

## The GOP Presidential Field

Michael Sean Winters | May. 25, 2011 | Distinctly Catholic

The GOP presidential field is beginning to take shape, and it has all the warmth and attraction of a jello-mold. This sad fact tells us nothing about President Obama's political vulnerability: He is incredibly vulnerable. Like all presidents, Obama's re-election chances hinge largely on the economy and even as the recovery gains steam, most economists are not predicting the kind of increase in employment in the next year that would turn Obama's campaign in 2012 into a repeat of Reagan's 1984 "It's morning in America" campaign.

Furthermore, Obama does not have until November 2012 to bring down the unemployment rate. People's sense of the economy has a lag time, as George H.W. Bush found out in 1992. Even though the economy really was rebounding by election day, people's views of the state of the economy start hardening in February and by the end of March, barring a catastrophe, those views are set. Certainly, filing income taxes is always a cold shower for every family, inviting them to take off any rose-colored glasses when assessing their economic status.

Of course, we journalists are still hoping that Donald Trump might reconsider his decision to exit the race. Trump at least would be fun to cover despite his obvious inadequacies for the presidency. And, I am still hoping Sarah Palin gets into the race. Sarah, if you are listening, your political skills are better than all the other announced candidates combined. Put differently, ask yourself: How many millions of dollars would someone like Tim Pawlenty or even Mitt Romney have to spend to get their message out with the effectiveness and reach Palin achieves with a tweet?

It is clear that Mike Huckabee, Mitch Daniels, Haley Barbour and John Thune all asked themselves that question and decided to take a pass on this race, despite the president's vulnerability. More was at issue in their decisions, to be sure, than the power of Palin's Twitter account. Why, then, did these seasoned politicians pass up a race to face a President saddled with a high unemployment rate?

I suspect the reason is that they recognize that what it may take to win the GOP nomination this year, the necessary run not just to the right as in previous years but to the far right, where the birthers and the Gold Standard adherents and the gays are evil crowd dwell, all this will make an otherwise worthy candidate so toxic by the time of the nominating convention, they will be in worse shape than Obama no matter what the unemployment rate is. We saw an example of how this will work last week when Newt Gingrich spoke publicly what many Republicans are saying privately: The Paul Ryan plan to do away with Medicare as a guaranteed benefit is simply not what the American people want. Turns out, Americans like government-run health care. Gingrich, recognizing the toxicity of the Ryan plan distanced himself from it, and then he got pummeled.

The GOP's equivalent of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith is in full strength this year. When Gov. Daniels suggested the GOP focus on the economic challenges facing the nation, and call a truce in the culture wars, he got pummeled. When Gingrich rightly said the Ryan plan goes too far, too fast, he got pummeled. When Jon Huntsman goes to New Hampshire and calls for civility, he does not get pummeled but he also does not get traction: The GOP base wants red meat, they don't want civility. Good luck to Huntsman if he can get them to put their pitchforks down. I am not seeing it.

Mitt Romney is running because he thinks it is his turn. He has not realized that the GOP base is hell-bent on entitlement reform, and that extends to his ambitions, not just to Medicare. Besides, his signature accomplishment as Governor of Massachusetts ? health care reform ? is no longer a credential but an albatross. Tim Pawlenty? I watched his interview with Greta vanSusteren the other night, and I know it was late, but he put me to sleep. When he tries to inject some passion into his voice and his movements, he just looks ridiculous. Pawlenty was well raised and so he just can?t pull off channeling the anger that motivates the GOP base. Herman Cain? Someone the other night, I forgot who but I am sure it was on Fox, made the point that others have won the presidency without prior experience in elective office. They mentioned Eisenhower. I suspect that voters recognize that there is a difference between building a pizza chain and launching D-Day.

The GOP has created a monster and all of the GOP?s leaders deserve some of the blame for throwing red meat to the Tea Party crowd, riling them up, winking at the birthers, lying about health care reform, blaming government spending for the economic downturn which had nothing to do with government spending. Surely the 4,000 new employees hired by GM will not look kindly at those who denounce the bailout of the auto industry. Seniors will not fall for the inter-generational grudge match the Ryan budget?s attacks on Medicare are designed to foster. The GOP is in big trouble. They might have had a real chance at unseating Obama, but they have mistakenly assumed that the entire nation shares their anti-government zeal. As we saw last night in NY-26, they have mistaken the national mood and that mistake has crippled their chances at re-taking the White House.

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