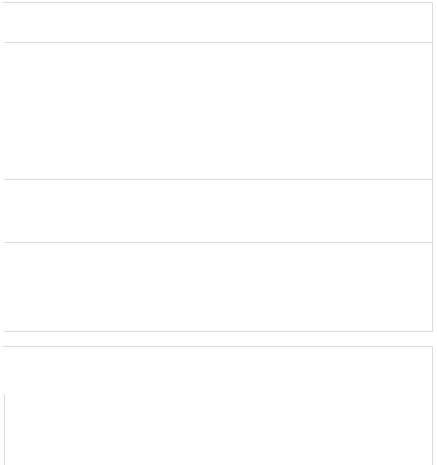


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For Romney, there's just one way to kill the tax return story

July 27, 2012 | By Carl Golden

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In 1993, I served as press secretary to the gubernatorial campaign of Christie Whitman. Virtually the only issue that year seemed to be the \$2.8 billion tax increase signed into law three years earlier by Gov. Jim Florio.

But just as Mitt Romney has been knocked off balance and off message by demands that he release more of his personal income-tax returns, the Whitman campaign was thrown into turmoil for releasing three years of her tax returns but withholding one.

Story continues below.

That return became a focus of the Florio campaign, as well as reporters who had heard enough about the Democrat's tax increases. They demanded to know what was in the return Whitman refused to release.

Ed Rollins, a battle-hardened political veteran who had led Ronald Reagan's 1984 campaign, was Whitman's campaign manager. He and I spent untold hours discussing the media clamor for the missing return — a clamor stoked daily by Florio consultant James Carville, a friend of Rollins'. Carville was absolutely manic about the tax return, taking to talk radio and seizing every opportunity to suggest Whitman was hiding something embarrassing. I took constant phone calls from reporters demanding to know why the tax return was being kept secret.

The missing return was dominating the debate. And the issue we wanted to run on, Florio's tax increases, was in danger of being swept aside.

Romney is confronting a similar problem. President Obama's campaign continues to imply that a fair chunk of the Republican's money went into offshore bank accounts to avoid U.S. income taxes. The controversy fits the Obama campaign's narrative, casting Romney as a selfish plutocrat.

The Republican has resisted, arguing that the 2010 and 2011 returns he has released are enough to show the American people that he is a successful businessman who has paid his fair share in taxes. He's losing the argument, though — just as Whitman, Rollins, and I were losing it 19 years ago. Voter distrust of politicians runs deep, and the "something to hide" argument finds a receptive audience.

Leading Republicans, including Gov. Christie, have unsuccessfully urged Romney to release his returns. While Romney may hope that the issue will fade with time, the life it's taken on can be extinguished only by disclosure. Media appetites are whetted, not satisfied, by denial.

Whitman ultimately recognized the peril of refusing further disclosure. The return was disclosed, and it turned out to be a dud, generating a one-day story that quickly disappeared. And this was early enough in the campaign that Whitman could redirect the debate toward Florio's tax increases and her own promise to cut taxes.

If Romney hopes to make headway in attacking Obama's less-than-stellar stewardship of the economy, he must put the tax return issue to rest and, as consultants are fond of saying, "stop the bleeding."

Whitman defeated Florio in 1993 by an exceptionally thin margin of about 27,000 votes. How many of

those were influenced by the release of the disputed tax return is impossible to divine. And we had no desire to find out.

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