Why did he lose so badly? And what does it mean now?

These two inextricably linked questions—why Rick Santorum lost his Pennsylvania Senate seat so decisively in 2006 and what it means for his presidential campaign in 2012—are increasingly being asked within Republican Party circles. In a party now obsessed with “electability,” Santorum’s own un-electability just six years ago in a key Electoral College state looms an urgent question. Indeed, it emerges as perhaps the central issue in Santorum’s still unlikely quest for the GOP nomination.

Why Santorum lost so lopsidedly in 2006 may be the easier to explain.

Santorum’s political persona is a study in timing. He has always ridden the political waves. First elected amidst a tumultuous flood of national change in the early 1990’s, he was defeated during a subsequent one 12 years later. On the way up, he personified the rising conservative movement; on the way down, he became the national symbol of discontent with Republican rule.

Electorally, Santorum has always been a shooting star. First elected to the House from a Democratic district in western Pennsylvania, he quickly gained notice as a member of the “Gang of Seven,” helping to expose the House bank scandal and working closely with Newt Gingrich.

Four years later, he ran for the Senate. As usual his timing was superb, catapulting into office in the huge Republican tide of that year. He quickly moved up the leadership ladder.

By 2004, he was one of the most powerful politicians in the country, closely allied to the Bush administration and sometimes mentioned as a presidential candidate himself. Yet only two years later, he suffered a stunning one-sided loss running for re-election. His trip from the political heights to the electoral depths was both sudden and short.

From a distance, Santorum’s fall evokes chords from classical Greek tragedy—a lesson on the hubris of power and the arrogance of ideology, or perhaps the revolutionary outliving the revolution.

But there was more to it. Many hard political facts also worked against Santorum in 2006, most notably the unpopularity of the Iraq War and Santorum’s close links to a president with historically low approval ratings. Through much of the campaign, Santorum was on the defensive. The one-time firebrand iconoclast metamorphosed into reactionary defender of the Washington status quo. It was a role thrust upon him—and one he did not wear well.
But Santorum was not merely the victim of a hostile political climate or an unpopular president. He also drew an imposing opponent in 2006, the scion of an iconic Pennsylvania political family. Bob Casey, Jr., son of the late, revered governor and a political force in his own right, was recruited specifically to defeat Santorum in a year that loomed disastrous for Republican incumbents.

Facing a formidable challenger, Santorum made his bad situation much worse. Frequently he seemed his enemies’ best friend, seemingly unwilling to temper his remarks or walk away from a fight. In 2002, he incensed both liberals and many Catholics by attributing sex abuse by priests to permissive liberalism. Equally controversially, he equated gay sex to bestiality and railed against homosexuals as immoral. For good measure, in a book published during the campaign, he questioned the propriety of working women and the necessity of two-income families.

In the process of these and other controversies, Santorum became an intensely polarizing figure, evoking stronger reactions from voters than almost any other contemporary politician.

So, why Santorum lost is reasonably clear. He was the wrong candidate with the wrong message running in the wrong year. Had he run a better campaign in 2006 he still would have lost, albeit much more narrowly. Casey’s 18-point victory was the largest ever for a Democrat running for Senate and the largest of any Senate challenger in 2006.

The remaining question is what Santorum’s spectacular loss in 2006 means in 2012. Is he, as some believe, a fatally flawed and self-destructive candidate destined to ultimately self-immolate his own candidacy? Is Santorum a ticking time bomb, whose only mystery is when he will blow himself up or whether he will take his party with him?

These are troubling questions for many Republicans.

Still, no one observing Santorum for almost a quarter century can doubt that he is a smart, canny, even cunning politician with a superb sense of timing and a shrewd ability to read trends and ride political tides. Santorum believes this is his time, and timing is his forte.

Moreover, few watching him during the past year have failed to be impressed with his enormous energy, disciplined focus, and growing confidence. A few short months ago the question “Can Santorum win?” could have been a punch line in a bad joke. Today many fewer are laughing at such a prospect.

And if Santorum does win the Republican nomination, 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 deeply rooted in controversy. The year was 1860, his name was Abraham Lincoln, and his election kicked off the single most tempestuous period in American history.

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