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## Mitt Romney acknowledges his healthcare dilemma

**He says the healthcare law he promoted as Massachusetts governor — a model for President Obama's overhaul — has become a liability for him as he seeks the Republican presidential nomination. But he won't disown or apologize for it.**

By Paul West, Washington Bureau

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Reporting from Ann Arbor, Mich.

Tackling an issue that poses a serious threat to his presidential ambitions, Mitt Romney acknowledged Thursday that the landmark healthcare law he promoted and signed as Massachusetts governor had become a liability for him.

"I hear some laughter in the room," Romney remarked after he said that he had regarded his Massachusetts plan as a political asset in his 2008 presidential run.

"That's not the case now," he added. "It's gone from being seen as an asset to being a liability, politically."

Under the plan, everyone in Massachusetts is required to obtain medical insurance or pay a penalty. Romney's government mandate — along with the rest of the plan — became a model for President Obama's healthcare plan, now the focus of a furious Republican attack in Congress and the courts to repeal or outlaw it.

As a result, Romney finds himself on the wrong side of an issue that could severely hinder his effectiveness to deliver the Republican healthcare message against Obama in a general election. One of the leading GOP candidates, he took note of that turnabout in his speech to 100 relatives, supporters and medical school personnel at the University of Michigan Cardiovascular Center.

His advisors had promoted the speech as a "big moment" in his campaign. Romney used it to attack Obama and outline an alternative national healthcare plan, which he admitted was essentially the same one he put forward in 2008.

In his speech, the first policy address of his 2012 campaign, Romney said he would neither disown nor apologize for the Massachusetts law. To do so "wouldn't be honest," he said. "I, in fact, did what I believe was right for the people of my state."

The 40-minute event contained some of the hallmarks of Romney's second presidential try: casual attire and limited contact with voters and the media. Using a PowerPoint presentation, rather than a prepared text, Romney said his plan "wasn't perfect." But he added: "Overall, am I proud of the fact that we did our best for our people and we got people insured? Absolutely."

As he has since leaving the governor's office to run for president, Romney said states should be free to adopt

their own plans. He criticized the federal plan as a "power grab" by the federal government "to put in place a one-size-fits-all" solution.

Romney has consistently supported government mandates, a stance that puts him at odds with conservatives in his own party. In his presentation Thursday, he glossed over the point that Obama's mandate is designed to reduce the number of people without medical insurance — the main objective of the Massachusetts plan, and still a problem in all the other states.

If elected, Romney said, he would issue an executive order allowing all 50 states to receive waivers from the federal law, but states would still be required to implement insurance plans at least as effective as those in the federal law.

The speech was the latest attempt by Romney to remove, or at least reduce, healthcare as a problem for his presidential ambitions.

Unlike other 2012 candidates who have apologized for past policy mistakes and reversed course — such as former Minnesota Gov. Tim Pawlenty on his past support for energy "cap and trade" — Romney is hemmed in by his reputation as a political shape-shifter.

When he ran for office in Massachusetts, one of the country's most Democratic states, Romney embraced abortion rights and gay rights, then reversed those stances when he began eyeing the presidency.

An apology for his signature achievement as governor — the only public office he has held — would add perhaps the most serious count yet to charges that Romney lacks authenticity.

If Romney's intention Thursday was to put the healthcare issue behind him, it's unlikely the event achieved that purpose. Instead, it may have served mainly to redirect criticism to his role in creating a prototype for a plan despised by Republicans.

"He didn't move the needle," said Michael Cannon, director of health policy studies at the libertarian Cato Institute and a Romney critic. "He said the same things he's always said."

Romney said Thursday that his position "is not going to satisfy everybody."

"I respect the views of those who think that we took the wrong course," he said, adding that "a lot of the pundits around the nation are saying that I should just stand up and say this whole thing was a mistake, was a boneheaded idea, and I should just admit it was a mistake and walk away from it, and I presume that a lot of folks would conclude that if I did that that it would be good for me politically."

But Cannon and others indicated that the speech was further evidence, if any was needed, that Romney had boxed himself in. If he apologizes or reverses course, "it will look crass and political. It will look like he was for it before he was against it," Cannon said.

The conservative opinion page of the Wall Street Journal said Thursday that Romney was "compromised and not credible" on healthcare, and called his introduction of a government health insurance mandate "a fatal flaw." In a blistering editorial headlined "Obama's Running Mate," the paper said that unless Romney changed his message, "he might as well try to knock off Joe Biden and get on the Obama ticket."

Republican strategist Dick Wadhams said Romney had done a good job in attempting to contrast his plan with Obama's. But he also said the speech didn't change things. "It's not going to go away, and I didn't think he thought it was going to go away," he said.

Afterward, Romney was asked whether he thought he had put the matter behind him. He brushed past reporters without replying.

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