A Politician's Worst Enemy

By Mel Lavine

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"We are Republicans, and don't propose to leave our party and identify ourselves with the party whose antecedents have been Rum, Romanism, and Rebellion." So said the Reverend Samuel D. Burchard, speaking for a delegation of clergymen calling upon James G. Blaine, the Republican Presidential candidate, in New York on October 29, 1884.

According to the "Complete Book of U.S. Presidents" by William A. Degregorio, Blaine listened passively, and the remark was left unchallenged. Blaine's silence cost him New York's crucial Irish Catholic vote and, say historians, the election.

On the other hand, a politician's worst enemy can be his own mouth.

In our own time there is such a Republican candidate. Ric Santorum created an uproar when he said he wanted to "throw up" after reading President John F. Kennedy's speech affirming the first words of the First Amendment to the Constitution. They declare, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof..."

Santorum's intemperate attack on John Kennedy's 1960 speech could have been delivered by Elmer Gantry, the charlatan preacher in a novel by Sinclair Lewis.

Later Santorum said he wished he had used different language, but clung to his argument: people who want to express their faith in the public square are not welcome, even oppressed.

In an interview with the New York Times, Catherine E. Wilson, a political scientist at Villanova University, said that by talking about matters of faith so often, Santorum seemed to come across as "more preacher than presidential contender." It can be a turnoff for many Catholics and others. "People want politicians to have faith, but they don't necessarily want to be hearing it all the time," she said.

This view was ratified in new surveys. Although many primary voters share Santorum's Catholic faith, they are not following him in overwhelming numbers. In fact, more Catholics supported Mitt Romney, a Mormon, in 10 of the 12 states where Edison Research canvassed people after they voted. The survey found that in most of the contests Santorum's most reliable base has been evangelical Protestants, some Tea Party supporters, and the very conservative.

On Monday, Santorum attempted to make gainful use of a confrontation with a New York Times reporter. "If you haven't cursed out a New York Times reporter during the campaign," he said on *Fox & Friends*, "you're not a real Republican." He asked listeners for a $30 offering.

The reporter, Jeff Zeleny, had the temerity to push the ex-senator on his claim that Romney is "the worst Republican in the country" to take on President Obama. In a debate on CNN in January, Newt Gingrich scolded anchor John King for raising questions about the ex-speaker's marriage to a former wife.

Gingrich's arrogance – like Santorum's – may have cheered supporters, but this is another case where a politician's mouth is his worst enemy. For Gingrich and Santorum, my guess is that this is their last hurrah. As for Mitt Romney, remains to be seen.

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