

Rick Perry and Republican Magical Thinking

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The approaching collapse of Rick Perry's candidacy is not, in and of itself, particularly surprising, but the speed and lack of drama with which it occurred is striking. Perry, of course, is still in the race; and may recover his footing and grow to be a strong candidate, and even win his party's nomination, but that is looking increasingly unlikely. Perry was not undone by some unexpected revelation about his past or major political scandal, instead it is occurring simply because of his inability to make the transition to the national stage, unimpressive debate style and a defeat at the hands of Herman Cain in a minor non-binding straw poll that are contributing to his likely demise.

There has always been a bit of magical thinking behind Perry's candidacy as the Texas governor was expected to ride onto the national political stage from the far right and somehow, despite having no experience outside of Texas, little knowledge of the economy or foreign policy and having done very little preparation or groundwork, sweep the nomination away from Mitt Romney, Michele Bachmann and other Republican aspirants. In this regard, Perry existed as much, and probably more significantly in the minds and hopes of Republican operatives than as an actual candidate.

It is not hard to see why Perry provoked this kind of magical thinking within his party. Perry is, unlike Michele Bachmann, Donald Trump and others who are either in the race with no chance of winning or who decided not to run, a potentially serious candidate. Perry, while probably too right wing for most American voters, is a big state governor who can tell a plausible, if not entirely accurate story about his state. Although he can talk himself into trouble as in his allegation that Social Security is a ponzi scheme, Perry is also able to project an image of strength and independence. He is a politician who can point to a record and some relevant experience while also legitimately presenting himself as a political outsider.

Not surprisingly, expectations around Perry's candidacy were unreasonably high leading, inevitably to disappointment in Perry. The obvious questions that surrounded Perry, whether or not he could raise enough money, if the country was ready for another tough-talking right-wing Texan in the White House and the possibility that many of his views would strike voters outside of the Republican base as too extreme, were ignored by many Republican activists desperate for a viable conservative candidate, and many in the media who had hoped that the race for the Republican nomination would evolve from a form of surreal political theater to a genuinely competitive election. Nonetheless, answering these questions was necessary for Perry's candidacy to be real and plausible rather than magical

and hypothetical. Because the Texas governor proved unable to answer these questions sufficiently, Perry's candidacy is now on the way to being over before it became real.

Strikingly, many Republicans are now seeking to repeat these events with an even less plausible candidate, Governor Chris Christie of New Jersey. The lesson of Perry's failure to become a real candidate, if that is what happens in the next weeks, is not that there is now an opening for Christie, but that jumping into a presidential race, with little preparation, less than six months before the first votes are to be cast is extremely difficult. It is hard to see how a Christie candidacy, which is still unlikely at this time, would end any differently than a Perry candidacy.

Romney who remains the front-runner for the Republican nomination will benefit greatly from the collapse of the candidacy of the man who only a few weeks ago was viewed as the only person who could prevent Romney from winning his party's nomination. Romney is also a well-spoken mature, albeit singularly uncharismatic, candidate who can present himself as a moderate. His ideas about the economy are not good, nor has he had to wrestle with an original thought in recent years, but he, at least by the standards of his party, is not a frightening reactionary.

In short, Romney is precisely the kind of candidate who Republicans would be happy to nominate if they really wanted to win in the general election. If the party fails to coalesce around Romney now, and continues to seek more options, it will be even more evidence that the rational and strategic voices within the party have been shouted down by the extremists. Romney is not a perfect candidate, but he is certainly good enough to run a competitive race against a vulnerable incumbent Democratic president.

The Republican fondness for magical thinking in the presidential primary is not altogether surprising from a party whose fundamental policy views are increasingly poorly grounded in, or simply in denial of, reality. If you believe that cutting taxes can magically solve all economic woes and that global warming is a conspiracy by liberal scientists, then it is natural to believe that a candidate who will save your party from an insufficiently right-wing nominee and win back the presidency for the far right is going to get in the race and win at the last minute.