

Would Santorum Have Been the Better Candidate?

✘ When Rick Santorum was doing well in the Republican primaries, the common beef against him was that he could never be a viable candidate in the general election because he placed too much emphasis on “social issues.” His tenacious positions on gay marriage, abortion, family values, religion and the like would scare off independent voters. He would be written off as a wacko by everyone outside the GOP right wing.

No matter that he held exactly the correct positions on fiscal responsibility, tax policy, bureaucratic red tape and military preparedness. No matter that he was an articulate foe of Obamacare, while Mitt Romney was dogged by his embarrassing history with Romneycare back in Massachusetts. Romney was the safer candidate.

It is quite possible that a conservative candidate would have prevailed over Romney in the primaries if there hadn't been so many of them. In several states that Romney captured during the early going, the combination of Santorum, Newt Gingrich and, for a brief time, Rick Perry and Michelle Bachmann, out-pollled Mitt. Mitt had the advantage of being the unique figure in the race – moderate and, so it was argued, safe. His support was strong enough to earn him pluralities, but rarely majorities.

I don't think Gingrich was ever likely to win the nomination, because despite his brilliant mind his reputation preceded him. An election with Newt as the candidate would have been all about him and his morals.

But Santorum – had Gingrich dropped out of the race earlier – could have made it a horse race against Mitt.

Ah, but then there would be that problem of his wacky

obsession with social issues.

That line of thinking has turned out to be nonsense. This election campaign has become very much about social issues. We can thank President Obama for that, starting from the moment that he made his public statement in support of gay marriage. Or perhaps we should go back farther, to when he decreed that Catholic institutions must pay to provide free birth control and abortion pills to their employees, in contradiction to their religious beliefs.

The citizens of 32 states have voted on gay marriage, and all of those states have voted in favor of propositions that define marriage as the union of one man and one woman. The 32 include hard-core GOP reliables, of course, but they also include such swing states as Colorado, Florida, Missouri, Nevada, North Carolina, Ohio, Virginia and Wisconsin. They even include some states that are normally considered solidly blue and were easily won by Obama in 2008.

Obama may have miscalculated badly here – something he rarely did when he was running four years ago. I suspect that he may have doomed his candidacy by his new emphasis on social issues. When it comes to social issues, the majority of Americans don't seem to be with him. This is not to argue that gay marriage, for example, is either good or bad. What matters in an election is whether the candidate's positions are popular.

If Rick Santorum had won the GOP nomination, he might have been better able to exploit the social issues. Social issues are his thing, he has strong convictions, and what he says rings true and sincere. He would have lit some fires.

Mitt, by contrast, even when he says the right things, always seems a little squishy. And now and then, alas, one can point to times in the past when he said something different about the same issue.

Some Free Advice for the Republican Field

✘ To be perfectly honest, I'm not crazy about any of the Republicans running for president. I still think Mitt Romney has the best chance to beat President Obama, but I also think he's one of those rich guys who's embarrassed about being rich. Rick Santorum is a train wreck. He blames the media for bringing up social issues that he had already brought up. I could be wrong, but I think deep down, Rick Santorum would like to set up a neat little theocracy here in secular America just to make sure we're all living moral lives – as he sees it. I like Newt Gingrich. I think he's smart and has some good ideas and would make Barack Obama look silly in a nationally televised debate. But every now and then he goes off the deep end and someplace along the line I fell out of love with him. Then there's Ron Paul, who makes a lot of sense when he's talking about money, and very little sense when he's talking about a whole bunch of other things, especially foreign affairs.

That said, I still plan to vote for anyone running against the person currently occupying the White House. But what has me worried is that the Republicans have spent entirely too much time belittling each other – all to the benefit, I fear, of Barack Obama. I understand the reality of the situation – they have to win the nomination before they can run in the general election. But all the name-calling can't help the Republican who survives. You think the Democrats aren't taking notes – and making video clips – to use in ads once the nominee is picked?

It's time for the Republicans to knock off the sniping and

start running against President Obama. Here's what I think they should do – and whoever does will will stand a good chance of winning the hearts of any voter who hasn't already made up his or her mind:

Tell the American people that this president doesn't have a clue when it comes to money. Tell them that he spends and spends and spends to make government bigger and more people dependent on it. Tell them that he has raised the debt by about \$5 trillion dollars since he took office and if he wins re-election things will get worse, that he will have no incentive to stop trying to transform America into something that resembles socialist Europe. Tell them that when he gets done taxing the "rich" he'll come after you – the middle class – because he can't tax the top one percent enough to do everything he wants to do.

Tell them that while we had to go to war in Afghanistan, 10 years (plus) are enough. Tell them that we beat the Germans and the Japanese in four years, and that we've been in Afghanistan way too long. Tell them we go to war to defend America, not to nation build. Tell them that 10 minutes after we leave – whenever that is – the Taliban will be back terrorizing the locals, because that's what terrorists do when the locals are afraid. Tell them that we as Americans abhor what the religious fanatics in that country do to their people but we will not shed any more American blood to make things better. The Afghan people must do that. And tell them that if the Taliban or their friends even think about using Afghanistan to stage another attack on America, we will unleash drones on them and when they die they won't even know what hit them.

Tell the American people that while you don't care whether they use contraceptives or not, and that you'll stay out of their way if they decide to have an abortion, tell them that having kids outside of marriage is hurting them, their kids, and their country. Tell them that having children without

being married – according to study after study – will put them and their kids behind the 8 ball; that their kids will likely grow up poor, that they run a higher risk of failing in school and will likely have all sorts of other problems. Tell the American people that you will use the bully pulpit not to preach morality but to encourage people to think straight – and to stop their dysfunctional behavior. Tell them that the reason they're poor is not because someone else is rich, or because America hates minorities or women or anyone else. Tell them the reason they're poor is because they do things that make them poor.

Tell the American people that we're all in this together. That no longer will half the working population pay absolutely no federal income tax. Tell them that we are a generous nation that will help the working poor. But half the country isn't poor. So the rest of the American people – the ones who have deductions that reduce their federal income tax rate to zero – will start paying something. Tell them that if they elect you president, everybody will have skin in the game – and even if they don't know it now – everybody will be thankful before long. Nobody really wants to feel like a freeloader.

And finally, tell the American people that Barack Obama rode into office on a promise to bring us together and then made a conscious decision to run for re-election trying to drive us apart. From now on, you should tell them, there will be no more class warfare, no more pitting Americans against each other based on how much money they have in the bank.

Tell them these are not just words. Tell them you too have a vision of America and that it is decidedly not Barack Obama's vision. Tell them, that with their help, we will feel good about ourselves again, that we will stop apologizing for America's supposed sins. And then tell them that if this is not the America they want then they should vote for the other guy.

Now “Anybody But Romney” Has a Name

✘ Now that Mitt Romney has won a landslide victory in Iowa – by 8 votes – “real conservatives” are gearing up for war. Not against Barack Obama. Against Mitt Romney.

“Real conservatives” never liked Mitt and never will. They say he’s not a principled conservative. They’re right. They see him as a “Massachusetts moderate” which is even worse than a regular moderate, a species of politician they hold in contempt. They see moderate pols – and the voters who support them – as soft, the opposite of how they see themselves, which is take-no-prisoners tough.

But now that Iowa is in the history books, it’s not just “anybody but Romney” anymore for the “real conservatives.” Now “*anybody*” is a real person, with a face, a voice and a name – Rick Santorum.

The “anybody but Romney” crowd would have been perfectly happy with any of the “real conservatives” in the race. They could have supported Michelle Bachmann if she was the one who emerged from the pack. But now she’s gone. They loved Herman Cain, but he went south and is now just a memory. They could gladly get behind Rick Perry, who will campaign in South Carolina before he drops out, too, if he doesn’t do well there. For a while they even liked Newt Gingrich. Not because they *really* liked him, but because he wasn’t Mitt Romney. They salivated over Sarah Palin and went into mourning when she said, Thanks but no thanks.

But now they’re all gone, or soon will be, leaving Rick Santorum as the great “real conservative” hope. They may give

a whole bunch of reasons for liking Santorum, but make no mistake – he’s their guy first and foremost because he’s not Mitt Romney.

But here’s where my “real conservative” friends lose me. They seem to think Santorum can actually beat Barack Obama, even though he couldn’t even hang on to his Senate seat in Pennsylvania last time around, losing by 700,000 votes and winning just 41 percent of the vote against his Democratic opponent’s nearly 59 percent.

Most of all “real conservatives” don’t seem to understand that the election will pretty much be decided in nine swing states – Florida, Colorado, Nevada, New Hampshire, Ohio, North Carolina, Virginia, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin. Santorum would do great in places like Idaho, Wyoming, Utah, Mississippi and a bunch of other deep red conservative states. But the battleground states aren’t red as much as they’re purple – a mixture of blue *and* red. They’re moderate states filled with moderate voters. Will Republicans have the best shot at winning those crucial states if their candidate is the “real conservative,” the most conservative candidate left standing?

I get the impression that “real conservatives” don’t really understand moderates and independents. All they know for sure is that they don’t like them, that they don’t respect them, and that they think they’re no better than liberals. At least liberals believe in *something*, the “real conservatives” think. What the hell do these moderates and independents, who jump from one party to the other ever four years, believe in? And you know what “real conservatives” dislike most of all? Having to pander to the moderates and independents. Sometimes I think “real conservatives” would rather lose – standing by their precious principles, of course – than expend too much energy appealing to wishy-washy voters they don’t trust.

This is not an endorsement of Mitt Romney, veiled or

otherwise. Despite the perfect hair, he's far from the perfect candidate. And who knows, he might lose, too, if he comes off as "the white Obama," as one caller to Rush Limbaugh's radio show described him. As I have said in this space before: I want the most conservative candidate *who can win* to get the nomination. And, even with his near victory in Iowa, even with his sudden popularity, I'm having a hard time believing that Rick Santorum is that candidate.