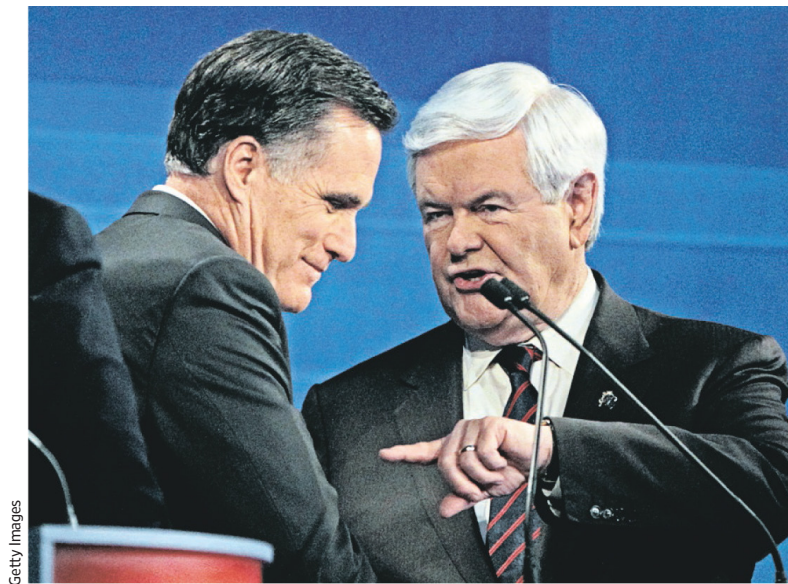


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**Is this the best they can do?**

The GOP Deserves to Lose

BY BRET STEPHENS

LET'S JUST SAY right now what voters will be saying in November, once Barack Obama has been re-elected: Republicans deserve to lose.

It doesn't matter that Mr. Obama can't get the economy out of second gear. It doesn't matter that he cynically betrayed his core promise as a candidate to be a unifying president. It doesn't matter that he keeps blaming Bush. It doesn't matter that he thinks ATMs are weapons of employment destruction. It doesn't matter that Tim Geithner remains secretary of Treasury. It doesn't matter that the result of his "reset" with Russia is Moscow selling fighter jets to Damascus. It doesn't matter that the Obama name is synonymous with the most unpopular law in memory. It doesn't matter that his wife thinks America doesn't deserve him. It doesn't matter that the Evel Knievel theory of fiscal stimulus isn't going to make it over the Snake River Canyon of debt.

Above all, it doesn't matter that Americans are generally eager to send Mr. Obama packing. All they need is to be reasonably sure that the alternative won't be another fiasco. But they can't be reasonably sure, so it's going to be four more years of the disappointment you already know.

As for the current GOP field, it's like confronting a terminal diagnosis. There may be an apparent range of treat-

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ments: conventional (Romney), experimental (Gingrich), homeopathic (Paul) or prayerful (Santorum). But none will avail you in the end. Just try to exit laughing.

That's my theory for why South Carolina gave Newt Gingrich his big primary win on Saturday: Voters instinctively prefer the idea of an entertaining Newt-Obama contest — the aspiring Caesar versus the failed Redeemer — over a dreary Mitt-Obama one. The problem is that voters also know that Gaius Gingrich is liable to deliver his prime-time speeches in purple toga while holding tight to darling Messalina's — sorry, Callista's — bejeweled fingers. A primary ballot for Mr. Gingrich is a vote for an entertaining election, not a Republican in the White House.

Then there is Mitt Romney, even now the presumptive nominee. If Mr. Gingrich demonstrated his unfitness to be a serious Republican nominee with his destructive attacks on private equity (a prime legacy of the Reagan years), Mr. Romney has demonstrated his unfitness by — where to start?

Oh, yes, the moment in last week's debate when Mr. Romney equivocated about releasing his tax returns. The former Massachusetts governor is nothing if not a scripted politician, and the least one can ask of such people is that they should know their lines by heart. Did nobody in Mr. Romney's expensive campaign shop tell him that this question was sure to come, and that a decision had to be made, in advance, as to what the answer would be? Great CEOs don't just surround themselves with consultants and advance men. They also hire contrarians, alter egos and at least someone who isn't afraid to poke a finger in their chest. On the evidence of his campaign, Mr. Romney is a lousy CEO.

But it's worse than that. The usual rap on Mr. Romney is that he's robotic, but the real reason he can't gain traction with voters is that they suspect he's concealing some unnameable private doubt. Al Gore and George Bush Sr. were like that, too, and not just because they were all to the proverbial manor born. It's that they were basically hollow men.

Thus the core difference between Mr. Romney and Mr. Obama: For the governor, the convictions are the veneer. For the president, the pragmatism is. Voters always see through this. They usually prefer the man who stands for something.

What about Rick Santorum and Ron Paul? They are owed some respect, especially for the contrast between their willingness to take a stand for principle against the front-runners' willingness to say anything. But Messrs. Santorum and Paul are two tedious men, deep in conversation with some country that's not quite America, appealing to a devoted

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base but not beyond it. Sorry, gentlemen: You're not going anywhere.

Finally, there are the men not in the field: Mitch Daniels, Paul Ryan, Chris Christie, Jeb Bush, Haley Barbour. This was the GOP A-Team, the guys who should have showed up to the first debate but didn't because running for president is hard and the spouses were reluctant. Nothing commends them for it. If this election is as important as they all say it is, they had a duty to step up. Abraham Lincoln did not shy from the contest of 1860 because of Mary Todd. If Mr. Obama wins in November — or, rather, when he does — the failure will lie as heavily on their shoulders as it will with the nominee.

What should readers who despair of a second Obama term make of all this? Hope ObamaCare is repealed by the High Court, the Iranian bomb is repealed by the Israeli Air Force, and the Senate switches hands, giving America a healthy spell of Hippocratic government.

All perfectly plausible. And the U.S. will surely survive four more years. Who knows? By then maybe Republicans will have figured out that if they don't want to lose, they shouldn't run with losers.
