

# The rise and fall of Herman Cain

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The withdrawal of businessman and lobbyist Herman Cain from the Republican presidential contest—only weeks after he had topped the polls nationally and in Iowa, the first contested state—is a stark demonstration of the way in which the American ruling elite makes use of scandals, particularly involving sex, to regulate its political affairs.

Cain announced the suspension of his presidential campaign on December 3, five days after an Atlanta woman confirmed publicly that she had been financially supported by him throughout a 13-year affair that ended early this year. This followed a month of media furor over charges that Cain had sexually harassed or assaulted as many as four women during his tenure as CEO of the National Restaurant Association, a Washington lobbying group.

Both Cain's rise and fall were the product of manipulation of the Republican nomination campaign by the corporate-controlled media and powerful financial interests. The American people have as little real influence over the process by which the next US president is selected as workers in American corporations have in the choice of the CEO.

Cain, an African-American, was the fourth candidate to be dubbed Republican "frontrunner" this year, following billionaire Donald Trump, former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney and Texas Governor Rick Perry, and he has been followed by a fifth, former House Speaker Newt Gingrich. The whole process has taken place without a single voter casting a ballot, through media-driven opinion polls and the flow of campaign contributions, mainly from wealthy donors.

Cain's political career is associated with a particular faction of the ultra-right, financed by the Koch brothers, Charles and David, the billionaire owners of Koch Industries, based in Wichita, Kansas. The second largest privately held company in the United States, Koch Industries would rank sixteenth in the Fortune 500 if it were a publicly listed company, and its annual sales revenue is estimated at \$100 billion. Each brother is worth an estimated \$25 billion.

The Koch brothers are among the most politically active of the super-rich, financing a vast array of right-wing organizations, from think tanks like the Cato Institute to overtly political operations like Citizens for a Sound Economy, which in turn established FreedomWorks and Americans for Prosperity, two of the main sponsors of the pseudo-populist Tea Party groups.

Cain came into the orbit of the Koch brothers during his days as CEO of Godfather's Pizza (1986-1996), the Omaha-based subsidiary of Pillsbury Co. At the time, he had pursued a conventional business career through the corporate ranks of Pillsbury, as well as serving on the board of directors of the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City, and later as chairman of the Kansas City Fed.

In 1994, he came to the notice of right-wing political circles as a vocal opponent of the Clinton health care reform plan, and two years

later he was offered the post of president of the National Restaurant Association, the industry lobbying group in Washington, where he raised his profile in the Republican Party. He was briefly a candidate for the Republican presidential nomination in 2000, then lost a Republican primary campaign in 2004 for a US Senate seat in Georgia.

Cain's more recent prominence is a direct result of his ties to the Koch brothers and the Murdoch media empire. He became a featured spokesman for Americans for Prosperity and a regular at Tea Party rallies, as well as hosting a right-wing talk-radio program in Atlanta, where he relentlessly promoted himself as a spokesman for market-based approaches to every social issue. In the course of 2011, he appeared on Fox News more than any other presidential hopeful.

Cain's second presidential campaign was initially dismissed, like his first, as no more than a vanity effort, aimed at raising his profile in right-wing circles and increasing the market for his radio program and books. The candidate himself seems to have regarded the campaign in that light, concentrating on bookselling tours through states with no significance in the primary election process, and largely avoiding the early states—Iowa, New Hampshire, South Carolina, Nevada and Florida—where those with actual presidential aspirations concentrated their efforts.

This was the case until the end of the summer, when discontent began to mount in ultra-right circles over the likely nomination of Romney. The multi-millionaire investment banker was considered too moderate, based on his career in state politics in Massachusetts, where he had supported abortion rights and efforts to curb global warming, and co-authored a state health care plan that became the model for the Obama administration's health care law. His subsequent shift to the right on all these issues was deemed an insufficient guarantee of his fidelity to ultra-conservative nostrums.

Christian fundamentalists propelled Congresswoman Michele Bachmann to victory in the Iowa straw poll, in August, but her campaign proved unviable, in part due to her ignorance regarding any political issue not spelled out in the Bible. Her obsessive hostility to homosexuality, linked to her husband's religious counseling business that focuses on "praying away the gay," also raised eyebrows.

Next, Governor Perry of Texas answered the call, after sponsoring a revival-style prayer meeting in a Houston arena attended by 20,000 people. He quickly surged to the top in polls of likely Republican primary voters. But Perry proved to be as ill-informed as Bachmann and even more inarticulate. A series of disastrous debate performances produced a collapse in his standing in the polls and a shriveling of campaign contributions except from wealthy Texas cronies.

Cain began to move into the top tier of candidates with a victory in a straw poll held at a Florida state Republican gathering in mid-September, where he and Perry addressed the audience and Cain was seen as the more convincing, particularly in his revival-style sermons

about his “9-9-9” program for cutting taxes on the wealthy and the upper-middle class. His standing in the polls skyrocketed from 3 percent in late August to over 25 percent by mid-October, putting him just ahead of Romney.

Almost as soon as he began to attract more media and popular attention, however, Cain’s own deficiencies became apparent. He knew little of domestic political issues outside of his call for slashing taxes and regulations on business, and nothing at all of international issues.

At one point, he warned of China’s desire to obtain a nuclear weapon (which Beijing has possessed for nearly 50 years). In another instance, asked by a newspaper editorial board about Obama’s war in Libya, he could be seen talking to himself, ransacking his brain for the proper bullet points but coming up empty.

On October 30, the Washington publication *Politico* published an expose of the sexual harassment charges against Cain brought by two female employees at the National Restaurant Association. The candidate flatly denied the charges, but more cases were identified, including two involving women who came forward publicly to describe their experiences.

These incidents, involving allegations of abuse of power over subordinates or job-seekers, did not torpedo Cain’s campaign. On the contrary, campaign contributions flooded in and right-wing pundits proclaimed him the victim of character assassination by the “liberal” media. He continued to top the polls of Republican voters nationally and in Iowa.

The revelations on November 21 were of a different character. Ginger White, an unemployed single mother in Atlanta, was interviewed by the local Fox television station and detailed her 13-year relationship with Cain, which included extensive financial support.

Nothing in the relationship was discrediting to Cain—if anything, White’s account testified to a more humane personality than the stereotypes of a right-wing talk-radio host or ruthless cost-cutting corporate executive would suggest.

But to the ultra-right audience, marital infidelity is far more of a disqualification than sexual harassment. Several Fox News personalities took the lead in condemning Cain, including Sean Hannity, Laura Ingraham, and former Arkansas governor and 2008 presidential contender Mike Huckabee. Cain’s support in the polls began to tumble, and financial contributions dried up.

Cain’s lawyer, Lin Wood, initially hired to rebut the sexual harassment allegations, carefully distinguished these from White’s account of a long-term affair, saying, “this appears to be an accusation of private, alleged consensual conduct between adults—a subject matter which is not a proper subject of inquiry by the media or the public. No individual, whether a private citizen, a candidate for public office or a public official, should be questioned about his or her private sexual life.”

This position is perfectly valid, but it touches a sore point in extreme-right circles. Iowa talk-radio host Steve Deace, in an interview with *Politico*, described the statement by Wood as a “kill-shot to his campaign.” Media pundits like himself would respond unfavorably, he said, “since many of them came to prominence on opining on Bill Clinton’s sordid private life.”

The swift demise of the Cain campaign has cleared the ground for yet another right-wing “frontrunner” and alternative to Romney, Newt Gingrich. There are no significant political differences between Cain and Gingrich, or, for that matter, between Gingrich and Romney, or

between the Republican field as a whole and Obama, for all the anti-Obama fulminations at Republican rallies and debates.

Both the Democratic Party and the Republican Party are political instruments of big business, committed to the defense of corporate profits, private wealth, and the worldwide domination of American imperialism. There are, of course, significant differences of a tactical character: how best to defend the interests of the financial aristocracy and hoodwink the working people who comprise the vast majority of the American population.

The selection of the presidential nominees of the two major parties is, for the American ruling elite, a serious business. The financial aristocracy manipulates the selection process to insure that its interests will be well served, regardless of which of the two parties eventually prevails in the Electoral College.

With no political experience, untested and untried, Cain was in the end not deemed a suitable choice for the presidency, even by the low standards of American capitalist politics in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. One veteran Republican operative, Steve Schmidt, campaign manager for Senator John McCain in 2008, conceded this point, declaring, “That Cain’s candidacy was taken seriously for longer than a nano-second in a time of genuine crisis for the country raises fundamental questions about the health of the political process and the Republican party.”

Cain’s standing in the polls had become an obstacle to the process of consolidating support behind a more reliable and tested Republican nominee, whether Romney, Gingrich or some other, only a month before the initial contest, the January 3 Iowa caucus. He had to go, and his removal was carried out swiftly and ruthlessly.

That a sex scandal was used to accomplish this political maneuver is no accident. Such operations have become a staple of bourgeois politics in the United States in recent years. The cycle of exposure, denial, media frenzy, grudging admission and final collapse has become a familiar script. It is both predictable and degrading.

More significant is what will *not* disqualify a candidate for the highest political office in America. In the course of the past month, while Cain’s campaign collapsed under the impact of allegations of sexual misconduct, his rivals (and Cain himself) condemned child labor laws, supported mass evictions, endorsed torture, advocated war with Iran and generally lined up behind the “right” of American corporations to be free of taxes, regulations, unions or any other restrictions on private wealth.

None of these reactionary and semi-fascistic opinions was regarded as an obstacle to the nomination. Meanwhile, a largely bogus and irrelevant issue was manufactured to clear Cain out of the path of the eventual nominee, who, like Obama, will be a tested and experienced defender of the interests of the financial aristocracy.



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