

MORMONS AND POLITICS

CAN A MODERATE MITT FIND A WAY TO PENNSYLVANIA AVENUE?

By R. B. Scott

HERE HE GOES again. W. Mitt Romney has already proved that a Mormon Republican can be elected governor of the nation's most liberal state. Now he's off on another "mission impossible" to win the hearts and minds of the Christian conservatives who control the Republican Party and historically have not thought highly of Mormons like him.

If he beats the odds again, he could well become the next president of the United States. If he is less persuasive, he could wind up as a capable and attractive running mate. Either way, the party gets a very smart leader at the top of the ticket or an agreeable number two man who always plays by the rules he likes to help shape.

But you never know what brass-knuckle politics will lead to: any day now, Vice President Dick Cheney could suddenly high-tail it out of Washington to his hideout in Wyoming (pick your exit strategy: weakening heart, looming indictments, fresh compromising pictures of him with Halliburton pals). The President, looking for a Mr. Squeak E. Clean replacement, would remember that Romney is nearing the end of his first term as governor, has a rather spectacular history of bailing out troubled organizations (not to mention saving lost souls), and . . . well, you get the picture.

If serendipity strikes Romney again, he could be sitting just a heartbeat away from the nation's corner office, ready to head out on the campaign highway as the anointed heir, savior of the party, in charge and in control of those radical neo-conservatives. Just the way he would prefer it.

This is not some incredible *Wag the Dog* scenario. Brilliantly serendipitous things happen to good people like W. Mitt Romney. So, pay attention.

FOR now, as he surveys the formidable obstacles that lie ahead, Romney must be experiencing what Yogi Berra did right before he uttered his most famous malapropism, "It's *deja vu* all over again." The most daunting obstacle of all is still his religion, the Mormonism that Senator Edward M. Kennedy shamelessly, but effectively, swung at Romney's kneecaps back in 1994.

Back then, Romney was downright scornful of propositions that his religion would be up for election as much as he was. Ultimately, his sense of what's fair in politics cost him an upset victory over America's most celebrated politician. Once the well-oiled Kennedy machine recovered from the shock of trailing in the early polls, it played the Mormon card so relentlessly and cynically that even the leader of Boston Catholics, Cardinal Bernard Law, indignantly wrote that the lessons John Kennedy taught the country about a man's religion have "been lost on President Kennedy's youngest brother, but salvaged by Mister Romney."

Law's stirring protest was of little lasting consequence as Romney was forced to react almost daily to potshots that his religion was racist, then sexist, then backward, then clanish with designs on ruling the U.S., if not the world, and still preaching the eternal efficacy of polygamy.

Fast forward to 2005. Enter stage far right: The new Romney who gets it, who fights back when attacked, as he ably demonstrated in the 2002 gubernatorial campaign. This new Romney gives offense to some if it wins support from the many. Recently, he flatly refused to modify his call to wiretap mosques and keep tabs on some U.S. Muslims. Why? In part, because it appealed to the hearts and minds of the people in the red states who kept George Bush in the

White House. And, it resonated with religious extremists everywhere who believe a holy showdown between Muslims and Christians is inevitable if not imminent.

IT has been nearly four decades since Mitt's father, George W. Romney, the immensely popular governor of Michigan, had a lock on the Republican nomination until he proclaimed, "I was brainwashed about Viet Nam." We will never know whether Mormonism would have dogged him had he won the nomination, but probably not. In 1968, moderate Rockefeller Republicans like George Romney were flying high, having just wrested control of the party from the clutches of strident Goldwater conservatives.

Today a different brand of zealot—the acolytes of the Christian Right—rule the moderate party of Romney senior and Nelson Rockefeller. But Mitt would rather switch than fight them. Sort of. "I'm a red state kinda guy," and "I've always been pro-life," he proclaims a bit disingenuously.

The truly peculiar, perhaps surmountable, problem for Romney is this: those most ardent in their self-righteous scolds—the one's foisting "abstinence only" and "intelligent design" onto the public schools—are often the same people who rant that Mormons are heretics, slickly deceptive and dangerous anti-christs.

If you are unfamiliar with this new breed of unChristian, drop by an "open house" for virtually any new LDS temple. You'll see them carrying placards bearing hateful messages condemning Mormon teachings and sacred practices. Or join a public LDS-oriented internet discussion group. Sooner and later and often, these well-trained Christian soldiers will attack and disrupt and taunt, avoiding thoughtful discussion at all costs.

"For me, the shame is that Mitt is running now when the Republican party has been co-opted by the far right with its extreme and very narrow agenda," says Helen Claire Sievers, a Democrat who has worked with him on many Church leadership assignments over the years. "The challenge for him, both politically and ethically, is to get the Republican nomination, because I think his centrist philosophies of fiscal responsibility and genuine social compassion will position him well with the general American electorate."

MITT showed so much promise when he began this quest a dozen years ago—very, very smart, principled, committed," said another long-time

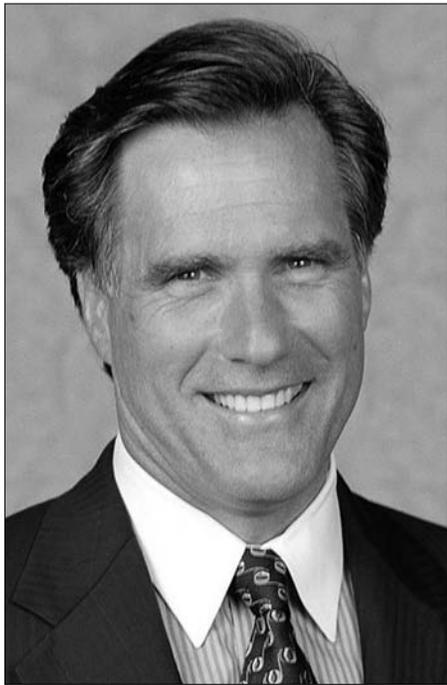


R. B. SCOTT—Ron to his friends and Bruce to his mother—is a native of Salt Lake City who has lived in New England for thirty-seven years, two as a missionary. He was a staff writer for the weekly *Life* magazine and was one of the founding editors of *People* magazine. His first novel, *Closing Circles*—"the ornate adventures of being Mormon"—will be out just as soon as an agreeable publisher offers a contract. He welcomes email comments and inquiries to <rbscott@comcast.net>.

admirer who would like to vote for Romney in 2008 if he “doesn’t become your typical politician, willing to do whatever it takes to win the election.”

Romney’s promising start included supporting the formation of the non-partisan Concord Coalition—dedicated to fostering sound social and fiscal policies—led by the late Senator Paul Tsongas, a Massachusetts senator, Democrat, and one-time presidential candidate, together with other thoughtful leaders of both political parties. Until he began focusing his sights on the White House, Romney’s politics were right down the middle, drifting slightly left on social issues, veering right on fiscal policy—a freshened and appealing version of his father’s politics.

As a Church leader, he was equally mod-



erate and pragmatic, even a careful change agent from time to time. Local members do not recall a single person who was excommunicated or disfellowshipped while he served as president of a stake that probably has as many religiously rococo and fiercely independent academics, writers, and thinkers as any in the Church. He eschewed using Church councils to settle ethical and financial disputes between members, encouraging them instead to press their claims in civil court.

When marital breakups beset the bishops and high councilmen who served under him, Romney refused to accept their *de rigueur* resignations because doing so would have suggested, incorrectly in his opinion, that the

Church viewed divorced members as second-class citizens.

ACCORDING to Kathleen Flake, assistant professor of American religious history at Vanderbilt University and chronicler of Utah Senator Reed Smoot’s influence on the public perception of Mormonism in the early twentieth century, “while Romney does not speak for the Church, he could be considered the next key figure in a sustained, if ill-defined and uncoordinated effort to reassure America that they have nothing to fear from Mormonism. This effort is as old as Mormonism itself, but as the Church has grown, so has the need for such assurances.”

The gregarious and media-savvy Mormon president Gordon B. Hinckley took to the

their own, a chosen son, was poised to be a leading peacemaker in the polarizing abortion wars and the emerging, potentially equally divisive gay civil rights movement. It was not lost on them that Romney laid out his nuanced views favoring choice and civil unions while he was yet serving as stake president. Were his words harbingers of a sea change at Temple Square? Surely no sitting stake president, particularly one with Romney’s sense of propriety, would publicly diverge from standard Church policies before sharing his views privately with members of the Twelve and First Presidency. Just a year or so earlier, the Church-owned Brigham Young University had terminated the contract of Cecilia Konchar Farr, a young English professor (now chair of the English department of the Catholic-run College of St. Catherine



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airwaves to dampen teachings that had long rankled fundamentalist and Trinitarian Christians alike. After an interview in *Time* wherein President Hinckley cast doubt on whether Church doctrine teaches that man can become as God is, a friend asked what I made of Hinckley’s and Romney’s efforts to soften the sharp edges of Mormonism. I buried my tongue in my keyboard and replied: “If you listen to Mitt and [President Hinckley] long enough, you might conclude that Mormons are really just Episcopalians who wear funny underwear.”

Romney’s recent slide right and his about-faces on choice, stem cell research, same-sex civil unions, and “morning after” birth control measures may be as satisfying to some traditional Mormon and Christian conservatives as they are disappointing to believers who took pride in the refreshingly inclusive approach Romney brought to the pressing social issues of the day. In essence, he seemed eager to apply the gospel of agency—“teach them correct principles and let them govern themselves”—to the process of developing responsive and fiscally responsible public policies.

AS the 1994 senatorial campaign got underway, many Latter-day Saints in Massachusetts (and elsewhere too, no doubt) were especially pleased that one of

in St. Paul, Minnesota) who had espoused qualified support for “choice.”

If open-minded members of the Church were pleased that Romney was willing to cautiously break new ground back in 1993, they have been stunned by his recent dramatic about-faces. They still want to believe that the unflinching, pragmatic leader who emerged in 1993 was the “Real Mitt” even if they worry that his tempered “pro-choice” endorsement then was more an expedient reaction to political reality than it was a vision borne of serious study, thoughtful reflection, and sincere prayer.

Ditto, the Church’s reaction—or lack thereof. The results of a private poll conducted before Romney announced for office made it quite clear: no candidate for statewide office who opposed a woman’s right to choose would ever be elected in Massachusetts. Period. The poll results were shared informally with the Brethren.

At that time, a senior LDS official close to the First Presidency said that some members of the Quorum were dismayed at Romney’s position on abortion even if they understood it was consistent with the doctrine of agency. They realized it would serve no purpose to quibble—the greater good was to get him elected, to give him a fair shot at realizing the victory his father booted forty years earlier.

PAUSE for a moment. Imagine it's 1994 and you are one of those Christian Right zealots. You already believe that the Mormon position on abortion is too squishy. Now one of its most visible members announces he's "pro choice," and the Church takes no action. Ditto "morning after" treatments. In 1994, Romney championed them, reasoning that they could render obsolete the need for most abortions. If he has had a change of heart since then, he's not admitting it. So would his recent rush right make you wary? Would you be confident he wouldn't rush left when it was convenient?

Even long-time friends understand how hard it is to get a handle on the "Real Mitt." "The fact is, he always tells the truth. He is extraordinarily precise about what he says and how he says it," says a former associate who worked with Romney at Bain & Company. His assessment is shared by many, many Romney friends in Boston who admire and know him well but are distressed that politics have forced him to compromise.

The former Bain associate continues: "If you were to go back and parse the actual sentences he used in 1993 to define his support for the right of women to choose, I'll bet

you'd discover his position today hasn't changed that much. It just seems that way. Like Clinton, Romney expects that you know the answers to important questions are always complex. Therefore, it's important to carefully define and understand what 'is' is."

Perhaps that is why conventionally conservative columnists profiling the attractive Romney often gloss over his apparent flip-flops on key issues such as abortion, same-sex unions, and casino gambling. The most boggling flip of all was from ardent support for stem cell research in 2002—research that could lead to effective treatments for his wife Anne's multiple sclerosis—to outright opposition in 2005.

For some conservatives, it seems enough that he is a fiscally conservative leader who has a reputation for rescuing failing ventures, has a moral compass that points "true north," and solid core values. Who cares if their origins are Catholic, Jewish, Presbyterian, Baptist or, egad, Mormon?

As recently as 1999, apparently 17 percent of the electorate *did* care, saying they wouldn't vote for a presidential candidate who was Mormon. The recent heated response to *Newsweek's* cover story commemorating the

200th birthday of Joseph Smith suggests that bitter, anti-Mormon sentiments are still alive and well in the land. The challenge to Romney is to demonstrate clearly that stacked against Hilary Rodham Clinton, an enigmatic and inscrutable Mormon like him looks pretty darn competent and is a better alternative than the take-charge former mayor of New York City, the straight-talking populist senator from Arizona and former prisoner of war, or the African-American woman who runs the State Department.

Right now, he faces the toughest decision of his life. It is not one he can put off for long. As if to underscore his personal angst, as he has done in the past, he sought advice from the man he admires most in this world: Mormon president Gordon Bitner Hinckley. The conversation eventually turned to whether a run for the presidency would be good for him and the Church. The specifics of the conversation are, of course, known only to people who were there. However, Romney left with the clear impression that the upbeat Mormon prophet was not worried one whit about the additional scrutiny a presidential campaign might focus on the Church and its teachings but was emphatic about steering wide of any and all partisan political involvements. "The choice to run or not must be yours and yours alone," he reportedly advised, firmly but kindly.

So there Romney stands, all dressed up with lots of places to go and no electronic Global Positioning System to get him there. He needs to warm the engines now if he is to run for re-election in Massachusetts in 2006, an election recent polls suggest he could lose decisively.

Or, he needs to devote all his energy to winning his party's presidential nomination, a goal that may ultimately prove unattainable, very costly, and personally compromising.

Or, he can hedge along the way, concluding that the stars have aligned to make him better suited for the job a heartbeat down the hall from the nation's corner office.

Perhaps the most promising prospect after all is the hope that Dick Cheney will retire soon to Wyoming and that good things will continue to happen to nice boys like Mitt Romney, as they always have. ☺



THE NUANCED POSITIONS OF MITT ROMNEY

THE ISSUE	THEN	NOW
<i>Abortion</i>	1993: Favors "choice" but personally opposed to abortion	2005: "I've always been pro-LIFE"
<i>Stem Cell Research</i>	2002: Enthusiastic supporter. Wife Anne has M.S. and could benefit from research	2005: Opposed to research on stem cells from new human embryos
<i>Gambling</i>	1994: Backs casino gambling as appropriate for Native American tribe near Cape Cod	2005: Does not want to be known as the "governor who brought casino gambling to Massachusetts"
<i>Homosexual Rights</i>	1993: "Same sex civil unions" are fair, reasonable way to address needs without compromising sanctity of traditional "marriage. Also believes "spousal" benefits should be extended to "unmarried partners" of state employees.	2004: Opposed to same sex unions and same sex marriage. Proposes constitutional amendment banning marriage
<i>"Morning After" Birth Control Treatments</i>	1993: Views RU486 "Morning after" pills then being tested in France as a promising solution to the wars over abortion laws	2005: Vetos legislation that would have made "Morning after" pharmaceuticals/drugs available over the counter
<i>General Politics</i>	1994: Moderate-to-liberal progressive Republican like his father, George Romney	2005: "I'm a red state kind of guy"





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