A Choice Between the Truely Bad and Merely Awful
March 9, 2012

G. Terry Madonna & Michael L. Young

In Greek mythology it’s known as being between Scylla and Charybdis. Logicians sometimes call it Morton’s Fork. And ordinary folks refer to it as finding oneself between a rock and a hard place or between the devil and the deep blue sea.

Whatever you call it, the Republican Party has plenty of it. Super Tuesday’s not so super results have left the GOP in a semi-permanent quandary over their 2012 nominee—one that promises no early or easy resolution.

Among Republicans, this much is excruciatingly clear: the continuing fight is harming their chances for a November victory.

But is there a way to put their dilemma into an historical context that might illuminate the choices they now have or the hazards they face? Are there historical parallels that suggest how this nasty primary fight may end up and what consequences it may bring?

Indeed there are, but few of them will bring solace to anguished Republican leaders increasingly feverish to just “get this thing over.” Super Tuesday’s split decision among Romney, Santorum, and Gingrich puts the Republican Party on a collision course with political history that offers just two likely outcomes. One is bad; the other is worse.

The GOP’s merely bad outcome is to lumber on to the Tampa convention without a nominee but to end it amicably on the first ballot. Something like that happened to the Republican Party in 1976, during the Gerald Ford/Ronald Reagan nomination fight. In the last convention in which the nominee was not known until balloting started, Ford, a moderate, narrowly beat Reagan, heading the conservative wing of the party. Ford then went on to lose to Jimmy Carter by a two-point margin and the closest vote in the Electoral College since 1916.

Although it lost the presidency, the GOP managed to actually gain a seat in the Senate and lose just one in the House. So despite a serious schism among Republicans in 1976 and a rough nomination struggle, the amicable convention helped unify the party enough to hold Carter (who once had a 30-point lead) to a razor thin victory while preserving Republican strength in Congress.

Losing the presidency is a bad outcome, to be sure, but holding onto congressional seats helped ameliorate the loss, as well as set the stage for a GOP comeback just four years later.

A worse outcome for Republicans—in fact, a truly horrible outcome—would be to continue their knock-down, drag-out, old-fashioned cat fight all the way to the convention (and beyond), dooming not only the ultimate nominee but the party’s hopes for elections to come. In modern times, Republicans have so far avoided such political carnage, but Democrats have not been so lucky. In 1968, they had such a convention.
The eventual nominee, Hubert Humphrey, probably arrived at the convention with enough delegate support to win on the first ballot, even though he had not competed in most of the primaries. But the bitter divisiveness in the party, stemming from prolonged pre-convention battles among Humphrey, Senator Eugene McCarthy, and the assassinated Robert Kennedy, spilled onto the floor of International Amphitheater in Chicago and into the streets of the city. The ominous results were night after night of ugly violence and recriminations televised graphically to millions of stunned Americans who had never seen a contested convention.

In fact, Democrats probably lost the 1968 election before the convention even ended. In the end, a Republican Party considered all but dead just four years earlier, running a candidate, Richard Nixon, widely written off after his humiliating loss of the California governorship in 1962, beat Humphrey and the Democrats narrowly. As bad, Democrats lost five seats in the Senate and another five in the House. The party itself took at least eight more years to recover.

One ray of hope for the GOP in 2012 is the magnitude of Romney’s current delegate lead. So far he has accumulated some 419 delegates, meaning Santorum, as putative challenger, would have to win 65% of remaining delegates to win outright. This is unlikely and means the nomination, baring a Romney collapse, could be settled by May, obviating for Republicans the worst effects of a contested convention.

But countering this prospect is the gradually improving economy, jobs outlook, stock market, and Obama job approval rating. These factors in particular have made the job of defeating an incumbent Barack Obama harder than almost anyone expected six months ago.

Still, an Obama victory in 2012 is far from assured. The nascent economic recovery is still fragile. If the economy falters in the critical mid-summer months, Obama will be in deep trouble. The recent steep rise in gas prices alone underscores the tenuousness of both the economy and Obama’s prospects.

Nonetheless, Republicans, on balance, may be running out of options. The self-inflicted damage they have absorbed during their unfinished intra-party struggle may carry lingering consequences after the convention is over. Intra-party political combat always incurs costs, and those costs are mounting for the GOP in 2012. Avoiding the truly horrible by achieving the merely bad may now be the GOP’s best outcome.

Politically Uncorrected™ is published twice monthly, and previous columns can be viewed at http://politics.fandm.edu. The opinions expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of any institution or organization with which they are affiliated. This article may be used in whole or part only with appropriate attribution. Copyright © 2012 Terry Madonna and Michael Young.