

Rich Lowry



Why Obama Deserves to Lose

One-party governance followed by a year of gridlock does not merit a second term

IN ABOUT TWO MONTHS, THE ELITE perception of President Obama's re-election prospects surged from tenuous to a strange kind of all-resistance-is-futile inevitability. George F. Will counseled Republicans to prepare to throw in the towel. Liberal columnists felt compelled to warn against complacency. It's a wonder that the panelists on *Morning Joe* didn't opine that only the 22nd Amendment could keep Obama from winning a third term against his perpetually bumbling, self-destructive, contraception-obsessed opponents.

Yes, the President's standing in the polls has ticked up. But a 47.1% job-approval rating is not the makings of a landslide. It doesn't take a regression analysis to realize that this middling job-approval level—less than 50%—means he is still at risk. For the first time since he lost to Representative Bobby Rush in an ill-considered primary challenge, Obama may not have the Santa Ana winds at his back.

He is hardly in the straits of Jimmy

Carter circa 1980. No foreign crisis eats away at him—although Afghanistan and Iran could still go badly wrong—and his highest-profile gamble overseas, the Osama bin Laden raid, succeeded brilliantly. There's no denying his political skills. A fluid speaker with an easy command of details, he is a vivid, appealing campaigner. It's a mistake, though, to consider his talent through the gauzy prism of 2008 rather than the pedestrian experience of the past 3½ years.

Obama has proved a better talker than a persuader. He never moved the needle of public opinion on his health care bill, despite repeated rhetorical exertions. The law passed on sheer partisan muscle. In the high-stakes

debt-limit debate, he came up with a shrewd mantra ("a balanced approach") but still left the confrontation as bruised as the congressional Republicans who lacked his megaphone and were deeply divided.

His words have never mattered less. He traveled the country on a multicity gas-prices-aren't-my-fault tour, lighting up crowds with his mockery of Republican devotion to fossil fuels. To no avail. So long as every visit to the pump is a



cause for agita, he can give graduate-level tutorials on petrochemistry and it won't matter. His fate is tied to irreducible economic realities.

Though the job market is showing signs of life, the unemployment rate would still be above 10% had so many people not left the labor force. We lost almost 9 million jobs in the recession and have regained a little more than 3 million. It is the weakest economic recovery in memory. Only 20% of people say they are better off than they were four years ago. The Obama mantra is no longer "Hope and change." It is "Hey, it could be worse."

Obama's economic policies have

been a farrago of the absurd ("cash for clunkers"), the ineffectual (pick your housing program) and the monumentally misconceived (a stimulus that discredited the word *stimulus*). He has presided over \$1 trillion deficits every year he's been in office, and his Treasury Secretary admits the Administration has no plan to deal with the debt. He wants to impose a punishing round of tax increases next year on what will probably still be a fragile economy. His signature health care law is constitutionally dubious and persistently unpopular. It adds another financially unsustainable entitlement on top of the ones that we already had and that the President has demonstrated no serious interest in reforming.

Rather than uniting the country, he has polarized it. The first half of his term featured partisan governance, the second half bipartisan gridlock. The public rejected the former and is equally unenthusiastic about the latter. A reasonably competent Republican can beat him. As it happens, that is exactly what front runner Mitt Romney is—no more, no less.

In an era of economic discontent, it would be better if Republicans weren't likely to

nominate a former titan of private equity with overseas bank accounts. He leaves the white working class as cold as the President does. But Romney has proved capable of running a large organization and has a résumé worthy of the presidency. He has appeal for suburbanites and moderates. For all his gaffes, he's inoffensive and nonthreatening. His greatest asset is his sheer acceptability should voters decide they want to fire Obama.

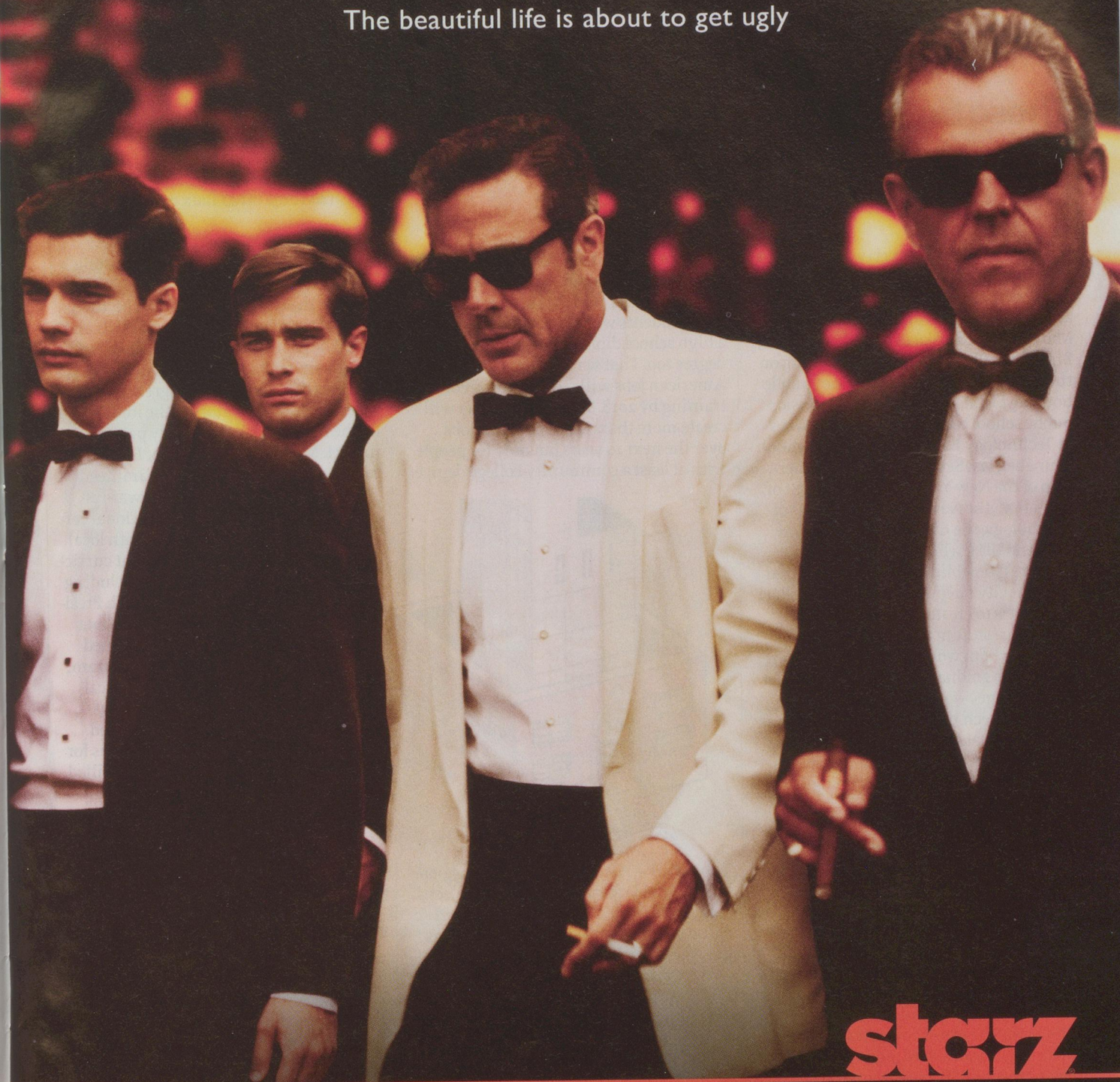
Romney is not formidable, but neither is the President. Game on.

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