A favorite movie is Japanese film director Akira Kurosawa's classic Rashomon. In it four characters relate their versions of a horrifying rape and grizzly murder--each version uniquely colored by the narrators own view of the crime. In the end, we have one crime, but four versions of how it happened.

Pennsylvania Republicans may soon be scripting their own Rashomon as they try to figure out who is responsible for the political mayhem just suffered in the 2002 gubernatorial contest. By any measure of things, Mike Fisher got rubbed out.

And although his stunning loss to Rendell was not unexpected, it surely needs to be explained. It was one of the most lopsided outcomes suffered by any candidate of any major party in modern Pennsylvania history.

The question now is: who done it? And like the film Rashomon, the answer depends on whom you ask. To facilitate the discussion we have rounded up the usual suspects.

THE EIGHT-YEAR CYCLE DONE IT

A main suspect is the eight-year cycle--the much noticed historical pattern in which Pennsylvania voters kick the incumbent party out of the governor's mansion every eight years like clockwork. This sequence--eight years of one party followed by eight years of the other--has now continued for almost 50 years since 1954.

Undoubtedly, the eight-year cycle is real in the sense that a succession of eight-year party alterations could not have happened for half a century just by chance. The trouble is that--although theories abound--nobody knows for sure how to explain it.

Most likely the eight-year cycle is caused by a multiplicity of contributive factors--some better understood than others. The larger point, however, is that the cycle is a better description of things than an explanation. It tells us retrospectively what happened, but doesn't explain why. For that, we need to look further.

FISHER DONE IT

Another version is that the victim did himself in.

The gist of this is that Fisher was a poor candidate, bad on TV, zestless on the stump, boring, boring, and boring. And there is some truth to this. Mike Fisher is not Mr. Excitement. Charismatic is not a word anyone would use to describe him--and TV is not a natural medium for him.

But it is easy to take this too far. Fisher after all had been a very successful politician for over 20 years. More a political journeyman than a political master, he has, nevertheless, consistently got the job done. The winner in four successive State Senate races, he was also the Republican nominee for Lt. Governor in 1986, and he has
won twice in statewide runs for Attorney General. In addition, the Fisher campaign itself has been mostly well conceived and well executed.

Bottom Line--Fisher was not a great candidate, but neither was he the candidate from hell some are now painting him. It's more complicated than that.

LACK OF A PARTY PRIMARY DONE IT

The charge here is that Republican leadership forced Fisher on a party not enthusiastic for him. This has some plausibility. Early on even some establishment Republicans signaled their discomfort with Fisher. And early polls showed that Fisher was far from a solid choice among rank and file Republicans.

But in avoiding a primary the GOP was following a game plan that had worked brilliantly for them in the past. The advantages of skipping a primary can be substantial. Saving money is one of them. Millions can be salted away for the general election.

Avoiding a primary also means the eventual nominee is not bloodied and bruised by negative ads that voters remember long after primary day. And bitter rifts among party supporters are less likely without a primary, so unity is easier to achieve.

But every rule has its exception--and this year might have been it for the axiom that contested primaries are to be avoided. Consider the costs incurred.

Crucial was the loss of many moderates and women in the party--offended by what seemed a transparent effort to deprive voters from making a choice between Hafer and Fisher. Hafer herself ultimately endorsed the Democrat nominee--a defection that symbolically hurt the campaign.

There were other costs as well. Fisher was a candidate who could have used a good primary--to become better known--and to compete for media attention with Rendell who virtually owned the media from January to September. Rendell clearly benefited from his struggle with Bob Casey. It's hard to believe that Fisher might not have gained similarly from a primary.

RENDELL DONE IT

This is surely the most obvious explanation for the Republican defeat: the charismatic candidate factor--Ed the Rock Star.

As a candidate type Rendell is rare in Pennsylvania politics. Candidates like him come along maybe once a generation--John Heinz in the 1980's or Governor William Scranton in the 1960's. Before them, you have to go back to the 1930's or 1940's to locate similar charismatic candidates.

Politically, he has achieved things once believed impossible. He is perhaps the first statewide Democratic candidate ever to have broad appeal to the business community. And his domination of the huge Philadelphia media market is virtually unprecedented. Rendell's base, as a former Philadelphia Mayor, was before him a virtual political death certificate.
So, those looking for reasons for Fisher's loss will find plenty of them in the person of his opponent. Rendell is without doubt a political phenomenon. But, too, much can be made of Rendell's political prowess.

Certainly he didn't seem like an inevitable winner at the beginning of the campaign. He is the same candidate after all who lost unimpressively in the 1986 primary to the future Governor Casey and then equally unimpressively in 1987 in Philadelphia's mayoralty. He also is the same candidate who many Republicans couldn't wait to run against earlier in the political year. And he is the same candidate who truth be told came into the gubernatorial this year with plenty of baggage. The fact that it didn't slow him down tells us less about Rendell then about other factors operating in the race. He can't be our only suspect.

So where does that leave us: four explanations of things--each of them interesting alone--but perhaps all of them necessary to explain the 2002 gubernatorial election.

- First, history was not on Fisher's side this year. The eight-year cycle seems powered by geopolitical forces that well may be beyond the capacity of any one candidate to overcome. Fisher became the status quo candidate at the point in the cycle most auspicious to change. The cycle rolls on as one of the most compelling aspects of Pennsylvania politics.

- Second, Mike Fisher himself was not a great candidate. But neither was he awful. In fact he was a pretty good candidate -- and being pretty good was good enough for most of his distinguished career. This time it wasn't.

- Third, both state parties needed a primary this year--to field test their candidates and to achieve consensus. But only the Democrats had one. Avoiding a primary robbed Republicans of the one vital resource they must have to win statewide in Pennsylvania's focus and intensity.

- And finally, Rendell is a political original. There is no obvious way to beat him, and he can beat you so many ways. Any candidate of any party running against Ed Rendell this year was ipso facto in trouble.

The Governor Elect is a sports fan and appropriately enough a baseball metaphor might sum up the election best: pitching against Rendell, Fisher and the Republicans needed to throw a perfect game. They didn't.

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