat away from the presidency?

Frequently a candidate chooses a running mate to balance the ticket in one way or another. George H. W. Bush chose Dan Quayle, a senator whose youth and vitality contrasted positively, the candidate hoped, with his own image as a senior statesman. The first President Bush's son, George W. Bush, chose Dick Cheney for

nearly the opposite reason—the presidential candidate was viewed as relatively inexperienced, particularly in foreign and military affairs, so he chose someone with that kind of experience.

Bill Clinton went as far from balancing the ticket as one could. He chose Al Gore, someone of the same age, with the same religious beliefs, from the same region of the country, in the same ideological wing of his party, in many ways almost an alter ego. He did so, according to those involved in the process, because he wanted someone who really would be ready to assume the presidency—and, politically, he wanted the public to see his first important decision made for other than political reasons.

Now let's return to John Kerry. What should the pundits have been looking for? What does this choice signal? If Kerry had chosen Tom Vilsak, for instance, he would have sent a clear message that he wants someone from the Midwest, to offset his eastern leanings, someone who can help in pivotal states like not only Iowa, but also Indiana, Ohio, and Michigan. But he would also have chosen someone virtually unknown nationally, with no foreign policy experience, with no national government experience. If he had chosen Richard Gephardt, he would have selected someone from another of the battleground states—Missouri—and someone with deep ties to organized labor, someone with a wealth of Washington experience and great credibility. But then he would have also chosen someone seen as a Washington insider, an old face, one many think looks like a retread. One might say that this would have signaled a preference for someone who could help him govern over someone who could help him get elected.

If he had chosen one of the long-shot candidates, the symbolism would have been obvious. Clinton would have been an appeal to women and to ardent Democrats (many of whom love her as much as many Republicans hate her). McCain would have been a huge step out of the ordinary, looking for a bipartisan government, but it would also have signaled that Kerry was willing to have someone with whom he fundamentally disagreed on issue after issue next in line for the presidency—and it would have signaled an incredible lack of faith in President Bush on McCain's part (which is why this move was so unlikely all along, even if it is politically appealing).

But he chose John Edwards. In so doing, he has selected someone who impressed the public and the pundits in the Democratic primaries, a young, fresh face, a great orator and campaigner, a southerner who might appeal to some southern and rural states. But then he also has chosen someone with one term's experience in the Senate, someone who is not thought to be terribly knowledgeable about the pressing issues of the day, someone whose maturity of judgment has not been tested. One could say that he is comfortable with his own ability to govern and with the public's perception of that ability; he chose someone he thinks can help him win.

Our advice then is not to spend too much time thinking about how one predicts a choice like this one, but rather to spend more time thinking about what it means—about Kerry, about his view of the upcoming election, about how easy it will be to develop a working relationship between the President and Vice President should he be elected. Look at the analysis on pages 325-328 of the text—even though you are not to that point yet. See if it helps you to understand the choice that Kerry has made.

Two more quick points for you to consider. First, thinking about Edwards's relative lack of experience, one might recall that Utah Senator Orrin Hatch, running for the Republican presidential nomination in 2000, questioned whether the experience of one term as governor of Texas qualified his opponent, George W. Bush, to sit in the Oval Office. Hatch said that he thought Bush had a bright future—and might do well to serve as his Vice President. None of Edwards's detractors are comparing his experience to that of President Bush four years ago.

Second, how important is this choice for the upcoming election? We cannot know, especially if the election is anywhere near as close as was that of 2000. But consider this. By near unanimous acclamation, the two worst choices for running mate in the last half century have been those of Spiro Agnew by Richard Nixon in 1968 and Dan Quayle by George H. W. Bush in 1988. Both won. With that in mind, you might begin to rethink all of the logic that presidential candidates go through in making this choice.