Raising Cain
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G. Terry Madonna & Michael L. Young

Is Herman Cain going to win the GOP nomination? Maybe! Must he now be taken seriously as a credible candidate for that nomination? Unquestionably!

Leading or in second place in virtually every recent national poll, Cain is steadily gaining support while demonstrating impressive resilience. The question is no longer whether Cain is a serious candidate for president; the question is why.

A non-politician, virtually a political amateur, and an unconventional character to boot, Cain hardly fits the popular wisdom of the traditional GOP presidential candidate. And yet, there he is, not merely holding his own, but apparently becoming stronger as the race goes on. Not even a shaky debate performance and trouble explaining his now widely known 9-9-9 plan has slowed him down. The guy, as pols once said, “is a horse.”

The cynical explanation for Cain’s ascendancy is almost a commonplace: GOP voters find the 2012 field mostly uninspiring. But uninspiring fields are not that unusual in contemporary American politics; indeed, they frequently produce strong contenders in the ultimate fall contest. Even more pointedly, uninspiring fields don’t usually produce unconventional frontrunners. We need to look elsewhere for a full understanding of the Cain phenomenon.

Doing so produces two much more plausible explanations for why the GOP is—pardon the pun—“raising Cain” just now. Together they provide some insight into Cain’s unexpected prominence at this point in the race.

1. Opposites Attract—One of the least understood aspects of presidential politics is the degree to which American voters seek out polar alternatives to unpopular incumbents. Obama certainly has his advocates, and the 2012 election looks likely to be close. But by most measures he has bitterly disappointed a majority of voters and certainly failed most expectations. His job approval ratings hover in the mid-40% range, and his critical “re-elect numbers” linger ominously around 40%.

In such a setting, voters historically have often sought out presidential candidates dramatically different than the unpopular incumbents they oppose. The pattern, in fact, started early in national life. A few examples suffice.

An ebullient, democratic Thomas Jefferson followed the gloomy aristocratic John Adams in 1800. A popular Andrew Jackson succeeded the disliked John Quincy Adams in 1828. War hero William Henry Harrison displaced the devious Martin Van Buren in 1840. Down-to-earth Warren Harding replaced the out of touch Woodrow Wilson in 1920. In more modern times, the cheerful, optimistic Franklin Roosevelt supplanted the dour and pessimistic Herbert Hoover in 1932. The sunny and upbeat Ronald Reagan beat the doleful and gloomy Jimmy Carter in 1980. And, of course, the eloquent and charismatic Obama supplanted the disliked
and syntax-challenged George W. Bush.

This is not an argument that American presidents are always elected in some kind of grand yin and yang of presidential succession. In fact, a good number of presidents succeeding popular incumbents strongly resemble their predecessors in style and substance. But in those cases where the incumbent is unpopular, the successor is often distinctly different. At least some of presidential history can be understood as action and reaction to the last president.

This year Herman Cain seems to represent a classic instance of this pattern. Cain, a southern-born conservative and African American Republican businessman, would be running against Obama, a northern-born liberal and African American big-city Democrat. It’s hard to imagine two more polar opposite candidates running against each other.

2. None-of-the-Above Factor—The second explanation for Cain draws upon still another cyclical pattern in national politics: the none-of-the-above factor. It was exhibited by Ross Perot in 1992, John Anderson in 1980, George Wallace in 1968, Henry Wallace in 1948, and Theodore Roosevelt in 1912. The none-of-the-above factor typically arises as a wave of widespread contempt toward politics, government in general, and Washington in particular. Commonly the phenomenon has a driving motif, such as Perot’s national budget deficit arguments in 1992 or the economy this year. It also derives its energy from the perennial search for a third-party alternative to America’s reining two-party system.

Currently Cain is ensconced as a frontrunner approaching the early caucuses and primaries. He could still win it all, and that should not be discounted. But if he fails in the early GOP contests, what will he do? Will he run as a third-party candidate, becoming the Ross Perot of 2012 and transforming the race in the process?

Certainly most traditional politicians quickly fold a weak hand, hoping to play again another day. But Cain isn’t a traditional politician, and predicting what he will do is a perilous pursuit. His style in many ways evokes Perot—direct, straightforward, and uncomplicated. Also like Perot, Cain arrives on the national scene at a time when voters are looking for unconventional candidates—looking for none of the above.

In the end, that may be Cain’s legacy. If he does decide on an independent candidacy, he will inevitably alter the 2012 race, as did Perot earlier, with consequences likely to be as profound as they now are uncertain.

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