

Post 9/1/68

Van Buren Did What Humphrey Hopes To

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CHICAGO—With Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey secure as the presidential candidate of his party, the question turns to his prospects in the election. After the bloodletting here, many people feel that neither the Vice President nor the Democratic Party can win in November. Political analysts are attempting to assess a situation that is extraordinary from any point of view.

In the long history of the American political parties, oldest in the world, similar situations have occurred before. They are worth looking at in any attempt to assess what has happened and what may happen.

The Democratic National Convention just over was essentially a convention to nominate a successor candidate to replace an unavailable incumbent in a party in power. This is not a common situation but neither is it so rare as to preclude special study.

Among the 34 previous presidential nominees that the Democrats have chosen in party conventions since 1832, six were successors to unavailable incumbents.

This special group that Vice President Humphrey has joined includes Martin Van Buren, the Democratic nominee of 1836; Lewis Cass, 1848; Stephen A. Douglas, 1860; William Jennings Bryan, 1896; James M. Cox, 1920, and Adlai E. Stevenson, 1952. Van Buren was the only winner, which may suggest a prognosis for Humphrey. But before jumping to this uncertain conclusion, let's take a look at the similar list for the Republican Party.

The Republican presidential candi-

dates who were nominated to succeed unavailable incumbents include Ruth-erford B. Hayes, 1876; James A. Garfield, 1880; William Howard Taft, 1908; Herbert Hoover, 1928, and Richard M. Nixon, 1960. All except Nixon were winners in the year of their first presidential nomination.

Not Great—But Not Bad

IF THE TWO LISTS are combined, those who became President include Van Buren, Hayes, Garfield, Taft and Hoover. In the judgment of American historians, as determined in a poll conducted by Prof. Arthur M. Schlesinger in 1948, not one of the five was rated as great or near great. But it is also noteworthy that not one was rated as below average or as a failure in office.

Garfield was omitted because of the brevity of his life in office. The other four placed in the group of Presidents rated as average. All but Hoover were at the top of that group, with Hayes rated highest.

The fact that these men won the Presidency cannot be attributed to any large amount of personal charisma. Hayes was not even a winner in the popular vote, which he lost to Samuel J. Tilden by 48 to 51 per cent. Van Buren led his opponent by 51 per cent to 49, while Garfield led his by a mere 48.3 to 47.9. Taft and Hoover were the substantial winners, Taft by 52 to 43 per cent and Hoover by 58 to 41.

Several of the losers in the previous listings were more noteworthy as individuals than most of the winners, both before nomination and after de-

feat. Certainly this was true of Douglas, Bryan and Stevenson.

In the great stakes of the American Presidency, it may be more fair to think about winning situations than winning candidates. Parties in power that find themselves in trouble are not ordinarily thought of as occupying winning situations.

The Jackson Administration was in more than a little trouble when the Democrats nominated Vice President Van Buren in 1835, a year before the election. So was the Eisenhower Administration when the Republicans nominated Vice President Nixon in 1960. Van Buren won no easy victory, while Nixon's defeat was by a hair's breadth.

Successor Nominations

ONE LINE OF theory on the successor nominations of a party in power runs strongly to the effect that

the party can only win with a candidate from within the administration or who has been closely associated with it. Under favorable conditions, it seems natural enough that such a candidate should be nominated, as Harvard Prof. Arthur N. Holcombe pointed out in 1950 in "Our More Perfect Union." It is only when the party is in trouble that pressures mount for a candidate from outside the administration. As Holcombe concluded, this has almost never proved to be a successful strategy.

Taft and Hoover are the leading examples of successor inside nominees who won big—a fact that may be hard to remember in view of what happened to each only four years later. Both were nominated during the great days of the Republican Party—the period during which it was credited with having a "natural majority."

The big losers among the successor nominees were Douglas in 1860, Bryan in 1896, Cox in 1920 and Stevenson in 1952.

As the struggle over slavery deepened in the 1850s, President Franklin Pierce sought renomination unsuccessfully in 1856. His successor, President James Buchanan, did not even attempt a second term in 1860. Douglas was nominated with no help from Buchanan in the most difficult of all national party conventions—the only one that was unable to complete its business without adjourning to a later date and a different city.

Douglas polled less than 30 per cent in the election to Abraham Lincoln's 40 per cent, with over 30 per cent of the vote going elsewhere. The Civil War followed, yet the Democratic Party was sufficiently durable to poll about half of the popular vote from 1876 to 1892, including President Grover Cleveland's two victories.

Bryan's nomination in 1896 represented a clear rejection by the con-

vention of the policies of the second Cleveland administration. William McKinley was the victor in the election by 51 to 46 per cent.

Cox was nominated in 1920 after the convention had rejected two members of Wilson's Cabinet, along with Gov. Al Smith, of New York. In the backwash of World War I, Cox lost by 34 per cent to Harding's 60.

Stevenson was nominated in 1952 after a long refusal to run as President Truman's chosen successor. Stevenson lost to Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, by 44 per cent to 55.

The record of the Republican Party

in winning elections with successor nominees who came from the inside is impressive—and so is the equally remarkable record of the Democratic Party in losing elections with successor nominees who came from the outside in very "open" conventions.

Nixon was the Republican exception by losing the election after an inside nomination. Van Buren was the Democratic exception both by coming from inside the administration and by winning. Coincidentally, both were serving as the incumbent Vice President when first nominated for President in their own right.

Perhaps this line of evidence may best be concluded by suggesting that Vice President Humphrey's chances of winning are no worse than Van Buren's in 1836 or Nixon's in 1960.

But the Polls Say . . .

THIS CONCLUSION is most likely to be challenged by those who have been reading the recent public opinion polls. In a recent Harris survey, Nixon was reported as leading Humphrey by 40 to 34 per cent, with 17 per cent of the voters for former Gov. George Wallace and 9 per cent undecided.

Pre-nomination polls are notoriously subject to wide fluctuations. In 1948, for example, Thomas E. Dewey was reported by the Gallup Poll as the preferred candidate of 38 per cent of all Republicans in February, 24 per cent in May and 33 per cent in June. During the same period, Harold E. Stassen climbed from 15 per cent to 37 as the challenger and then slipped back to 26.

In 1956, Adlai Stevenson was the preferred candidate of 51 per cent of all Democrats in March, 39 in April, and 45 in June. Meanwhile, Estes Kefauver went up from 18 per cent in March to 33 in April and back down to 16 in June.

These figures reflected the preferences of party voters in making their own party choice. Trial heat data in which a potential candidate of one party is tested against a potential candidate of the other party fluctuate less widely, but they do fluctuate, as they have this year. They are especially unreliable during the interval



"Ned, don't you think we're getting a little too old to be Democrats?"

after one party has nominated and before the other has done so.

Some years ago, I discovered that historically the most interesting trial heat data are those published just before either nominating convention is held. At a Salzburg seminar on American politics in 1963, Louis Bean looked at a table I had put together and published along these lines for the years from 1936 to 1960.

Bean announced to the seminar that there is a "David's law" in this field, to the effect that the last trial heat before either convention is a better prediction of the November outcome than any poll during the changing fortunes of the campaign.

This year the oracles were confused by the divergent results of the final pre-convention polls by Gallup and Harris. But if the two are averaged, as the experts suggested, Vice President Humphrey is entitled to take some comfort from David's law. When averaged, the results were as follows: Humphrey, 39½ per cent; Nixon, 38; Wallace, 16; undecided, 6½.

How this would convert into Electoral College votes is a question for which this essay has neither time nor space. The undecideds may decide it in the end or it may be settled by events beyond the control of anyone.

There is no reason why either candidate should conclude that this election is already won or lost. There is also a genuine possibility that what the candidates do themselves between now and November may actually be decisive.