



“Venerable” Old Politics on the Newt Frontier

Former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich has pledged to work for Puerto Rican statehood if the voters on the island commonwealth approve of it. Whether that will happen before or after Americans gain statehood for their settlement on the moon is uncertain. The former Speaker has said that once the lunar colony he envisions reaches a population of 13,000, those residents will be eligible to petition for statehood. Since Puerto Rico has a population of nearly 4 million, perhaps the residents there should consider subdividing the island and petitioning for the entry of 333 new states. That at least would provide new employment for flag-makers, which could be called an economic stimulus.



And stimulus, along with votes, is surely what Gingrich had in mind when he promised voters on Florida’s “space coast” that there would be an American base on the moon by the last year of his second term. Even in sunny Florida, Newt is not inclined to let any grass grow under his feet. He has won one primary and he already has his presidency planned out to the end of his second term. Surely, historians will have a lot of explaining to do if there is no Gingrich administration for his grandchildren to read about in the years and decades to come.

This year’s election is still more than nine months away, but Newt is already planning on winning that one and the one to follow, leaving America to wonder in 2021, how the republic will survive without him. How the moon mission will be financed in a country whose government is approaching a \$16 trillion national debt remains unclear. Gingrich said in last [Thursday’s debate](#) that it will require a reordering our priorities, that it would “probably end up being 90 percent private sector” and would include the offering of “a handful of serious prizes” to get “an extraordinary number of people out there trying to get to the moon first...” That gave former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney all the opportunity he needed to mount his faithful white horse Frugal and ride to the rescue of taxpayers threatened by the extravagance of the Prodigal Newt.

“That’s an enormous expense,” Romney warned. As for the feasibility of having private enterprise foot the bill, “If I had a business executive come to me and say they wanted to spend a few hundred billion dollars to put a colony on the moon, I’d say, ‘You’re fired,’” Romney scoffed. *Ooops!* There he goes again, reminding us of how he likes to fire people. But beyond that, he gave a little lecture about pandering:

The Speaker comes here to Florida, wants to spend untold amount of money having a colony on the moon. I know it's very exciting on the Space Coast. In South Carolina, it was a new interstate highway, and dredging the port in Charleston. In New Hampshire, it was burying a power line coming in from Canada and building a new VA hospital in New Hampshire so that people don't have



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on January 30, 2012

to go to Boston. Look, this idea of going state to state and promising what people want to hear, promising billions, hundreds of billions of dollars to make people happy, that's what got us into the trouble we're in now.

No kidding. Is this the same Mitt Romney who went to the Iowa cornfields last year, plighting his troth to [subsidies for ethanol](#)? "I support the subsidy of ethanol," he said. "I believe ethanol is an important part of our energy solution for this country." That was in May. By October he was saying, "I've indicated I didn't think the subsidy had to go on forever." The subsidies would expire in December, but "I might have looked at more of a decline over time," Romney said, because of "the importance of ethanol as a domestic fuel." His position was evolving, as it has on most issues. Romney may be the most evolutionary candidate for President we have ever had. And his plans for the space program will evolve also.

"I believe in a very strong and vibrant space program," Romney said in Thursday's debate. Okay, to do what? "To define the mission of our space program, I'd like to bring in the ... the top professors that relate to space areas and physics, the top people from industry. Because I want to make sure what we're doing in space translates into commercial products. I want to bring in our top military experts on space needs. And — and finally, of course, the — the people from the administration if I had an administration."

In other words, we have no clue as to what a space program would be like in a Romney administration, but whatever it will be, it will be "strong and vibrant" and doing something that "translates into commercial products." Couldn't, and shouldn't, the makers of commercial products do their own research and development here on earth, for heaven's sake? Do we have to send people to outer space for that? David Stockman, the budget director during the first few years of the Reagan administration, used to characterize that rationale from NASA and the aerospace industry as an argument that "the way to build a better mousetrap is to go to Jupiter."

With about 2.1 million Hispanic voters in Florida, it's hardly surprising that both Romney and Gingrich have been pledging their support for Puerto Rican statehood and appealing to Cuban Americans in particular with talk about bringing down dictatorships in Cuba and Venezuela. Gingrich went so far as to pledge that "a Gingrich administration will not tolerate four more years of this dictatorship" in Cuba.

The wisdom of trying to force a "regime change" in Cuba is certainly debatable, but wisdom was not what the candidates were either seeking or dispensing in Florida for the past week. They were, of course, hustling for votes and if what they said to please the voters wasn't always sound policy, they will leave those nuances for another day. This is how the game is typically played, but it is also, as Romney said, how we got into the mess we're in.

As far back as the early 1960s, shortly before Lyndon Johnson launched his "Great Society," historian Richard Hofstadter wrote of "the venerable tradition of appealing separately to a variety of special interests in the course of a campaign and then trying to act as a broker among them in the actual process of governing." Half a century and roughly \$16 trillion borrowed dollars later, it is surely not too soon — and we may pray it's not too late — to ask the following: How is that "venerable tradition" working out for us?



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