

OP-ED

# Not in the mood for Mitt

**JONAH GOLDBERG**

WRITING FROM MANCHESTER, N.H.

**M**ITT ROMNEY is the most improbable of presidential candidates: a weak juggernaut. He is poised to sweep every primary contest — a first for a non-incumbent. And yet, in Republican ranks there's an abiding sense that he should be beatable — and beaten.

It's not that Romney doesn't have fans. His events here in New Hampshire are packed to the rafters and feel like general election rallies. He's surging in polls in South Carolina and Florida.

And yet the non-Mitt mood just won't go away. Indeed, it's intensifying. One reason is that people are starting to doubt whether he is in fact the best candidate to beat President Obama. For instance, you hear conservatives wondering more and more whether all of the attention from the White House is a head fake. Romney certainly makes a convenient foil for a presidential campaign already in populist overdrive.

I think that's overdone. Romney has his faults, but he's non-threatening. He seems more like the super-helpful manager at a rental car company than a Bible thumper. The White House would love the opportunity to run against a culture warrior. It seems many in the media would like the same thing. Hence the absurd grilling of the candidates in Saturday night's ABC/Yahoo/Wmur-TV debate.

(For reasons that remain mysterious, the moderators wasted vast swaths of time quizzing the candidates on gay marriage, whether states could ban condoms and on how Rick Santorum would respond if one of his sons declared his homosexuality. Because as we all know, how the president would treat his hypothetically gay son is issue No. 1 for so many voters.)

Romney was at his best swatting away the swarm of inanities at the debate — "birth control is working just fine." He's weakest when discussing his own motives and career. Romney can sell ideas, and he can criticize Obama well. But he has a very hard time selling himself. When he talks about what he likes and what drives him, he reminds people that there's just something off about him.

For instance, in Sunday's "Meet the Press" debate, Romney suggested that he didn't run for reelection as governor of Massachusetts because to have done so would have been vain or selfish somehow. "That would be about me."

Newt Gingrich ridiculed that as "pious baloney."

And he was right. Romney's claim that he's just a businessman called to serve — Cincinnatus laying down his PowerPoint — is nonsense. Romney, the son of a politician, has been running for office, holding office or thinking about running for office for more than two decades. "Just level with the American people," Gingrich growled. "You've been running ... at least since the 1990s."

For some reason, Romney can't do that. Or at least it seems like he can't. His authentic inauthenticity problem isn't going away. And it's sapping enthusiasm from the rank and file. The turnout in Iowa was disastrously low, barely higher than the turnout in 2008 — and if Ron Paul hadn't brought thousands of non-Republicans to the caucus sites, it would have been decidedly lower than in 2008. That's an ominous sign given how much enthusiasm there should be for making Obama a one-term president. It's almost as if Romney's banality is infectious.

Santorum's tie in Iowa is widely attributed to his diligent door-to-door campaigning. The Iowa political hacktocracy is deeply invested in the idea that the retail politicking in Iowa pays off. But it wasn't paying off three weeks before the voting, when Santorum was in single digits. Gingrich's erstwhile surge in the polls wasn't a product of retail voting either. No, Santorum's Iowa success was attributable almost entirely to Gingrich's Newtacular implosion. Santorum was simply the last non-Romney standing who hadn't been torn apart by the news media or Romney's super PACs.

The most persuasive case for Romney has always been that if he's the nominee, the election will be a referendum on Obama. But that calculation always assumed that rank-and-file Republicans would vote for their nominee in huge numbers no matter what. That may well still be the case, but it feels less guaranteed every day.

Every four years pundits and activists talk about how cool it would be to have a brokered convention (if no candidate has 50% of the delegates by convention time). This is the first time I've heard people saying it may be necessary.

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# Talking tough on Iran

**Micah Zenko and Emma Welch**

**L**ISTENING to the Republican presidential candidates, one would believe there is no foreign policy challenge more threatening to the United States than a nuclear Iran. As the remaining candidates attempt to distance themselves from President Obama and one another, all but one (Ron Paul) has described the prospect of an Iranian nuclear weapons capability as "unacceptable" and endorsed the use of military force if that were necessary to prevent an Iranian bomb.

The most troubling aspect of this default position held by most of the Republican candidates is the complete absence of any details on how the use of force could accomplish this ambitious objective. Consider the sketchy logic offered by each:

Mitt Romney sets the tone, arguing that the Obama administration has been weak in managing an increasingly intransigent and confrontational Iranian regime. "If we reelect Barack Obama, Iran will have a nuclear weapon," Romney stated unequivocally. "And if you elect Mitt Romney, Iran will not have a nuclear weapon." He has called for regime change in Iran and, when pressed on how a President Romney would achieve his goals, has said he supports both "covert and overt" actions, including military action if necessary, though he rules out "boots on the ground."

Rick Santorum has repeatedly

called for a preemptive bombing strike on Iranian nuclear facilities as part of his "plan." He has implied that he would expand the use of covert operations, possibly including targeted killings, against Iranian nuclear scientists: "I will say to any foreign scientist that's going into Iran to help on their [nuclear] program: You will be treated like an enemy combatant, like an Al Qaeda member."

Rick Perry has not proposed specific unilateral steps, but when asked in an interview with ABC's Christiane Amanpour whether he would support a preemptive strike on Iran's nuclear facilities, he said: "We find ourselves with two really bad positions. We're either going to allow this madman to have become in control of a nuclear device, or we are going to have a ... military strike to keep that from occurring." He has endorsed a joint U.S.-Israel preemptive strike: "I've said we will support Israel in every way that we can, whether it's diplomatic, whether it's economic sanctions, whether it's overt or covert operations up to and including military action." Perry has also indicated that during the civilian protests in Iran in 2009, the Obama administration should have been "actively involved in taking that oppressive regime out of control of Iran."

Newt Gingrich explicitly advocates regime change by whatever means necessary. In the short term, he has called for increased sanctions and covert operations to "break the Iranian regime"

## GOP candidates are rattling sabers. How would they carry out their threats?

within a year by "cutting off the gasoline supply to Iran and then, frankly, sabotaging the only refinery they have." However, he also has said he would support military force as a last resort: "Unless they disarm their entire system, we are going to replace their regime."

Jon Huntsman Jr., often portrayed as a sober foreign policy hand, is as hard-line on Iran as any of the candidates. When asked if he would deploy U.S. troops to stop a nuclear weapon, the former governor replied: "I can't live with the implications of not doing it.... You got to have all options on the table. You got to be prepared to use all elements of national power."

The strategies put forth by the candidates all rest on the assumption that U.S. military action could eliminate Iran's nuclear program. For military force to be effective, however, there are three core requirements the candidates have not addressed.

First, does the U.S. intelligence community know where every weapons-related nuclear facility is located? As demonstrated by the revelation of a potential hidden uranium enrichment facility near the city of Qom in 2009, it

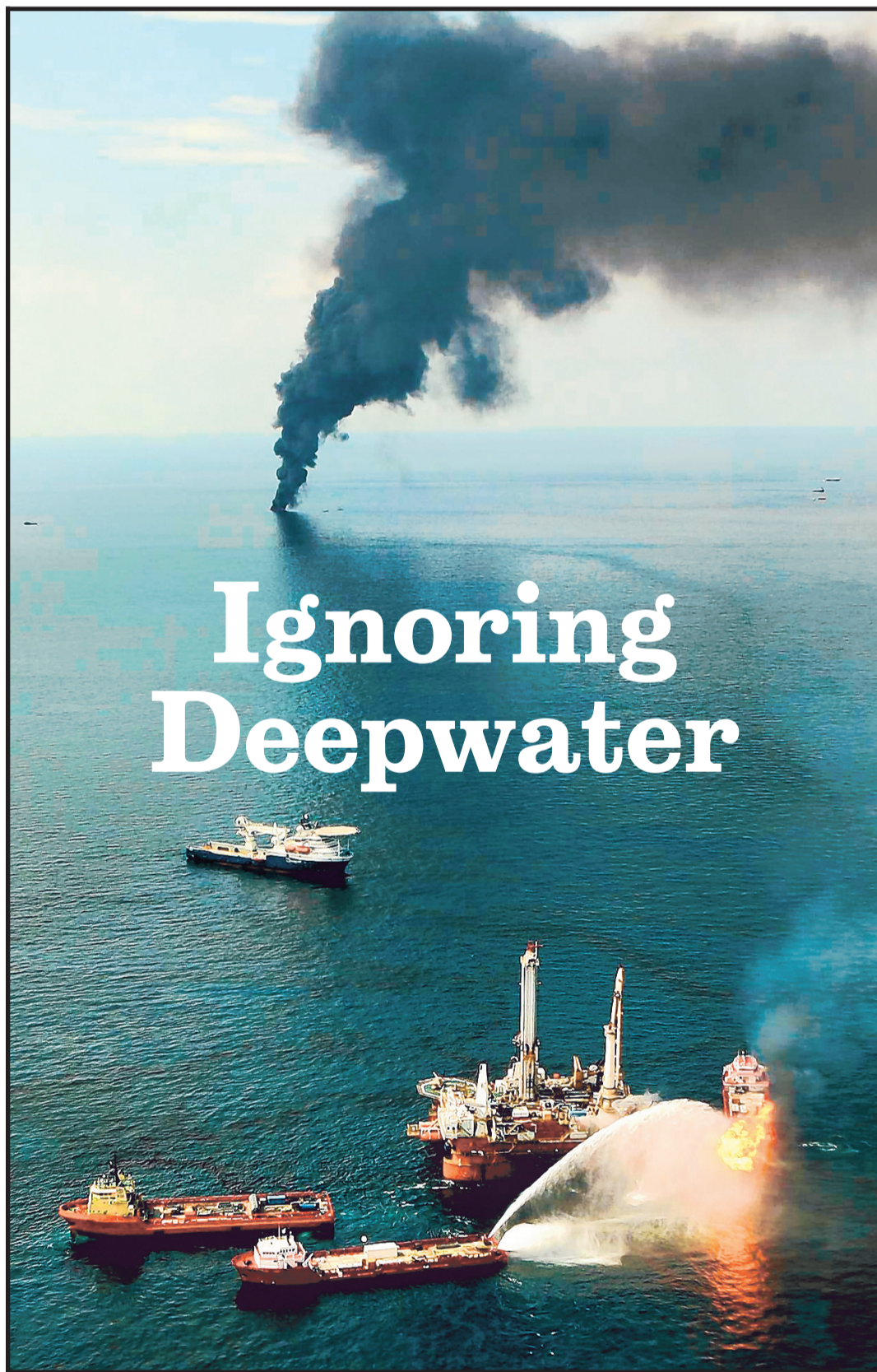
is impossible to know whether Iran is concealing other nuclear facilities.

Second, can airstrikes alone eliminate all nuclear facilities? Even Gingrich acknowledged: "The idea that you're going to wage a bombing campaign that accurately takes out all the Iranian nuclear program ... is a fantasy."

Last, but certainly not least, have senior leaders in Iran decided to pursue nuclear weapons? Last February, Director of National Intelligence James Clapper admitted: "We do not know ... if Iran will eventually decide to build nuclear weapons."

Initiating a preemptive military strike against Iran to eliminate its suspected nuclear weapons capability would be an enormously significant — and potentially disastrous — foreign policy decision. As the Republican presidential campaign continues, the media and prospective voters must challenge the candidates for greater explanation on this application of military force. In Iraq, the U.S. discovered the enormous costs and consequences of trying to disarm a country through regime change. It is crucial, therefore, that we demand that those running for president clearly articulate a realistic strategy for preventing an Iranian bomb before placing "all options on the table."

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**MANY OF THE** changes recommended after the gulf disaster have not been implemented.

## Federal plans are understating the risks of offshore drilling.

**Richard G. Steiner**

**A**S THE 2010 Deepwater Horizon tragedy fades from public concern, its painful lessons seem to have been lost as well.

A year ago this week, the National Commission on the BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill and Offshore Drilling issued its final report, recommending sweeping changes in the way industry and government manage offshore oil drilling. The bipartisan panel made 30 broad recommendations aimed at improving the safety of offshore drilling, safeguarding the environment, strengthening oil spill response,

advancing well containment capabilities and ensuring financial responsibility.

But few of the recommendations have been implemented. Congress has taken no action at all. And after making only modest reforms, many of which were cosmetic (e.g. reshuffling and renaming the dysfunctional Minerals Management Service), the Obama administration is again charging forward with plans to expand offshore drilling. Given the Deepwater Horizon tragedy, and recent offshore spills by Chevron in Brazil, ConocoPhillips in China and Shell in Nigeria, you would expect the oil industry and U.S. government to take such risk much more seriously.

Unfortunately, it seems that ignorance and wishful thinking are more politically convenient than honestly dealing with risk.

The administration has approved Shell's plans for exploratory drilling in the Arctic Ocean for this coming summer, which not only presents significant spill risk but — even if no spills occur — will harm an ecosystem already suffering the disastrous impacts of climate change. And the administration's 2012-17 offshore leasing plan, now out for public review, proposes yet another expansion of drilling in the Gulf of Mexico and Alaska. As is typical with such pro-drilling federal plans, the environmental impact statement for the new plan dramatically understates risk and overstates response capabilities and potential benefits.

What's more, the drilling plan ignores the urgent need to transition to a sustainable energy econ-

omy that would stabilize climate and provide economic and environmental security. The hundreds of millions of tons of carbon that would be produced in the new offshore drilling program would end up in the global atmosphere, biosphere and oceans, serving only to deepen the climate crisis and to delay our transition to sustainable energy.

Our time is up for dealing with the energy and climate crisis. Most reputable scientists say that to avoid climatic, ecological and economic catastrophe, we urgently need to bring atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> concentrations down to less than 350 parts per million. Today we are at 390 ppm and rising. Despite all the feel-good rhetoric on this issue from the Obama administration, its new drilling plan bows to political expediency and proposes more high-risk reliance on carbon-intensive fossil energy for decades to come.

Although the administration has taken small steps to increase energy efficiency and low-carbon energy supply, those actions are nowhere near what is possible or necessary. We still waste more than half of the fossil energy we use, although we have the technology to cut energy use and carbon emissions in half. But our hydrocarbon addiction and economy of waste run so deep that there seems little political motivation to change.

The administration's new drilling plan warns that if no additional offshore lease sales are offered between 2012 and 2017, the government may need to compensate by "favor[ing] alternative vehicle fuels such as ethanol or methanol, vehicles with greater fuel efficiency, or alternative transportation methods such as mass transit"; "might mandate increased reliance on ... wind-generated electric power"; and "might give more emphasis to programs encouraging more efficient electricity transmission and more efficient use of gas and electricity in factories, offices and homes."

Of course, that's just the point. These are precisely some of the policy actions that are urgently needed, and it seems clear that government will not pursue them aggressively enough if it simply leaves the door open to easy oil, onshore and offshore. It is time to limit access to new oil development and force society to make the switch to a low-carbon energy economy in time to avert a climate disaster.

President Obama needs to walk his talk on the climate and energy crisis; abide the lessons learned from past mistakes, in particular the Deepwater Horizon catastrophe; implement the oil spill commission recommendations; and lead an aggressive transition to a sustainable energy economy.

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