

Quayle Hunt by Dan Jacoby

Last week, presumptive Republican nominee for President John McCain surprised the political world by choosing Alaska Governor Sarah Palin as his running mate. As self-appointed pundits bombard us with phony and irrelevant “theories” as to why he would choose her, the truth goes eerily silent.

Governor Palin has almost no experience, and has clearly not demonstrated any readiness to lead. She has legal and ethical problems surrounding her attempt to get someone fired from a state job for the heinous “crime” of divorcing her sister. Now it turns out that this “abstinence-only” politician doesn’t practice at home what she preaches in public.

This has to be the worst choice for a running mate since George H.W. Bush picked Dan Quayle. So why would John McCain pick her?

In order to understand this pick, and to understand why Bush chose Quayle, we must first understand the makeup of the Republican Party. This party is not united; it is split into three separate factions. They are the “religious right wing,” the “military right wing,” and the “fiscal right wing.” Since 1976, whenever a Republican candidate has united all three right wings of the party, he has won; whenever he failed to unite all three, he lost.

In 1976, Gerald Ford failed to include the religious right wing, and he lost.

In 1980 and 1984, Ronald Reagan united all three groups, and won big. His “cut taxes” mantra was a fiscal right-wing home run. He had wholehearted support from Jerry Falwell and other religious right-wingers. His pledge to increase military spending significantly contrasted deeply with the failed rescue attempt in the Iranian desert.

In 1988, Bush’s CIA position and his record in WWII gave him military “cred.” He said “Read my lips; no new taxes,” and the fiscal right-wingers cheered. But he had a real problem with the religious right wing of the party. His son (George W.) helped a lot, but his choice of Quayle, a tool of the religious right wing, made a huge difference, and he won handily.

By 1992, Bush had failed to uphold his “no new taxes” pledge, and the religious right-wing became as disenchanted with him as the fiscal right-wing. He lost to Bill Clinton.

In 1996, Bob Dole never got the religious right-wing, and he lost.

In 2000, George W. Bush had the religious right-wing support from the start, and his fiscal rhetoric was right on target for the fiscal right-wingers. By selecting Dick Cheney as his running mate, he brought the military right-wingers on board. He has been President ever since.

This cycle’s Republican primaries featured one candidate from each right wing of the party. John McCain had the military, Mitt Romney had the fiscal, and Mike Huckabee had the religious right-wingers. Since McCain became the presumptive nominee, however, the religious representative has been out of sight. Of course, McCain made a lot of statements intended to appease the religious groups, but they haven’t been swayed. Something had to be done.

Something was done. John McCain chose a religious right-winger to run with him, just as George H.W. Bush did twenty years ago. (It could also be noted that McCain chose a pretty, religious right-winger, as did George H.W. Bush.)

In some respects, McCain's is a better choice. Sarah Palin is merely a political novice, with no experience doing anything that demonstrates her readiness to assume the presidency; Dan Quayle was clearly unfit for command, lacking the skills to run anything. Sarah Palin is well spoken, with a brief record of standing up and getting a budget passed; Dan Quayle couldn't put three sentences together, and had no record of accomplishing anything. Sarah Palin has managed to accomplish things on her own; Dan Quayle was the beneficiary of a wealthy grandfather who owned newspapers.

Things have changed in twenty years, however, and the differences may prove to be McCain's ultimate downfall. Some differences are:

- Barack Obama is not Michael Dukakis. Dukakis talked about competence while running an incompetent campaign. Obama's campaign team is a lot smarter.
- In 1988 we had an extremely popular Republican President. Today we have an extremely unpopular Republican President.
- In 1988 the economy had not yet turned downhill at the macro level. Today we are facing both a looming recession and rising inflation.
- In 1988 the three right wings of the Republican Party were working together. Today each wing is fighting for its own purposes.
- In 1988 there was no progressive grass roots movement and little excitement among younger voters. Today, there are many progressive grass roots groups all over the country, and younger voters are turning out in record numbers.

In short, while the choice of Sarah Palin is clearly a rehash of George H.W. Bush's choice of Dan Quayle, the outcome of that choice is not so clear.