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THE WEEKEND INTERVIEW

Latter-day President?

A Mitt Romney candidacy would test the religious right.

BY JAMES TARANTO

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BOSTON--Mitt Romney insists he has hardly thought about running for president: "That's a decision you make way down the road." With the 2008 election 1,039 days away, that's fair enough. But I'm guessing he'll run.

I first met Mr. Romney in September at New York's Monday Meeting, a conclave of right-leaning movers and shakers who gather to hear politicians from around the country make pitches for support. This month, after it emerged that the backing Mr. Romney sought was not for re-election as governor of Massachusetts, I visited him at the Statehouse here. "I will accomplish in my term the objectives that I set out to accomplish, or some will be rejected and I wouldn't get them done in the second term anyway," he tells me. "There's no reason to hang around and warm the chair, taking advantage of the perks and fun of office, if the agenda is complete." What he doesn't say is that there's also no reason for a governor to risk defeat if he has his eye on the White House.

The governor's office is equipped with a fireplace, making it a rarity in 21st-century politics: a smoke-filled room. Mr. Romney, a devout Mormon, abjures not only tobacco but also alcohol and coffee. A 58-year-old Detroit native, he is a businessman-turned-politician like his late father, George, who was chairman of American Motors Corp. before serving six years as governor of Michigan. George Romney ran for president in 1968 but famously withdrew after attributing his support for the Vietnam War to "brainwashing" at the hands of U.S. generals.

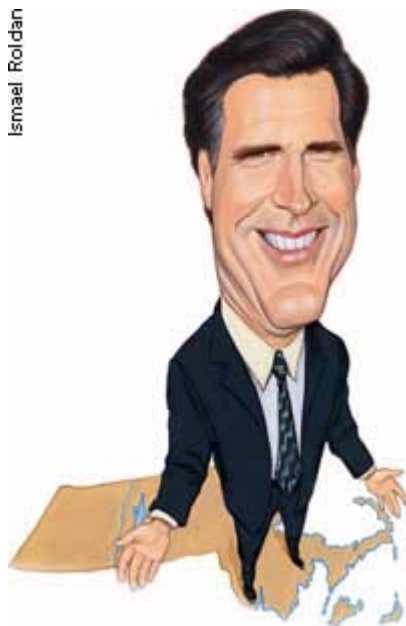
Mitt Romney had a successful career in management consulting and capital management, culminating with a stint as CEO of Bain & Co. In 1994 he made his first political run, challenging Sen. Ted Kennedy. Even that year's Republican tide was not enough to drown Mr. Kennedy, who won 58% to 41%. Yet Mr. Romney's showing remains the best of any challenger Mr. Kennedy has faced. Mr. Romney got high marks for turning around the debt- and scandal-plagued organizing committee for Salt Lake City's 2002 Winter Olympics, and in 2002 he defeated Democrat Shannon O'Brien to become the Bay State's fourth consecutive GOP governor.

Mr. Romney could be an attractive presidential candidate. His sunny disposition puts one in mind of Ronald Reagan--he laughs easily and smiles almost continuously. He is a governor, as four of the past five presidents were; but he can claim more international experience than most state executives. In addition to his work on the Olympics, he has served on the federal Homeland Security Advisory Council, chairing its working group on intelligence and information sharing.

Massachusetts, the only state George McGovern carried in 1972, is an unlikely place to find a Republican presidential candidate. The last Bay State Republican to seek the presidential

nomination was Henry Cabot Lodge in 1964; the last to win it was Calvin Coolidge 40 years earlier. All 12 members of the state's congressional delegation are Democrats, and Republicans who win office here tend to be liberals like former senator Edward Brooke and former governor Bill Weld.

Ismael Roldan



Not Mr. Romney, whose views put him well within the mainstream of GOP conservatism. A self-described "fiscal hawk," he takes credit for staving off tax increases, no mean feat given that the Democrats have a veto-proof legislative majority. When he took office, the state had a \$3 billion budget deficit. "We held the line on taxes, we did not borrow more money, and instead we cut back on state programs," closing the gap. He hopes next year to persuade the Legislature to cut the top income tax rate to 5% from 5.3%.

He praises George W. Bush on the war: "The president is right to point to an international jihadist movement aimed at the collapse of the United States," he says. "He has gone after that threat in the right way and with great energy and vigor, and I applaud the fact that he has taken it on very seriously and has not considered it just a criminal action but instead a war action, which requires a military . . . response."

Asked if he disagrees with prospective rival John McCain's proposal to ban "cruel, inhuman and degrading" interrogation of terrorists in U.S. custody, he demurs: "I'm not a senator; [I] haven't looked at his act." When I persist, he says, "Would you like me to do an analysis of that for you?"--a rare flash of sarcasm, albeit delivered with a smile.

His views on social issues--about which more in a moment--seem ill-suited to this ultraliberal state. But his ability to win election in Massachusetts may give him a crossover appeal in blue states, just as Bill Clinton was able to carry some half a dozen states where John Kerry wasn't even competitive.

Mr. Romney's background as a businessman leads him to think of government in pragmatic terms. "I tend to be more analytical than I think the average politician [is]. I tend to look for a lot of data, and don't reach conclusions based on . . . political doctrine, but instead based on analysis. . . . I look at each issue and try and evaluate what I think the right answer is."

It's a bit reminiscent of Michael Dukakis's pronouncement in 1988: "This election is about competence, not ideology." But the comparison is misleading. A Massachusetts liberal can take ideology for granted, whereas a Massachusetts conservative actually does have to collaborate and compromise in order to get things done.

Mr. Romney says his business experience helped prepare him to deal with an opposition legislature. "People imagine that when you're a chief executive officer, you snap your fingers, and everybody bows." In fact, a CEO has to appeal to multiple constituencies: boards, shareholders, customers, subordinates who covet the corner office. "You're in a position of give-and-take that is more akin to public life than you might imagine. I'm in a state where my legislature is 85% Democratic. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to recognize that that means if I'm going to get anything done, it's going to have to be done on a collaborative basis." This may be a refreshing message to voters weary of the bitter partisanship of Washington politics during the Clinton and Bush presidencies.



Could Mr. Romney win the Republican presidential nomination? Three early primaries look promising: New Hampshire, where he is well known from governing the state next door; Michigan,

where his family name has cachet; and Arizona, which has a large Mormon population. But these are not enough--as Sen. McCain, who won all three contests in 2000, can attest.

A crucial question will be whether Mr. Romney's religion is a handicap. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is indigenous to America, but many Americans view it with suspicion. In a 1999 Gallup poll, 17% of those surveyed said they would not vote for a Mormon for president, far more than said the same of a Jew (6%) or a Catholic (4%).

In 1994 Sen. Kennedy made an issue of the LDS Church's tardy embrace of racial equality (it did not allow the ordination of blacks until 1978). "I don't think that's the reason I lost to Ted Kennedy," says Mr. Romney, and he's surely right. In any case, Mr. Kennedy doesn't seem to have any problem today answering to a Mormon Senate leader, Harry Reid.

Mr. Romney also says religion wasn't a problem for his father: "When he was running for president . . . he was the front-runner. His faith just didn't factor in. . . . His statement on Vietnam--that put him under, but certainly not his faith."

The trouble is that much of today's anti-Mormon sentiment is found on the religious right, a constituency that looms much larger in the GOP now than it did in 1968, or than it ever has in Massachusetts. Ask a conservative Christian what he thinks of Mormonism, and there's a good chance he'll call it a "cult" or say Mormons "aren't Christian."



Yet on the issues, Mr. Romney is largely in tune with the Christian right. "I am pro-life," he says, though he's not an absolutist. He favors a return to the status quo ante *Roe v. Wade*, when states decided abortion policy. In 2002, recognizing that Massachusetts is an "overwhelmingly pro-choice state," he campaigned only on a promise to veto any legislation changing the state's abortion laws, including a proposal, which Ms. O'Brien endorsed, to reduce the age of parental consent to 16 from 18. The Legislature never passed that measure.

Some question whether he is antiabortion enough to satisfy his party's base. But George W. Bush has made similar nods to political reality--"I'm a realistic enough person to know that America is not ready to ban abortions," he said in 1999--and few dispute the president's pro-life credentials.

Mr. Romney is a scathing critic of the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court's 2003 decision imposing same-sex marriage: "We've got a liberal activist court . . . and I have now seen firsthand the perils of a court that decides to substitute its values for that of the founders." The governor has backed efforts to undo the ruling by amending the state constitution, most recently through a signature campaign. He also has enforced a 1913 law making it illegal for out-of-state couples to wed in the Bay State if they cannot legally do so back home. "It's basically kept Massachusetts from being a Las Vegas of same-sex marriage."

How would he overcome anti-Mormon prejudice if he seeks the presidency? He doesn't answer directly, but cites his experience in Massachusetts: "As people got to know me . . . they accepted me for who I am, and religious doctrines didn't make much difference to them."

In the end, there's probably not much Mr. Romney can do about the "Mormon problem" other than put his faith in the American tradition of religious pluralism. "I think our nation needs people of faith in public service," he says. "My policies in the public sector are not a mirror image of any church's doctrines. But of course the respect I have for American values flows from the faith that I have." If Mr. Romney runs for president, it may test the proposition that the religious right is an issues-based movement as opposed to a sectarian one.

Mr. Taranto is editor of OpinionJournal.com.

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