

Bloomberg/Hagel or Hagel/Bloomberg?

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If there's any glamour at all in third party politics, it's at the top of the ticket. You can dream of being a sane, winning Ross Perot. But who wants to be Adm. James Stockdale?

As the ritual courtship of Sen. Chuck Hagel (R-Neb.) and New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg exploded into the public last week, however, there was an odd lack of attention on the fact that there is distinctly little sizzle to the idea of being No. 2 on an independent ticket.

"It's a great country to think about a New York boy and a Nebraska boy to be teamed up leading this nation," Hagel teased on "Face The Nation."

But commentators have tiptoed around the practical question: were they to run as a ticket, which of these unlikely allies would be president?

In Bloomberg's inner circle, at least, there's little doubt which job he wants.

"Mike Bloomberg was not designed to be standby equipment," said Bloomberg adviser and New York University professor Mitchell Moss. (He was quoting another rich New Yorker, Nelson Rockefeller, who rebuffed Richard Nixon's offer of the No. 2 job, only to accept it years later under Gerald Ford.)

"He's an alpha male," Moss said of the mayor, who has in recent months been fueling presidential speculation with a series of addresses on matters of national policy, with open hints from his political aides and with appearances beside national figures including, last Wednesday, former President Bill Clinton.

Hagel and Bloomberg commenced their courtship earlier this month with a very public dinner at Washington's venerable Palm.

"I'm not sure he would run for president, but I'm fairly certain that he wouldn't want to run for vice president," said another Bloomberg friend, the New York public relations eminence Howard Rubenstein, who represents the mayor's company but stressed that he doesn't speak for Bloomberg. "It's just in his personality."

Even Doug Bailey, a founder of the political news source Hotline and one of the creators of Unity '08, a group planning to run a bipartisan presidential ticket, said he couldn't imagine Bloomberg anywhere but the top.

"It's a little difficult to imagine Mayor Bloomberg in a second slot on a ticket," he said. "I don't think he runs unless he's willing to pay for the run. And if he's going to pay for the run, I can't see him in the second slot."

People around Hagel are more circumspect, but one prominent Nebraska Republican, who declined to be named, said many in the state think Hagel would consider the second slot on an independent ticket.

"While I think Sen. Hagel would make a strong presidential candidate, I also think he would be a strong vice presidential candidate," said another who knows Hagel well, former Nebraska Republican Party Chairman David Kramer.

But if a raised profile and enhanced stature, win or lose, is the aim of an independent run, the second slot may not be the ideal platform from which to do it.

Even modern-day third party candidates who didn't get as many votes as Perot have made an impact by carrying a message or even changing an election's outcome. Ralph Nader and John Anderson before him each made a point and carved a space in American politics.

Nader's running mate, Winona LaDuke, however, returned pretty quickly into obscurity after her spot on the ticket below Nader. And who can name Anderson's running mate? (It was former Wisconsin Gov. Patrick Lucey.)

Still, Unity '08's Bailey said he hopes his group can attract people of stature to both slots.

"If they were going to run for the Unity '08 nomination, they would have quiet conversations and figure out not just how they would run together but also how they would govern together," he said.

Of course, all this speculation is premised on the notion that Bloomberg and Hagel will actually make the leap, something supporters of both men say may not happen. A Hagel spokesman, Mike Buttry, declined to comment on whether his boss would be interested in the vice presidency.

And Bloomberg's spokesman, Stu Loeser, brushed the question off.

"The mayor is not running for president, vice president, secretary of state, secretary of the treasury, secretary of defense or anything else down the line of succession," he said.

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