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AN AFFIRMATIVE ACTION VEEP

The principal problem with Walter Mondale's choice of Geraldine Ferraro to be his running mate is that she had never run for President. She was an Affirmative Action Veep selection; that is, she was chosen to satisfy an artificial gender quota instead of being chosen from the pool of persons who sought the Presidency.

Ferraro had never been tested on the number-one criterion of the democratic process -- do the voters like her? Do they respect her qualifications and experience?

Every four years, the unique American electoral process is the target of a litany of criticisms. Yet, it has stood the test of time and maintained our freedom better than the institutions of any other nation.

The office of Vice President can be a nothing, but then there is always the chance that it could be an everything. The Vice Presidential candidate absolutely must be some one whom the American voters can credibly picture as sitting in the White House making decisions of peace and war, the economy and the military, and the faithful supervision of the spending of hundreds of billions of taxpayers' dollars a year.

The only way to determine whether the American people would vote for any person for President or Vice President is when persons offer themselves to the voters and face the press corps in the excruciating series of quadrennial primaries from the snows of Iowa and New Hampshire all the way through to the sunny June days in California.

The chief problem with Ferraro is not that she is a woman, not that she is just a three-term member of Congress, not that she lacks experience in foreign affairs, but that she had not run for President. She had not offered herself to the voters, faced the sharp questioning of the press corps, laid her beliefs, her policies, her reactions, and her past on the campaign table and let the voters evaluate them.

If she had faced intensive questioning by the press in Iowa, New Hampshire, Ohio, Florida, Illinois, Georgia, Alabama, and California, most of the details of her private life and finances would have surfaced and been already examined by the press and public prior to the San Francisco Convention.

She would have learned how to avoid statements offensive to other people's religion, such as accusing Ronald Reagan of not being a good Christian and, at the same time, saying that whether one is a good Christian or not is measured by one's support of liberal spending programs. Because she hadn't had experience in the national arena, she offended not only all those who object to a personal attack on a candidate's religion, but she offended all Christians who believe that the measure of your "good" Christianity is your belief in Jesus Christ.

Every Delegate to the Republican National Convention in Dallas was surveyed again and again by the television networks and the national press on the question, "Will there be a woman on the Republican ticket in 1988?" The answer to that question is, that's a question the voters will decide when and if a woman runs for President in the Republican primaries in 1988.

Suppose a poll had been taken a year ago on the question, "Would you vote for an astronaut to be President or Vice President on the Democratic ticket in 1984?" The answer would surely have been at least 99% "yes."

But that public opinion in favor of astronauts didn't help John Glenn when he offered himself in the primaries. The voters didn't vote for "an astronaut"; they just quietly said no to John Glenn and he dropped out of the race. That doesn't mean that the voters discriminate against astronauts; it just meant that this particular astronaut didn't have the chemistry and the charisma to win a majority of voters.

Why did the voters reject John Glenn, George McGovern, Alan Cranston, Fritz Hollings, and Reuben Askew, and leave Mondale, Hart and Jesse Jackson in the race to the end? The voters don't have to give their reasons; there is no place on the ballot to fill in their explamations.

America should have a woman on the national ticket when -- and only when -- a woman runs for President, mounts the national organization, raises the funds, faces the voters in the primaries, endures the glare of pitiless publicity from New Hampshire to California, and survives to be freely chosen by the Delegates to the National Nominating Convention. Any other route to the top means a "quota" candidate and the disaster that followed Mondale's choice of Ferraro.