Who is Mitt Romney?

By Mel Lavine

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“A Life Hidden Behind the Adjectives,” is how the New York Times framed it in a review of a new biography, “The Real Romney,” by Boston Globe reporters Michael Kranish and Scott Helman.

I have not read the book, but in her article about it, Michiko Kakutani, an American Pulitzer-Prize-winning critic for the New York Times, points out that journalists have described Mitt Romney “as robotic (not unlike Al Gore), father-haunted (not unlike George W. Bush), disdainful of hands-on politicking (not unlike Barack Obama) and capable of complete flip-flops on hot-button issues (not unlike Newt Gingrich).

“He has been hailed,” she adds, “for his analytic business skills as a turnaround specialist, and assailed as a job-killing vulture capitalist; lauded for his skill in getting health-care legislation passed in Massachusetts and criticized by both the left and right for subsequently trying to distance himself from that achievement.”

Is there a core to the man, or should we dismiss him as another charlatan? According to Kakutani, the authors write that in his campaign against the liberal Ted Kennedy for the U.S. senate in 1994, he dumped ideology for strategy; whatever worked was the credo.

We learn from Kakutani’s review that Romney had joined the Republican party only the year before the race against Kennedy, and had supported Democratic Congressional candidates and Paul Tsongas, a radical liberal., in the Democratic primary in 1992.

Small wonder there is unease among Republicans. A few days from an important primary in South Carolina, Mitt Romney, the recognized front-runner, under pressure to release his tax returns, acknowledged he pays a tax rate of around 15 percent. This is a great deal less than people making $50,000 or $75,000 or $100,000 a year.

Almost all of his income, Romney explained to reporters on Tuesday, comes from investments made in the past, capital gains on mutual funds, his post-retirement share of profits and

investment returns from Bain Capital, the company he once headed, and hundreds of thousands of dollars from speaking engagements ($41,592 per speech) from February 2010 to February 2011. He also earned a small amount from a book but that money he gave away. According to the New York Times story, President Obama "paid an effective federal tax of just over 26 percent on his 2010 returns, the most recent available."

Romney's good fortune, which he shares with other people of great wealth, stems from a radical shift to the right in federal tax policy in the 1990s and widened a good deal more when George W. Bush was in the White House. According to the Times, as a result of the change in federal tax policy, income on investments have been taxed at much lower levels than wages and salaries that make up the earnings for the great majority of people.

Romney might not have been so eager to acknowledge his tax rate had his rivals not pushed him hard to release his tax returns in their debate on Monday night. Romney looked rattled, like a bad actor who'd forgotten a line in his script. "I'm not opposed to doing that," he said. "Time will tell."

After a night to sleep on it, he told reporters in the morning that the April tax season seemed to be the "traditional" time to do so, in step with presidential contests in the past.

Gobbledegook. It doesn't take a political scientist to see that by April the people in South Carolina and Florida would already have voted, as his rivals have pointed out, and the

Republican game is over.

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