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Mitt Romney's South Park Primary



By Marty Kaplan

Egypt makes Mitt Romney look good — at least compared to other Republican presidential hopefuls.

As Egypt's pro-democracy movement showed its first peaceful signs of life, there was former Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee telling a Knesset meeting that the anti-Mubarak protests "could threaten the world." He demonstrated his grasp of the fragility of the moment by joining right-wing Israeli officials and activists at the laying of a cornerstone for new Jewish housing on contested ground in East Jerusalem.

There was former UN ambassador John Bolton likening the "idealistic student demonstrators" to hippies ("We are not on the verge of the dawning of the Age of Aquarius in Egypt if only the demonstrators get their way"), ridiculing those who would "toss away lightly" the upside of standing by our man Mubarak "against the promise, the hope, the aspiration for sweetness and light and democratic government."

It took former Alaska governor Sarah Palin a week to say anything about Egypt, and when she did — speaking in Reno, Nevada to 2,500 hunters at the annual convention of Safari Club International - her angle was what Egypt meant for Sarah Palin, victim. She said that a recent call by a *Washington Post* columnist for journalists to ignore her "sounds good, because there's a lot of chaos in Cairo, and I can't wait not to get blamed for it — at least for a month."

If Rep. Michele Bachmann (R-Minn.) broke her radio silence on the Egyptian crisis during its first three weeks, whatever she said was under Google's radar.

So simply by echoing President Obama's call for a managed transition in Egypt — the kind of nonpartisan support during international crises that a White House once could count on — former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney now leads the pack. In a CNN interview with Piers Morgan, Romney's only misstep was his clumsy attempt to distinguish between calling Mubarak a dictator (which he wouldn't), and calling him a "monarch-like" figure (which he would), which unfortunately recalled his clumsier attempt to tap-dance away from the mandate that everyone buy health insurance that he put at the heart of his own state plan.

Romney's vulnerability on the signature Republican issue — he's the godfather of Obamacare! — has his staffers tearing their hair out trying to write a better answer than the one he's giving. Compared to his flip-flops on abortion, "don't ask, don't tell," gun control, campaign finance and immigration, his touting the Massachusetts mandate as "a model for getting everybody insured" is proving way trickier to explain to GOP primary voters.

But there's another issue that could well steal center stage from Romneycare: religion.

On February 24, previews begin on Broadway for *The Book of Mormon*. A musical by *South Park* creators Matt Stone and Trey Parker, as well as Robert Lopez, co-writer of *Avenue Q*, the show is a spinoff of a 2003 episode of *South Park* called "All About the Mormons?"

Even within the *South Park* tradition of making savage fun of everything, including other religious denominations, "All About the Mormons?" is particularly brutal. It basically says that you have to be dumb or crazy to believe the foundational story of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Joseph Smith translating ancient glyphs on golden plates that an angel led him to), or to believe the sacred story told on those plates (the resurrected Jesus preaching to the Indian descendants of a pre-Columbian civilization whose founders emigrated from Jerusalem to America).

In 2007, Romney gave a speech about religious liberty, religious tolerance and the role that faith would play in his presidency. It hit many of the same notes as John F. Kennedy's 1960 speech about religion, politics and his Catholic faith. In it, Romney refused to "distance myself from my religion, say that it is more a tradition than my personal conviction.... That I will not do." Like President

Obama at the National Prayer Breakfast last week, Romney said in his speech that he believes “that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and the Savior of mankind.” To go beyond that and discuss LDS doctrine, he said, “would enable the very religious test the founders prohibited in the Constitution.”

That speech put the religious issue to bed for the 2008 primary season, and it’s likely that he’ll cite and recycle it at key moments in his campaign for 2012. But I wonder whether the high-profile skewering of his religion on Broadway will require some new Qs & As in his briefing book. The easy Q is what he thinks of the attack; the A to that is the wisdom of the First Amendment. The hard Q is whether he believes that the story of the golden plates and what was written on them is literally true — factually accurate history.

Perhaps he can just repeat what he said in 2007 and rule the question constitutionally out of bounds. But Broadway may raise the bar on what his answer needs to accomplish, both for fundamentalists who are looking for someone more electable than Sarah Palin, and for more secular voters who want to know what Romney’s made of and might be disappointed by his ducking.

At the end of the “All About the Mormons?” episode, Gary, a Mormon kid whose family moved to South Park, says this:

“Look, maybe us Mormons do believe in crazy stories that make absolutely no sense, and maybe Joseph Smith did make it all up, but I have a great life, and a great family, and I have the Book of Mormon to thank for that. The truth is, I don’t care if Joseph Smith made it all up, because what the church teaches now is loving your family, being nice and helping people. And even though people in this town might think that’s stupid, I still choose to believe in it.”

Mitt Romney doesn’t agree with Gary, so that tack isn’t an option. Still, just as he desperately needs a better answer to the mandate issue, the pop culture assault on what he holds to be true may require upgrading his answer on the religious issue to version 2.0.

This is my column from The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles. You can read more of my columns here, and e-mail me there if you’d like.

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