Dual biographies have achieved enduring favor in American politics. Popular personalities have included Hamilton and Burr, Grant and Lee, Lincoln and Davis, Brandeis and Frankfurter, Nixon and Kissinger, and many others. That popularity is not difficult to understand. The genre offers authors a unique opportunity to bring forth the details that comprise a life while capturing the broader trends that characterize a historical moment.

Alas, we lack a good contemporary dual biography. Certainly the times we live in are tumultuous enough to deserve one—one that might focus on two American politicians who reflect our age but who are different enough to illustrate the texture of the times.

One might conjure a pretty long listing of American politicians who might fill that role: Bush and Obama, perhaps, or even Cheney and Biden. But it would be hard to find a better pair for a contemporary dual bio than Pennsylvania politicians Rick Santorum and Ed Rendell.

Both now out of office, Santorum and Rendell are studies in contrast—politically, ideologically, and temperamentally. Santorum is a conservative Republican, a committed ideologue, an ardent cultural warrior, and a hugely polarizing figure. By contrast, Rendell is a liberal Democrat, pragmatic to the core, unmoved by cultural issues, and generally esteemed by both friend and foe.

While contrasting figures, they both rose in the famously hidebound Pennsylvania political culture, pursued their respective careers during the same period, and made their putative exits about the same time.

Perhaps most fascinating, they illustrate a double standard applied to some American politicians. Teflon-like Rendell can say just about anything that comes to his lips, however outrageous or bizarre, without qualm or controversy, while Santorum says little that doesn’t stick like glue and seems always to be mired in one controversy or another.

“Rendellisms” are legion and fast becoming legendary. One of his most recent was delivered on 60 Minutes in response to a question from Lesley Stahl inquiring how Pennsylvania’s casinos affect addictive gamblers. Said Rendell, “Those people (gamblers) would lose that money anyway . . . . You’re simpletons. You're idiots if you don't get that.”

Another recent zinger occurred after a Philadelphia Eagles game was postponed due to snow, prompting this Rendellism: “We've become a nation of wusses. The Chinese are kicking our butt in everything. If this was in China, do you think the Chinese would have called off the game? People would have been marching down to the stadium, and they would have been doing calculus on the way down.”

More recently, in a spat over economic and community development funding in Pennsylvania, Rendell called the new House majority leader, Republican Mike Turzai, “a maniac, a lunatic, and a hypocrite.” This apparently was Rendell’s bow to the new post-Tucson shooting civility.
And what portentous political repercussions accompanied all these? Exactly none, zero, zip! For Rendell there is no price to pay, no mea culpa to declaim. Indeed, the looser his lips, the more the press covets to cover him. Rendell, as the saying goes, “can’t get arrested” when it comes to saying too much, much too often.

Santorum, however, is another case. One imagines he could be facing prison time if caught jaywalking. The anti-Rendell, Santorum regularly and religiously gets himself into controversy with his remarks. He is a virtual lightning rod for dissension.

To be sure, Santorum is neither taciturn nor reticent. Like Rendell, he has few peers when it comes to off-the-cuff popping off. Probably his most infamous remark was his “man on dog” comment that seemed to link homosexuality with bestiality.

In 2005, he enraged critics with comments that compared a Democratic filibuster to “Adolph Hitler in 1942.” And his most recent contentious comment came this year talking about Obama’s pro-choice stance. Santorum appeared to make slavery and abortion moral equivalents, saying, “I find it almost remarkable for a black man to say, ‘We’re going to decide who are people and who are not people.’”

The list of immoderate, foolhardy, and just plain loony remarks both have made is lengthy. But Santorum is consistently nailed for them, while Rendell is likely to draw a chuckle or maybe a yawn.

The obvious question is why the difference?

Three explanations occur. One is the personality difference between Rendell and Santorum. Rendell is jocular, spontaneous, and unbuttoned, whereas Santorum is serious, sober, and buttoned down.

Then there are the cultural issues, which Rendell usually avoids or downplays, while Santorum tackles them head on to such a degree that some think he’s a homophobe and a racist.

Maybe policy explains some of it. Santorum’s remarks tend to be policy oriented, while Rendell’s outbursts seldom involve policy matters.

Or is it a question of the liberal press hanging the conservative Santorum out to dry while giving the liberal Rendell a pass? The press has duly reported Rendell’s outbursts but with little consequences. His remarks did not politically damage him at the time nor have they haunted his career later. In contrast, Santorum’s utterances have followed him relentlessly, probably harming his presidential ambitions.

And so we have two politicians: Rendell can say almost anything without consequences, while almost everything the other says spawns repercussions. This enigma tells us a lot about both of them, but it probably tells us most about contemporary American politics.

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