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The Santorum Predicament: A Sign of the Times



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Former Reagan speechwriter Peggy Noonan had it just right — someone had better read Rick Santorum his Miranda rights. In the big leagues of national politics, she warns, “Everything you’ve said can and will be used against you.”



Keep in mind that Rick Santorum has said a great deal, and is still talking. In a world accustomed to bland politicians, Santorum breaks the mold. He admires conviction politicians, and he aims to be one. He speaks his mind, and then keeps on talking. On crucial issues of a moral nature, Santorum not only states his position, he explains it in detail and then goes on to present his convictions in the form of an argument. He is willing to make comprehensive statements of cultural analysis and sweeping moral judgments.

He talks of moral issues — shockingly — in terms of right and wrong. He believes that marriage has been undermined by cultural confusion and that marriage can only mean a union of a man and a woman. He is a stalwart defender of human life — opposing abortion, arguing for the prosecution of abortion doctors, and warning that the widespread use of prenatal testing will lead to even more abortions.

Consistent with his Catholic faith, Santorum believes that contraception is harmful to women, and that the birth control revolution has been very harmful to society at large.

He has questioned President Obama's worldview, suggesting that the President's brand of environmentalism is based in a "phoney theology" and not a "biblical theology," since it fails to recognize the central importance of human beings. Mainline Protestantism "is in shambles" he explains, destroyed by liberal theology. "It's gone from the world of Christianity as I see it," he said.

Back in 2008, Santorum spoke at Ave Maria University in Florida, and told the students that their generation is engaged in "a spiritual war." Referring to Satan, he said: "The Father of Lies has his sights on what you would think the Father of Lies would have his sights on: a good, decent, powerful, influential country — the United States of America."

His 2005 book, *It Takes a Family*, is filled with similar arguments, made with straightforward candor and elaborated moral judgments. Rick Santorum does not trim his sails. Instead, he has well-documented positions on a host of issues that more conventional politicians try their best to evade. As a matter of fact, it is hard to imagine a current issue of cultural and moral conflict that Santorum has not addressed candidly and extensively.

The man has a huge closet of sound bites, and the mainstream media have been ransacking that closet. You can be sure the Obama campaign has been doing the same.

The former United States Senator from Pennsylvania is drawing the full glare of media scrutiny now that he is a potential frontrunner for the Republican nomination. Dorothy Rabinowitz of *The Wall Street Journal* argued recently that the Democrats are praying for a Santorum nomination. "His long record of statements on religious and social issues are of a sort that large sectors of the American public find unpalatable," she asserted. There can be no doubt about that.

Santorum has charged to the front ranks of the Republican nomination battle precisely because of his convictions. Even though these beliefs may be "unpalatable" to large sectors of the American public, they are the very arguments that animate the passions of conservative Christian voters, who drive much of the energy in the Republican Party.

Rick Santorum is still a long shot for the Republican nomination, but his candidacy and its coverage in the mainstream media tell us a great deal about the fate of conservative candidates and conservative convictions in the public square.

Columnist Maureen Dowd of *The New York Times* called Santorum "Mullah Rick," painting him as a religious fanatic who is raising issues "that were settled a long time ago." Santorum, she said, "is not ashamed to admit that he wants to take the country backward."

Even more recently, Dowd renamed the Republican Party the "Ghastly Outdated Party" and argued that the party, led by Santorum's energies, is against sex.

She quoted former New York mayor Rudy Giuliani, who said that Santorum and company are making “the party look like it isn’t a modern party . . . It doesn’t understand the world that we live in.” Giuliani is very modern, of course, having lived with a gay male couple while he was divorcing his wife. When Giuliani points to Santorum as lacking an understanding of “the world that we live in,” he just makes clear that he and Santorum live, culturally speaking, in two different worlds.

That is true of so many in the media as well. Santorum is rebuked, disdained, and scandalously vilified. The mainstream press, academics, and liberal intellectuals really do think that these cultural issues were “settled.” They were, of course, settled long ago in those elite circles. The 2012 campaign has awakened some observers to the fact that they are not settled everywhere. This has not come as good news.

Santorum is undeterred, even as some believe he has made himself unelectable. He has said that when he first read the text of candidate John F. Kennedy’s address to the Houston Baptist pastors in the 1960 campaign, “I almost threw up.” He added that Kennedy, “threw his faith under the bus in that speech.” Santorum is a Catholic who does not intend to throw his church’s teachings under any political bus.

Time will tell how Santorum fares as a candidate for the Republican nomination. If he were to be the nominee, America would face the clearest electoral choice in generations. The truth is that the liberals who want a Santorum nomination may well be right. A candidate with Rick Santorum’s convictions may be unelectable on a national level. Peggy Noonan is right when she argues that Santorum can hardly crawl back to the political center now.

Santorum is a Catholic who often sounds, perhaps by intention, like an Evangelical. In any event, his positions on moral issues like marriage and his use of theological language are recognizable to Evangelicals. In terms of the political context, we share a common space.

You do not have to agree with the way Rick Santorum chooses to argue on all issues to recognize the central predicament he represents. Far more Americans that we would like to think agree with Maureen Dowd more than with Rick Santorum. The moral convictions Santorum articulates are deeply rooted in the Christian inheritance of Western civilization, but the denial of that inheritance has been a central aim of moral progressives for years. Even many who style themselves as moral conservatives live like moral liberals, with the rules intended to regulate the lives of others, rather than their own.

When moral conservatives reveal their reasoning, the elites hear the launch of a new Inquisition. It is simply incomprehensible to them that sane, rational, educated people might still believe in the Father of Lies. When Catholic Rick Santorum speaks theologically at

Catholic Ave Maria University, the secular elites go into toxic shock. The same would be true of an Evangelical politician who would speak theologically of such issues at a truly evangelical college. Speak on love and you will not be in much trouble, but admit that you believe in the Devil and the press corps will go into apoplexy.

Pete Wehner of the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington recently argued that Santorum's main problem is "his rhetorical approach to social issues." As he explained, "The danger for Santorum is that, fairly or not, these statements and stands, separately and (especially) combined, create a portrait of a person who is censorious and sits in critical judgment of the lifestyle of most Americans."

Well, my guess is that Rick Santorum does indeed sit in critical judgment of the lifestyle of most Americans. That would be true of many on both the Right and the Left. As Joe Klein of *TIME* acknowledged, Santorum is attacked as radical when he argues that the expansion of prenatal testing has led to a vast increase in abortions for babies with Down syndrome and similar detectable conditions. And yet, Santorum is absolutely right, and there can be no real doubt about this. Furthermore, Santorum's own credibility is underlined by the fact that he and his wife chose not to abort when one of their children was diagnosed prenatally with a usually fatal genetic condition.

Wehner is probably right, and any politician who seeks election at the national level had better avoid sweeping moral judgments. But, in the end, that same politician will have to answer pointed questions that the mainstream media have learned to ask. No amount of determination to "stay positive" will last when the media taste moral judgment in the air.

Finally, Rick Santorum attracts protests on college campuses because people believe him when he speaks. William McGurn of *The Wall Street Journal* pointed out recently that, even as Rick Santorum opposes same-sex marriage, so did Barack Obama when he ran for the White House in 2008 (and, at least in terms of official statements, even now). But Santorum gets jeered and Obama gets a pass. Why? McGurn understands: "There's no mystery why. Mr. Santorum is attacked because everyone understands that he means what he says."

That may be the real bottom line when it comes to the Santorum predicament. Saying such things might not be a problem, but saying them when everyone understands that you mean them . . . that is another thing altogether.

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