The Resurrection of Rick Santorum
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It was only a matter of time. Apparently that time has arrived. Former Pennsylvania Senator Rick Santorum, once the U.S. Senate's resident enfant terrible, and more recently think tank habitué and op-ed columnist, is making news again. He's doing so by logging highly publicized trips to early 2012 presidential primary states, including Iowa and New Hampshire, suggesting he might run for president in 2012.

Santorum was known for many things in his time—his outré outspokenness, his passionate conservatism, and his outsized chutzpah among others. But he was never known for his sense of humor. Hence we must take seriously that he isn't kidding, and that he is running. The remaining question: how serious should we take him as a candidate?

At first blush the answer would seem to be not very. The conventional wisdom on Santorum is that he's a guy who had his moment. That moment is over and so is he. And that may be so. He has been out of electoral politics almost four years. Four years absence from politics today is a long time.

Moreover, while Santorum inspires near hero worship from many, others passionately despise him. Many revere him as an ideological giant, a stand up guy who says what he believes and believes what he says. Others, however, dismiss him as a political primitive, a homophobe, and a misogynist who has become a political museum piece.

Yet Santorum's history cautions against hasty dismissal of his political prospects.

There are, to be sure, many reasons Santorum might fail. He is an intensely polarizing figure. In office he made himself a virtual lightening rod for controversy on a wide variety of social and cultural issues, running the gamut from gay rights to working women to pedophile priests. He sometimes alienated key conservatives in his own party, generally angered moderates, and enraged liberals. Furthermore, he was a big loser in his last race by 18 points. Losers have trouble raising money for the next race, especially if that race is for the White House.

Nevertheless, Santorum has to be taken seriously as a candidate for the GOP nomination. There are eight key reasons he just might pull it off.

- **No Clear Consensus Nominee:** 2012 shapes up as the most open GOP presidential nomination in decades. Perhaps not since Wilkie in 1940 has the Republican nomination been so wide open as 2012 appears. That lack of an heir apparent gives Santorum a much more level playing field.

- **Nature of the Early Contests:** Given the ideological cast of early caucus and primary voters, Santorum looks very competitive. Throughout his career he has been the darling of conservatives around the country. Santorum has consistently articulated policies that will resonate with voters in an age in which conservative Republican Scott Brown won Ted Kennedy's Senate seat in Massachusetts. In his latest book, *It Takes a Family*, Santorum provides enough pro-family, anti-big government material to charm a lot of voters in the heartland.
- **Timing:** Santorum's political career has been about being a candidate at the right time and in the right place. Good timing has been a major element of his success. He is a virtuoso at riding an incoming tide. He won his U.S. Senate seat in 1994 by running in the best year for conservatives in 40 years. This year's parallels to 1994 ring eerily similar, convincing Santorum that 2012 will be an inspired moment to launch his conservative candidacy.

- **The Real Deal Factor:** Like 1994, conservatives are now galvanized, spoiling for a fight, and looking for a presidential candidate who's the real deal—not a hybrid look-alike, but a champion, bare knuckle fighter who has consistently espoused social conservatism and fiscal discipline. Santorum's that in spades.

- **The Other Guys:** Notwithstanding the fervent prayers of wishful Democrats, a Dick Cheney-Sarah Palin Republican ticket in 2012 will not happen. Mike Huckabee, an amiable fellow, has morphed from potential candidate to TV entertainer. Maybe Newt Gingrich or Mitt Romney can do it. But, as one political wag put it, Santorum has a "chance to put himself in a position to take advantage of an opportunity." And that opportunity is that the GOP field is unusually weak.

- **The Don Quixote Factor:** Santorum believes he can be a giant killer. He is David warring against Goliath, and it's a role he clearly relishes. His willingness to fight against both the conventions and the odds explains many of the controversial issues he champions. Inside Santorum, the consummate pol, lives a Don Quixote personality, regularly tilting at political windmills. He loves being the underdog and plays the role well. He plays to win, but also dares to lose. It is that paradoxical quality in him that confounds his supporters and bewilders his opponents.

- **The Fatigue Syndrome:** Voters aren't fatigued of Santorum the way they might be two years from now with Romney, Huckabee, and Palin. Those three gained lots of exposure during the 2008 presidential election. Since then they've worked hard to retain their share of the national spotlight, so much so that they might be overexposed-in effect, past their "sell-by-date." Some interesting research uncovered by the National Journal suggests the "freshness" factor might powerfully influence presidential elections.

- **Small is Beautiful:** Finally, what might be bad news for Republicans could be great news for Santorum. The GOP base has shrunk, while trending more conservative and less moderate. This could work in Santorum's favor because of his historically consistent socially conservative positions. True, it may also mean trouble in a general election. But a more conservative base of Republican voters participating in presidential primaries and caucuses augurs well for him in pursuit of the nomination.

If Santorum does run for president, a chilling historical parallel will be noted. The Republican Party once actually did give its nomination to someone who had recently lost a Senate race. The nominee, like Santorum, was a polarizing politician with strong views and a deeply rooted ideology. The year was 1860, his name was Abraham Lincoln, and his election kicked off the single most tempestuous period in American history. And for lovers of contemporary historical irony, Santorum, like Nixon, will have wandered in the political wilderness for six years before the 2012 presidential election.

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