A Heartbeat Away

The vice presidency has long been the butt of jokes, but the job is a lot more important than it used to be

BY PATRICIA SMITH

When voters go to the polls on November 6, they won’t just be electing a president. They’ll also be putting another man “a heartbeat away” from the most powerful office on earth.

Though only 1 percent of Americans typically say that the bottom of the ticket influences their vote, vice presidential nominees can make a difference in close elections like the one shaping up between President Obama, a Democrat, and his Republican challenger, Mitt Romney.

Obama’s running mate, Vice President Joe Biden, can charm voters but has a reputation for making political gaffes on the campaign trail. Before becoming vice president, Biden was a U.S. senator from Delaware for 36 years.

Wisconsin Congressman Paul Ryan, Romney’s choice for vice president, is chairman of the House budget committee and considered an expert on budget issues. But some of Ryan’s ideas—including his proposal to change Medicare, a health care entitlement program that many elderly Americans have depended on for decades—are quite controversial.

Four years ago, Republican John McCain’s surprise selection of then-Alaska Governor Sarah Palin as his running mate played a role in his defeat by Obama, according to most election experts. One reason that vice presidential candidates get more scrutiny than ever by the media is that vice presidents no longer serve as powerless figureheads in presidential administrations.

“It’s certainly a good deal more than just going to state funerals these days,” says Lee Edwards, a presidential scholar at the Heritage Foundation.

The shift began during the presidency of Bill Clinton in the 1990s and continued under his successor, George W. Bush. By all accounts, Presidents Clinton and Bush gave Vice Presidents Al Gore and Dick Cheney more power and influence than any other vice presidents in American history.

The importance of the No. 2 spot today would astound the Founding Fathers. Aside from taking over for a president who dies or can no longer serve, the Constitution assigns the vice president responsibility for presiding over the Senate and breaking tie votes. Other than that, the job wasn’t given much thought, says Stanley N. Katz, a constitutional historian at Princeton University.

But the vice president has always been first in line in terms of presidential succession, and many of these understudies have ended up stepping into the lead role.
Franklin D. Roosevelt’s vice president for his first two terms (1933-41), said the job wasn’t worth a bucket of warm spit. (Actually, he used a word we can’t print here.)

In the early days of the U.S., the vice president wasn’t a running mate but a runner-up: The candidate who finished second in the presidential election became the vice president. This meant that the president and vice president were political rivals, as was the case in the election to succeed George Washington in 1796. Thomas Jefferson became vice president after losing the presidential election to John Adams. The system in use today—in which the president and vice president run on a single ticket—took effect with the ratification of the 12th Amendment in 1804.

Even with that change, until recently few presidents have shared significant power with their vice presidents, who often were left to perform mostly ceremonial duties.

That changed, first with Vice President Al Gore, who was President Clinton’s most trusted adviser and a key voice in policy decisions, and then decisively with Vice President Dick Cheney, who had an unprecedented amount of influence in the Bush White House. For the last four years, Biden has carried on that tradition. He attends Obama’s daily briefing and all important foreign policy meetings; he was largely responsible for managing the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq in 2011. It’s a far cry from the days during World War II, when FDR’s vice president, Harry S. Truman, wasn’t even told about the top-secret development of the atomic bomb.

It’s not clear whether Ryan would function in a similar advisory role if Republicans win the White House. Ryan is 23 years younger than Romney, but he has a history of deep involvement in Republican policy issues.

Five vice presidents have used the job as a launching pad to get elected to the presidency. Biden, who has twice run for president already, has not ruled out a run for president in 2016, when he could face off against Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. Ryan, who is young and ambitious, would likely pursue the top job too after serving as vice president.

“It is very much a stepping-stone to the top spot,” says Edwards, the presidential scholar.

Whoever winds up as No. 2 come January 20 might reflect on what’s changed—and what hasn’t—since 1789, when John Adams said: “I am vice president. In this I am nothing, but I may be everything.”

With reporting by Suzanne Blyeau.