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Right recoils from Romney speech

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All Mitt Romney had to do was the impossible.

Perhaps not surprisingly, he failed.

The reaction on the right to Romney's much-anticipated Big Speech on health care in Michigan Thursday was overwhelmingly negative, leaving him about where he started, if not worse off.

Conservatives blasted the former Massachusetts governor for his complicated defense of the universal-care law he enacted in the Bay State, while giving him little credit for his detailed critique of President Barack Obama.

"Having now gone through his speech, I think we can all start referring to Romney as a 'former' Presidential candidate," tweeted RedState.com blogger-in-chief Erick Erickson Thursday evening.

It was by no means the only, or even the most, scathing reaction to the speech from the right.

Facing a choice between sticking with a stance loathed by the GOP base or abandoning it and reinforcing the knock on him as a flip-flopper, Romney chose consistency over repudiation.

"I recognize that a lot of pundits around the nation are saying that I should just stand up and say this whole thing was a mistake ... and walk away. I presume that a lot of folks think that if I did that it would be good for me politically," Romney said, in the speech's most-quoted line. "There's only one problem with that: it wouldn't be honest."

But if he was hoping to win admiration for this stand on principle, Romney was disappointed. Between liberal schadenfreude and conservative disdain, there was remarkably little sympathy for the putative Republican front-runner.

National Review responded with an editorial headlined "PowerPoint Failure," a reference to Romney's presentation.

"If there is one thing we would expect a successful businessman to know, it is when to walk away from a failed investment," the editors wrote, noting that the conservative magazine endorsed Romney in 2008.

Elsewhere on the NR website, a guest blogger's post was titled "Mitt Romney's Illogical, Terrible Health-Care Address."

Reason's Peter Suderman mocked: "Mitt Romney Says He Hates ObamaCare, Defends It Anyway."

What was he thinking? Romney's advisers had indicated, in advance of the speech, that the former governor would find a way to put the issue behind him. He would deftly put to rest the criticism of his Massachusetts plan, but the real focus of the speech would be looking forward

criticism of his Massachusetts plan, but the real focus of the speech would be looking forward to what he would do as president — repealing and replacing ObamaCare.

“We didn’t go into the speech expecting to quiet the critics,” Romney spokesman Eric Fehrnstrom said Friday. “What Governor Romney wanted to do was to lay out his specific conservative reforms to replace ObamaCare once it is repealed, and that is what he did.”

The problem was that all anybody was interested in was how he would address RomneyCare — and surely he would not have scheduled a major address unless he had something new to say, some previously un-thought-of rationale that would serve as a silver bullet of an argument.

Against the backdrop of such high expectations, there may have been no way for Romney to succeed.

All of Romney’s defenses were familiar to followers of his candidacy: The plan was right for Massachusetts, not necessarily for other states or for the country as a whole. States, not the federal government, should decide health-care policy. The much-despised mandate requiring every citizen purchase insurance was in keeping with conservative principles of fiscal prudence and personal responsibility.

The response: Nice try.

Conservatives generally rejected as overly nuanced Romney’s attempt to distinguish his plan from the federal Affordable Care Act. “It doesn’t even seem fair to call them similarities, it seems like they’re identicalities,” the Cato Institute’s Michael Cannon told POLITICO.

FreedomWorks CEO Matt Kibbe complained to USA Today, “It takes five minutes for him to explain why they’re different,” and suggested Romney instead “tactfully back away from RomneyCare.”

Conservative pundit Matt Lewis pointed out on Twitter Romney’s refusal to back down from the mandate, adding parenthetically: “Explaining the theory won’t make it better.”

“Romney makes passionate case for violating personal freedom at state level,” was the headline of a commentary by the Washington Examiner’s Philip Klein. Sample line: “If Romney really is interested in repealing and replacing ObamaCare, the best thing he could do to help the cause is to stop running for president.”

Some of this unpleasantness appears to have been anticipated by the Romney camp, with the idea that they could take their lumps now, all at once, and get it over with. When asked about the issue in the future, he can note that he addressed that point in detail in his May 12 speech.

There were scattered statements of support for Romney Thursday — from Massachusetts Sen. Scott Brown, for example, and from former Missouri Sen. Jim Talent, now a Heritage Foundation fellow. But both were already Romney supporters.

On Friday, he also got backup from New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie, who applauded Romney’s “candor.”

Aside from that, however, it was difficult to find uncommitted conservatives who were swayed

by the speech or who thought it was a good move politically.

Rather, the most generous reaction was befuddlement: Since the message fell so far short of expectations, the assumption was that it must be part of a long-range strategic plan by Romney's campaign.

"Romney is a smart man, and his success in business and politics is no accident," wrote the Examiner's Byron York. "He still might win this time. But his secret strategy better be very, very good."

Most of the critics were not so charitable. Their responses were foreshadowed before the speech had even been given by the Wall Street Journal, which headlined its blistering editorial "Obama's Running Mate" and called Romney "compromised and not credible" on "the central question of the 2012 election."

In a follow-up editorial after the speech, the Journal editors were unappeased, writing that Romney "has lashed himself to the contradiction of attacking Mr. Obama's plan while claiming his own is different."

To Washington Post conservative blogger Jennifer Rubin, the whole speech was a massive political blunder. "No professional campaign adviser who knows the tiniest bit about GOP politics would have advised him to take this route," she wrote.

Rubin put it more succinctly on Twitter with a reference to an old Romney story — the one where he attached the dog carrier to the roof of the family station wagon, leading to a windshield spattered with doggie diarrhea.

"The only idea dumber than this speech," she tweeted, "was strapping the Irish setter to the top of the car."

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