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Romney and Gingrich, from bad to worse



By [George F. Will](#), Published: December 2

Republicans are more conservative than at any time since their 1980 dismay about another floundering president. They are more ideologically homogenous than ever in 156 years of competing for the presidency. They anticipated choosing between Mitt Romney, a conservative of convenience, and a conviction politician to his right. The choice, however, could be between Romney and the least conservative candidate, Newt Gingrich.

Romney's main objection to contemporary Washington seems to be that he is not administering it. God has 10 commandments, Woodrow Wilson had 14 points, Heinz had 57 varieties, but Romney's economic platform has [59 planks](#) — 56 more than necessary if you have low taxes, free trade and fewer regulatory burdens. Still, his conservatism-as-managerialism would be a marked improvement upon today's bewildered liberalism.

Gingrich, however, embodies the vanity and rapacity that make modern Washington repulsive. And there is his anti-conservative confidence that he has a comprehensive explanation of, and plan to perfect, everything.

Granted, his grandiose rhetoric celebrating his “transformative” self is entertaining: Recently he compared his revival of his campaign to Sam Walton's and Ray Kroc's creations of Wal-Mart and McDonald's, two of America's largest private-sector employers. There is almost artistic vulgarity in Gingrich's unrepented role as a hired larynx for interests profiting from such government follies as ethanol and cheap mortgages. His Olympian sense of exemption from standards and logic allowed him, fresh from pocketing [\\$1.6 million](#) from Freddie Mac (for services as a “historian”), to say, “If you want to put people in jail,” look at “the politicians who profited from” Washington's environment.

His temperament — intellectual hubris distilled — makes him blown about by gusts of enthusiasm for intellectual fads, from 1990s futurism to “Lean Six Sigma” today. On Election Eve 1994, he said a disturbed South Carolina mother drowning her children “vividly reminds” Americans “how sick the society is getting, and how much we need to change things. . . . The only way you get change is to vote Republican.” Compare this grotesque opportunism — tarted up as sociology — with his devious recasting of it in [a letter to the Nov. 18, 1994, Wall Street Journal](http://bit.ly/vFbjAk) (<http://bit.ly/vFbjAk>). And remember his recent swoon over the theory that [“Kenyan, anti-colonial”](#) thinking explains Barack Obama.

Gingrich, who would have made a marvelous Marxist, believes everything is related to everything else and only he understands how. Conservatism, in contrast, is both cause and effect of modesty about understanding society’s complexities, controlling its trajectory and improving upon its spontaneous order. Conservatism inoculates against the hubristic volatility that Gingrich exemplifies and Genesis deplors: “Unstable as water, thou shalt not excel.”

Obama is running as Harry Truman did in 1948, against Congress, but Republicans need not supply the real key to Truman’s success — Tom Dewey. Confident that Truman was unelectable, Republicans nominated New York’s chilly governor, whose virtues of experience and steadiness were vitiated by one fact: Voters disliked him. Before settling for Romney, conservatives should reconsider two candidates who stumbled early on.

Rick Perry (disclosure: my wife, Mari Will, advises him) has been disappointing in debates. They test nothing pertinent to presidential duties but have become absurdly important. Perry’s political assets remain his Texas record and Southwestern zest for disliking Washington and Wall Street simultaneously and equally.

Jon Huntsman inexplicably chose to debut as the Republican for people who rather dislike Republicans, but his program is the most conservative. He endorses Paul Ryan’s budget and entitlement reforms. (Gingrich denounced Ryan’s Medicare reform as [“right-wing social engineering.”](#)) Huntsman would privatize Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac (Gingrich’s benefactor). Huntsman would end double taxation on investment by eliminating taxes on capital gains and dividends. (Romney would eliminate them only for people earning less than \$200,000, who currently pay just 9.3 percent of them.) Huntsman’s thorough opposition to corporate welfare includes farm subsidies. (Romney has justified them as national security measures — food security, somehow threatened. Gingrich says opponents of ethanol subsidies are “big-city” people hostile to farmers.) Huntsman considers No Child Left Behind, the semi-nationalization of primary and secondary education, “an unmitigated disaster.” (Romney and Gingrich support it. Gingrich has endorsed a national curriculum.) Between Ron Paul’s isolationism and the faintly variant bellicosities of the other six candidates stands Huntsman’s conservative foreign policy, skeptically nuanced about America’s need or ability to control many distant developments.

Romney might not be a Dewey. Gingrich might stop being (as Churchill said of John Foster Dulles) a bull who carries his own china shop around with him. But both are too risky to anoint today.

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