Romney and the Business Narrative

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Lincoln Mitchell, Harriman Institute, Columbia University

One of the themes of a recent *New York Times* Magazine piece on Mitt Romney is that the likely Republican nominee for president is running a campaign that, unlike President Obama's successful bid for the White House in 2008, is not based on the candidate's personal narrative. This is largely true, not only because Romney, a national figure for at least four years now, still presents as an extremely boring man about whom ordinary people feel no curiosity, but also because the son of privilege who goes to elite schools and gets rich as a consultant urging companies to lay people off is not exactly a compelling story.

The absence of any personal narrative around Romney does not mean there is no narrative to his campaign and the image of "All-Business Man, the world's most boring superhero" which, according to the *New York Times*, he has cultivated. Romney is not the first GOP candidate to present himself as a leader from the private sector uniquely positioned to rebuild the country and the economy. The businessman as savior is a popular Republican theme, which is consistent with the Republican's ideological preference for business interests over those of working people, youth, senior citizens, the environment or anything else.

It also suggests a more disturbing approach that is also part of the Republican appeal. There is a degree of confidence -- arrogance is probably a better word -- that while likely reassuring for his supporters, is not what the US needs right now. Unquestioning confidence in a set of solutions and approaches which in reality, rather than the distorted context of a Republican primary, is precisely what the US should avoid right now, is not something we need in our next president.

While the notion that if something worked in the private sector, it can work in government makes for a good campaign sound bite, it is a disastrous foundation for making policy. Governing is not about turning a profit, sacrificing long term goods for immediate benefit and exploiting natural and human resources, but these are principles which drove most of Romney's private sector career.

Romney's campaign will likely continue to be a largely closed self-congratulatory loop of business people assuring each other that they can cure the country's economic ills and that they know what is best for the US because of their business experience. This, again, is standard Republican fare, but part of that fare is an implicit belief that people, notably the current administration, who seek to govern on principles other than doing what is best for business are either naive, misguided or dangerous. If Romney wins, the government will be run not just by people whose loyalties are to business interests, to a great extent
that is already the case, but by people who see no other angle as having any legitimacy at all.

Interestingly, Romney's moderate record as a governor somewhat betrays this business oriented approach, but Romney has not governed in a long time. He has been essentially a full time candidate for about five years. This experience has forced him to emphasize his business background while, in order to remain viable in a Republican primary, and downplay his experience and the knowledge he gained as a governor.

Romney has been fortunate in that he has not had a well-funded competent conservative candidate challenging him for the nomination. He is also fortunate that the other candidates' many strange stories, gaffes, claims and missteps have dominated the campaign thus far. This has taken attention away from closer scrutiny of Romney and his two-dimensional and unhelpful views on the economy. However, while it is easy to laugh at Michele Bachmann's position that we should close our embassy in Iran, or at Rick Perry's inability to recall which three government agencies he would eliminate, Romney's positions are probably more dangerous because unlike Bachmann, Perry, Herman Cain or the others, Romney has a real chance of being president.

The substance of Romney's approach to governance and economics is troubling, but the tone is perhaps more disturbing. It is almost as if the theme of his campaign is that it is time for Americans to grow up and let a businessman take over. Romney's comfort with business people, and almost nobody else, confirms this. A big part of the reason the country is in its current economic mess is because for too long the wisdom of the business community drove overall economic policy. Obama has not been tough enough in investigating Wall Street, seeking to dismantle the cozy relationship between the finance sector and the government or challenging the notion that the self interest of business leaders should guide economic policy. Romney, however, will embrace these principles far more than Obama or even other Republicans because of his experience, background and, yes, personal narrative.