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Official Feuding

In all the furor over the President's apparent effort to stiff-arm the Vice President out of office, one important fact has been rather generally overlooked: Feuding between the Chief Executive and his gentleman-in-waiting is characteristic, not uncommon.

True, this situation is another of Mr. Nixon's "historic firsts." Never before has a Vice President been under investigation on such serious charges and never before has there been such open discussion of a President's wish that the Vice President resign.

But, putting aside this specific and historically unique problem, the coolness that has grown between the two-time ticket-mates is so predictable as to be routine. In the relationship of President and Vice President, familiarity almost always breeds contempt.

Franklin Roosevelt dumped Vice Presidents John Nance Garner and Henry Wallace, and both of them responded by challenging his right to rule his own party's convention.

Harry Truman looked the other way while the labor leaders put the knife to the presidential hopes of his loyal Veep, Alben Barkley, and then engineered the nomination of his own choice, Adlai Stevenson.

In 1956, Dwight Eisenhower told Richard Nixon he would like him to step down from the vice presidency to a cabinet post—anyone except Secretary of State—and Mr. Nixon was so angry, biographers Hess and Mazo say, that he "planned to quit public life in disgust." Then, Eisenhower relented.

After three years as John Kennedy's Vice President, Lyndon Johnson was, in the words of biographers Evans and Novak, "gloomy and morose about his future. He walked into the office of a Texas Congressman in early October (1963) and complained, 'Why does the White House have it in for me?' "

The humiliations that Hubert Humphrey suffered in his tenure as Johnson's Vice President—being dropped from meetings and frozen out of conversations when he chanced to stray from the White House line—contributed incalculably to the wreckage of Humphrey's presidential bid.

Considering the disparate personalities involved in these continuing controversies, the only sensible conclusion is that there is something inherently self-destructive in the relationship between these offices.

It is fairly obvious what it is. Presidents treat their Vice Presidents like dirt because no good politician likes to give power to someone he cannot control. A President who will hand vast authority to staff members will give the Vice President only crumbs because he can fire a staff member, but he can't fire a Vice President. So, he keeps the Vice President on a leash by giving him nothing important to do, and the Veep, inevitably, fumes.

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The second reason the partnership turns to poison is that no one can ever bring himself to love a potential successor. What is true of congressional committee chairmen, railway engineers, reporters and movie stars is also true of Presidents—they hate the thought that anyone can truly replace them. Consciously or not, they place barriers in the way of vice presidential succession, and effective barriers they are.

Not since Martin Van Buren in 1836 has a sitting Vice President been elected to the presidency; Mr. Nixon and Mr. Humphrey are the latest in a long line to try but fail to use the stepping stone to the Oval Office.

If this rule of human relationships is recognized, the constitutional consequences are also clear. What would make sense would be a constitutional amendment that takes the Vice President out of competition for the presidency by making him ineligible to run for the office. Instead of ambitious younger men going on the ticket and suffering miserably if elected to the No. 2 job, the vice presidential nomination would customarily be given to a broadly admired senior statesman, who might well be accepted by the President as a personal adviser. That admirable elder (say, an Averell Harriman among today's Democrats or a Henry Cabot Lodge among Republicans) would be available to serve as an interim President, in case the President died in office. But there would have to be provision for a special election within a short time to choose someone else to fill out the term.

That would be a logical method to eliminate the conditions that now make life in the vice presidency all but intolerable and feuds between President and Vice President all but inevitable.

But, this being a country that prefers politics to logic, we will probably keep the system we have — and discover, to our continual amazement, that Presidents and Vice Presidents just don't seem to get along.