Sarah Palin the Entertainer vs. Sarah Palin the Politician

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In recent days most of the energy in the Republican nominating contest has been take up by Sarah Palin's bus tour. Palin, who moves more seamlessly between entertainment and politics than any politician in recent memory, may, like her erstwhile New York City pizza companion, Donald Trump, soon realize that running for president is likely to be an unsuccessful and not particularly lucrative endeavor. For now, however, she has become the main story in the GOP primary, disrupting Mitt Romney's official announcement, drawing attention away from Herman Cain's recent rise in the polls, and reducing Rick Santorum's announcement of his intentions to seek the Republican nomination to a non-story for all but the most devoted followers of Dan Savage.

There have, of course, been politicians who have moved between entertainment and politics in the past. Ronald Reagan, Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sonny Bono, for example, were all extremely successful entertainers before moving into politics. For these three men, the film or music industry was their first career, out of which they transitioned before running for office. Once in office, they all focused their attention on being president, governor or congressman, not on the next move as entertainers.

Palin is different. For her the line between entertainment and politics is so vague that it is legitimately difficult to know whether she is beginning a run for the White House or simply seeking to keep her name in the spotlight as other candidates begin to vie for the right wing voters with whom she is so popular. Amazingly, this bus tour could be real first step to a serious bid for the presidency. Her name recognition, fundraising ability and, while it may be lost on many, charisma and charm would make Palin a strong candidate for her party's nomination; and as Howard Dean recently argued, in a general election any Republican candidate would have a chance against Obama.

The bus tour could also be simply a preface to Palin's next reality show, talk show, book or other product. Some candidates write books to help raise their profiles as candidates; some entertainers take up issues or causes to make themselves be seen as more serious, but Palin just keeps talking and drawing attention to herself as both an entertainer and a politician, like some weird far right Energizer Bunny that never stops, but always keeps her options open.

Occupying the grey area between politics and entertainment has helped Palin turn what should have been her greatest vulnerability, a lack of familiarity with the basics of American history or policy, into something of a strength. Any Palin appearance or statement has the possibility to be exciting with real entertainment value because of the
potential for her to forget who fought who in the American Revolution, assert that Alaska's proximity to Russia makes her a foreign policy expert or make a factual mistake of the kind that would not be acceptable in most junior high schools.

Palin, however, must remain in this grey area. She is not an entertainer seeking to become a serious politician, or a politician seeking to do the reverse, but depends on being a little bit of politician to be successful as an entertainer -- nobody would be interested in her books and television shows if she were just another inarticulate, angry right winger. Similarly, if she presented herself as simply a real politician, her ignorance of basic policy issues and unwillingness to learn much about the details of major issues would no longer be an asset. Maintaining this balancing act will be tough, but Palin has proved able to do it for several years mixing in political statements, bus tours or attacks President Obama with the ongoing developments in her entertainment career.

While this works well for Palin, it creates problems for her party because of Palin's ability to distract the media and draw attention to herself, causing less charismatic and visible politicians, including ones who might be better candidates in November to be overshadowed. Every day in which Palin dominates the news is a good one for Obama and a bad one for any of his likely Republican opponents, other than Palin, who may not run anyway.

After being plucked from relative obscurity by an impetuous and panicking John McCain in 2008, Palin found herself overmatched by the prospect of a traditional vice-presidential campaign and brilliantly turned her campaign into something else, a celebration of her brash and charismatic style and her status as a self-described maverick. After that campaign, Palin could have spent a few years learning the issues and building a real political organization in preparation for a presidential campaign in 2012, but instead she focused her attentions, with enormous success, on being a celebrity. Now that the campaign is here, Palin is a weaker candidate than she could have been, but, even as an entertainer cannot afford to let the campaign go by without having a presence. This is now both her dilemma and that of her party as well.