Eagerness seen as a vice in presidential veepstakes

By Stephen Dinan

Sunday, April 8, 2012

While Mitt Romney finally looks to have the Republican nomination within his grasp, the jockeying among the wannabes for the No. 2 spot on the GOP ticket is only now ramping up.

In the so-called "veepstakes," the big question for the hopefuls is how to play it.

Some of those considered to be in the mix are playing it cool: South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley and Sen. Marco Rubio of Florida have said they don't expect to be picked. Others, such as New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie, pointedly say they would have to consider an offer if it's made.

Then there are the matters of fitting in with the rest of the ticket and, in the post-Sarah Palin era, a sense that whoever the pick is, he or she needs to be well-vetted early on.

"The wannabes would be wise to hang back, play it cool, see how the cards in the deck are dealt," said political strategist Ron Christie, who worked for one man who played it right — former Vice President Dick Cheney. "No one likes the over-eager beaver — particularly one angling to become the next vice president of the United States."

With President Obama seemingly locked into keeping Vice President Joe Biden on his ticket, this summer's chief guessing game will center on who will be the best fit for the Republican nominee.

Those under consideration usually would complement the presidential nominee well, would be qualified for the top office, and could help shore up support in a battleground state.

But the pick is also the equivalent of a one-shot rifle: It gives the presidential nominee a chance to reset the political conversation and quell whatever questions happen to be rising at that time.

In 2000, Mr. Bush used his pick of Mr. Cheney to answer critics' questions about his own gravitas. In 2004, Sen. John Kerry, the Democratic nominee, used his pick of fellow Sen. John Edwards to try to reach out to Southern voters. In 2008, Sen. John McCain tapped Mrs. Palin, the Alaska governor at the time, in part to calm lingering fears among conservatives.
The political oddsmakers at Paddy Power, an Irish bookmaker that takes bets on things such as the veepstakes, released odds last week that made Mr. Rubio the clear favorite at 2-1, followed by Mr. Christie at 5-1 and New Mexico Gov. Susana Martinez at 11-2.


The best way for those hopefuls to boost their own chances is to play it cool and to make sure they have done the work of running the traps on their own records, said longtime political operative Mike McSherry, who works at Mercury Public Affairs.

"Make sure that you're helping Gov. Romney in any way the campaign needs it — whether it's winning states, delegates or helping him raise money," Mr. McSherry said. "The Romney campaign is excellent at constructing political voting and quotation record narratives. If a potential V.P. believes any issue may impact, positively or negatively, consideration for selection and the fall election they'll need to get it vetted."

That was true for the past two vice presidents, who had spent their lives in Washington in the public eye — decades in the Senate in the case of Mr. Biden and in Congress and the administrations of previous Republican presidents in the case of Mr. Cheney.

It also didn't hurt that Mr. Cheney was the one doing the vetting as head of the search committee for candidate George W. Bush in 2000 — when Mr. Cheney put forward his own name.

Those two men also have transformed the post dramatically over the past 11 years, making it even more attractive, said Joseph A. Pika, a political scientist at the University of Delaware who has studied the vice presidency.

"The vice presidency, as a job, is more influential today — some even say 'powerful' — than ever before in U.S. history," Mr. Pika said. "Cheney was enormously influential during eight years of the Bush II administration and V.P. Biden, although defining the job a bit differently, remains one of the Obama administration's most influential figures."

He said several calculations that go into potential aspirants' minds include the dangers — in this case of being tied to Mr. Romney if he loses — and the chances that Mr. Romney could unseat Mr. Obama.

"Why become part of a losing effort if they think they can hope to secure the nomination for the top spot one day on their own? The losing V.P. candidates on tickets disappear from American politics even faster than losing presidential candidates," Mr. Pika said.

As for Mr. Romney — or whoever the eventual nominee is — everyone has a suggestion for how he should move forward.

Ronald L. Feinman, a political scientist who runs TheProgressiveProfessor.com, said he doubts either Virginia Gov. Bob McDonnell or Mr. Christie will be the choice.
"I think both of them are much too controversial. He doesn't need someone who's controversial," said Mr. Feinman, who teaches political science at Florida Atlantic University. "Being cool, like Rubio, is the best way. There's no question about it. He knows who's out there. If you look too eager, that is not good."

Mr. Feinman said he also thinks Sen. John Thune of South Dakota and former Minnesota Gov. Tim Pawlenty will be on the eventual shortlist.

Ron Christie, the former Cheney employee, said his early bet is on Sen. Rob Portman of Ohio, whose extensive experience in Congress and as White House budget director and U.S. trade representative could make him the right fit for an election focused on the economy and deficits.

Mr. Christie said he doubts the other Mr. Christie — the governor of New Jersey (the two are not related) — makes a Romney-headed ticket because Republicans won't want two moderates.

Then there are those who are calling for an out-of-the-box approach.

Emilio T. Gonzalez, a former Bush administration official who does political commentary for Univision, wrote a column for the network last week saying the party needs to look seriously for a Hispanic for the No. 2 slot, and offered Nevada Gov. Brian Sandoval as a stand-in should Mr. Rubio not be the right fit this year.

Mr. Gonzalez told The Washington Times that Republicans do have a problem with Hispanic voters, and that the party needs to become pragmatic in looking for a good messenger. He said Mr. Sandoval, a Westerner of Mexican descent, can punch a hole in two areas where Democrats have been gaining.

"If you really want a chance at defeating Obama in November, you're going to have to eat into his base, which means right now the African-American vote and the Hispanic vote. If you put a qualified Hispanic on the ticket, there's a better than even chance Hispanics will vote for that person," Mr. Gonzalez said.