

POLITICS

THE CHOICE IS

By Justin Remus



On the surface, Barack Obama and Mitt Romney couldn't be more different. For a particularly paranoid segment of the population who sees a person holding the nation's highest office who doesn't look like them, Obama constitutes a threat to their way of life. To those on the other side of the ideological divide, Romney is an entitled plutocrat using his wealth and influence to bully his way into the White House so that he can further the diabolical machinations of his corporate cronies, who

seek only to exploit the lower classes and add to their already overflowing coffers.

But how close are either of these perceptions to reality? Are Romney and Obama really as diametrically opposed as their supporters and detractors would have you believe?

Rather than being a puppet of the 1%, as most liberals view the former Massachusetts governor, many in Romney's own party see him as a stealth leftie who jacked up fees on gun owners, supported gay rights, stem cell research, and

legalized abortion. He even donated to Planned Parenthood, although he now insists it was his wife. Trying to rehabilitate himself in the eyes of the far right, he now panders to the gun crowd and condemns illegal immigration. He mocks the president's health plan, even though Obama borrowed important aspects from Romney's own healthcare reform. On virtually every issue, he has tilted sharply to the right, but conservatives still won't show him any love. During the Republican primaries, even Newt Gingrich sneered, "there

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With so much at stake in the coming election, how much difference is there really between President Obama and Mitt Romney? The answer isn't black and white.



really is no difference" between Romney and Obama.

They do share similar temperaments that make this election intriguing on a personal level. Both men are more aloof than the average politician, although Obama's detachment is more fluid than Romney's. The president easily charms strangers while Romney struggles to connect outside his inner circle. Both are cerebral and analytical observers who study data carefully and rely on experts before making decisions. Despite years of public service,

their core convictions are ambiguous. But the comparisons can only go so far. Romney had a privileged childhood, whereas Obama's mother was once on food stamps. Obama hardly knew his father; Romney worshipped his. Mormonism was integral to Romney's upbringing, but Obama had no interest in religion until later in life. Obama devoted himself to public service, becoming a community organizer and teaching constitutional law, while Romney was the consummate corporate raider, running Bain Capital, a private equity

firm that engineered leveraged buyouts of struggling companies, shedding thousands of jobs and pensions. While at Bain, he amassed a fortune estimated at \$250 million.

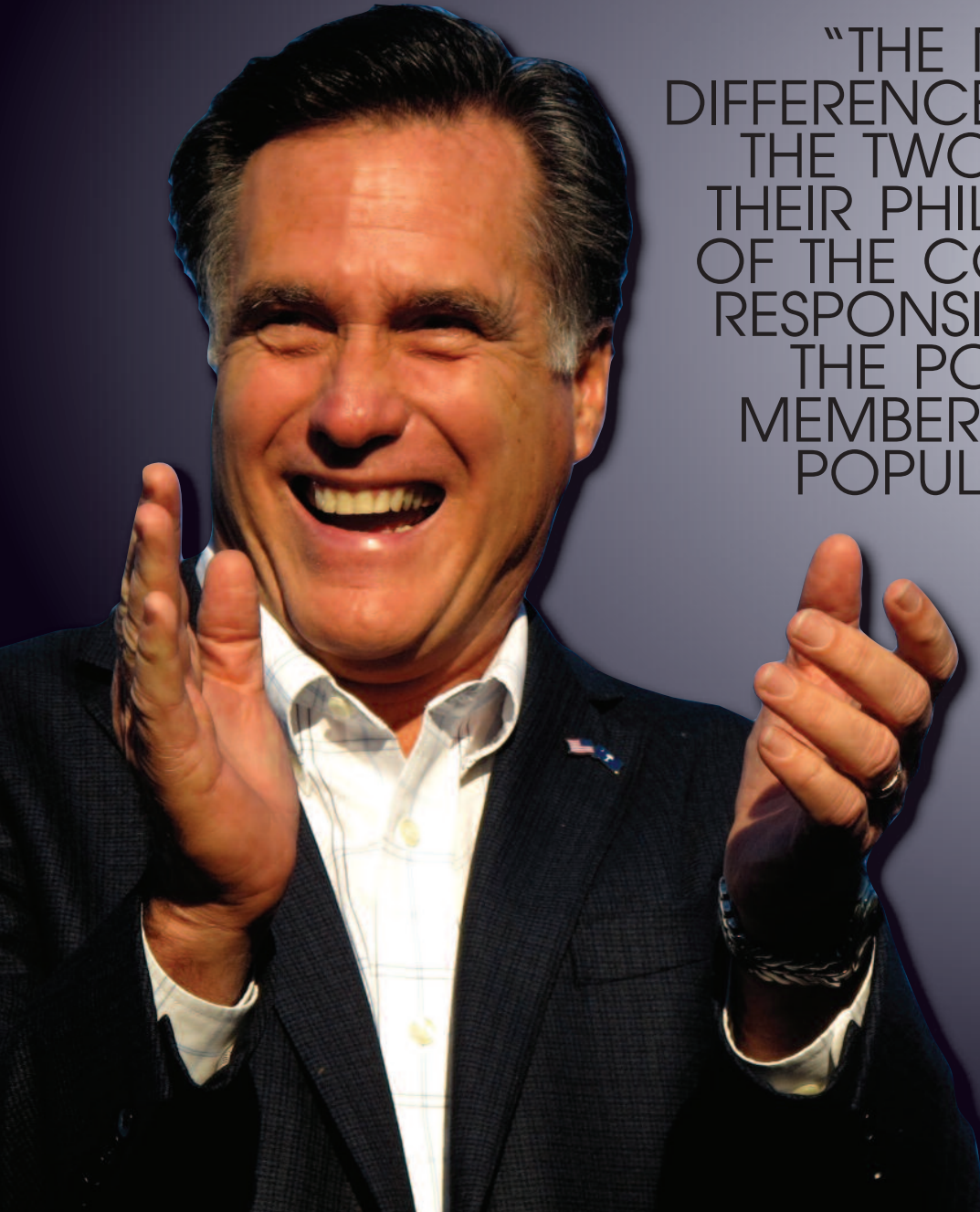
The main difference between the two, however, lies in their philosophy of the country's responsibility to the poorer members of its populace. For example, Romney has signed on to his running mate Paul Ryan's budget, which cuts \$5.3 trillion more than Obama's over the next 10 years—much of it from social services that would benefit

the needy. Romney's plan to cut income taxes skews heavily to those at the top while Obama wants to increase taxes on the highest wage earners. The Bush tax cuts mostly benefitted the rich and ballooned the deficit. Obama was forced to extend them by an additional two years during last summer's budget standoff. Romney would like to make the cuts permanent. However, unlike Romney, who is a free market ideologue, Obama believes in government spending to stimulate the economy and create jobs as well as offering a safety net to protect the needy. Part of his re-election campaign is the Buffet Rule, a minimum tax of 30% on millionaires. The president also wants to freeze student loan rates, some-

thing the opposition opposes. Now exceeding \$1 trillion, they are the second largest source of consumer debt, lagging only behind mortgages. This would help an entire generation of middle- and lower-class Americans get the education they need to improve their lives without being stuck under a mountain of crippling debt. The Republicans have always maintained that there is equal opportunity for all, but the United States ranks at the bottom of developed nations as far as social mobility between generations. If you are born poor in America, odds are you will stay that way.

It's part of a bigger picture that makes this election especially relevant to most Americans. In the past few

decades, there has been a steady rollback of the entire welfare state, with health care, public transportation, public housing, pensions, and education all taking hits. The economy has been globalized, causing manufacturing jobs to move offshore. Tax breaks for big business have been rammed through, and currencies and banking systems have been deregulated. Decent-paying jobs for unskilled workers are a thing of the past. On the other end of the spectrum, a superclass has emerged. Similar to nobles in medieval times, these extremely wealthy individuals live in castle-like gated communities, separated from the realities that the average American faces.

A photograph of Mitt Romney, smiling broadly and clapping his hands. He is wearing a dark suit jacket over a light-colored, button-down shirt. The background is a dark, solid color.

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This skyrocketing inequality has been continuing unchecked in America for many years, and it will only get worse with a government that doesn't give a damn in office. Republicans push the hardest for downsizing government and privatization, and a Romney victory will bring massive cutbacks and further perks for the rich.

What really gives this election an outsized significance is whether the country will continue to be a two-tiered society or whether it will head back in the direction of equal opportunity for all. Political machinations have created an America where the gap between rich and poor is reminiscent of what existed over 100 years ago, before labor unions

won some measure of political power for the working class. A Romney victory with Republican control of either the House or Senate might be a point of no return. It could get ugly: layoffs at state and local levels, cutbacks in Medicaid, unemployment insurance, postal services, and more. The attempt to privatize Social Security may be revived. Massive spending cuts will mean a drop in gross domestic product so severe that another recession is almost guaranteed.

If the Democrats regain control of Congress, Obama will at least preserve some measure of a safety net. The rich will no longer receive massive tax breaks, which means that their increased tax dollars will trickle down to housing, healthcare,

education, and so on. The economy should improve, albeit slowly, through infrastructure and other government spending. But if the president gets re-elected and Republicans control the House and the Senate, the present stalemate will only intensify as the two sides vie for dominance with all of us caught in the middle.

With the economy in semi-permanent limbo and 13 million still unemployed, the election promises to be a turning point. Which America will we see four years from now—one where government lends a helping hand to those who need it most or one where the less fortunate get crushed under a steamroller of big money and corporate greed?

