Romney's Not So Bold Choice

Mitt Romney's choice of Paul Ryan as his running mate was, in many respects, consistent with, and a reflection of, Romney's political views and political style. Romney's decision to put Ryan on the ticket is being heralded as a bold move by much of the conservative media. The main reason this is such a bold move appears to be because the media keeps repeating it. Putting Paul on the ticket is not so much a bold move as a coward's idea of courage, or more charitably a timid candidate's idea of risk taking. A bold move for Romney would have been to put a liberal Republican who might have infuriated some of the Republican base, but given the ticket a better chance of winning centrist voters in November on the ticket.

Instead, Romney has chosen a candidate who, while not as radical or unqualified as, for example, Michele Bachmann, still has few substantive disagreements with the Tea Party faction of the party and shares Romney's primary policy goal of making the rich even richer. Ryan is a congressman from a swing state with solid right wing credentials who also happens to be white and male. This is about as conservative a choice as Romney could have made.

For some reason, however, the notion that this was a bold move has gotten some traction. This is part of what makes Ryan such an intriguing political figure. In general he has come to national fame by doing ordinary right wing things but repackaging them as bold and innovative. Paul Ryan rose to national prominence by proposing a budget that was billed, in a triumph of spin over substance, as an innovative approach to solving the deficit and other spending problems.

Ryan's budget plan has few new ideas, but is the same conservative plan to cut spending on budget items aimed at helping poor people while shifting the tax burden even further away from wealthy Americans. In short, Ryan's plan is the standard Republican economic plan. It is special not because of the substance of the plan itself, but due to the effort and expense to which Ryan went to present his budget as something different and new.

Strikingly, although Ryan's budget is what catapulted him to national fame and onto Romney's short list for vice president, the announcement of Ryan as running mate had barely been completed before Romney began backing away from Ryan's budget plan. This is very strange behavior on Romney's part as the only reason to put Ryan on the ticket is because of his budget proposal. If Romney has doubts now about Ryan's budget, as well he should, this is further evidence that Romney is either incapable of making decisions or that he does not concur with the right wing of his party, despite being its captive.

Romney's selection of Ryan as a running mate also speaks to Romney's weakness as a candidate. It would seem that the one area where Romney has relatively strong credentials should be his handling of budget and tax related issues and in his commitment to continue Republican style class warfare. If a longtime business consultant cannot convince voters of that, he is in pretty bad shape. Romney's weakness as a candidate include his paucity of foreign experience, a problem which the candidate himself made worse during a gaffe filled trip overseas last month, as well as his lack of charisma and dynamism. By choosing Ryan, who has little foreign experience and who despite, like most of the people
on the planet, being more exciting than Romney, is hardly an inspiring figure or great orator, Romney did not help himself in any of these areas.

Ryan is unlikely to have a dramatic impact on the race. He will mobilize some of the Republican base and help Romney slightly in the upper midwest, but Romney, like all presidential candidates, will still be the focus of the ticket. By putting Ryan on the ticket, Romney may not have made much of an impact on this race, but this decision has already had an impact on the 2016 race. Should Obama get reelected, Ryan will be a strong front-runner for the Republican nomination in 2016. Ryan has demonstrated that he is a smart politician who understands how to generate good publicity and raise money. He is also probably smart enough to use this campaign as an opportunity to strengthen his ties to the Republican grassroots across the country which will be very useful in a 2016 Republican primary. Romney choice of running mates may have made the next Republican president, but it is not going to be Romney.