Mark Twain, the celebrated American writer was born in 1835, a year that recorded an appearance of Haley’s Comet—a periodic meteor that reoccurs about every 76 years. Twain is quoted in his biography as saying: I came in with Haley's Comet in 1835…and I expect to go out with it. The Almighty has said…'now here are these two unaccountable freaks; they came in together, they must go out together.

Twain was dead right. He died days after the next Haley’s appearance in 1910.

It’s not known whether Rick Santorum, the celebrated American politician, dates the rise and fall of his congressional career with respect to any astronomical signs, but his meteoric climb and sharp fall was certainly comet-like; Santorum arrived as a shooting star, and now departs the US Senate a falling star.

First elected amidst a tumultuous wave of national change, he was defeated during a subsequent one. On the way up, he personified the rising conservative movement—on the way down he became the national symbol of discontent with Republican rule. In between Santorum’s mercurial rise and his almost equally spectacular fall is 12 momentous years of American political history.

Santorum’s career is central to the epoch; indeed, both his ascent and fall almost exactly brackets the period; from his rise to his demise, he came to represent the era both for those who adored him and those who reviled him. Santorum’s electoral history actually began some 16 years ago in 1990, when he was first elected to the House from a Democratic district in Western Pennsylvania. He spent four frenetic years in the House where he quickly gained notice working closely with Newt Gingrich.

By 1994, Santorum was ready to run for the Senate and his timing was fortuitous. He catapulted into office in the huge Republican tide of that year. In the Senate, Santorum—despite his confrontational style and often brash personality—quickly moved up the leadership ladder, becoming the third ranking Republican leader by 2001.

By 2004, Santorum was one of the most powerful politicians in the country, closely allied to the Bush administration and sometimes mentioned as a presidential candidate himself. But only two years later, he suffered a lopsided loss. The trip from the political heights to the electoral depths was both sudden and short.

It is tempting to explain Santorum’s fall as grand political tragedy: a case of the revolutionary outliving the revolution; a lesson on the hubris of power and the arrogance of ideology.

But there is more to it. Many hard political facts also worked against Santorum, most notably the unpopularity of the Iraq war, and his close link to a president whose approval ratings sit at historically low levels. Through much of the campaign, Santorum was on the defensive: the firebrand iconoclast of 1994 mutated into the reactionary defender of the Washington status quo in 2006. It was a role thrust upon him—and one that did not fit well.
But Santorum was not merely the victim of an adverse political climate or an unpopular President. He has often been his enemies’ best friend, seemingly unable 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 has equated gay sex to bestiality, and railed against homosexuals as immoral. More recently in his book, It Takes a Family: Conservatism and the Common Good, 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 that evokes stronger reactions from voters than almost any other contemporary politician. Perhaps nothing illustrates the provocative nature of Santorum’s Senate career better than the enigmatic way he ended it. In the final three weeks, faced with dismal polls and bleak prospects for reelection—Santorum threw caution to the wind by delivering the widely publicized “Gathering Storm” speech. Evoking Winston Churchill’s famous warning of the rise of fascism, the Senator warned about the growing threat of Islamic extremists. The speech was bold and daring. It was quintessential Santorum, and it probably ensured his defeat.

So, why Santorum lost is reasonably clear. He was the wrong candidate with the wrong message running in the wrong year. But the battle to define what his loss means has just begun. Conservatives and others who supported him will try to localize the significance of Santorum’s loss. They will argue that he became politically careless, alienated too many interests, and was often self-destructive. Nothing about Santorum’s defeat, they will argue, should be read to infer trouble in the conservative coalition or rejection of conservative principles.

But this seems a line of argument with limited persuasive power. Santorum was the go-to guy between the GOP and its social conservative coalition. The social conservatives have suffered a body blow from his loss. But even that doesn’t cover the damage. In addition to being an unabashed defender of conservative policies, no senator has been more identified with the President’s agenda. Santorum has come to symbolize the social conservative wing in the Republican Party more than anyone in high office today.

The remaining question about Santorum is whether we have seen the last of him. Will this defeat be the final chapter in a 16 year epic that saw both him and his party soar to giddy heights? Many believe his political career is over. No Pennsylvania politician in modern times has ever lost a Senate seat and come back to be reelected. Additionally, his opportunities in Pennsylvania are limited. Another Senate seat does not come up in Pennsylvania for four years, and it is currently held by Republican Arlen Specter. Similarly the next governor’s race is four years away.

Some have speculated that Santorum may run for president in 2008. That belief has been fueled by his Churchillian turn to foreign policy and radical Islam during the final days of his campaign against Bob Casey. But a Santorum run seems a long shot at this point. Would any party give their presidential nomination to someone who can’t win in their home state?

Still, if Santorum does run for president, a chilling historical parallel will be noted: the Republican Party once actually did give its nomination to someone who had just lost a Senate race. The nominee, like Santorum, was a polarizing politician with strong views and a deeply rooted ideology. 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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