

PRESIDENT CHEIBERMAN?

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Are you one of those who believe that the presidential choice this year is between a robotic phony and a dim bulb? Too simplistic. Still, there is a perceptions problem -- and, thankfully, an upside to this year's downside:

Whichever of the vice presidential candidates loses this year will likely be a pace-setter in the nomination process in 2004. Beyond allowing a silver-lining seeker to see a silver lining, there really is one.

Who will lose? The so-called "tracking polls" are flawed and impossible to track; Bush seems to be gaining ground; state polls don't match national polls; anything can happen. Accordingly, consider the two alternatives.

Cheney. For all his exterior calm, he has the mythical "fire in the belly." He wants to be president. Little-remembered after leaving government when Clinton beat Bush in 1992, Cheney spent many months of grinding travel in an "explorative" mode, before deciding not to run for the presidency in 1996. He had learned that he couldn't raise the requisite money for a solid campaign. But many political observers, the putative "great mentioners," also had a rap on Cheney: True, he was superbly qualified, they said, but he was charisma-deficient and he had a health problem.

Fast-forward to 2004. Dick Cheney would not lose "the money primary" if he chose to enter it. Running for vice president, Cheney has achieved far greater public recognition than he had as a former defense secretary. He was particularly

impressive in the vice presidential debates, displaying a full bushel of gravitas (expected) as well as a quick sense of humor (not expected). His health problem (a heart condition, since mended by bypass surgery) has not been an issue this year, and given his active campaign schedule, there is little reason to think that health would be an issue in 2004, the year he will turn 63.

Cheney's biggest problem for 2004 comes in two words: "John McCain," the other Republican who has captured the American imagination this year. I think a President McCain would be good for America, as would a President Cheney. Both men are now positioned as "moderate conservatives," which is where a winning Republican ought to be. In a primary contest McCain has more flair, but on the assumption that he continues McCainesquely to go after the GOP establishment, Cheney might well be a less threatening figure to many Republican primary voters.

Lieberman. If the Gore-Lieberman ticket loses, Joe Lieberman is in very good shape politically. Recall his earlier situation. There was one big question about any potential national candidacy: Would Americans elect a Jew to the presidency or the vice presidency? It is now quite apparent that if the Al-Joe ticket goes down, it won't be Joe's fault. In fact, it is clear that the addition of Lieberman helped Gore. So much so that the original enthusiastic reaction for Lieberman among some Jews has been diluted. After all, what's left to prove? Win or lose, Lieberman has shown that a Jew can be accepted, elected and even lionized in America today.

Like Cheney, Lieberman was regarded as a dull speaker and lacking charisma. That was never true, and it's patently untrue

now that we've seen the animated, joke-cracking, singing Jew at work in the political trade he loves.

Lieberman had yet another problem: He was perceived as, and indeed was, more conservative than the mainstream of the too-liberal Democratic Party.

He's taken some hits for allegedly changing his positions and his emphasis since his nomination. But, by my lights, he's been fairly skillful at retaining his core beliefs while, perforce, accommodating most of Gore's liberal positions. In that balancing act, he has shown that he can be accepted, if not loved, by liberal Democrats, while adding real strength to a Democratic ticket in the center of the political spectrum. That's where presidents are elected, from where wise governing flows and to where Democrats must be dragged.

Like Cheney, Lieberman (now 58) would have some big-time competition in 2004, including some important U.S. senators, one of whom might be named Hillary. Of course, she has promised that if elected from New York, she would serve out her six-year term and not run for higher office in 2004. That's the same pledge made by her husband and political mentor when he ran for governor of Arkansas in 1990.

So: America has some new bench strength in the middle of the line. So: many of those who have been saying they wished they had a chance to vote for Cheney and Lieberman for president may still get it. So: don't feel sorry for whichever vice-presidential candidate loses in 2000. He may end up as president in 2004.

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