

All About Fear

By Mel Lavine

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In 1964, when I was a graduate student in journalism at Columbia University, I interviewed James A. Farley. He had been Franklin Roosevelt's campaign manager and postmaster general in the 1930s. ("As Maine Goes so Goes Vermont," he told the press on November 4, 1936, after correctly predicting that Roosevelt would carry 46 of the 48 states then in the union in that presidential election.)

The paper I was writing was on TV and politics. I'd called on the seventy-six-year-old Farley to help me understand how TV, the new electronic media, had re-shaped political campaigns since his time when most people got their news from print and radio. Perhaps, I thought, the old pol would have insights about the new electronic medium.

I wanted to know if he agreed with the conventional wisdom that TV had changed the rules of the game?

To my surprise, he said no, not really, and not fundamentally. The same old rules applied. Citing the Roosevelt landslides in the depression years of the 1930s, he said people voted their fears, and always have. When people vote they vote against someone or some thing they fear. Technology aside, the principle still held.

After 1932, Democrats held power for a generation running against Herbert Hoover. Republicans have done as well running against socialism. And so on.

The conversation with Farley came to mind when I watched the Republicans debate on Monday. It was all about fear.

Gov. Rick Perry of Texas had scared the Republican elite with his assault on Social Security by calling it a Ponzi scheme. Consequently, the party elders, the New York Times reports, are beginning to coalesce around Perry's principal rival, Mitt Romney, the former governor of Massachusetts, though in this debate, Perry seemed to back away from the allegation.

Perry pledged that the people who are on Social Security have nothing to fear. The program would stay in place for them.

Former Minnesota governor Tim Pawlenty, who dropped out of the contest after a poor showing in the Iowa straw vote, is now backing Romney. The move is seen as a “signal in the battle for the party’s soul” between traditional party leaders and grass-roots, Tea Party conservatives, according to the Times.

The G.O.P. peerage remembers that George W. Bush made a move to privatize Social Security but dropped the subject when the country rose up in fury.

□ Just as old Jim Farley said, people are moved by their fears.

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