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^BACHMANN'S NEW TONE: FAREWELL TO ALL THAT@<

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WASHINGTON _ It was the right thing to do. Chris Wallace, host of the "Fox News Sunday" show, called an "insulted" Michele Bachmann and said he's sorry. She has accepted his apology for asking her: "Are you a flake?"

He got a lot of flak for that, deservedly so. It was demeaning. And it was not exactly the right question.

After watching her official candidacy speech in Waterloo, Iowa, where she presented herself as the "voice of reasonable, fair-minded people," she now calls herself a "unifier."

Her suddenly mellow tone had played well at the New Hampshire debate a couple weeks earlier so she's now avoiding the incendiary rhetoric that made her a cable news inciter. She has switched from careless to calculated. So, the proper question is: "Are you a fake?"

Anybody who's been paying attention knows that Michele Bachmann has built her political career on "Don't Confuse Me with the Facts" sound bites that range from bombast to bomb blast. She was right out in front of the fringe parade last November with the claim that President Obama's trip to India would cost \$200 million a day.

Never mind that this was hogwash. She put it out there and the Obama haters had new reason to hate _ and to love her for it. Her oratorical resume is splattered with McCarthyisms, such as the suggestion in 2008 that members of Congress should be investigated for being "anti-American."

She is stridently conservative, arguing, "Literally, if we took away the minimum wage, if conceivably it was gone, we could potentially wipe out unemployment completely, because we would be able to offer jobs at whatever level." She overlooks the possibility that if we went all the way in that direction, to outright slavery, we could have full employment. Maybe she's forgetting that's been tried.

Her grasp of history has become legendary. Her most recent flub came in the opening speech of her campaign, in Waterloo, Iowa, where she was born, and where she is hoping to triumph in the state's first-in-the-nation delegate-selection competition. She declared that Waterloo was the home of John Wayne. Actually, it was the birthplace of John Wayne Gacy, the gruesome serial murderer.

Still Bachmann is running a killer campaign. She has shot to the top of the latest Des Moines Register poll that shows her neck and neck with Mitt Romney for the lead among Iowa Republicans.

They are a particularly conservative bunch in the state, so she gets a lot of points for her support for teaching "intelligent design" in schools or rallying people to be "armed and dangerous" in their opposition to an energy tax or last year claiming that Obama administration policies were "turning our country into a nation of slaves."

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She is the self-appointed leader of the Congressional Tea Party Caucus and channels all of that movement's anger. She is defiant, for instance, in the face of forecasts that failure to raise the debt ceiling by early August could cause a catastrophic default by the United States government, insisting those warnings are "scare tactics by the Obama administration."

The dilemma, though, is that the far right is crowded with GOP candidates, and could fill up even more if Sarah Palin adds her out-sized presence or Texas Gov. Rick Perry joins in. So Bachmann is reaching to the middle with a new found warmth and fuzziness aimed at independents.

"Our problems," she declared in Waterloo, "don't have an identity of party _ they are problems of both parties."

The real problem is that Michele Bachmann has suspiciously abandoned her fire-breathing ways. Presenting herself as a gentle breath of fresh air might ultimately be viewed as oxymoronically cynical. There is another possibility, of course: She knows what she's doing, she and her consultants.

She needs to be taken seriously. She is definitely not a flake and her success so far is not a fluke.

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