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July 13, 2012

What a Tangled Web

By CHARLES M. BLOW

Mitt Romney's stories just don't jibe.

First, there is the issue of when he left Bain Capital, the private-equity firm he founded.

On an August 2011 federal disclosure form, Romney stated that he "retired from Bain Capital on Feb. 11, 1999, to head the Salt Lake Organizing Committee." The statement continued: "Since Feb. 11, 1999, Mr. Romney has not had any active role with any Bain Capital entity and had not been involved in the operations of any Bain Capital entity in any way."

But, as [The Boston Globe reported](#) this week, Securities and Exchange Commission [documents filed](#) after 1999 by Bain Capital state that "he remained the firm's 'sole stockholder, chairman of the board, chief executive officer, and president.' "

Furthermore, [according to documents obtained by The Huffington Post](#), Romney testified in June 2002 that there "were a number of social trips and business trips that brought me back to Massachusetts, board meetings, Thanksgiving and so forth." According to The Huffington Post, Romney also testified that he "remained on the board of the Staples Corporation and Marriott International, the LifeLike Corporation."

Here is where we must split the hair. All these things could be technically true, but that'd rest on a distinction most people wouldn't make. There is no evidence that Romney played an "active role" in "any Bain Capital entity," although he was active in the companies that Bain invested in. This depends on what you consider an "entity."

[As FactCheck.org puts it](#): "We think the term 'Bain Capital entity' on Romney's disclosure forms could only refer to Bain's various investment funds, not to companies in which it invested."

That may be technically true, but the spirit of the truth as most people engage it doesn't turn on technicalities.

For most Americans, filings for the Federal Election Commission and the Securities and Exchange Commission are foreign concepts that would have limited resonance. But being misleading is a universal concept: most have done it and most frown upon it. The insinuation by the Obama campaign that Romney was either lying then or is lying now (or is shaving the truth down to a sliver) to make a buck and win an office is a much easier and more dangerous concept for voters to

wrap their minds around.

Furthermore, the slipperiness of this explanation underscores Romney's otherness. If you were a construction worker or a schoolteacher, the year you stopped doing your job wouldn't be ambiguous. Having no "active role" in a parent "entity" feels like a term of art for a con artist.

Second is the issue of Romney's tax returns.

Romney has only released a complete return for 2010 and an unfinished estimate for 2011. This is less than any other presidential candidate in recent history. As [The Times put it in a scathing editorial](#) this week, "what information he did release provides a fuzzy glimpse at a concerted effort to park much of his wealth in overseas tax shelters, suggesting a widespread pattern of tax avoidance unlike that of any previous candidate."

Blind trusts, Swiss bank accounts and Bermuda accounts designed to shield your money from the taxing agency of the country you want to lead just doesn't sound right. And Romney's reluctance to reveal more suggests that there is more that's distasteful.

In general, people are uneasy when politicians are unwilling to disclose details. President Obama learned this as it related to his birth certificate. He may have been withholding it on principle because no other president had been forced to go to such an extent to prove his legitimacy, but, eventually, the damage being done by withholding became greater than the principle. So he released it, and much — but not all — of the second-guessing went away.

Romney may have to reach that decision more quickly than Obama. The narrative is starting to take hold that he is dishonest, devious and irreconcilably different. These are simple, deadly character flaws in a candidate because they're antithetical to the American ideal of the presidency.

This is the country of George Washington and the cherry tree lore — the tender story of a little boy who would become the nation's first president and the now famous line "I cannot tell a lie." Whether truth or fable, it's a fixture.

One thing that seems questionable is Romney's tax return defense that, "[all the taxes are paid, as appropriate.](#)" Propriety is a matter of perspective.

My mother used to say: "If you tell the truth, you don't have to remember what you said." The simple truth makes sense, stands on its own and can be proved. Nine times out of 10, things that require constant clarification and endless appending aren't the simple truth.

That's mother's wit, and everyone has a mother.

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