



The Invisible Man

06.11.2012
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POLITICS - With the Republican presidential nomination sewed up, Mitt Romney is now pretending to be acceptable to the moderate voters he will need to win in November.

Gone are the conservative promises of the primary: "I know conservatism because I have lived conservatism. ... I was a severely Republican governor." Note that his so-called severity didn't prevent him from creating Romneycare, the model for the Affordable Health Care Act. He fakes to the center, although his ultimate policy goal is on the right, dismantling the safety net, wiping out the health care law and assuring the wealthy of continued low taxes. Or is it? What does he really believe?

In Romney's present incarnation, he is fixated on joblessness—blaming President Barack Obama without offering any solutions of his own. This is a path designed to appeal to moderates as well as conservatives.

But he can't fool the true conservative believers. They've got X-ray eyes, capable of boring into the depths of a faker's soul. And they spotted apostasy when Romney named Mike Leavitt, former governor of Utah, to head the transition team if the Republicans win the presidency. Leavitt is conservative, but he runs a consulting business specializing in hooking up state governments with the insurance exchanges that are a major part of Obamacare, just as they are under Romneycare.

"There are many, many Republicans who have come to terms with supporting Mitt Romney because, despite their reservations, we can all agree he is far better than Barack Obama," Erick Erickson wrote on his conservative Red State blog this week. "One issue, above all others, still gives many of the base qualms about supporting Romney. He never distanced himself from Romneycare and over the past several years [has] gone back and forth between definitive statements on full repeal of Obamacare and partial repeal of Obamacare."

"We're troubled by it," Dean Clancy, who runs health care advocacy for the conservative group FreedomWorks, told Talking Points Memo. "We're very concerned. The tea party grass roots have always feared that **Gov. Romney would be a weak standard-bearer because of Romneycare.** This choice only reinforces those doubts."

Talking Points Memo quoted another blogger, Michael Cannon of the libertarian Cato Institute, as saying "Romney's appointment of Leavitt is a first step toward flip-flopping ... or Etch A Sketching ... on Obamacare repeal."

These concerns were an interesting counterpoint to the week's more visible development. The mainstream media, including the pundit branch, discovered political brilliance in the Romney campaign, unnoticed during the primaries. The media also began the process of prematurely writing off Obama as a loser.

The main evidence for that were the May job growth figures, less than half of what was expected, and former President Bill Clinton's assessment of Romney's business career as "sterling." In today's media world, where every blip is considered a game-changing event, these were portrayed as decisive, even though Clinton a couple of days later said a Romney victory would be "calamitous for our country and the world."

Actually, things weren't bad for the president. Some hopeful figures were ignored amid the praise for Romney and the criticism of the Obama campaign.

Summer employment of teens was off to its strongest start since 2006, The Associated Press reported, citing a study by outplacement firm Challenger, Gray & Christmas. Last month, it was 157,000 compared

with 71,000 a year ago and 6,000 in May 2010. A Gallup survey showed consumer spending was up, as was consumer confidence in the economy.

This echoed **a survey quoted by conservative writer William Kristol in The Weekly Standard** that found that 26 percent of those polled said the economy is improving at an acceptable rate, and 40 percent thought it was getting better “but the rate of progress is still unacceptable.” A total of 32 percent thought the economy is not getting better at all. Republican strategist David Winston did the survey of 1,000 registered voters.

Kristol wrote that Romney could lose most of that crucial 40 percent if he “fails to present a compelling alternative. ... This is a winnable election for Mitt Romney. But he can’t win simply by asserting that things are worse than they’ve ever been.”

The fact is that Romney doesn’t have a compelling alternative. During the primaries, he was for Republican Paul Ryan’s economic plan, endorsed by the Republican House, which would cut trillions in federal spending over the next decade, dismantle Medicare and continue low taxes for the affluent.

He’s still for it, a top campaign aide said over the weekend. But Ryan doesn’t seem to be his constant sidekick as he was just a few months ago. Romney has clearly sidelined Ryan and his controversial budget plan in this new phase of his campaign, leaving the candidate, once again, without much of a program.

The right doesn’t trust Romney. Nor will the center, so vital to his campaign. That’s because, by Election Day, Americans will still have no idea where he would take them. Hopefully, they will see him for what he is—a hollow man.