Op-ed piece March 3, 2016 Mitt and George Romney

By Walt de Vries, Ph.D. Telephone: (910) 769-4071 or 769-4070; email: waltdv@ec.rr.com

THE ROMNEYS; FATHER AND SON: THE SAME GOP CONVENTION STRATEGIC MISTAKE?

Ready for a “probability—not conspiracy” theory? It’s a father-like-son story about George Romney and son, Mitt. You see, in 1967-68 when George was Governor of Michigan he wanted to become President of the United States and for a while his chances against Richard Nixon, including national polls, looked very good. I know. I was George Romney’s Executive Assistant and a member of his campaign team. After all, he had won three statewide gubernatorial elections—two of them very difficult: in 1962 against an entrenched Democratic machine and in 1964 with Goldwater at the head of the ticket. His 1966 re- election was a breeze and George carried into office a U.S. Senator, five Congressmen and a GOP legislature. Our campaign strategies based on some new concepts involving ticket-splitters and unique communications and campaign techniques seemed ready-made for a national campaign.

Then, in late July, 1967 came the deadly Detroit race riots followed immediately by the September 4 “brainwashing” episode referring to the Governor’s earlier 1965 trip to Viet Nam. On the heels of these two disasters a critical decision was made by Romney to increase his presidential chances by moving his winning Michigan campaign Lansing team. The Governor was convinced to follow the Washington conventional wisdom that presidential campaigns need to be organized and run out of the capital by old-line, D.C. “strategists.” I, as George Romney’s Executive Assistant, fought these decisions which also involved a win-New Hampshire-at-any-cost strategy (where polls showed us losing 2-1). I, and others in the Michigan presidential campaign group, argued that we concede that New Hampshire election and cross Lake Michigan to Wisconsin, where Romney’s popular American Motors plant was located and our polls showed a 50-50 race with Nixon. I lost those strategic fights, saw no need for two presidential campaign offices competing with each other, and resigned from George’s staff in November, 1967.

Leonard Hall, who had headed President Eisenhower’s 1956 re-election campaign, was made Chair of the Romney for President Committee. He, along with several other Washington insiders including Bill Marriott, Sr., who invariably would start his comments in campaign strategy meetings with: “Now, I am just a hot dog stand operator on 14th Street, but….,” were placed in charge of the presidential campaign. When I heard those kind of comments and saw what Hall and the rest of that group had in mind for the new Romney “team,” I knew this wasn’t going to fly. We had spent six years and three elections in creating and implementing a Michigan campaign strategy with tactics that would now work in a presidential campaign. However, the principle campaign organization, office, financial resources and most of the staff moved to Washington. In retrospect, this decision had many unfortunate unintended consequences.

 Announcing for President on November 18, 1967, Romney, following the Washington group strategy and the Leonard Hall formula, worked tirelessly in New Hampshire. George was determined to use his famously strong powers of persuasion to convince New Hampshire to move to him, but New Hampshire voters are just as famously hard to be convinced. By late February, 1968, after a poll of New Hampshire GOP voters (paid for by Nelson Rockefeller), Romney had slid to a 6-1 position against Nixon. The Governor withdrew from the race on February 28, 1968 just weeks before the New Hampshire primary election (his wife, Lenore, heard of his decision on the radio.) For me, that withdrawal before any primary election voting was unnecessary and exhibited traits not associated with Romney--weakness and indecision. This fateful decision served the Governor badly and was central to the defeats yet to come.

Meanwhile, after my November, 1967 resignation from George’s staff, I got a Ford Foundation travel-study grant and then a life-changing post-graduate fellowship in the newly established Institute of Politics in the Harvard Kennedy School of Government for 1968-69.

I thought I was through with Governor Romney’s presidential ambitions, but I was wrong. That Spring of 1968, Rockefeller, once again, revved up his always ready, well funded, presidential machine only to have it sputter to a stop before the August 1968 GOP convention in Miami Beach. What I did not know at the time was that the Washington Romney team had hopes that Nelson would stumble during the run-up to the convention and that the GOP would turn to the Governor to “save” the party’s moderates from a Nixon nomination before the convention.

Early that summer in Cambridge, I was flabbergasted to receive an invitation (indeed a mandate) to attend the GOP Miami Beach convention as a member of the Romney convention staff. It wasn’t until I got there I found out that my assignment was to interview and determine from some of the Washington press corps, with whom I had professional and cordial relations, if George Romney had a chance to be chosen as Nixon’s candidate for Vice President. And, if so, how did they think Romney and his Washington strategy group and new staff might pull this off. I thought this plan absurd, but after 6 years serving with George Romney and my high admiration for him, I said I would do it. My first pre-convention meeting was breakfast with David Broder of the *Washington Post* who told me that this strategy was a fantasy and would hurt Romney. I then followed up with Bob Novak, *Inside Report,* Mary McGrory, *Washington Star,* Alan Otten, *Wall Street Journal,* Warren Weaver, *New York Times,* Bruce Biossat, *Newspaper Enterprise Association,* and Don Oliver, *NBC News,* and a few others. Those two days of my contacts the reporters I interviewed concluded—some vociferously--that this was a delusional strategy and would never happen. I reported this intelligence to the three Michigan members of the Washington strategy team: Dick Van Dusen, Bill Seidman and finance chair, Max Fisher. I recommended very strongly that they dump the VP nomination strategy and get on the Nixon team. I was not alone, it turns out that other team members had also talked with many GOP convention delegates who warned against those strategic moves. Of course, those recommendations were not listened to. What the Washington group, led by Len Hall, did do was double down and had George’s name placed in nomination for president. George did not endorse any other candidate (specifically, Nelson Rockefeller who had been an enormous help to the Romney campaign) during the lead up to the August convention or during it. Nixon was easily nominated with 55% of the delegate’s votes while the other “establishment” candidates divided up the rest of the delegates with 21% for Governor Rockefeller, 14% for Governor Reagan, and 4% each for Governors Jim Rhodes and Romney. It was embarrassing and disastrous for George (only 50 votes, 44 from Michigan and 6 from Utah). Now, the father’s failed strategy is apparently the same strategy being considered by his son, Mitt, in 2016.

So, the Washington strategists then had the Governor’s name placed in nomination for Vice President. Of course, he lost to Nixon’s choice, Spiro Agnew, by 1,119 (86%) votes to Romney’s 186 (14%). Another embarrassing, yet predictable failure.

After the convention, Romney went on to campaign for Nixon who after the election appointed him as Secretary of Housing and Urban Development—a basically unhappy experience for both Secretary Romney, President Nixon and the White House staff.

Son, Mitt, in 2012 made it through the GOP nomination, campaigned hard and suffered a loss which many believe still pains and galls him and his wife, Ann. This was a loss from which I do not believe Mitt and Ann have quite recovered. The Romney’s do not like to lose and are, in my experience with his father, unwilling to accept loses and will work harder than most to undo defeat. I believe George and Mitt with their unshakable Mormon faith and strong work ethic are fiercely dedicated to winning in both politics and business. Something which I, and many others, admire and applaud.

I don’t really know Mitt except through working six years with his father and seeing the many similar personality traits I detect in both men. But, since his 2012 defeat Mitt’s behavior reminds me of the desert ground squirrels common to the Utah desert. They pop out of their burrows when they sense opportunities or dangers and stand on their hind legs, sniffing, looking around trying to figure out the environment and, then, scuttle back into their burrows.

That’s what Mitt has been doing throughout the past three years, commenting, criticizing, suggesting and yet not committing to any of the GOP presidential candidates. His latest suggestion is that Donald Trump tax returns may have a
“bombshell” in them. The pattern is set, anticipate more “pop-up” episodes to come from an emerging presidential (or vice presidential) candidate, Mitt Romney.

My guess is that Mitt has retained much of his 2012 presidential fund raising and organizational contacts, and if required, they could spring into action during the next four months. They will certainly hold on until the July Cleveland Republican National convention begins. In any event, Mitt, like his father, will not endorse any other candidate before this process shakes out.

No one really knows at this point what the GOP primaries will produce and at least one of the candidates believes and says he will take this fight into the Cleveland Arena. But, as of this moment, it does not appear that Donald Trump will be denied the nomination.

So, the 2012 Mitt Romney strategy and fund raising team is in the readiness mode. Maybe this time what didn’t work for his father might, in a deadlocked convention, give Mitt the presidential nomination. His chances seem to me better than his fathers were. If that doesn’t work out, there is always a good shot at the Vice Presidential nomination.

How’s that for a “probability” theory? It is based on the shared experiences and traits of George and Mitt Romney, father and son, and both governors. They were successful businessmen and politicians who strongly believed, and one who still believes, that the presidency was their fate.

So, stand by.

Like father, like son?

 -30-