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Martin Amis Goes on the GOP Campaign Trail

Meet Rick ‘Crotch’ Perry, Newt ‘the Vulgarian’ Gingrich, and the rest of the GOP contenders as they scramble for the prize in the Des Moines debate.

by [Martin Amis \(/contributors/martin-amis.html\)](/contributors/martin-amis.html) | December 19, 2011 12:00 AM EST

"[Oops \(/articles/2011/11/09/oops-tweets-about-rick-perry-s-oops-moment.html\)](/articles/2011/11/09/oops-tweets-about-rick-perry-s-oops-moment.html)" sounds even worse—even more sheepish and abject—if you say it with a [Texan \(/newsweek/2011/10/30/rick-perry-his-campaign-is-sinking-what-he-s-done-wrong.html\)](/newsweek/2011/10/30/rick-perry-his-campaign-is-sinking-what-he-s-done-wrong.html) accent: something like “Ewps.” It was certainly an arresting moment. When was the last time a would-be emperor denuded himself in the space of a single syllable? Yet it also pointed to more general confusions.

Over the course of about a generation, it has come to seem that while the [Democratic Party \(/articles/2011/11/21/why-demographic-shifts-on-religion-and-marriage-could-doom-the-democratic-party.html\)](/articles/2011/11/21/why-demographic-shifts-on-religion-and-marriage-could-doom-the-democratic-party.html) represents the American mind, the [Republican Party \(/articles/2011/11/27/the-republican-party-is-losing-its-grip-on-foreign-policy.html\)](/articles/2011/11/27/the-republican-party-is-losing-its-grip-on-foreign-policy.html) represents, not its heart, and not its soul, but its gut. The question is as old as democracy: should the highest office go to the most intellectually able candidate, or to the most temperamentally “normative” (other words for normative include “unexceptional” and “mediocre”)? In the rest of the developed world, the contest between brain and bowel was long ago resolved in favor of brain. In America the dispute still splits the nation. Things are slightly different, and more visceral, in periods of crisis. Nine years ago, if you remember, the populace looked on in compliant silence as the president avowedly “went with his gut” into Baghdad.

Until very recently it looked as though the GOP had been blessed with the most intensely average candidate of all time. Rick “Crotch” Perry (the nickname derived from his habit of readjusting his blue jeans) was a shoeless farm boy from an old Rebel family, a straight-C student and Aggie yell leader, a devout Air Force pilot who rose to become the potent governor of a major state.

All right, he speaks like a drunkard or a stroke victim (for example, his attempt to say “Joe Arpaio” came out as “Joe Aroppehyeh”)—but so did George W. Bush. All right, he used to hunt deer at a

game reserve called Niggerhead—but he carefully avoided that other Texan beauty spot, Dead Nigger Draw. All right, he may be prone to errors of fact—but don't we feel that it's somehow quite manly to make mistakes? Here was a gut candidate with a barrel chest. What on earth could go wrong?



Charlie Neibergall / AP

But now it is time to meet the people. This, we're still told, is what presidential campaigns are all about. So on a cold and frosty morning the car trundles east out of Des Moines, across the North Skunk River, and into the great tray of the Iowan plain. The destination is Marshalltown. You go past Casey's General Store and the GitnGo gas station, past signs saying "Snowblower Sale" and "Masonic Temple," past the fuming hulks of vague industrial shapes in the misty distance, till you reach the modest community center tucked in behind the railway tracks and the rusty rolling stock.

I took my seat among about a hundred windbreakers and woolly hats, in an atmosphere of friendly inclusiveness, and passed the time with the complimentary pamphlet *The Ron Paul Family Cookbook*—28 pages of recipes "to warm your kitchen and your heart." Why, here we have the Razzle Bo-Dazzle Tenderloin and Mama's Peanut Butter Cookies. As 10 o'clock neared, I turned to the biblical tags, and then to Carol Paul's family newsletter, where I caught up with the huge Paul dynasty and the doings of Rand, John David, Collin, Caylee Joy, Kelly, Lori, Valori ...

Glowingly introduced, the candidate takes the stage: Mr. Ron Paul, 76, lean-faced and thin-lipped under a silvery comb-over, and with that endearingly excitable crack in his voice and his laugh. Fiscally responsible, Ron is an isolationist and a constitutional fundamentalist; he is also "a pro-life libertarian"—which means that he favors minimal state intervention except when it comes to pregnant women.

All this has its eccentric side, but you could reasonably claim that the community center, that day, showed us American democracy at something close to its best: an uncynical candidate affably

bonding with his base. Paul told the constituents that their votes, in the coming caucuses, would be “magnified a thousandfold,” which is true in the anomalous case of Iowa (and Paul remains everyone’s tip for a surprise winner on Jan. 3). Yet there’s an inescapable sense that the back-and-forth of the parish pump (“We have time for one last question”) is becoming a sideshow.

“Meeting people is bullshit,” said a prominent politician who, unsurprisingly, wishes to remain anonymous—and he said it 20 years ago. Similarly, it now seems that the community center is bullshit; swinging by the coffee shop or the diner is bullshit; pressing the flesh is bullshit. An old friend of mine, a veteran of polls and primaries whom I will call the Insider, assures me that ads, too, are bullshit. “They haven’t mattered at all,” he says. “Perry has spent—what?—\$5 million, Huntsman \$3 million, to no visible effect. Ads only make a difference if you go late and nasty.”

So what isn’t bullshit? The debates matter, the media matter—but mainly as they relate to the “narrative” associated with each particular candidate. And, as in other walks of public life, the narrative is often only one word long.

Take Mitt Romney. The narrative on Mitt is “flip-flopper.” He has a murky past, what with his health-care plan (anti-individualist), his environmental vigilance (anti-job creation), and above all his laxity on abortion (anti-life). The stigma of Mormonism—the temple underpants, the recruitment and “praying in” of the dead, among other inanities—costs him surprisingly and perhaps scandalously little (no more than 2 or 3 points). He is an outstandingly proficient technocrat; he has electability; he alone has presidentiality. So why does he keep bumping into his 25 percent glass ceiling?

There is something strangely semi-human about Mitt. To enlarge on a metaphor first articulated by the great Clive James, Romney looks as though he went to the dentist one afternoon, and came out with his head capped. With Mitt, we run up against what is known as the “dog food” problem. “The dog just won’t eat the dog food”—and nobody knows why. But make no mistake, the Insider warns: “Gingrich is ahead in the polls. Romney is still the frontrunner. The White House thinks it’s Romney—though of course they’re hoping for Gingrich. Obama is crushing Gingrich in Florida.”

Who else is hoping for Gingrich? And what are people of even moderate good taste supposed to make of Newt and Newt’s surge? He is hoping to change the Gingrich narrative to “redemption,” but for now he is stuck on “insider” (or “provenly corrupt insider,” if you prefer). Newt has been around the Capitol so long that you could see him in some old sandal movie, like *Quo Vadis* (1951), limply reclining in his toga between Peter Ustinov and Deborah Kerr.

A couple of weeks ago we learned that Gingrich was doing bookstore signing sessions on the campaign trail—alongside Callista, who was pushing *Sweet Land of Liberty*, a story about Ellis the Elephant. Well, said a source in *The New York Times*, he “monetized” his years as speaker (as a consultant “historian” for Freddie Mac, and so on), why wouldn’t he monetize his jump in the numbers? “I believe in free enterprise,” Newt explained (at least he didn’t say he “happened” to believe in it), “and I think it’s OK to make money.” Yes, but making money cost him a \$300,000 fine, and a scathing reprimand, just 15 years ago. Gingrich is not just an abysmal vulgarian; he is also a serial adulterer who, while having an affair with a staffer, persecuted Bill Clinton for the identical offense.

“Before you can win,” says the Insider, “you have to be humiliated. Right now, Romney is being humiliated. Then things will change. Remember, Newt’s negatives are an all-you-can-eat buffet.”

On, then, to the debate, at the Drake campus in Des Moines. The six candidates stand at lecterns ribbed with bars of white light, as if in the control bay of the Trekkie starship, and ready to beam down to the planet Earth. Taken together, they are quite a crew. In two weeks’ time, the Iowa Caucus, like a death panel, will give its verdict. Only three will live.

The narrative on the absent Jon Huntsman is “absent.” So apart from the two likely finalists, chameleonic Romney and avaricious Gingrich, we were left with Rick Santorum (“work in progress”), Ron Paul (“shame he’s so elderly”), the gorgeous corpse of Rick Perry (“can only count up to two”), and the equally decorative, and equally discredited, Michele Bachmann (“very creepy husband”). Much as expected, the debate was a dismal anticlimax. In the only high point, Newt showed his dialectical skills, turning a painful question about marital fidelity—by way of spousal oaths and oaths of office—into a disquisition on the Federal Reserve.

There was a specter at the feast. Our Banquo was of course the sorely missed Herman Cain—Cain, who hoped to apply the lessons he absorbed at Burger King and Godfather’s Pizza to the leadership of the free world. And we recall, with some incredulity, that the flamboyantly ridiculous Herman was once leader of the pack. How much clearer does it need to be? The flip-flopper in chief, the most hopeless ditherer and button-puncher of them all, is the poor old Republican electorate.

And this is perfectly understandable. To see how far the GOP has traveled in recent years, it is necessary only to turn to the much-saluted figure of Ronald Reagan. As governor of California, Reagan raised taxes, expanded the number of state employees, defended gay rights, and passed a conspicuously liberal law on abortion; as president, he closed corporate loopholes and amnestied illegal aliens. In short, Reagan would these days be considered a pariah.

“All the ‘isms’ are ‘wasms,’” said Tony Blair, quite a while ago, affirming the end of the age of ideology. With its Taxpayer Protection Pledge, the patriarchal, philoprogenitive, science-averse, fact-averse, anti-governance government-in-waiting has imprisoned itself in dogma. The gut party is all tangled up, both within and without. What we are now hearing is little more than the sullen grumble of its stomach, and the fitful rattle of its chains.

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