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MICHAEL: GOP preparing for 1964-style 'politicide'?

Internecine warring could hand the victory to Obama

By Terry Michael

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It's seven months before their convention in Tampa, a lifetime in today's five-minute-news-cycle politics. But the split decisions in the first three primaries and the personal attacks in the televised debates beg the question: Are Republicans divided into so many parts they are about to engage in 1964-style "politicide"? As a teenage Democratic political junkie, I watched TV with partisan glee as Goldwaterites booed Nelson Rockefeller at the Cow Palace in San Francisco in 1964. That was two decades before Jeane J. Kirkpatrick labeled those who nominated Walter Mondale "the San Francisco Democrats," a year when my party, obsessed with identity politics and disconnected from the middle-class center, suffered a defeat as bad as Barry Goldwater's.

It made little difference whom Republicans nominated in 1964. Their chances after John F. Kennedy's assassination were slim. But this year offers an exceptionally good opportunity for Republicans. Thus why would the party give even fleeting consideration to a grandiose K Street demagogue like Newt Gingrich or an electorally failed, culturally out-of-touch ex-senator like Rick Santorum?

That observation might be written off as the partisan rant of a former professional Democrat. (I was communications director for the convention of those 1984 San Francisco Democrats.) But, as a now-libertarian Democrat, I admit I might commit apostasy and - though not with enthusiasm - vote for a GOP candidate (Mitt Romney) for president if he served as a positive messenger to markets to stimulate jobs and growth.

Mr. Gingrich's and Mr. Santorum's liabilities aside, why would Republicans blow a chance to defeat President Obama? There are three reasons they might commit political suicide, and none is Mr. Romney's deficiency as a candidate or the absence of some desired but unavailable GOP superstar.

First, the party is more split than at any time since Goldwater. I count at least four factions engaged in internecine battles for the mantle of "real Republican." There are the Main Street/Wall Street balanced budget, low-tax types; the social-cultural religious conservatives; the libertarian wing, still mostly focused on small government and low taxes, but some opposing foreign interventionism and favoring more personal liberty; and the neoconservative branch (actually a twig), which not only hasn't found a war it doesn't like but preaches oxymoronic big-government "compassionate conservatism."

Representatives of those thought streams have slugged it out in debates, in which the glib Mr. Gingrich resurrected his candidacy. The angry booing of spectators, directed particularly at Mr. Romney and Ron Paul, reminds me of the intraparty invective against Rockefeller. To understand the deep divisions, contrast 2012 Republicans with 2008 Democrats, when Mr. Obama, Hillary Clinton and John Edwards fought over slight shades of difference to distinguish themselves.

Second, Republican rants against Mr. Obama reflect hatred not seen since Franklin D. Roosevelt was excoriated as a traitor to his class and Ronald Reagan was accused of throwing sick and hungry old people into the cold.

"Socialist" and "European-style social welfare state advocate" have been two over-the-top taunts against Mr. Obama, especially since George W. Bush was never accused of the "s" word when he signed the biggest social welfare program since Lyndon B. Johnson - Medicare Part D, a giveaway to big pharma as great as corporate welfare for drug companies in Obamacare.

The bitterness with which Mr. Obama is bludgeoned reflects a tunnel vision that shouts the third reason Republicans are in danger of blowing a serious chance: They're losing touch with the sensible center - independents and leaners watching the spectacle from the sidelines.

When Mr. Gingrich and Mr. Santorum assert that only they are conservative enough to provide a winning contrast to Mr. Obama, both reflect willful ignorance of how you must campaign for November, focusing on persuadables. Possibly learning from his own fruitless pandering to social conservatives in 2008, Mr. Romney uses language that addresses independents as well as his own right flank. (On a libertarian mission, Ron Paul is fighting for a philosophy, not a nomination.)

Meanwhile, as the Republican cage-fight continues, Mr. Obama recently paid a YouTube-winning happy 90th birthday tribute to Betty White and performed a brief but crowd-pleasing rendition of Al Green's "Let's Stay Together" - something the four warring wings of the Republican Party might want to consider.

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