The Costs of Combat
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Among Republicans, it’s axiomatic: Protracted presidential primary battles in the spring tend to hurt the party’s chances for victory in the fall.

This year, however, that hoary maxim seems to have been turned on its head by the newer GOP conventional wisdom that prolonged nomination contests lead to stronger, battle-tested nominees who win in the fall.

Thus, the GOP, long known for its obsessive insistence on settling nomination contests early and quietly, is instead having an old fashioned shoot out. It’s one that’s likely to last a long time, provide the Obama campaign with lots of juicy ads, and burn a lot of time and money that might have been directed at Democrats in the fall.

Through all of this Republicans are having their family squabble, seemingly unconcerned for the cost such combat may incur. Just why they are doing so and what it might mean for the 2012 presidential election are questions worth pursuing.

To some extent, necessity is the mother of invention for a GOP blessed with an abundance of candidates and an absence of consensus. Leading GOP candidates seem determined to fight it out in any case, so why not make a virtue of what was once a vice?

But there is more going on here than a few feisty candidates fueling a nasty ideological struggle among warring wings of a political party. Many Republicans—perhaps a majority—are now convinced that a drawn out primary is not so bad and may be the way to win it all. Such a contest, they reason, will vet early and often the issues Obama will use in the fall.

One need not go back further than 2008 to discover the source of such thinking.

In 2008, Republicans wrapped up their nomination contest early, as planned and expected. By February, John McCain had the nomination within reach and clinched it outright by March 4. Republicans then settled down to watch Democrats presumably tear each other apart in a pitched battle between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama that lasted until June 3.

But a funny thing happened on McCain’s way to the White House. Obama emerged stronger, not weaker, from his vigorous struggle with Clinton. He went on to thump McCain in November, taking 53 percent of the popular vote to McCain’s 46 percent and winning in the Electoral College 356 to 173. If Republican’s did everything “right” and lost, Democrats did everything “wrong” and won. In the end, the tough economy and the unpopularity of George W. Bush mattered more to voters than the long, drawn-out battle between Obama and Clinton.
The disjunction between what should have been and what was in 2008 makes Republicans in 2012 willing, even eager, to host a drawn-out battle to settle their party’s nomination.

But they do so at their peril.

Yes, Democrats occasionally have combined contested primaries with ultimate fall victories. As noted, 2008 is the most recent example. The 1960 Democratic contest between Kennedy and Johnson is another instance. But just as often, bitter nomination battles have weakened the Democratic Party. One might argue that Democrats fare somewhat better than Republicans in throwing off the ill effects of party squabbles. But this is far from asserting that either party benefits from prolonged pre-nomination conflict.

Looking at the Republican Party specifically, modern history strongly suggests that extended nomination contests markedly diminish its chances of winning in the fall. Since the early 20th century, the GOP has recorded at least five presidential elections featuring protracted nomination fights: Roosevelt versus William Howard Taft in 1912; Willkie versus Dewey in 1940; Eisenhower versus Robert Taft in 1952; Goldwater versus Rockefeller and Scranton in 1964; and Ford versus Reagan in 1976. All five are redolent of the current 2012 contest. And in all but one—Eisenhower in 1952—the GOP was defeated in the fall, usually decisively.

The record is compellingly clear. When Republicans reach consensus on a candidate early, they fare better in November. When they don’t, they fare poorly—very poorly. Excepting Eisenhower, who was a war hero, the GOP has not won in modern times after a protracted nomination process. This bears repetition.

Excepting Eisenhower, Republicans have not won the presidency in modern times after a bruising primary fight.

Surprisingly, few Republicans are focusing on this historical fact. That they are not is largely because of the countervailing experience Democrats had during the Clinton/Obama contest in 2008. For the GOP, however, this could be a fatal mistake in 2012.

Actually, both parties have drawn the wrong lesson from 2008. In fact, sustained nomination contests are not good for either party. The real lesson of 2008 was that what Democrats sometimes survive, Republicans rarely do. It might be a lesson Republicans learn again in 2012.

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