

Rating Bachmann's Chances

Michael Sean Winters | Jun. 1, 2011 | Distinctly Catholic

Sarah Palin is not the only conservative female contemplating a bid for the GOP presidential nod. Congresswoman Michelle Bachmann from Minnesota is also seriously thinking of throwing her hat into the ring.

Bachmann has become a Tea Party favorite and she knows that the loose-knit organization is her best chance at gaining traction. She founded the Tea Party Caucus earlier this year. She mentions the Tea Party and "Tea Party Principles" in almost every sentence. Bachmann also embraces all the major social conservative issues necessary to win the GOP nomination: She is pro-life on abortion, opposed to immigration reform, and against gay marriage.

Bachmann suffers from three sizeable problems we might call structural. First, she is from Minnesota, as is already-announced candidate Tim Pawlenty. Every state has only so many donors able to form the base of financial support needed to carry a candidate through to victory, the people who can "max out" by giving the total amount allowed by law. She and Pawlenty will be dividing those in Minnesota. Second, she will be competing for the Huckabee vote with Palin. Huckabee's 2008 campaign was built almost entirely on the strength of the Christian home schooling movement, and home schoolers are mostly women. They see Palin and Bachman not just as politicians who support their interests but as one of their own. Third, Bachmann's Tea Party credentials cut both ways: When you ride the tiger, you go where the tiger wants to go.

That said, Bachmann also brings several important items to the table. First, she is, like Palin, an attractive woman. While Bachmann lacks the "wow" factor Palin possesses, she nonetheless has the ability to articulate views that are quite harsh in tones that don't sound harsh and, because men do not want to look like they are beating up on a woman, she will be difficult to challenge in a debate. Second, she has a very compelling personal story, in some ways, more compelling than Palin's. Bachmann was a lawyer who set aside her career to become a mother. She and her husband have five children and have also been foster parents to 23 children. Bachmann and her husband started a small business, a Christian counseling center, she is part-owner of her family's farm, and she joined with other parents in starting a charter school in Stillwater, Minnesota. Finally, she is a true believer in a party that has, for the past thirty years, been honing its instincts for ideological orthodoxy.

Therein, of course, is Bachmann's biggest challenge. She comes across as someone who has drunk the Kool-Aid. She speaks about refusing to raise the debt ceiling in cavalier ways, as if such a move would not create chaos in the world markets and gravely harm the economy. Bachmann invokes a simplistic view of almost every complex issue: The problem is always big government and taxes that are too high, even though taxes are at historically low rates. She speaks about the Founding Fathers as a singular noun, as if there were not deep and difficult differences among them, and the Constitution they produced an unambiguous standard never in need of interpretation. Such a view may benefit from clarity and conciseness but it suffers from a lack of any semblance to reality.

The fact that Bachmann's worldview is often untethered to reality comes out all the time. There was the time

she suggested that the Founding Fathers had been appalled by slavery and did away with it, when, in fact, they did not such thing.

But, Bachmann's major difficulty is that she lacks Palin's wattage. Last night, both women appeared on the Greta Van Susteren show. Palin's answers were vague to the point of being meandering. Van Susteren kept trying to pin her down, make her face the complexity of certain issues such as aid to Pakistan, and Palin retreated into the safety of platitudes. Bachmann provided more meat to Van Susteren's questions: She has been in Congress since 2007, so she is conversant on a range of issues. It was clear to me that Van Susteren had been frustrated by Palin but enjoyed her interview with Bachmann. And, Bachmann was relentlessly on message while Palin had a dozen messages which is the same thing as having none at all. But, Palin's interview took up the first half hour of the show and Bachmann got a mere ten minutes after that. Even if Palin does not run, she is going to engage in activities like this bus trip to maintain her brand, and it will be just that easy for her to outshine Bachmann.

So, I don't see Bachmann accepting the GOP nod in Tampa next year, although she might pull off a win in Iowa and elsewhere. In an America that is drunk with "American Idol" and "Jersey Shore" nothing matters more than media wattage and, as Sarah Palin is demonstrating this week, she can turn on those lights, and blot out the rest of the field, anytime she wants.

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