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## **Blessed by Bradley: Al Gore benefits from challenge**

This has been a tough week for Al Gore. He discovered that the road to the White House requires a scenic tour through Nashville. In fact, he has found out that it's a lot easier to get invited to the White House than get elected to the White House.

Gore's candidacy has been stuck in neutral ever since the vice president launched his campaign in Tennessee last spring. Contrary to popular belief, Bill Bradley's candidacy, energized by the endorsement of Sen. Daniel Moynihan and a cover story in Time magazine this week, may well turn out to be a blessing for Gore.

Until Bradley came along, the vice president was living in the shadow of President Clinton. For the past seven years, Gore has been Clinton's cheerleader. He introduced the President at public events and then led the applause for him, typically the first person to start clapping and the last to stop.

But with Bradley on the scene, Gore is no longer being compared with Clinton. And Gore matches up well against Bradley. The vice president's lack of spontaneity is no longer a flaw when dealing with the cerebral former senator from New Jersey.

Admittedly, Bradley has glamour from his days as a New York Knick, but he's basically a quiet, thoughtful guy who has never been tested in a national race. Competing in multiple primaries and debating on live TV is a lot different from walking on the beaches of New Jersey or playing defense with Willis Reed under the boards.

Gore, despite his slow start, is a seasoned pro who smothered Ross Perot during the fight over NAFTA and ate Jack Kemp's lunch in the 1996 vice presidential debate.

Bradley's campaign, although fueled by big money, is based on a blend of suburban

independents and hard-core liberal Democrats. His voting record in the U.S. Senate reflects the ideological contradictions of his independent persona: against welfare reform and the war against Iraq but for aid to the Contras. This is precisely the type of voting record that Gore can dissect.

Until now, Gore's campaign has been defined by Clinton's record. But with Bradley in the race, the vice president can run an offense, attacking Bradley's voting record rather than just defending the Clinton-Gore legacy.

It's tough to run for President when you have no choice but to defend the incumbent. That's what sank Hubert Humphrey in 1968 and Richard Nixon in 1960. Now, instead of being Clinton's lapdog, Gore can run as an underdog against Bradley, a highly desirable position at the start of the presidential primary season.

A well-fought primary contest between Bradley and Gore is healthy for the Democratic Party. It energizes voters, enriches campaign consultants and forces the candidates to confront each other face to face, not just in scripted press briefings.

In addition, a Democratic presidential primary demonstrates that the party consists of more than Clinton and his wife. With Bradley in the race, Gore's campaign has the potential to be newsworthy, rather than just an afterthought to the prospective Rudy Giuliani-Hillary Clinton Senate fight in New York.

Although Gore may not appreciate it now, he is fortunate to be running against Bradley and not Pat Buchanan. Bradley is a team player who knows how to play by the rules. Unlike Buchanan, Bradley understands his future is in the Democratic Party. Buchanan, on the other hand, is not politically housebroken and will surely soil the carpet if he doesn't get his way.

Most important, Bradley strategists and voters can be converted to the Gore campaign, while Buchanan supporters are zealots who would prefer to go down with their captain rather than accept defeat at a political convention. And finally, voters are more likely to pay attention to a Democratic horse race than a Republican coronation of George W. Bush.

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