

by Terry Michael

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Beltway Rap on Romney: Wrong!

The Beltway rap on the presidential prospects of retiring Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney was predictable.

The Washington Post's report on Romney's announcement last week that he wouldn't seek a second term concluded with these observations, which probably would be echoed by nine out of ten members of the Washington political class, and the media types who reflect their conventional wisdom:

"On his side," the Post reporter concluded, "Romney does have good looks, charisma and a proven ability to win in the bluest of states. But he would face significant political hurdles, including his lack of foreign policy experience and a resume that includes just one term in elected office."

Whose hurdles?

Significant hurdles from whom? Not voters, for sure, if you know anything about American political history.

Not to pick on the Post's correspondent, but did he ever hear of Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton and George W. Bush? Most served only one or two terms as governor, and none experienced a day in federal elective office.

And, to the best of my knowledge, New Jersey, New York, Georgia, California, Arkansas and Texas have no foreign policy.

Every four years, three or four senators and an occasional House member announce their candidacies for leader of the free world. Quickly, members of the Beltway press corps anoint one or more as front runners for their respective party's nomination.

National political experience, and foreign policy credentials, nearly always play into the calculation. Why? Because, the Washington political and media culture have trouble seeing beyond these 10 square miles of surreality.

Senators, not governors, are the guys who populate the guest lists of the Sunday morning shows, and they are the likely suspects who appear most often as quoted sources in the Post and the New York Times.

It's how the Democratic Party got saddled with the disastrous candidacy of John Kerry. Washington elites and the reporters and editors who mirror their myopic political vision swoon over the politicians they see daily, the ones who are their guests at the self-congratulatory black tie press dinners, and who are their neighbors in Georgetown and McLean and Chevy Chase.

Who actually gets elected?

But who actually gets elected president? Look it up, guys!

Just three of our 43 presidents have been chosen directly from the Congress: Garfield in 1880, Harding in 1920, and Kennedy, the last to do so, almost 50 years ago, in 1960. Yes, other presidents have served in the legislative branch, but Republicans understood the curse of “legislative experience” well enough in 1996 that they forced Bob Dole to resign his Senate leadership position so he wouldn’t be an incumbent legislator.

They were able to take the man out of the Senate, but not the Senate out of the man.

In a piece I wrote for ABCnews.com a few weeks before the 2004 election, I argued that undecided voters would break toward Bush in the final days, because voters elect governors – executive types – as president, not have-everything-every-way legislators, who spend their lives in Washington splitting every difference.

Senators and congressmen like Kerry, I pointed out, are the ultimate creatures of compromise. Each day on Capitol Hill they try to convince the National Assn. of That and the American Council of This that they’re on both their sides.

Olympic challenges?

So, Gov. Romney, take heart that the Washington experts envision your way being blocked by the Olympic-size hurdles of elective inexperience and foreign policy naivete.

To be sure, lots of governors have failed in their quests for the presidency, but almost never when one is matched against a legislator in a general election.

Romney, I believe, is making a big mistake with too much pandering to the social cultural conservatives in his party. He’d be much better advised to run a general election campaign from the outset, talking to the center, and relying on his elect-ability in a blue state and his Mormon conservative credentials to attract pragmatic Republicans to his bid for the nomination.

But if it’s Romney vs. the Senator from New York (and Illinois and Arkansas), I know who I’d place my money on. Just as I’d advise Barack Obama to go back and get himself elected governor of Illinois if he wants the job of chief executive.

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