

Opinion: Will Super Tuesday fuse Republican party's split personality?

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By

By Carl Golden

WebMD, the internet site of choice for hypochondriacs everywhere, defines multiple personality disorder this way: "characterized by the presence of two or more distinct or split identities or personality states that continually have power over the person's behavior."

While the competition for the Republican presidential nomination may not qualify as a medical or psychological condition, it comes close to the WebMD diagnosis.

Having flown too close to the sun and seeing their candidacies incinerated, businessmen Herman Cain and Jon Huntsman, Rep. Michele Bachman and

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Republican presidential hopefuls Mitt Romney (left) and Ron Paul (right) look on as Rick Perry speaks during the Republican debate on Wednesday.

Gov. Rick Perry have become footnotes in a process that has sorely tested the patience of the American people and whose appeal is increasingly narrowed to the media/political universe.

The field of personalities for Republican voters to choose among has shrunk to four:

Mitt Romney, the quintessential corporate executive with the administrative experience that only being governor of a large state can bring, but who periodically careens off-script and suggests he likes to fire people, isn't focused on the plight of poor people, and earning \$375,000 in speaking fees in one year isn't much money.

Former Sen. Rick Santorum, who channels the late John Belushi — "I'm on a mission from God" — in bringing a rigid, near-puritanical approach to individual morality, suggesting that satanic forces are at work to undermine the nation, and practicing medicine without a license by claiming that prenatal testing procedures lead to abortions and are part of a systematic effort to cull the disabled.

Former House Speaker Newt Gingrich, the Prince of Bleakness, with his ominous warnings that the nation is on the verge of an apocalypse and that only his election as president can avert it and preserve civilization.

Texas Rep. Ron Paul's libertarianism — seasoned with a pinch of isolationism — that would bar government from

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sticking its military or diplomatic nose into the affairs of other nations, scrap most government social assistance programs, leave responsibility for those programs to individual choice, and allow people to do whatever they choose as long as it's legal and not harmful to others.

After an astonishing 20 candidates' debates, voters have yet to decide which personality they prefer.

Romney, Gingrich and Santorum have all won primaries or party caucuses and have traded frontrunner status since January. Paul hasn't won any contests but is still standing, and his fervent band of followers remains a force.

The fluid nature of the contest has undercut Romney's claims of inevitability and electability. His campaign is considerably better funded and far better organized than the others and, under normal circumstances, his nomination would be assured by now.

His opponents are someone who, six years ago, lost a re-election bid for U.S. Senate by 18 points (Santorum); someone who was chased out of the U.S. Congress in an ethics scandal 13 years ago (Gingrich); and a rather obscure Texas congressman whose ideas have been charitably described as quirky and not so charitably characterized as goofy (Paul).

Romney, though, has been unable to close the deal, lodged persistently in the mid to high 30 percent range in voter preference.

While his gaffes haven't inflicted mortal damage, it is the perception that he lacks core convictions that has become the greatest obstacle to his drawing support away from the others and building such a commanding lead that his opponents will recognize the futility of continuing.

Santorum, Gingrich and Paul have vowed to take their campaigns to the national convention in Tampa in August, because they see no valid reason not to. Despite his overwhelming superiority in money and organization, Romney hasn't scared them out or blown them out.

The proportional allocation of delegates, rather than a winner-take-all primary system in some states, has worked in their favor as well, allowing them to continue to lose and accumulate delegates while denying them to Romney.

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rise above the others.

Carl Golden is a senior contributing analyst with the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Richard Stockton College.

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