Joe Klein

The Wounds of Victory
Mitt Romney prevails but is in trouble with women, Latinos and Midwesterners

The Republican presidential-primary campaign is over. The result was a good one for the country: Mitt Romney was, by far, the most plausible of the major candidates. It was an entertaining campaign. Crucial issues about the size and reach of the federal government were raised. Several candidates, especially Ron Paul and, occasionally, Rick Santorum, demonstrated the courage of unpopular convictions. But let's face it, folks, this race was an embarrassment for the Republican Party and, at times, an insult to the intelligence of the general public. Conservative columnist Charles Krauthammer has called it a "clown show," and there is some truth to that. It always is, in primaries on both sides—Donald Trump, meet Al Sharpton. But the real damage this year was not caused by the candidates. It came from a segment of the Republican electorate, which too often celebrated ignorance and bigotry and displayed a disturbing appetite for nihilism.

It began with the aforementioned Mr. Trump, who surged to the front of the Republican polls a year ago by questioning Barack Obama's citizenship. This was, as likely as not, a ploy to create publicity for Trump's reality-TV show, and it was a fancy that passed pretty quickly, but it was a sign of fickle things to come. There followed, in quick succession, whirlwind romances with Michele Bachmann, Rick Perry, Herman Cain and Newt Gingrich. Of these, the rise of Cain and the fall of Perry were particularly instructive. Cain rose on the strength of a farright simplistic "9-9-9" tax plan but quickly proved he was comprehensively ignorant about every aspect of foreign policy and most domestic policy. Still, he floated along for weeks atop the field, his supporters celebrating his lack of knowledge about "Uzbeki beki beki take a stan" and other topics, until his alleged history of sexual predation forced him to withdraw. Perry's fall is even more interesting. The Texas governor became the favorite as soon as he entered the race and then plummeted, not because he was tongue-tied in debates but because he showed compassion for the children of immi-

grants: "But if you say that we should not educate children who have come into our state for no other reason than they've been brought there by no fault of their own, I don't think you have a heart." Mitt Romney took advantage of this gaffe and chose to run well to Perry's right on the issue of illegal immigration. This was the first of several instances in which Romney's candidacy suffered long-term damage because of positions he took to please the Republican base. Most of his opponents, even Gingrich (also on immigration), found ways to occasionally show their independence from the party's nasty wing. Romney never did. Indeed, he even tried to run to the right of Santorum on contraception—by criticizing Santorum's support for a large appropriations bill that included funding for Planned Parenthood. Romney reinforced the disdain many women were beginning to feel toward him with his spurious allegations that Rush Limbaugh's assault on Georgetown law student Sandra Fluke: "It's not the language I would have used." Romney's obsession to the base is a debilitating problem as he proceeds to the general election. His sketchy eves on immigration and contraception have crippled him with Latinos and women. His gratuitous opposition to the Dream Act, which would grant citizenship to the children of illegal immigrants who join the military or graduate from college, is an indelible stain on his record that will not soon be forgotten by Latino voters. He has hurt himself with white working-class voters as well, especially in crucial Midwestern states like Ohio, Michigan and Wisconsin, where the auto-industry bailout, which Romney opposed, has lifted the economy and given President Obama significant leads in statewide polling, for now.

There is a deeper problem for Romney. He seems a figure from the Great Depression, a combination of Daddy Warbucks and Old Man Potter. He celebrates creative destruction at a time when the destruction has been a bit too creative. He talks a lot about firing people. He just can't help himself. In Wisconsin, he talked about his father firing people in Michigan. After he won the Wisconsin primary, Romney wandered incomprensibly into the steel-plant closings on the South Side of Chicago in the 1970s. The President, he said, became a community organizer because "he saw free enterprise as the villain and government as the solution." The man simply does not understand that most people do not see plant closings as progress. "There's fault may work for Donald Trump—and for the long-term strength of a compassionate and well-regulated free-enterprise system—but it's a lousy way to introduce yourself to the American people."