

## **Another Missed Opportunity for Mitt Romney**

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Posted: 03/5/2012 1:59 pm

One of the reasons Mitt Romney has had such a difficult time nailing down the Republican nomination, in addition to his ample weaknesses as a candidate, is that rather than running against one or two other candidates seeking to represent their party on the November ballot and become president in 2013, Romney has been forced to campaign against a seemingly endless stream of candidates who are not serious about trying to become president. Newt Gingrich is running for a job on Fox News; Rick Santorum is running to make a point about theocracy being a better system of government than democracy; Ron Paul is running to draw attention to his Libertarian views; and Herman Cain seemed to be running for the fun of it, which is why he quit when it stopped being fun.

Romney's task is more difficult because his opponents, whom he has had to vanquish in almost serial fashion, have much less to lose by taking extremist positions which do not help them win votes. This has made it harder for Romney to pursue a campaign strategy that can get him elected in November, as he has let himself react to the right wing assertions and statements made by his opponents who have no chance of ever becoming president. In this respect, Romney has made the mistake of letting the far right of the party drive the Republican primary season even more than usual.

Romney's timidity in the face of his party's more extreme wing will not be an asset for Romney in the general election. Additionally, as the primaries begin to move to bigger states, he will have less to lose by breaking from the far right. He missed a great opportunity to do that this week. Romney has been the biggest loser in the decision of some in the Republican Party to make contraception a major issue in the 2012 election. Santorum has much less to lose in this as he is still more concerned with breaking through to his natural far right constituency than winning in November, but it is Romney who will have to represent the party that wants to take away contraception in November.

Accordingly, Romney needs to differentiate himself from not only the contraception discussion, but the ugliness and misogyny that has surrounded it. Romney was presented with such an opportunity last week by Rush Limbaugh, the right wing talk show host who is viewed as an important player in Republican politics. Limbaugh's attack on Georgetown Law Student Sandra Fluke, which included referring to the young woman as a "slut" and a "prostitute," was outrageous, sexist and hateful. Limbaugh has already lost eight sponsors and may soon face more problems of that nature.

While Democratic leaders, not surprisingly, have criticized Limbaugh for these comments, and President Obama called Fluke to offer his support, Romney has only said he did not approve of Limbaugh's choice of words. By doing this, Romney missed an opportunity to craft a message that could have appealed to his right wing base as well as the swing voters whose support he will need in November. He could have said something like, "While I do not agree with President

Obama's decision to force religious institutions to pay for contraception, we as a country need to discuss this in a way that does not descend into name-calling and misogyny." He could have then added that Limbaugh is now facing the economic consequences of his mistakes and that the actions by his sponsors confirm that there is no place for this kind of language and behavior in our politics and debates.

Had Romney done this he could have begun to distance himself from the elements within the Republican Party that will make victory in November extremely difficult. Instead, Romney's relative silence on this must be interpreted as an unawareness of the seriousness of the problem that people like Limbaugh and Santorum have created for him, as well as, more disturbingly, an acceptance of the views expressed by the extremists regarding women, contraception and sex. It would have been very easy to push back against that extremism while still opposing President Obama's proposal, but Romney apparently found that too difficult or too dangerous politically.

Romney's failure to speak out against Limbaugh or otherwise seek to chart a more centrist course indicates that he has given in to the forces of the far right. It is not so early in the campaign that a candidate with a big lead in money and delegates, facing faltering opposition should begin to think about November, but Romney has chosen not to do this. Romney's failure to do the politically bold and smart move can only be interpreted to mean that he is either not bothered by Limbaugh's vitriol or too fearful to say anything about it.