



How Mitt Romney Could Cost Mark Sanford the Election

By: Peter Roff – April 5, 2013

No conservative seriously expected Barack Obama would win a second term. Beating him was supposed to be an easy layup. In the months leading up to the election his approval rating was typically below 50 percent – a sure sign of trouble – and he had no substantive legislative accomplishments on which he could campaign. Romney's loss came as quite a shock, a shock from which the GOP has not yet recovered.

This has produced a crisis of confidence throughout the conservative movement, with a lot of people engaged in a lot of finger pointing (little of it in Romney's direction, oddly enough) and with little to show for it.

Going forward, this can be a fatal conceit, producing a kind of pessimism and paralysis that one might only expect to hear coming from Marvin, the Paranoid Android, a character well-known to fans of Douglas Adams' "Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy."

The chatter over the special election to fill the House seat once held by South Carolina GOP Sen. Tim Scott is a good example. In their wisdom, the Republican voters in the state's 1st Congressional District have seen fit to nominate former Gov. Mark Sanford. And this has some people very, very nervous.

Sanford held the seat once before, having been elected as part of 1994's "Contract with America" class of GOP freshman. While in Congress he compiled a solid record as a fiscal conservative, opposed to tax increases and no fan of increased government spending. He was even, at times, a thorn in the side of the Republican leadership in his unwillingness to go along with efforts to grow the size and scope of government.

His record was enough to carry him to victory in competitive GOP primary for governor in 2002 and to easily win the ensuing election. As South Carolina's chief executive, he continued to fight for lower spending, often incurring the wrath of his party colleagues in the GOP-controlled state legislature while doing it. But he also won accolades from groups like the libertarian Cato Institute, which called him one of the nation's most fiscally conservative governors. He was even being talked about as a potential 2012 presidential candidate until a pronounced failing in his personal life led to his becoming, for a time, a national joke on late night television.

It is a different man, a different Mark Sanford, running for Congress in 2013. His previous political accomplishments were all for naught, he writes in an essay "On Second Chances" that he penned for the April issue of *The American Spectator*, on account of his "very public failure in 2009."

"I have come to learn that life has many turns and twists. Some come by chance, providence, or God's plan; others instead seem more the consequences of our own action or inaction – for good or bad," he wrote. "I now stand at on those turning points."

"I had thought politics was forever over for me, yet I am now running for Congress, campaigning on a longstanding belief in the need for more liberty and limited government," he wrote. He is back in the arena, a changed man. Since leaving office, upon great reflection, he wrote, "I have grasped in a new way the meaning of God's grace and its reflection in others."

"I listen in ways I never did before. I approach many things differently and with a far greater level of humility," Sanford wrote. "I recognize one of the consequences of my failure is that some will never see a way to a second chance for me, but I am amazed by the number who do."

The Republican voters in South Carolina have seen fit to give Sanford a second chance, as evidenced by his success in the primary and the subsequent runoff. There are those in Washington, however, who seem reluctant to follow suit. If there is a better example of the lingering shell shock inflicted by Romney's loss to Obama, no one has discovered it yet.

South Carolina's 1st Congressional District is prime GOP territory. Sanford won it easily each time he ran before. So did his successor. And so did Tim Scott, who would still be there if he had not been elevated to the U.S. Senate. Yet, because they think they know more about electoral politics than anyone else, these same DC-based experts fear Sanford may lose the upcoming election to the Democrat, Elizabeth Colbert Busch, whom – some of them seem to believe – might be moderate enough to attract enough crossover GOP votes to eke out a win.

In the search for an electoral future, some of the GOP brightest minds have lost touch with the past. South Carolina's 1st Congressional District is one of the most reliably Republican in the South. Its voters are highly unlikely to cast their ballots for a candidate like Colbert Busch who is a friend to Hollywood, a vote for the Obama agenda, a vote for higher taxes, a vote for more federal spending, a vote for the expansion of Obamacare, a vote for Nancy Pelosi to be speaker, and a vote against spending restraint, entitlement reform, education vouchers, a balanced budget amendment, and any of the other public policy changes the GOP currently supports.

The way for the Republicans to win the race is to establish contrasts, to talk about what Sanford is for and Colbert Busch is against in a way that will garner the support of a majority of voters. The GOP knows how to do this, has done it hundreds of times before and was even doing it while Romney was losing the presidency – and nine million fewer people were turning out in 2012 than turned out in 2008.

To put it simply, Republicans need to get back to what works, turning out the GOP vote, rather than do a lot of hand-wringing about whether Colbert Busch is moderate enough to win the race.