

Super Frenzy: A Tactician Juggles 21 Contests at Once

By LAURA MECKLER
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BOSTON -- Running a presidential campaign in 21 states with less than a week to woo voters involves hundreds of decisions. At one point last Thursday, the question at hand was whether Mitt Romney should watch the Super Bowl kickoff in a bar or at a private home.



Carl Forti

In a bar, the campaign ran the risk that reporters might interview someone who hates Mr. Romney. A house party could look cramped in a small home, or, if it took place in a mansion, out of touch with middle-income Americans.

The man who ultimately made the call was Carl Forti, Mr. Romney's national political director. It was just one of the logistical issues confronting Mr. Forti as he helped direct a coast-to-coast campaign in the run-up to today's action. With an unprecedented number of states holding nominating contests on a single day, this year's Super Tuesday presents a particularly grueling challenge for the campaigns. Candidates have been campaigning farther afield and packing in more advertising than ever for a single primary day.

Complicating the political calculus, many voters have already cast their ballots, thanks to changes in state rules that make it easier to vote early.

These frenzied choices are falling to people like Mr. Forti, a brand of political strategist rarely seen in public. He doesn't decide if Mr. Romney should portray himself as a social conservative or an experienced businessman, or whether to attack an opponent or stay positive. He doesn't shape message. He shapes tactics. This means wrestling with a range of rapid-fire calculations about where Mr. Romney should spend his time, how to divvy up dollars and where to focus get-out-the-vote phone calls.

These decisions will play a role in determining whether the former Massachusetts governor, coming off a painful loss in Florida, is still standing after today's vote.

A GRUELING RUNUP

- **Packed Schedules:** With an unprecedented number of states participating in Super Tuesday this year, the campaigns faced a tough juggling act.
- **The Logistics Man:** As Mr. Romney's National Political Director, Carl Forti is tasked not with shaping the candidate's message, but with his tactics.
- **Mr. Romney's Attack:** Over the past week, Mr. Forti has wrestled with hundreds of rapid-fire calculations, from which states to launch phone blitzes in to where Mr. Romney should watch the Super Bowl.

The Republican front-runner, Arizona Sen. John McCain, has focused on the biggest prize, California, and on winner-take-all states of New York and New Jersey seen as receptive to his independent streak. Former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee, short on cash and attention, is fixed on Southern states where aides figured his appeal to evangelical Christians would be best received.

The two Democrats left -- Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama -- are running a parallel race in 22 states. Unlike Republicans, the Democrats allocate all delegates on a proportional basis, meaning they are likely to win delegates even in states where a candidate loses the popular vote. Mr. Obama's hopes for victory include the heavily African-American Southern states; his home state of Illinois; and Republican-leaning states like Kansas and Idaho, where anti-Clinton feeling is strong. Mrs. Clinton is counting on her home state of New York and an edge in states with big Latino populations, like California, Arizona and New Mexico.

Laying Out the Road Map

Mr. Forti started strategizing for Super Tuesday a few days before the Jan. 29 Florida primary. In a hotel conference room in St. Petersburg, Fla., Mr. Forti's team laid out a road map targeting states where additional spending would do the most good. A map showed green, red and yellow states.

Green states were the best bets -- smaller states holding caucuses or conventions instead of primaries: Colorado, Alaska, Montana, North Dakota, Minnesota, West Virginia and Maine, where he wound up winning caucuses held on Saturday, Feb. 2. These low-turnout affairs tend to attract mainly Republican loyalists who have been Mr. Romney's core supporters. Also on the list was Massachusetts, Mr. Romney's home state, where Mr. McCain has made inroads.

The plan was to deliver tens of thousands of phone calls with a mix of positive messages about Mr. Romney and negative information about Mr. McCain. These states would also get additional on-the-ground staff. Mr. Forti hoped that a small amount of money would produce a big return. More than 200,000 phone calls to Minnesota, for instance, would cost just \$175,000.

The campaign was counting on a free win in Utah, where a large Mormon population gives the Mormon Mr. Romney an advantage.



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A second set of states were labeled red, including the delegate-rich, expensive territory of California, Missouri and Illinois. Mr. Forti believed these states were winnable if the campaign was willing to spend a combined \$5 million in paid TV ads. Georgia and Tennessee might justify TV ads, but with Mike Huckabee strongest in the South, Mr. Forti put them lower on the priority list.

Yellow states, those least likely to get attention, rounded out the map. Labeled "high risk-low ROI" (return on investment), they included Alabama, Oklahoma and Arkansas (Huckabee territory), and New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, Delaware and Arizona, where Mr. Romney's chief rival, Mr. McCain, had the edge.

On the morning of Jan. 29, as Florida began voting, Mr. Forti met with Mr. Romney to discuss the spending allocations. Mr. Romney signed off on staff and telephone calls in the green states. He didn't approve any money for TV ads, or for pricey phone calls into California.

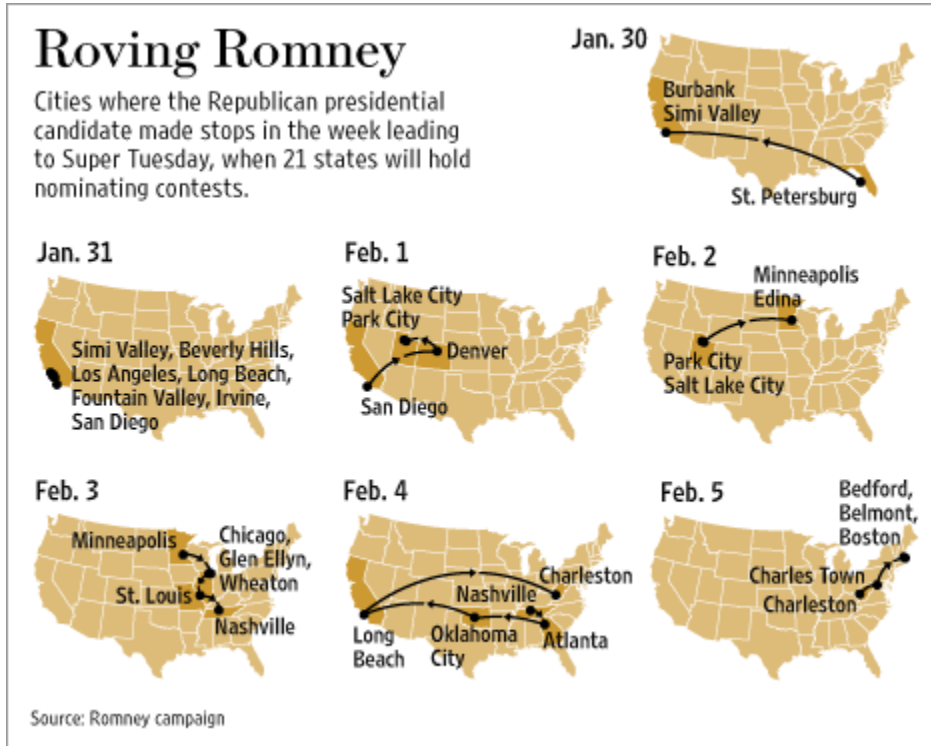
Despite Mr. Romney's vast personal fortune, and his willingness to spend \$35 million of it last year, his campaign had limits. "The only thing approved is green," Mr. Forti told his staff. Looking at a list of people on the payroll who weren't being deployed to Feb. 5 states, Mr. Forti said, "Unless we can make a strong case, all of these people are going to stop getting paychecks." Traveling staff were assigned to bunk with local workers when possible.

Reveling in the Sport

Mr. Forti, pudgy and hair thinning at age 35, approaches his job with emotional detachment. In conversations and in meetings with his staff, he rarely raises his voice and is more likely to chuckle than growl. In the days after Mr. Romney's loss to Mr. McCain

in Florida -- a vote widely seen as a turning point that may have given the Arizona senator a decisive edge -- Mr. Forti replied to various bits of bad news with a straightforward, "It is what it is."

Growing up in upstate New York, Mr. Forti says he knew and cared little about politics. A college course at George Washington University in political strategy led to a job with a political ad maker. This led to nearly eight years working for the National Republican Campaign Committee where he focused on getting Republicans elected to the House.



As the 2008 presidential campaign began to heat up, he says he was offered a job in communications with the Rudy Giuliani campaign. Instead, he signed on with Mr. Romney in late 2006 -- a job he thought would be more interesting -- for an annual salary of \$126,000.

Mr. Forti says he doesn't take strong ideological stances, reveling more in the sport of campaigning. On his office wall in Boston hangs a framed editorial cartoon imagining the negative ads a modern-day Lincoln and Douglas would have spewed. ("He helped pass the compromise of 1850. What else is he going to compromise?")

Wednesday: In the 'War Room'

By 7 a.m. last Wednesday, after Mr. Romney had conceded Florida, Mr. Forti was on a plane for Boston. By noon, he was setting up a Feb. 5 "war room" in a conference room at campaign headquarters. He propped up a white board to track the timing and content of phone calls to targeted states.

He also began assembling state-specific videos of Mr. Romney laying out his case. The idea was to blast email to people with a link to the video. On the California video, Mr. Romney derided illegal immigration, an issue where party hardliners see Mr. McCain as soft. For Alaska, he talked up his support for opening the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge

to drilling -- which Mr. McCain opposes, defying the party line. When there was no specific message to deliver, there was this: "West Virginia is a special place with unique issues."

Later, Mr. Forti worked to resolve the schedules for Ann Romney, the candidate's wife, and four of their five sons, all of whom travel the country to campaign. This presented a giant puzzle. Mr. Forti wanted to maximize press exposure, so he didn't want overlap. He finally made the puzzle work: On Friday, Josh would be in Alaska, Matt in Montana, Craig in Georgia and Tagg in Maine. Over four days, Mrs. Romney would visit North Dakota, Minnesota, Missouri and possibly West Virginia.

The next morning, campaign manager Beth Myers called Mr. Forti to say Mr. Romney had signed off on about \$1.5 million in TV ads for California, and possibly other states. And it looked like he would approve at least \$300,000 for phone calls in California, enough for about four million calls. (On Friday, Mr. Romney would approve a national cable-TV ad buy and added calls into Georgia, but not the massive ad buy some outsiders had predicted he would make.)

There were only five days left before Super Tuesday, and the candidate's schedule still wasn't nailed down. Mr. Romney had already spent more than two days in California after leaving Florida. Now the schedule had him traveling to Denver, Minneapolis, Chicago, St. Louis, Nashville, Atlanta -- the largest cities in Mr. Forti's first- and second-tier states. But details weren't settled. The funeral for Mormon leader Gordon Hinckley required a time-consuming Saturday stop in Utah, a state that didn't need attention.

At a scheduling meeting, Mr. Forti said he wanted events that would draw a "media splash" -- events that were more exciting than the usual hotel ballroom speeches. Aides considered a roller-coaster ride at the Mall of America in Minneapolis and a visit to a Harley Davidson showroom in Denver. They cautioned that Mr. Romney should not pretend to ride a motorcycle or describe himself as a biker, since he isn't one.

"He'll get press if he does it," one staffer said.

"Yeah, he also got press when he said 'who? who?' " another replied, a reference to Mr. Romney's awkward rendition of the song "Who Let the Dogs Out?" at a Martin Luther King Day parade in Jacksonville, Fla.

In the end, he went to a Target in Minneapolis and a Ford dealership in Denver.

In Chicago, Mr. Forti said, the location should lend itself to an economic message, perhaps new development on the waterfront. In Nashville, Mr. Forti wanted Mr. Romney to visit a diner and talk with a family about the economy.

The West Virginia Problem

Staff was also trying to recruit prominent backers, including supporters of Rudy Giuliani, who had just dropped out of the race. That afternoon, word came in that Tennessee Sen. Bob Corker had signed on, and they asked Mr. Romney to call him to seal the deal.

Mr. Forti tried to figure out how to approach former Pennsylvania Sen. Rick Santorum, a hero among social conservatives, who already had publicly lambasted Mr. McCain. It seemed that every time he looked up, someone else was endorsing their chief rival. "Cross off Jerry Kilgore," Mr. Forti announced, after he opened an email with a news story about the former attorney general of Virginia backing Mr. McCain.

Hours later, word came back that either their information was wrong or Mr. Corker had changed his mind. Mr. Corker has so far decided to remain neutral. Mr. Santorum, who was ultimately approached by a campaign intermediary, did come out for Mr. Romney.

The mood stayed light. When a friend sent Mr. Forti a YouTube link of John Belushi's defiant speech in "Animal House," he played it for all to hear: "Nothing is over till we decide it is. Was it over when the Germans bombed Pearl Harbor?"

West Virginia posed a problem. The campaign's consultant there was warning that it could hurt Mr. Romney to stop by Monday night at the state convention, according to plan, if he didn't also stay and address the convention the next day. The consultant argued that it would be an insult to be in town so close to the event but not stay. Annoyed, Mr. Forti threatened to skip the state altogether. He then reconsidered, deciding Mr. Romney might win West Virginia's 30 delegates if he went Tuesday, which would make a Tuesday stop worthwhile.

With West Virginia off the calendar for Monday, the campaign decided to send Mr. Romney back to California for one last rally last night. On the way, he'd stop in Oklahoma, where the plane could refuel, and do a quick event at the airport.

Mr. Forti still needed to resolve the St. Louis Super Bowl stop. The Missouri field director phoned in, saying he was worried about holding the event at a bar in case reporters found people to interview who were against Mr. Romney. Mr. Forti told him why doing it at a public place was preferable.

"If we do a Super Bowl event at someone's house, to accommodate 100 people and the national press it has to be a mansion," he said. That would send the wrong message for a multimillionaire candidate sometimes accused of being out of touch with middle-income Americans. As for the possibility that an anti-Romney person might be at the bar, Mr. Forti said, "I could care less."

That was that. The event was held at Dave & Buster's, a sports bar.

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