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Mitt in '08?

A primary contender.

Mitt Romney's national political stock is skyrocketing. The Republican governor of Massachusetts's pre-Christmas announcement not to run for reelection upped speculation that he's got an eye on the opening at 1600 Pennsylvania Ave. in 2008.

Though you may not be too familiar with Romney yet, the 58-year-old Mormon is not coming completely out of left field. He's been a successful Republican governor in a Democratic state, yes. But he's also been a venture capitalist with a reputation as a good fixer-upper businessman. In 2002, he was president of the Salt Lake organizing committee for the Winter Olympics. Not only were these first games after Sept. 11 a clean-up operation with unprecedented security concerns, the scandal-ridden Salt Lake Organizing Committee was \$379 million in debt when Romney started. But under his leadership turned a \$100 million profit.

I first really took note of Romney as a leader with national political potential earlier this year when he took on his alma mater, Harvard, on cloning. Critics can cynically chalk Romney's position up to courting — even pandering — to conservative primary voters, as most writers and pundits do. But that strikes me as a lazy read of what happened.

Go back and read what he said at the time. You'd be hard-pressed to find a pol who better understands the issue — or who's taken the time to — which is drowning in euphemisms, confusion, and a crowd of loud snake-oil salesmen.

Romney realizes, first of all, that there are already-working alternatives to the ethically problematic embryonic-stem-cell research and so-called "therapeutic cloning" that so many are keen to throw money and resources at. But as a political matter, where he came down didn't make sense as a cut-and-dry secure-the-pro-life-vote maneuver. His compromise position was to allow for the use of embryos already created, but not being used ("surplus" from in-vitro fertilization). That's not perfect for a lot of us opponents of the destruction of embryos, but it was way better than what the cloners wanted. And what Romney did was draw a principled line in the sand and stuck with it — he could not and would not support the creation of new embryos for destruction. In the end, Romney, though he lost the debate in the legislature, taught his opponents that he would not concede his ideals for the political status quo.

Romney has already demonstrated an ability to lead. While governor he's turned around a \$3 billion deficit without raising taxes (in "Taxachusetts"!) and has taken a hard-line stand on illegal immigration. Romney also refused to budge when lightning-laced bricks came down on him for arguing during a D.C. speech that some U.S. mosques, which reportedly preach jihad against the United States, should be under surveillance. He made a common-sense argument and refused to falter under fire. In conservative circles, his biggest perception problem is on abortion. His campaign vowed that he would not change the state's abortion laws, and he's stuck by that. But that makes many abortion opponents nervous. However, in recent months Romney vetoed a bill that would have given kids access to emergency contraception without their parent's knowledge. That's good sense.

With his experience with the cloning and the emergency contraception fight adding to his now national focus, he clearly has had to rework his abortion position.

If you're willing to believe him, there's something of a sensible evolution there. This summer he wrote: "In considering the issue of embryo cloning and embryo farming, I saw where the harsh logic of abortion can lead — to the view of innocent new life as nothing more than research material or a commodity to be exploited." He sees all these big culture-of-life issues in a "Brave New World" framework.

As more Americans meet Mitt Romney, I think they'll see beyond the handsome exterior and see not just a good salesman, but a thoughtful (and, yes, conservative) leader.

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