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The Shrinking Field

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There have been many speculative stories recently on the 2000 presidential race. Some articles have said Texas Gov. George W. Bush's \$36 million campaign fund gives him a great advantage. Some have concluded that Vice President Albert Gore Jr. will win once he establishes an identity separate from President Clinton.

I have many friends among the analysts and reporters who have written these stories. They are intelligent and honorable people. It astonishes me that they have all, once again, missed the point.

As I have been trying for years to explain (with distressingly little success), the best measure of electability is the distance from the bottom of a candidate's calloused heels to the top of his or her well-coifed head. Height rules, in politics as in nearly every other endeavor in which personal appearance is a factor.

We are a species that equates larger size with maturity, leadership and sex appeal. If we were like some insects, where adults are smaller than larvae, we might not think this way. But we do. Why doesn't everyone see it?

I believe that the height factor influences every election in which voters have an opportunity to see the candidates standing side-by-side, particularly those races with televised debates. In the 12 presidential elections of the television era, beginning in 1952, the shorter candidate has won only twice, in 1972 and 1976. Of 31 contested U.S. Senate races in 1990, a year I chose at random, the shorter candidate won only eight.

That means height gives a candidate about a 3-1 advantage. The more prominent the race, the greater likelihood its result can be predicted with a tape measure, instead of all those expensive polls and focus groups and campaign breakfasts with voters in Keene, N.H. Yet when I call campaign press secretaries and ask them how tall their candidate is, the first response I almost always get is a suppressed giggle. Some have had the gall to ask if I really worked

for The Washington Post.

Perhaps their guffaws are meant to cover their pain and embarrassment at the injustice of it all. At 5-foot-5 3/4, I will never be president. Not that I want the job, but it would have been nice to know it was an option. Historians note that James Madison was only 5-foot-4, but most of the people who voted for him never got a look at him.

Among the other disadvantages of short stature is the disrespect I must tolerate from my children, particularly from my twenty-something sons. Now my 14-year-old daughter has just returned from her pre-high school physical to report, gleefully, that she also is officially taller than Dad.

Many people find this amusing. But I am beginning to see signs that some politicians are developing an appreciation of the power of height. None of them dare say so in public, but there have been some odd developments lately that suggest I am no longer the only one who sees politics as a game of inches.

Consider the 1996 presidential election. Approaching that campaign the Clinton White House, so forthright on other issues, began to waffle on the president's height. In 1992 Clinton's aides said he was 6 feet 2 1/2 inches tall. That year he beat George Bush, who was 6-2. His opponent in 1996 was to be Bob Dole, also 6-2. The outcome seemed certain, until doubt about the president's height began to surface.

None of this ever received the media attention it deserved, but in 1993, once Clinton was safely in office, his doctor reported he was only 6-2. In 1994, the report of his annual physical said he was 6-2 1/2. In 1995, he was back to 6-2.

In the last few weeks of the campaign, the president appeared to be standing much straighter. He was particularly careful to keep his head up when he appeared with Dole at the debates, and he won the election. Now we face a 2000 race where height is likely to have an even more significant--if unheralded--impact.

If voters had a chance to consider height in the Republican primaries, the winner would be Utah Sen. Orrin Hatch at 6-2, followed by Pat Buchanan at 6-1 and Steve Forbes at 6-0. But Texas Gov. George W. Bush's huge lead in the polls and in fund-raising may get him the nomination before primary voters realize he is only 5-11. His true height may also be clouded somewhat in the public's mind by memories of his father. The elder Bush at 6-2 towered over his 1988 Democratic opponent, 5-8 Massachusetts Gov. Michael

Dukakis.

Two recent news events seem intriguingly related to this issue, even if no one will admit it. New Hampshire Sen. Bob Smith dropped out of the GOP race to run as a third-party candidate, a move that makes no sense unless you know that Smith is 6-6. As a third-party candidate, he has a chance to appear in the nationally televised presidential debates next year and become instantly electable.

There is also Minnesota Gov. Jesse Ventura's effort to have the Reform Party, which has lost twice with diminutive candidate Ross Perot (5-7), nominate former Connecticut governor and senator Lowell Weicker, who is also 6-6.

What of the Democratic front-runner, Vice President Gore? He is at least as tall as the remaining Republican candidates except Hatch. He always stands very straight. And now, in what may be a sign of how much some Gore staff members learned from watching Clinton in 1996, I can reveal that an attempt has been made on Gore's behalf to manipulate the height issue.

When I surveyed 1990 senatorial candidates several years ago, Gore's aides told me he was 6-1. When I asked the question again this year, a campaign spokesman said the vice president was "6-3 and standing tall." I was suspicious, but exaggerations of this sort have proved powerful in other professions. It made me think that the vice president's people had finally begun to understand the primordial need to look up to our leaders and cultural exemplars.

Sociologist Ralph Keyes has shown that men often claim to be taller than they are. That goes double for celebrities. Men's Health magazine compared claimed heights to actual heights and discovered that Arnold Schwarzenegger was 5-10, not 6-2, that Charles Bronson was 5-7, not 5-11, and Burt Reynolds 5-8, not 5-11.

Such embellishments, to be effective, require not only changes in the numbers, but daily use of special footwear. I see nothing wrong with this. I have not resorted to such devices myself, but in an age in which politicians have become comfortable with contacts and hair dye and girdles and toupees, a little boost in the heel department should not bother anyone.

I thought Gore's people had finally got it. Thus it grieves me to say that when I asked his White House staff to check his medical records and resolve the discrepancy, they showed no imagination at all. They said the campaign spokesman was in error and that the vice president had not grown in office. He was still 6-1.

Too bad. That means Gore is going to lose. When you consider the remaining candidates, the identity of the next president of the United States is obvious.

I have long wondered why national politics has not attracted more basketball stars. I suppose it is the relatively poor working conditions. Who wants to give up millions of dollars a year for a job that requires you to smile whenever a camera appears and return reporters' telephone calls?

Bill Bradley, former NBA star and former U.S. senator, is one of the few exceptions to that rule. Now he is running for president. He says he is ready to serve his country, he loves talking about endangered species and soft money and tax preferences, and he is 6-5.

I think this is an unbeatable combination. He has enough money to campaign through the primaries. Almost certainly there will be debates where Gore, a third of a foot shorter, will be forced to stand next to the former New York Knicks forward. Once nominated, Bradley will go into the general election with a half foot on Bush, exactly the margin that gave the 1988 race to Bush's father.

Can anyone stop him? Smith and Weicker have a chance, but if the two major parties freeze them out of the general election debates, you will know why. A straight Bush-Bradley race puts Bradley in the White House, ducking as he goes through low doorways. He will be the tallest man ever elected president, beating out the previous record-holder, 6-4 Abraham Lincoln.

Bradley will be in command, the ultimate alpha male, his head above the pack and almost certain of reelection in 2004. Unless, of course, noted businessman and civic activist Michael Jordan (6-6) gets the urge to run.

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