

2011

Romney and Huntsman: Two Answers to the 'Mormon Question'

Nathan B. Oman

William & Mary Law School, nboman@wm.edu

Repository Citation

Oman, Nathan B., "Romney and Huntsman: Two Answers to the 'Mormon Question'" (2011). *Popular Media*. 246.
https://scholarship.law.wm.edu/popular_media/246

Copyright c 2011 by the authors. This article is brought to you by the William & Mary Law School Scholarship Repository.
https://scholarship.law.wm.edu/popular_media

Deseret News

Romney and Huntsman: two answers to 'the Mormon question'

By Nathan B. Oman

Published: Saturday, Feb. 5 2011 12:00 a.m. MST

With Jon Huntsman's resignation as Ambassador to China, speculation about a possible presidential run by the former Utah governor is heating up. If he emerges as a serious contender, two Mormons will be in the race for the GOP nomination, the other one being former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney.

Mormonism creates a significant issue for a presidential candidate. According to pollsters, one in five Americans would be less likely to vote for someone who is a Latter-day Saint. During Romney's run for the 2008 GOP nomination, pundits on both the left and the right suggested that Mormons, with their devotion to Mormon church leadership, could not be trusted with high office.

Romney's response came in a speech where he said that many supporters "would prefer it if I would simply distance myself from my religion, say that it is more of a tradition than my personal conviction, or disavow one or another of its precepts. That I will not do."

Romney also labored, however, to find common ground with conservative religious voters, particularly Evangelical Christians. His message was "Yes I am Mormon, but Mormons are just like you." Many were skeptical.

It's early, but Huntsman's strategy seems to be different. In a recent interview, he insisted that he was not "overly religious" and said, "I get satisfaction from many different types of religions and philosophies."

Standing alone, these are innocuous sentiments. It doesn't take a great deal of political cynicism, however, to see them as an early trial balloon on "the Mormon question." Huntsman's message is "Don't worry, I am not really all that Mormon."

Given American queasiness with the idea of a Mormon president, the strategy makes political sense. Convincing voters that you aren't all that committed to Mormonism is easier than convincing them that Mormonism isn't something to worry about.

The sources of faith are mysterious. The Spirit, according to the New Testament, bloweth where it listeth. Most Americans understand this, and provided that a politician is respectful toward religion, they don't object if he or she is not personally devout. There is, however, a danger to Huntsman's strategy.

Only those with a nearly overwhelming ambition for the White House are willing to submit to the grueling scrutiny that voters demand. Yet it is precisely this iron ambition that frightens us. In the end, we want politicians who understand that there are worse things than not being elected president. Despite his often-awkward handling of "the Mormon question," Romney knows this and was at his best when he set limits to his ambition.

To the extent that Huntsman is genuinely less devout, his stance will reassure Americans concerned about Mormon prophets pulling strings behind the scenes. Ironically, however, his lack of devotion

needs to be sincere. Otherwise, he risks becoming another pol willing to place anything — including his most basic beliefs — on the altar of ambition.

In the end, the political fates of Romney and Huntsman do not hang on "the Mormon question." Americans are more concerned by the concrete problems of unemployment, deficits and our seemingly endless military adventures in Afghanistan. So long as the American electorate remains wary of Latter-day Saints in high office, however, religion — and their reactions to it — will test both candidates.

Copyright 2013, Deseret News Publishing Company