

Religious Rhetoric: Mitt Romney's "Tour de Farce"

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Aimed directly at the heart of America's bewildering mosaic of religious fundamentalism voter groups, Mitt Romney's presidential campaign stumbled in London, staggered into Jerusalem stalking the extreme US right-wing neocon voter from Britain to Israel to Poland and beyond.

With an appearance of ice-cold calculation, the architects of Romney's presidential strategy used Romney's overseas visits to zero in on the radical religious fundamentalists populating Red State America, a geographical area that is now known globally as "The Middle of Nowhere" described as such only days ago by David Cameron the Prime Minister of Great Britain.

After consulting his augurs and oracles who incessantly scan, scrutinize and survey polls of the American right, Romney discovered that his Olympic credentials – tenuous as they may seem – appeal to the fundamentalist right, for whom sport is a lingering mixture of warfare and pagan nature worship — and the Olympics evoke a vision of Paradise where the lanes are literally paved with gold medallions. At exactly that precise moment when the penny dropped about the Olympiad-religion, the Romney plan for his *tour de force* was hatched. The Republican presidential hopeful would first visit the UK, then the Middle East to bask in the reflected glory of the London Olympics, then race off to the Holy Land to exploit the Western Wall of Jerusalem as a backdrop for a photo op (although in some photos without wearing the de rigeur Yarmulke) metaphorically to declare war on Iran and then drop in on Poland to lock arms with staunchly conservative Roman Catholics and declare the launch of Cold War II against the atheistic Russians. In the process, many observers felt that Romney had gone beyond the protocol limits of what a senior US personage, in his case running for President, would say 'in foreign lands' and with foreign officials.

Along Romney's merry way, no opportunity would be overlooked to project the image of a deeply religious candidate in order to contrast starkly with Barack Hussein Obama the first and only American president to abandon regular church attendance during his presidency – confirming the certainty of the fundamentalist right that he is surely a tightly closeted Muslim. Romney's presidential strategy is predicated on his religious piety, his sanctimonious psyche and his self-righteous religiosity, even his chest-thumping Mormon ideology a subject that of this writing has been far from closely explored.

The geography of America's Religious Right is rife with political complexity: extending from the Protestant outreaches in the South and the Great Plains, occupied by the followers of Oral Roberts, Jimmy Swaggart and Jim Bakker to the Roman Catholic realms of Rick Santorum in Pennsylvania and Opus Dei in New York and Washington DC, to the ultra-orthodox Jewish communities in Brooklyn, Queens as well as those orthodoxies scattered across the heartlands of America with a contingent in Florida.

Advised on diplomacy and foreign relations by the ilk of John Bolton, Coffer Black and a host of jobseekers from the hyper-religious Bush administration, Romney presents a foreign policy that reveals him to be a genuflecting textbook neoconservative of the far-far right.

However, Romney does have one major problem with religion that tends to dwarf most of his other political difficulties. Romney's fundamentalist political dissonance runs deeply into the mind of the American psyche — because he is a Mormon. As a Mormon, Romney is so far beyond the mainstream of American fundamentalist ideology that Franklin Graham, one of America's most vocal haters of Barack Obama, declared that the Republican presidential hopeful was "Not a Christian" strictly because of his genetic Mormonism. The fragile thread of a fearsome authoritarian power cannot hold the jagged fracture in the crazy quilt of American religious peculiarities against the 'heretical' (in their minds) Mormon Church of Latter Day Saints. Mormonism stands apart, not a torn seam, but a schismatic fault line that isolates religious extremists of many hues, tones and colors from the self declared certainty of their religious beliefs.

To alleviate this potentially fatal flaw in their candidate's Republican profile, Romney's handlers drew up a plan that began with what they deemed to be the low-hanging fruit – the London Olympics. This London launch was a tragic mistake straight out of the nineteenth century when Mark Twain published, *The Innocents Abroad*, a travel book that became the author's most popular bestseller. Twain chronicled the humorous exploits of a group of innocent Americans aboard the *USS Quaker City* when they toured Europe and the Middle East in 1867.

Twain's tour was billed as "The Holy Land Expedition." Romney's tour could have used exactly the same billing. Beginning in London, Romney alighted into an explosive firestorm he ignited all by himself when he assaulted the sensibilities of the British by needlessly stating that London might not be ready to stage the Olympics. How much an innocent abroad Romney was then!

Romney's comment was interpreted quite correctly as a profoundly gratuitous insult to a city, a people and a culture that represent a stunning millennium of unbroken continuity underpinning their glittering iconic traditions. Thus, Romney instantaneously became the target of a particularly painful and pulverizing verbal and written assault by the denizens of Fleet Street. The feeding frenzy was vicious. It surpassed the savagery of the scene in *You Only Live Twice* when Ernst Stavro Blofeld feeds Helga Brandt to his starving school of pet piranhas for failing in her attempt to kill James Bond. The atmosphere surrounding Romney in London immediately turned into an incarnadine shade of diplomatic crimson.

Although the Queen said nothing whatsoever about the Romney Insult, Britons could tell that Her Majesty was not amused – not even slightly. Prime Minister David Cameron returned insult for insult by damning Romney's perceived and self-promoted Olympic grandeur as trivial due to the locale in Salt Lake City now known in London and the world over as, "the middle of nowhere." London Mayor Boris Johnson called out "this guy, Mitt Romney" before an incensed throng of 60,000 fans assembled in London's shining new Olympic Stadium. To give these putdowns their context, consider for a moment the fact that both Cameron and Johnson are Tories/Conservatives.

In London, the world's largest daily newspaper, with a circulation of five million, Rupert Murdoch's notorious, *The Sun*, proclaimed, "Mitt the Twit," an honorific that Romney will never live down. *The Times* echoed Cameron, labeling Romney "Nowhere Man." The

counterattack of Fleet Street was simultaneously fierce and searing.

Before he realized what was happening to him, Romney was folded, shredded, spindled and mutilated – the modern equivalent of being beheaded, drawn and quartered and boiled in oil to be fed to the dogs on the docks and the sharks slithering along just below the surface of the Thames. As far as Britain is concerned, in fact as far as Europe and most of the rest of the world are concerned, Mitt Romney is deader than the proverbial doornail.

No matter, however, the people back in Peoria, Duluth, Omaha and Salt Lake City will never notice what took place in London. They don't read anything but the blandishments of the American press, and they don't care what Romney did in London although they should. After his serial disasters in London, Romney fled with his besieged retinue to seek refuge in Israel.

In the Holy Land, Romney swiftly and fervently embraced the logic of a new US war with Iran, his next *faux pas* that sent Foggy Bottom into diplomatic paroxysms and awakened the rest of the world to the dangers he represents for international security and the global economy. Many now expect to see rising prices at the gas pumps all across America in direct response to Romney's belligerent bellicosity in Jerusalem. But that was not all. Not by a long-shot.

Hounded by the Jerusalem press for his plan to hold a fundraiser sans media coverage, Romney blundered into Israel hoping to hold a luxurious dinner party on Tisha B'Av, a solemn day of fasting and mourning. To recover from this horrendous gaffe, Romney decided to transform his fabulous feast into a much more modest fundraising breakfast two days after the fast day.

In the meantime, Romney performed like an oddly embarrassed American neophyte in a very weird photo opportunity with Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu. Both men acted stiff, chastened and wooden – which is not that unusual for these two, but this joint appearance was one of the clumsiest attempts at diplomacy in world history. Even though these two right-wing politicians have known each other for over twenty years, their appearance sent shivers down the spine. Romney haltingly mouthed support for Netanyahu's neocon policies, leaving no room for misinterpretation, but when he uttered the word "Peace," the Israeli Prime Minister visibly blanched and then smiled to paper over Romney's failure to grasp that peace is Obama's policy – not Netanyahu's.

For the first time on his tour, though when Romney visited the Western Wall and made a speech on Temple Mount, he found a friendly audience populated by Israeli neoconservatives from the nation's Haredi community, the Israeli equivalent of the fundamentalist flocks of John Hagee, Pat Robertson, Oral Roberts and Billy Graham combined.

Most of what Romney says at any given moment on foreign policy is boilerplate Neocon vintage circa 2003. Romney uttered the *de rigueur* hawkish castigations of Iran as a nation of violence-prone Mullahs eager to get their restless and trigger-happy hands on nuclear weapons. The Haredi audience responded warmly with standing ovations for Romney. Romney left no room for doubt on Temple Mount. When Romney becomes President, war will rain down on Iran and an undivided Jerusalem will be the capital of Israel.

Romney's kinetic hawkishness contrasts sharply with the more astute diplomatic policies of

the Obama administration. While Romney defaults to bombs in place of diplomacy, the Obama administration urges diplomacy instead of war, an unthinkable concept in Romneyworld.

Everywhere Romney went in Israel, he assured people that he would be a far firmer and faster friend of Israel than Barack Hussein Obama. The Israeli right was visibly relieved as they hailed Romney with lavish applause and cheers of approval.

For his hawkish comments in Jerusalem, though Romney was assailed by a violent hailstorm of negative comments in the global press and media that was most intense in China and Iran. In Tehran, Mahmud Ahmadinejad ridiculed Romney for 'kissing Israel's foot.' China's Xinhua agency reported that Romney's hawkish outbursts were aimed at the Jewish bloc of voters for the November election.

At the fundraising breakfast, Romney agreed to permit press coverage only at the last minute. To make matters even more farcical, the controversial casino billionaire Sheldon Adelson made his appearance where he reportedly acted like the host of this \$50,000 per ticket event.

Adelson's presence is now haunting Romney's campaign. Adelson is massively wealthy. In addition to his casinos in Las Vegas and Macau, Adelson owns the largest daily newspaper in Israel. Called *Israel Hayom* (Israel Today), the free newspaper has a daily circulation of 500,000 print copies, making it by far the largest in the tiny nation. *Israel Hayom* has published several long and laudatory articles about Romney, and they ran a full transcript of his Jerusalem speech.

For his final gaffe in Israel, Romney insulted the Palestinians by insinuating they were lazy, stupid and incompetent because their per capita GDP was lower than Israel's - ie. because they are poor. Not only did this reveal Romney's intellectual limitations, it made him appear to be callous at least and racist at worst. Saeb Erekat the leading Palestinian negotiator, shot back with a sharp repudiation of Romney's inflammatory statement. Experts are now suggesting that the impact of Romney's stunningly reckless remarks will lead to a sharp rise in gas prices at the pump in the USA after Arab principalities take his pro-Israel prejudices into consideration when they set the price for crude oil. Neocons simply can't seem to remember the Energy Crisis of 1974.

It is safe to assume, though, that Romney's performance in Israel will re-enforce his strength with the right-wing of the American Jewish community. Even so, Romney has a very difficult task in unseating Obama within the American Jewish community. A recent poll of the US Jewish community was published in the *Jerusalem Post* the day before Romney's arrival in the Holy City. Obama is backed by 64 per cent of US Jews and Romney is backed by 29 per cent. Experts in the American Jewish community do not believe that Romney will get anywhere close to 50% of their vote, but images of Romney in Jerusalem could clearly help him overcome his Mormon problem and may possibly help him consolidate his support among some of America's religious right.

From Israel, Romney schlepped off to Poland. Lech Walesa is a devout Roman Catholic with a strong affinity for Opus Dei and a steadfast opponent of abortion as well as the erstwhile leader of the unionized Solidarnosc movement that played a key role in the collapse of the Soviet Union. Sporting a walrus moustache and a bloated girth that give him the appearance of a large flippered marine mammal, Walesa warmly embraced Romney and

enthusiastically endorsed him. One year ago when Obama was in Poland, Walesa snubbed the President of the United States because of his support for women's rights to abortion. It is no secret that the hyper-religious Walesa despises Obama and loves neocon fundamentalists.

By warming up to the Catholics, Romney was, once again, crassly deploying his religious orthodoxy in the hope of making inroads into the important and somewhat overlapping Catholic and Hispanic demographics where he trails Obama badly. In Poland, Romney was blatantly playing for the right-wing Catholic vote that backed Opus Dei-linked former Senator Rick Santorum in the primaries. However, the Republican from Massachusetts is in a very difficult political position with Hispanics and Roman Catholics. A long series of public opinion surveys suggest that Romney cannot expect to receive a majority of the Roman Catholic vote, because the majority of Roman Catholics are progressive and he is too conservative. Because of his policies on immigration and his support for the Dream Act, Obama is overwhelmingly popular amongst Hispanic Catholics, and he has a very strong lead among non-Hispanic Catholics, all of whom recall Ted Kennedy's stirring support for Obama in 2008.

Walesa's limited appeal to the Roman Catholic right completes the strategic arc of Romney's religion-soaked tour. While his tour did not turn out exactly as he had hoped, Romney has definitely taken a bold lead in appealing to the highly motivated demographic of the American religious right. At the same time, Romney made so many gaffes – insulting the British nation; advocating a new US war in the Middle East; insulting Palestinians for being poor and attempting to host a lavish dinner party to raise millions of dollars for his own campaign on a Jewish day of fasting – these were troubling enough.

The lingering image of Romney shadowed in Jerusalem by the unmistakable wheelchair-bound figure of billionaire Sheldon Adelson marred the Republican's tour and left an indelible impression that is strongly reminiscent of the relationship between Richard Nixon and Bebe Rebozo. Rebozo was a well-to-do Hispanic banker based in Miami who served as Nixon's bagman and routinely collected illegal cash contributions for the criminal president. Rebozo is believed to have been the conduit for millions in cash that funded the Plumbers who were arrested during the Watergate break-in. The FBI described Rebozo as a non-member associate of organized crime figures. As a banker, Rebozo provided the conduit for organized crime to channel bribes to Nixon.

It should be obvious that Sheldon Adelson's high profile role with Romney at the very time the casino billionaire is under investigation by the Securities and Exchange Commission and the Department of Justice for his alleged (repeat "alleged") connections to organized crime in China works against the Republican presidential hopeful. Whether the rumors of corruption are true or untrue, the vision now insinuating itself into the political psyche of America is that of a corrupt money funnel from the Chinese triads to the Republican presidential candidate, a conspiracy theory that could morph into a scandal that would dwarf all previous scandals in US presidential history. Reports are abundant that Adelson receives the greatest proportion of his corporate profits from his sumptuous casinos in Macau.

Even if Adelson is not personally engaged in organized crime, the impression that his massive gambling empire in Macau is a base for suspicious and unsavory operations is becoming stronger among America's religious right, as well as within international legal and law enforcement communities. Adelson deliberately made a public splash with his pledge of

\$100 million to help elect Romney, a ploy that could cancel out any conceivable advantage from the contribution itself.

Regardless of the federal investigations now scrutinizing the casino billionaire, the Adelson-Romney coalition itself simply doesn't pass the smell test for a future President – especially not for a candidate who refuses to reveal his taxes or his financial holdings in foreign tax haven bank accounts. People wonder: What is Mitt Romney hiding? How have his hundreds of millions been invested? Romney's steadfast refusal to disclose his taxes and his wife's assertion on camera that it would be "dangerous" for him to make his tax history public leave the lasting impression of a savvy but unsavory financier making a very strong play to buy the presidency or rig another stolen election. The omnipresent shadow of Sheldon Adelson does not strengthen Romney's chances. Their political relationship weakens and damages the public standing of both of these two rich and powerful men, conjuring up the image Sheldon Rebozo hand-in-hand with Mitt Nixon.

By this time it should be perfectly clear that Mitt Romney tries to talk like Ronald Reagan, think like George W. Bush and operate like Richard Nixon.

Make no mistake, Romney is emerging with a massive financial advantage over the sitting president. Flooded with financial support via the Citizens United decision of the Catholic-dominated Supreme Court, billionaires like the Koch brothers, Sheldon Adelson, aspiring billionaires like Art Pope and John Allison and dozens of America's ubiquitous right-wing Ayn Rand ideologues who are out to buy this election if they can or – according to Greg Palast — to steal it if they must. Expect a massive and highly effective campaign to 'suppress' the vote – ie. tossing out millions of ballots clearly marked for Barack Hussein Obama. In the aftermath of Romney's Jerusalem speech, Tom Hayden has written a telling paper titled: "A Romney Presidency Would Be a Threat to Peace We Cannot Allow." Hayden echoes some of Palast's scathing analyses of the rancid corruption inside the electoral machinery of American democracy. Hayden writes:

Democrats generally try to win elections, while the Republican Party, because it represents a fading demographic minority, is forced to steal them. The Republicans steal them primarily with money, but also with voter suppression and disenfranchisement laws that reduce turnout among the young, students and racial minorities.

Romney is now launching into his sprint for the lead in his race against Obama. In August, Romney will announce his Vice Presidential running mate and ratchet up his neocon and religious rhetoric in advance of the Republican National Convention in Tampa, Florida. Romney's popularity will spike at the Florida convention, but the very next week the Democrats will hold their convention in Charlotte, North Carolina where Obama will deliver his acceptance speech before a massive throng of over 75,000 of his most ardent supporters in Panther Stadium. Then the presidential campaign will spiral through three televised debates, incessant and boringly repetitive negative media barrages and the closing arguments in the end game that will result in checkmate on Election Day.

In the aftermath of it all, Romney's *tour de farce* these past days may eventually come to be seen as the turning point in this election cycle – an unprecedented series of diplomatic miscalculations and political blunders so severe and so egregious that they served as the fulcrum's tipping point in Romney's defeat.

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