As a politician, Rick Santorum presents an enigma. While most politicians seek power by ingratiating themselves to voters, Santorum often does the opposite. While most seek favor by being favorable, Santorum often does neither. While most try to produce the widest consensus, attract the broadest constituency, and incur the least wrath, Santorum often takes a different path.

He says what he wants, when he wants, towhomever he wants. He seems not to care about popularity, approval, or applause. Once one of the most powerful politicians in America, Santorum has become America’s anti-politician—doing and saying exactly what it is supposed “real” politicians don’t do. Paradoxically, in doing the not done, he has propelled himself into a viable candidacy for the 2012 Republican presidential nomination.

Since his entry into the race, Santorum has attracted enormous national press attention. His fundraising efforts appear to be gaining momentum, and he has won important early straw votes, including a critical South Carolina test. Moreover, early withdrawals from the field, including Mike Huckabee, may now benefit Santorum among key Christian conservative supporters. Finally, Santorum’s performance in the critical South Carolina debate was highly praised. He seemed seasoned, comfortable as a candidate, and ready for prime time.

Is this early success despite Santorum’s prevailing image as the enfant terrible of American politics or because of it? Surely his political provocations have become legendary. Santorum regularly insults key constituency groups, alienates large swatches of voters (both Democrats and Republicans), and almost viscerally seeks controversy.

Here’s a small sample of “Rickisms”:

- Most famously, Santorum has equated homosexuality to adultery, bigamy, incest, child molestation, and zoophilia, notably coining the phrase, “man on dog” sex.
- In interviews, Santorum has stated “the right to privacy does not exist in the U.S. Constitution,” inferred by some to mean there are few if any limits on government to regulate private sexual behavior.
- Santorum has attributed the problems with Social Security to abortion: “The reason Social Security is in big trouble is we don't have enough workers to support the retirees. A third of all the young people in America are not in America today because of abortion, because one in three pregnancies end [sic] in abortion.”
- Santorum has blamed the Catholic Church’s sex scandal on “moral relativism,” a sick Boston lifestyle, and “cultural liberalism.”
- Santorum has compared abortion to slavery, adding that comparing the two was nothing new and he wouldn’t apologize
- Most recently, Santorum stated that Senator John McCain, who underwent horrendous torture in Vietnam, couldn’t understand why torture was necessary in the fight against al-Qaeda: “McCain
doesn’t understand how enhanced interrogation works. I mean, you break somebody, and after they’re broken, they become cooperative.”

So the former senator and wannabe president has broken just about all the rules. Yet although not quite thriving—his polls are still wobbly—he is doing just fine. In the inchoate mess that is the present GOP field, he is holding his own and then some.

So what gives? By every political convention, Santorum should be stone cold dead right now, yesterday’s news, a failed politician, and obnoxious to boot.

But he’s not. He’s not because he understands what others fail to grasp—that the GOP presidential nomination fight has become not just great political theater, but a genuine three-ring circus. And who better to look to for advice about running a circus than the great circus master himself, P. T. Barnum! Better known for his work with carnivals, sideshows, and assorted hoaxes, Barnum was also a politician. He served in the Connecticut legislature for two terms, was mayor of Bridgeport, and ran for Congress.

Barnum, in short, is the perfect role model for anyone running for the 2012 Republican presidential nomination. Santorum, of the odd dozen GOP aspirants, is the first to figure this out. That explains the otherwise inexplicable—why Santorum talks and acts as he does.

The conclusion is inescapable. Santorum has discovered Barnum’s secret—that the public loves a show and that one can say almost anything and someone will believe it. Santorum has also adopted and perhaps perfected Barnum’s abiding personal philosophy: “I don’t care what you say about me, just spell my name right.”

And that is what the ex-senator is doing superbly. He is putting on a good show—perhaps as Barnum might style it, “the greatest show on earth.” And he is saying just about anything, making sure his name gets spelled right in the reporting.

Santorum’s brilliant strategy is to grab the most attention he can, caring little for any negative fallout, hoping the other “acts in the show” get ignored while he basks in the limelight of outrageous notoriety.

Will it actually work? Can Santorum use P. T. Barnum’s tactics to steal away the Republican nomination, winning the chance to take on Barack Obama for the presidency? Given the utter pandemonium now prevailing among Republican aspirants, the palpable weakness of the field itself, and politics penchant for the unpredictable, who can say?

One thing seems certain, however. P. T. Barnum would be enjoying the show if he were here to see it and may be a tad envious he wasn’t running it himself.

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