The Comeback Kid
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by Dr. G. Terry Madonna and Dr. Michael Young

Bill Clinton and Rick Santorum have at least one thing in common--both have been known as the "comeback kid." In Clinton’s case it’s based on his near-death experience in the 1992 primaries followed by his amazing political rebound to win the Democratic nomination. In Santorum’s case, the moniker is based on his supposed record of come-from-behind wins against better-known and better-financed political opponents. Supposed is the key word, because a close reading of Santorum’s campaign history suggests the comeback kid persona is a myth--one perpetuated at every opportunity by the junior Senator himself.

Let’s start with the facts from his U.S. Senate races, beginning in 1994. The polling record, drawn from Keystone Polls, shows that Santorum has never been behind in any Senate race, the sole exception being the very early part of his 1994 race against incumbent Harris Wofford. In that contest, he was briefly behind in trial heat numbers: 38 percent to 24 percent in April 1994 when only 32 percent of Pennsylvania voters could recognize him. But into early October, he had pushed his name recognition to 70 percent and by late October he had a 42 percent to 32 percent lead.

But then the so-called comeback kid almost blew a ten-point lead after a pair of late campaign blunders; one was the celebrated verbal exchange with Theresa Heinz, then the widow of recently deceased and widely admired Republican Senator John Heinz and a Wofford supporter. Santorum followed up this feat of political virtuosity late in the campaign by calling for an increase of the social security age to 70--this in the state only second to Florida in proportion of senior citizens. On Election Day, he limped to a two-point victory.

Fast forward to the 2000 campaign: Santorum’s first re-election to the Senate seat taken from Wofford. His opponent that year was Democratic Congressman Ron Klink, a western Pennsylvania candidate, similarly conservative on abortion and gun control like Santorum himself. The comeback kid never showed up for this race either. Santorum was never behind Klink at any point in the race. The polling numbers tell the tale: he was ahead of Klink 45 percent to 25 percent in July, and held that lead all summer into October when he led 48 percent to 27 percent. Ron Klink was on the ballot, but he was never in the race. At the end of the campaign, Klink was still unknown by a whopping 42 percent of the voters. Yet, Santorum only won by seven points. Not much of a comeback kid.

So, Santorum has faced two very weak campaigners. Wofford hated to campaign and was bad at it. Klink was only a marginally better campaigner, never raised enough money, remained virtually unknown, but still came close.

Is Santorum just lucky to have had weak opponents so far? Does the appellation Senator Fade Fast fit better than the comeback kid moniker? More pointedly: is Santorum just a paper tiger?

Simple explanations like these are appealing, but undoubtedly they miss much of the complex picture Santorum presents as a candidate and politician. Several more nuanced conclusions are suggested from even a cursory review of Santorum’s previous races.
• Santorum is a smart politician and good campaigner. He is a superb fundraiser and a great organizer—with legions of loyal followers who have been regularly part of a substantial Santorum army. But, he is also capable of making huge mistakes at critical moments. The Wofford campaign serves as the best example. But even against Klink the race ended up closer than anyone expected.

• Santorum is not a closer. He regularly fumbles big leads or stumbles in the clutch. To some extent he also does not wear well with voters as the campaign runs on. Much of his electoral success has been based on running up big leads and then hanging on to win what becomes a close race.

• Santorum is a master at riding an incoming tide. His first congressional race against incumbent Democrat Doug Walgren in 1990 is illustrative. In that race, Santorum ran against the Washington establishment, presciently anticipating a full-blown conservative revolt four years later. By 1994, against Harris Wofford and with Gingrich Republicans sweeping into national power, Santorum had become the fiery ideologue running against entrenched big spending, big government liberals. Good timing has been a major element of his success.

• But good timing or even just good luck doesn’t fully explain Santorum’s success. Also worth mentioning, and there’s no other word for it, is Santorum’s sheer bravado. He believes he can be a giant killer; he is David, warring against Goliath and it’s a role he clearly relishes. This aspect of his success, his willingness to fight against the odds and against the advice of his friends, explains his stands today on many of the controversial issues he champions. Inside, Santorum, the consummate pol, lives a Don Quixote personality, regularly tiling at political windmills. He loves being the underdog, and plays the role well. He plays to win, but also dares to lose, and it is that paradoxical quality in him that confounds his supporters and bewilders his opponents.

There is some delicious irony lurking here: so far, the comeback kid persona has played mainly in Santorum’s own imagination. But now, far behind in the polls, up against a formidable opponent, and saddled with accumulated political liabilities from 12 years in office, he really has to become the comeback kid to keep his Senate seat. Beyond doubt, he believes he can do just that – indeed he believes he is already the comeback kid. His political career now depends on making that happen in the real world.