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Mitt Romney's venture-capital politics

By [Richard Cohen](#), Published: November 28

Mitt Romney runs for president with the eye of a venture capitalist. He sees the profit in certain positions, discards those that are no longer profitable and moves on. He was pro-choice when it did him some good, instituted a health insurance plan that he now denounces and once supported amnesty for some illegal immigrants. Richard III offered his kingdom for a horse. Romney offers his principles for some votes in Iowa.

Amnesty for undocumented immigrants has become a GOP pariah and a matter of some passion among Iowa Republican caucus-goers — about 0.05 percent of the national electorate. Reasonable men — even unreasonable ones — have been hurt by the issue. John McCain spent much of the 2008 campaign backing away from an amnesty plan he had supported, and it is conceivable that he chose Sarah Palin for his ticket just so people would talk about something else. No other explanation comes to mind.

[Bloomberg News unsurprisingly reports](#) that Romney at one time held such an amnesty position himself. “We need to begin a process of registering those people, some being returned, and some beginning the process of applying for citizenship and establishing legal status,” Romney said during a March 2006 interview. This is dangerously close to the position [Newt Gingrich staked out in a Republican presidential debate](#) last week.

Almost instantly, Gingrich got the word “amnesty” flung in his doughy puss. Michele Bachmann, still in the race for some unfathomable reason, uttered the vulgarity and so did Romney. “The principle is that we are not going to have an amnesty system,” he said. This rare coupling of Romney and principle was not followed by what the 11 million undocumented immigrants might have been listening for: the promise that draconian measures would not be taken. Romney, presidential in voice but not in policy, never assured us that no one was going to round up these people, assemble them — grandparents and grandchildren alike — in schools, National Guard armories and Wal-Marts, put them on buses to transit camps and then shove them across the border to Mexico: Done and done.

As sometimes happens in these debates, one or another of the candidates reveals a soft spot for their fellow human beings. The first to exhibit this fatal moderation was Rick

Perry. He supported giving the children of illegal immigrants the same college tuition rates as other Texans. He was instantly attacked for his inexplicable humanity, plummeted in the polls and has yet to recover. It was, as they say, a teachable moment.

Next, it was Gingrich's turn. He showed himself to be familiar with the daunting complexities of illegal immigration (never a good thing), but even worse he exhibited a modicum of sympathy, empathy and — dare I say it? — Christian charity toward those illegal immigrants who had come here years ago, found jobs, established homes and families, and would, under various plans, be forced back to their native lands, usually Mexico.

“If you've been here 25 years and you got three kids and two grandkids, you've been paying taxes and obeying the law, you belong to a local church, I don't think we're going to separate you from your family, uproot you forcefully and kick you out,” Gingrich said. The black heart of the GOP turned purple with rage.

Interestingly or maybe just ridiculously, Romney had earlier suggested the phrase “American exceptionalism,” dropping it PowerPoint-style into his presentation. The term is supposed to suggest a nation favored by God and is adored by mushy conservatives. Romney put it this way: “I believe America is an exceptional and unique nation.”

Possibly, yes. But if the term has any meaning at all, it has to refer to the country's tolerance of minorities. Unlike Europe, America has had no wars of religion. And with the thudding exception of racism and the settling of Native Americans on bantustans out West — no small matters, I grant you — we have avoided the harsh measures that have made Europe so peaceful and at such a frightful cost. Mass deportation will make us exceptional no more.

As a venture capitalist, Romney created jobs and he destroyed them. It was all the same to him. Only profit mattered — the end, not the means. But a shrinking middle class is going to exacerbate ethnic and racial tensions, and America is no exception to the ugly verities of human nature. Gingrich acknowledged this, saying that America would never give 11 million people the boot. Romney, provided the chance to agree, just looked the other way, his eye as always on the bottom line. In the short term, there's no profit in moderation.

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