June 16, 2008

Rockefeller dismissed VP role

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Guest essayist

Just in case, here's some advice for Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton from the last New Yorker who became vice president in 1974: Don't expect much and you won't be disappointed.

Thirty-four years ago, Nelson Rockefeller, the four-term New York governor, didn't expect much and he didn't get much.

Now in 2008, I find myself writing a book, soon to be published by the Rochester Institute of Technology press, titled No Room for Democracy and subtitled The Triumph of Ego Over Common Sense, which discusses Rockefeller's vision of the job.

In 1979, Rockefeller wrote me a letter included in the appendix of my book. At the time, I was chairman of the Rules Committee of the Republican National Committee, and it was important to determine what Rockefeller, having been vice president, thought of the vice presidential selection process.

In that letter, Rockefeller said, "I have known all the vice presidents since Henry Wallace, and I think it is fair to say that all of them were frustrated."

They needn't have been, though, he continued, if each one had accepted the fact that he was assuming a position of "standby equipment and that whatever useful purpose he may have will be as a loyal assistant to the president, without any executive power or responsibility in his own name."

A vice president might try to flex his vestigial muscles as the presiding officer of the Senate, Rockefeller said, but the exercise would be "politically unrealistic." He would alienate senators and undermine the president's legislative agenda.

Changing the job constitutionally, he cautioned, would be "impossible" and "undesirable."

If the vice president is a person of ability, stature and loyalty, Rockefeller said, there are really unlimited possibilities as to the role that he can play in assisting the president.

But Rockefeller predicted that any attempt by Congress to invigorate the vice presidency legislatively would be vetoed by the president because it could "create the temptation of giving an ambitious vice president a platform with separate authority" and further divide the White House.

What about the way vice presidential candidates are chosen?

Rockefeller's memo offers some timely advice for Sens. Barack Obama and John McCain.

For starters, Rockefeller said, don't reveal your choice until the convention.

Doing so earlier, he said, gives your running mate "a greater political importance during the election process than he would ultimately have when he took office," just adding to the potential for mischief-
making and frustration.

Also, choosing a running mate should be entirely at the discretion of the presidential nominee — not left for the delegates to decide on the basis of political expediency.

"The president has enough problems to worry about in this really impossible job without having to cope with a recalcitrant or conniving vice president at his side," Rockefeller wrote.

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