What Does Rick Really Want?
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Rick Santorum’s startling surge in Iowa to a near-first-place finish has stunned much of the political world. Governor Romney called it a “virtual tie,” and a virtual tie it was. For months the former U.S. Senator from Pennsylvania and putative Republican presidential candidate looked like a sure loser. His polls reflected single-digit support. He had little money, even less organization, and no chance of winning the GOP nomination—or so it appeared.

Now in the heady glow of his Iowa success, all of that has changed. Now he has to be seen as someone in the race to win it all. No more bad Internet jokes, no more “Senator Sanatorium,” as Tony Soprano once called him. Now it’s President Santorum, if you please, and on to the Tampa Convention.

Or maybe not!

Yes, Iowa has shown that Santorum needs to be taken seriously. But taken seriously for what? Certainly not the presidency! Santorum is virtually unknown outside of Iowa, where he has practically lived the past year, and Pennsylvania, which he once represented in Congress.

His Real Clear Politics national polling average going into Iowa was a whopping 4%. Even after Iowa he will still have little money or organization. What he does have, however, is a “ticket” to New Hampshire and probably South Carolina. After that, saving bus money for the trip home might be a prudent consideration.

This is not a particularly auspicious prognosis for a presidential candidate. It is, however, an entirely satisfactory scenario for a vice presidential candidate. All of which is fortuitous for Santorum, because running for vice president is exactly what he is doing.

There are some pretty compelling reasons to conclude that’s so.

First, Santorum can’t win the GOP nomination, and he certainly knows that. His base is too narrow, his funding is too fragile, and his message is too polarizing. Santorum’s focus on social issues misses by a mile the average voter’s concern about the economy. In presidential terms, he is a fringe candidate.

Second, Rick Santorum is no dummy. Yes, he says and sometimes does dumb things. The Terri Schiavo debacle comes to mind, and the phrase “man on dog” will forever evoke Santorum’s name. But he is also one of the shrewdest, most tenacious, and ambitious politicians of his generation. He may tilt at windmills once in a while, but he’s always known a windmill when he sees one.

Finally, well aware of modern GOP history, Santorum understands the overwhelming probability that the eventual nominee will be a moderate, centrist, establishment-type figure—very likely Romney—running on a jobs and economic growth platform. No Santorum-type conservative running on social issues is going to win
in 2012.

This stark reality poses a dilemma for Republicans. On the one hand, a moderate, centrist, Romney-type choice might be the GOP’s best chance to beat Obama. On the other hand, it leaves the party’s vital social conservatives out in the cold. Not good for social conservatives and ultimately not good for the Republican Party.

Enter Rick Santorum to make sure that won’t happen. Most social conservatives like him or at least tolerate him. Indeed, his success in Iowa was almost entirely due to the support of social conservatives. He’s a true believer, strong on the hot-button social issues, and the perfect balance to a ticket likely to need a lot of balancing. Maybe he’s not quite ready for the presidency, but the vice presidency will do just fine.

Moreover, Santorum might deliver Pennsylvania’s twenty electoral votes, which Obama probably must win for a second term. He becomes the Dick Cheney of 2012—a candidate Republicans need rather than one they love.

To do this, Santorum must now survive New Hampshire and get through South Carolina. Then he can drop out, play loyal Republican, and endorse the nominee.

Is Santorum thinking about all this? How could he not be thinking about it?

But it won’t be easy.

Staying in through South Carolina is going to be challenging given his modest resources and thin organization. Furthermore, there are other prominent social conservatives who could replace him. Bachmann is a possibility, and figures like Mike Huckabee, Mike Pence, and John Thune, among others, would probably satisfy conservatives for second place on the ticket.

But if Santorum is named and the Republicans do win in the fall, what kind of vice president would he be? Comparisons will inevitably be made to Cheney, but Joe Biden is a better model. Both have been presidential candidates, and both served in the Senate. Santorum, in fact, is Biden’s conservative counterpart. He’s as conservative as Biden is liberal and equally as voluble—meaning prone to say almost anything at almost any time.

One difference between them, however, may matter most. Biden at age sixty-nine and four years away from any possible run for president is unlikely to ever again seek the presidency. Santorum at age fifty-three is almost certain to run again.

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