

Romney's Jaw-Dropping Incoherence

Exclusive: Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney's latest distortion about an attempt by the U.S. Embassy in Egypt to calm Mideast tensions is not only renewing concerns about his honesty but raising new questions about his mental stability, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

For all his supposed business competence, Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney is running a campaign of jaw-dropping incoherence, mixing some of the most dishonest rants from right-wing talk radio with focus-group worries about health care and the economy even if they clash with conservative principles.

You saw this at the Republican National Convention, which was almost fully devoted to gross distortions of President Barack Obama's positions like the endless repetition of his out-of-context quote, "You didn't build that" combined with complaints that Obama had not intervened enough in the economy to create more jobs, even in contradiction of the GOP's supposed love of "free markets."

Now, Romney has pounced on a well-meaning though ultimately unsuccessful effort by the U.S. embassy staff in Cairo to tamp down anger caused by an incendiary anti-Muslim video that appeared designed to elicit the kind of violent rage that is now sweeping the Middle East.

Seemingly without regard for the delicate circumstances, Romney issued a statement that transformed the embassy's criticism of the video into an expression of sympathy by the Obama administration for the protesters who attacked U.S. diplomatic outposts in Egypt and, fatally, in Libya. However, to make his point stick, Romney had to reverse the actual chronology of events.

Here is how the chronology actually went: Early on Tuesday, the U.S. Embassy in Egypt sought to calm tensions by issuing a statement condemning "the continuing efforts by misguided individuals to hurt the religious feelings of Muslims."

Despite the embassy's message, hours later, mobs of angry protesters attacked the U.S. Embassy in Cairo and the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, Libya. In Benghazi, the assault involved weapons which led to the deaths of U.S. Ambassador to Libya J. Christopher Stevens and three of his aides.

Shortly after 10 p.m. EDT on Tuesday, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said, "I condemn in the strongest terms the attack on our mission in Benghazi."

However, Romney saw an opening to hammer home his beloved theme that President

Obama “apologizes for America.” Disregarding the actual chronology, i.e. that the message by the U.S. Embassy in Cairo *preceded* the mob attacks, Romney put out a statement at 10:24 p.m., which declared: “It’s disgraceful that the Obama administration’s first response was not to condemn attacks on our diplomatic missions, but to sympathize with those who waged the attacks.”

Romney’s statement ignored Secretary Clinton’s stern words, which represented the first official response from a senior member of the Obama administration. However, rather than correct his mistake on Wednesday, Romney expanded on his criticism of the embassy officials in Cairo and implicitly defended the offensive video.

Romney said, “the Embassy of the United States issued what appeared to be an apology for American principles. That was a mistake.” The principle that Romney appeared to be defending was the right to grossly ridicule someone else’s religion, while ignoring a competing American principle, tolerance of the religion of others.

On Wednesday afternoon after his own somber and stern response to the attacks on the U.S. diplomatic outposts President Obama said in an interview that “Governor Romney seems to have a tendency to shoot first and aim later.”

A Troubling Pattern

But Romney’s problem appears to be somewhat different. Both during the Republican primaries and since he nailed down the GOP nomination, he has demonstrated a readiness to say whatever he thinks will help him politically without regard to its truthfulness or its fairness.

While it’s common for politicians of all stripes to stretch the truth now and then, Romney has taken that behavior to a new level. He lies, distorts and misrepresents in a wholesale fashion, not the occasional retail fib that is more typical. Then he refuses to apologize as if accountability is not for him.

Earlier in Campaign 2012, Romney even won some grudging respect for his skill as a liar. On April 16, Washington Post columnist Richard Cohen wrote: “Among the attributes I most envy in a public man (or woman) is the ability to lie. If that ability is coupled with no sense of humor, you have the sort of man who can be a successful football coach, a CEO or, when you come right down to it, a presidential candidate. Such a man is Mitt Romney.”

Cohen cited a Republican debate during which former House Speaker Newt Gingrich accused Romney’s SuperPAC of running dishonest attack ads. Romney claimed that he hadn’t seen the ads but then described and defended the content of one.

Cohen wrote: "Me, I would have confessed and begged for forgiveness. Not Romney, though, and herein is the reason he will be such a formidable general-election candidate. He concedes nothing. He had seen none of the ads, he said. They were done by others, he added. Of course, they are his supporters, but he had no control over them. All this time he was saying this rubbish, he seemed calm, sincere, matter of fact.

"And then he brought up an ad he said he did see. It was about Gingrich's heretical support for a climate-change bill. He dropped the name of the extremely evil Nancy Pelosi. He accused Gingrich of criticizing Paul Ryan's first budget plan, an Ayn Randish document. He added that Gingrich had been in ethics trouble in the House and [Romney] ended with a promise to make sure his ads were as truthful as could be. Pow! Pow! Pow! Gingrich was on the canvas.

"I watched, impressed. I admire a smooth liar, and Romney is among the best. His technique is to explain, that bit about not knowing what was in the ads, and then counterattack. He maintains the bulletproof demeanor of a man who is barely suffering fools, in this case Gingrich. His [Romney's] message is not so much what he says, but what he is: You cannot touch me. I have the organization and the money. Especially the money. (Even the hair.) You're a loser."

Economic Distortions

Other commentators have made the same point about Romney and his readiness to seize on any distortion relating to President Obama if it helps reinforce one of Romney's campaign themes.

As New York Times columnist Paul Krugman noted earlier this year, Romney's whole campaign is based on a cynical belief that Americans suffer from "amnesia" about what caused the nation's economic mess and that they will simply blame President Obama for not quickly fixing it.

To illustrate the point last April, Romney staged a campaign event in Ohio at a shuttered drywall factory that closed in 2008, when Bush was still president and when the housing market, which had grown into a bubble under Bush's deregulatory policies, was collapsing.

Krugman wrote: "Mr. Romney constantly talks about job losses under Mr. Obama. Yet all of the net job loss took place in the first few months of 2009, that is, before any of the new administration's policies had time to take effect. So the Ohio speech was a perfect illustration of the way the Romney campaign is banking on amnesia, on the hope that voters don't remember that Mr. Obama inherited an economy that was already in free fall."

Krugman added that the amnesia factor was relevant, too, because Romney is

proposing more tax cuts and more banking deregulation, Bush's disastrous recipe. In other words, Romney's campaign is based on the fundamental lie that the cure for Bush's economic collapse is a larger dose of Bush's economic policies.

Romney's speech at the shuttered drywall factory in Ohio was a precursor to a similar misrepresentation at the Republican convention when Rep. Paul Ryan, Romney's vice presidential running mate, blasted Obama over the fact that a GM plant in Janesville, Wisconsin, which stopped production under President Bush, had not been reopened as if it were suddenly the role of the federal government to make such detailed decisions for corporations.

The convention itself was a remarkable exercise in dishonest propaganda, focusing on two accusations against Obama that lacked any credibility. One was the repeated use of the misplaced antecedent in the "you didn't build that" quote. Obama's "that" clearly referred to roads, bridges and other public infrastructure that help business, not to individual businesses, as Romney and the Republicans pretended.

The other was a racially tinged claim that Obama had gutted the work requirement in welfare reform when his administration responded to a bipartisan request from some governors to give them more flexibility to make the work requirement more effective.

Wild Talk

Both lines of attack originated in the world of talk radio and then were adopted by the Romney campaign. But Romney's dishonest attack lines sometime merge with his own ever-shifting positions on key issues.

For instance, on Sunday, Romney seemed to reverse his oft-stated pledge to repeal all of the Affordable Care Act, known as "Obamacare." In an interview on NBC's "Meet the Press," Romney said he would keep some of its popular provisions, such as the ban on insurance companies denying coverage for preexisting conditions, though presumably without the individual mandate to buy insurance, which makes the reform economically feasible for insurance companies.

Of all people, Romney surely understands this link between mandates and preexisting conditions since he addressed that issue as governor of Massachusetts in passing "Romneycare," which became the model for "Obamacare." However, just as voters were trying to figure out Romney's new position on health care, he reverted back to his previous promise to repeal "Obamacare" in its entirety.

Then, on Tuesday and Wednesday, Romney's flailing efforts to land a knock-out blow on Obama went to new extremes amid unrest in Egypt and Libya over a

provocative video produced in California and posted on "YouTube," presenting the Prophet Muhammad as a buffoonish sex pervert and sadistic mass murderer.

Regarding the Egyptian-Libyan unrest, Romney appears to have jumped out front on his own, sensing that the statement from the Cairo embassy bolstered his dubious claim that Obama "apologizes for America," a central point in Romney's neocon-oriented book, *No Apology*.

But the emerging problem for Romney is that he has now developed a reputation for making any wild allegation that he thinks might rile up his conservative "base" or score some points against President Obama, no matter how reckless the words might be.

Romney's behavior, particularly since his poll numbers have begun sinking over the past two weeks, is leading to a dangerous new narrative for him, that he is not simply an accomplished liar but that he may be mentally unstable, incapable of differentiating between fact and fiction.

Mitt's Meltdown

New York Times columnist Gail Collins touched on this emerging theme in her Thursday column, entitled "Mitt's Major Meltdown," in which she says Romney "could do anything he wanted during this campaign as long as he sent out signals that once he got in the White House he was not likely to be truly crazy.

"It didn't seem to be a lot to ask, but when the crisis in the Middle East flared up, Romney turned out to have no restraining inner core. All the uneasy feelings you got when he went to London and dissed the Olympic organizers can now come into full bloom. Feel free to worry about anything. That he'd declare war on Malta. Lock himself in a nuclear missile silo and refuse to come out until there's a tax cut. Hand the country over to space aliens.

"Here is the Republican candidate for president of the United States on Wednesday, explaining why he broke into a moment of rising international tension and denounced the White House as 'disgraceful' for a mild statement made by the American Embassy in Cairo about the importance of respecting other people's religions:

"They clearly, they clearly sent mixed messages to the world. And, and the statement came from the administration, and the embassy is the administration, the statement that came from the administration was a, was a statement which is akin to apology and I think was a, a, a severe miscalculation."

If running a national campaign with all its challenges and frustrations is a test for how someone might serve in the pressure-cooker job as President of the

United States, Mitt Romney may be in the process of demonstrating that he is unfit for the post that he seeks.

Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories in the 1980s for the Associated Press and Newsweek. His latest book, *Neck Deep: The Disastrous Presidency of George W. Bush*, was written with two of his sons, Sam and Nat, and can be ordered at neckdeepbook.com. His two previous books, *Secrecy & Privilege: The Rise of the Bush Dynasty from Watergate to Iraq* and *Lost History: Contras, Cocaine, the Press & 'Project Truth'* are also available there.
