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Gene Healy: The Right can do better than Romney

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In recent months, former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney has hit the speaking circuit like a man who is determined to be president and knows he needs to get an early start.

Last week brought news that Romney had secured a major publisher for his forthcoming book, "No Apology: The Case for America's Greatness," in which Romney stands bravely against all those who insist that the United States is a mediocre country that's done more harm than good.

Even before the recent Palin and Sanford flameouts, Romney looked like the Right's favorite son for 2012. He'd garnered National Review's 2008 endorsement as a "full-spectrum conservative," and won the Conservative Political Action Conference's February 2009 straw poll handily.

With his square jaw and flawless salt-and-pepper hair, Romney certainly looks presidential: Like a character actor playing the president in a superhero movie -- or, less charitably, like a creature genetically engineered and grown in a vat for the sole purpose of securing the nation's highest office.

There's more to the presidency than looking the part, however. Conservatives ought to take a good look at the Romney record and ask themselves whether a man of such flexible convictions is the best they can do.

Romney professes to be appalled by what he calls Obama's international "tour of apology." Given Romney's pernicious influence on the health care debate, maybe he should go on an apology tour himself.

The health care reform package that Romney signed as Massachusetts governor in 2006 sought to provide universal coverage with a combination of individual and employer mandates and state subsidies.

Three years later, we have a record, and, as my colleague Mike Tanner demonstrates in a recent Cato study, it's nothing for Romney to be proud of. Despite fee increases and a cigarette tax increase -- and despite the fact that most of MassCare's costs are off-budget, imposed on the private sector -- the program's costs have grown much faster than projected, making up nearly one-third of Massachusetts' projected \$1.3 billion 2009 deficit.

With health care costs skyrocketing, and insurance premiums rising at double the national average, "the state is considering caps on insurance premiums, cuts in reimbursements to providers, and even the possibility of a

'global budget' on health care spending."

Nonetheless, Romney continues to insist that MassCare is "a good model" for reform. Our current president seems to think so, too: As Tanner notes, Obama's approach to remaking health care is "substantially the same as Romney's."

Nor can libertarians be comfortable with Romney as limited government's standard-bearer. Asked in 2007 whether he shared President George W. Bush's belief that the president has the power to arrest and imprison American citizens without review, Romney said that he'd like to hear the pros and cons from smart lawyers before making a decision.

His foreign policy positions reflect a jingoistic (and increasingly unpopular) bellicosity, and he wants to increase an already-swollen Pentagon budget by \$50 billion a year.

But Romney's biggest problem is this: It's difficult to tell what his core political principles are, if indeed he has any. Running for governor in 2002, Romney proclaimed "I will preserve and protect a woman's right to choose and am devoted and dedicated to honoring my word in that regard."

Three years later, with an eye toward the GOP primary electorate, he announced that he was pro-life. Sure, people change their minds, but Romney's rethinking always seems conveniently timed, as when he morphed from a Brady Bill and assault weapons ban supporter, to signing up as a lifetime member of the National Rifle Association, just as his 2008 presidential campaign got under way.

The conservative temperament is uncomfortable with uncertainty. Maybe that's why conservatives tend to pick their candidate early: The front-runner at the beginning of the presidential primaries almost always becomes the GOP nominee.


But instead of looking desperately for a leader, perhaps the Right should relax a bit. Three years before the 2008 general election, Obama was a freshman senator who'd made one big speech, and virtually no one imagined he'd be the next president.

After a season of discontent, the limited-government movement has finally found its voice rallying opposition to the planned federal takeover of health care. Why, then, would the Right line up behind the architect of the reform scheme that's served as a model for Obamacare?

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