

Mitt Romney Unhinged

The slow collapse of Mitt Romney's presidential campaign is good news for supporters of President Obama, but it is, nonetheless, at least on the surface, strange. In a period of about a week, Romney has made two statements, one regarding [attacks on the U.S. Embassy in Libya](#) and the other regarding his [views of people](#) who receive government benefits that between them paint a picture of somebody who is deeply out of touch with the country he seeks to govern and, more significantly, suggest that he does not have even a basic understanding of how foreign policy or domestic programs work.

It is not clear whether Romney believes these statements, or thinks this is what he must say to get elected and to keep his right-wing base happy. What is apparent is that the former governor of Massachusetts has become, in a political sense, unhinged. Romney's failure as a presidential candidate originates with his unwillingness to run as the moderate Republican that he was. He was too quick to believe that he could never get nominated unless he adapted a more right-wing profile. Romney began moving to the far right despite not having any credible primary opposition on his right, or any, flank. This was a tactical mistake, but a forgivable one. More puzzling is why after sewing up the nomination relatively easily, Romney never sought to move back to the center.

Romney's inability to do this suggests both poor strategic thinking and the absence of political courage. Standing up to the base of one's party, even if it is necessary to win an election, is never easy. Romney also faced the additional fear that efforts to move back to the center would cause conservatives to question his credentials as a true conservative, but because of that fear, Romney lost track of who he was and what he needed to do. Another explanation which should probably be considered, is that Romney is a genuinely ignorant right-winger who simply lacks the understanding of foreign and domestic policy one would expect from a good high school civics student. However, the evidence from Romney's past suggests that while this may be an appealing explanation, it is also an oversimplification.

The subtext of Romney's recent comments, particularly when taken in the context of his collapsing presidential campaign, is frustration and bitterness. Romney's comments that Obama supporters are all dependent on the government is the kind of hyperbole that grows out of anger. Foolishly, Romney has targeted this anger at the American people, some of whom are considering voting for Romney. Romney seems to think that disabled veterans or senior citizens who worked their whole lives and now receive Social Security are undeserving and dependent on the state. This is the product of a mind whose rationality is tarnished by anger.

As Romney's campaign moves closer and more inexorably to defeat, he appears to be prone to believing whatever right-wing idea is put in front of him and to lashing out at President Obama, and indeed the American people, in increasingly irrational ways. This is not a pretty sight to behold; nor is it good for the social fabric of the country. It also makes Romney's defeat even more likely.

Given the increased level of hostility we have seen from Romney in recent days, it is unlikely that defeat will lead the GOP candidate to introspection, but it is possible that the day after the election Romney will become aware that he not only lost the election but badly damaged his reputation. It is not, on its own, very important what Romney might think or feel if he loses the election, but it is further evidence that the Republican Party has backed itself into a dangerous corner. Romney's defeat, which is now quite likely, will damage the Republican Party in many ways, but one of them will be to send a message to many rational conservative politicians that, until something changes, the Republican nomination for president is not something worth having.

The Republican Party's future presidential hopes lie in finding somebody who will push back against the right-wing of the party and make an effort to appeal to a broader electorate. Romney, despite his background and centrist credentials, was either unable or unwilling to do this. In the future, even Republicans with more political courage than Romney, which should not be too difficult to find, may determine that getting into a dispute with the right-wing of the party is not worth it. If that view dominates the more moderate wing of the party in 2016, the primary will be a fight between right-wing Republicans like Paul Ryan and Marco Rubio, or candidates like Chris Christie who will almost certainly, like Romney this year, give in to his party's extremist wing; and the Republicans may find themselves having to struggle even more to remain relevant to an electorate with which they more out of touch every election.