

This article originally appeared in TIME.

Monday, February 27, 2012

Can Mr. Fix-It Fix Himself?

by Mike Murphy

Mitt Romney is in trouble again. Despite having won the must-win states of New Hampshire and Florida, he faces yet another formerly lagging opponent's surge to the top of the polls. While Romney's super PAC is certainly unwrapping its beloved ugly stick to give Rick Santorum the kind of thumping on the airwaves that crushed Newt Gingrich, it could be that Romney's problems will take more than a barrage of negative campaign ads to solve.

That is because the political terrain has changed in ways Romney never planned for. A year ago, the recession's sharp pain promised to drive an angry electorate to fire President Obama and replace him with an economic repairman. And who better to fix the economy than Romney, a highly successful businessman? Unfortunately for Romney, Republican-primary voters look at Washington and do not want a skilled repairman. They want a TNT-wielding demolition team. And this voter fury is not at work just in the GOP's grassroots. While voters on the right want to take a sledgehammer to Washington, the left has launched an occupying jihad against Wall Street and wealth in general. Romney now finds himself trapped between two big political trends: the rise of rich-bashing class warfare in national politics and a Republican electorate more interested in ferocious passion than cool intellect. Welcome to the Riot Primary.

Passion, on the other hand, is Santorum's great advantage. He is the most emotionally transparent of the candidates. If his morning oatmeal is cold, you need watch him for just 10 seconds to sense his unhappiness. That makes him a fine vessel for the anger and frustration of GOP voters. Romney is the opposite. While Santorum rages, Romney calculates, trying to determine what product he can supply to meet voter demand.

This is all good news for Team Obama and bad news for Romney. It may be that to win this year's Republican primary, you'll have to do a lot of things that will hurt you dearly in the general election. Romney is too smart to accept that. And although he is a conservative, he is not an ideological "movement conservative." But Santorum? He is a movement conservative. He'd like very much to win the White House, but he doesn't feel he has to. His first loyalty is to the cause. While Romney is trying to make a sale, Santorum is trying to lead a crusade.

Romney's dilemma also stems from the disintegration of his image as a likely general-election winner. His support comes largely from Republicans who grumpily accepted the idea that he's the candidate best suited to beat Obama. As that perception melts away, his appeal fades fast. For Romney, looking like a loser is kryptonite.

So what is Romney to do? Fixing Santorum's wagon with negative ads in the upcoming Michigan and Arizona primaries may slow Santorum down. And Gingrich has sunk into the third tier, with spotty prospects for recovery, as conservative-base voters rally to Santorum. But to really regain control of the race and put himself back on track to beat Obama, Romney must fix himself.

He should drop the biography-based message. Nobody wants a well-intentioned accountant in charge when the house is on fire. For the first time in his professional life, Romney needs to stop thinking and calculating and get stupid. The race now is about his

heart. What is his motive? Why is he so famously hardworking? Who does he worry about when he wakes up first thing in the morning? Voters may respect his success, but they do not think they truly know him. And while the cerebral Romney may recoil at the psychological striptease this requires, it is how people pick their President in modern America. Romney must fill that vacuum or else others will maliciously fill it for him.

Most of all, Romney needs to address his success in a tougher and less saccharine way. I know him well--I advised him when he ran for governor of Massachusetts--and I think he would be a great President. He is kind but also very tough and determined. Voters should see much less of the smiling master salesman and much more of the tough but fair operator. Elections are about contrasts. We already have a President who is long on bromides and poetry but very short on hardheaded results. The country is in trouble, and the voters know it. They are looking for something different: a tough yet honest coach who may cut the slowest players but who knows how to push hard, lead a team and bring home the championship.

That Mitt Romney--smart, direct, tough and far more visceral--can win this election. He had better start soon.