Bowing out gracelessly

by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch

It would have been better for the nation if Mitt Romney had said he just wanted to spend more time with his family.

Instead, the former Massachusetts governor, in dropping his bid for the Republican presidential nomination Thursday, insulted the patriotism of most of the American electorate - and its intelligence as well.

In his speech to the Conservative Political Action Conference in Washington, Romney said he was stepping aside because, "I simply cannot let my campaign be part of aiding a surrender to terror."

Both of the candidates for the Democratic nomination, Sen. Hillary Clinton of New York and Sen. Barack Obama of Illinois, Romney said, "have made their intentions clear regarding Iraq and the war on terror: They would retreat, declare defeat." For him to continue campaigning, he said, would "forestall the launch of a national campaign, and frankly, I'd make it easier for Sen. Clinton or Obama to win."

Even by today's debased standards of political discourse, this borders on slander. Most Americans in both political parties have rejected President George W. Bush's attempt to conflate the war in Iraq with the war on terrorism. Romney is bright enough to know the connection is dubious, but his comments suggest he's craven enough to use it to curry favor with the party's extreme right - just in case he wants to try again in 2012.

Yet it is exactly this sort of transparent, say-anything political opportunism that characterized and, ultimately, torpedoed Romney's campaign. Time and again, he espoused positions that conflicted with views he had expressed previously - on abortion, gay rights, stem cell research, immigration and health care reform. Those flip-flops, more than his Mormon faith, caused evangelical Christians in the GOP to be wary of him.

At the same time, they found an affable long-shot option in former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee who, as early as the Iowa caucus, began siphoning conservative votes from Romney. The result was the resurrection of Arizona Sen. John McCain's campaign and a badly fractured Republican Party. Indeed, even with the early and enthusiastic support of Missouri Gov. Matt Blunt, Romney languished in third place in Tuesday's primary behind McCain and Huckabee.

Romney tried Thursday to compare his 2008 campaign with that of former California Gov. Ronald Reagan in 1976. Reagan, although narrowly trailing President Gerald R. Ford in the delegate count, took his battle for the nomination to the August convention in Kansas City. But those were different times, when primaries and state party conventions lasted well into the summer. Reagan didn't have to wage an expensive six-month campaign to stay in the race, as Romney would.

Reagan did emerge, however, as the party's heir apparent, a slot Romney clearly covets. His withdrawal from this race gives him four years to polish his conservative credentials for the next one - or change them if that's more expedient.

The irony of all of this is the "to thine own self be true" message that it sends. Romney might have had a better shot at winning the nomination if he had not changed his positions on so many issues. He was an attractive, articulate candidate with a solid record of accomplishment in the private sector and four years as a Republican governor working successfully with a Democratic legislature in Massachusetts.

By the end of 2007, Romney had spent more than $86 million on his campaign, and he surely has spent many more millions not yet reported. Included in that sum is the $35 million of his own fortune that he lent his campaign. By leaving the race now and helping heal internal party differences, he improves his standing among potential Republican donors, whose largesse could help him repay the money he lent himself.

In short, there were good reasons, both political and financial, for the timing of Romney's exit from the campaign. But being "part of aiding a surrender to terror," as he put it, was not one of them. Perhaps now that he has more time to spend with his family, he can gain a better perspective by asking his five military-age sons why none of them felt strongly enough about the war on terror to enlist.

Reprinted from the St. Louis Post-Dispatch â€“ CNS.

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