

In Campaign Kickoff, Huntsman Tries to Justify the Hype

June 20, 2011

By Alex Altman

Brooks Kraft / Corbis for TIME

Former U.S. ambassador to China and possible Republican presidential candidate Jon Huntsman attends the Nashua Republican Committee Picnic in Hollis, NH.

Jon Huntsman likes to call himself the “margin-of-error candidate.” It is not an accidental phrase. In the seven weeks since the former Utah Governor and Ambassador to China returned from Beijing with visions of filling the gaping void in the GOP field, Team Huntsman has seemed interested in nothing so much as humanizing the candidate, in portraying him as modest and relatable. They want you to know that this is a guy who loves motocross, who dropped out of high school to play keyboards in a prog-rock band called Wizard, who drags friends and reporters to his favorite taco carts for lunch. When you’re a handsome former CEO with a pretty wife and a billionaire dad, self-effacement can help soften the schadenfreude.

But there is nothing marginal or modest about the plans for the kickoff of Huntsman’s campaign Tuesday morning. His aides have scripted an opening set piece thick with heady iconography. Liberty State Park in Jersey City, the setting of the announcement speech, was also the site of Ronald Reagan’s general-election curtain-raiser in 1980. Lady Liberty, shimmering across the water, will provide the backdrop. The visuals are meant to suggest that after weeks of playing small-ball in the hamlets of New Hampshire, the GOP’s potential savior has arrived at center stage.

Which is often the place where the new guy gets hammered. In Huntsman’s case, a schizophrenic press corps – eager to hype a buzzy candidate, but hedging its bets to avoid appearing too effusive about a candidate who registers in the low single-digits in polls – has been speculating for weeks about his weaknesses.

By now you can probably rattle them off. He is a soft-spoken, self-professed pragmatist in a primary fight that seems built for screamers. He supported the idea of a stimulus package; one of his criticisms of Obama’s was that [it should have been bigger](#). He [flirted with embracing a health-care policy that contained an individual mandate](#). He backed a regional cap-and-trade pact, and while he has renounced this conservative apostasy, some say he will regret defying Republican doctrine by siding with the climate scientists who correctly say the world is warming. Whether the base will warm to a candidate who served Barack Obama (as he did Ronald Reagan and both Bushes) is an open question. And even if they can forgive his other sins, some social conservatives may not be willing to vote for a Mormon.

But this cycle, every candidate has a few scars. The notion that Huntsman could mount a credible challenge to early pace-setter Mitt Romney – another Mormon ex-CEO with a health-care problem and a moderate climate line – is not, as some suggest, a fairytale spun by Beltway pundits seduced by a comity candidate with a compelling storyline. Huntsman was a highly popular governor in a deep-red state. He compiled [a record of supporting pro-life legislation](#). He cut taxes. In 2008, he won re-election with 78% of the vote. That same year, the Pew Center named Utah the best-run state in the U.S. “During Huntsman’s tenure, January 2005 to August 2009, Utah had the best overall job-growth rate of any state in the nation,” [writes Katrina Trinko](#) of the conservative *National Review*, citing the publication’s analysis of Bureau of Labor Statistics records. Better, she notes, than Romney or Tim Pawlenty.

This is the record Huntsman will run on. “As governor of Utah – while our country faded into recession – we created an environment that brought jobs to the state without

resorting to out-of-control spending and debt," Huntsman said in a recent statement. On the eve of his roll-out, he tried to sharpen his appeal to fiscal conservatives by [backing a balanced-budget amendment](#), and he has assiduously sought to link the isolationist strains in his foreign policy – which increasingly align with voter opinion, according to polls, but risk offending defense hawks – to the need for deficit reduction. He is still tinkering with his message, but the central pieces – likable pragmatist, record of growing an economy, foreign-affairs expertise to lead the steer the country through a confounding world – could strike a chord.

To be sure, Huntsman will take his lumps as he edges from the sidelines into the spotlight. In a 2008 report card on the nation's governors, the [Cato Institute argued](#) Huntsman "completely dropped the ball on spending, with per capita spending increases at about 10% annually." (Thanks to his tax-cutting record, he still earned a B overall, tied with uber-conservative Rick Perry and slightly ahead of Pawlenty. The top scorers, to give a sense of the fleeting shelf lives of politicians, were Charlie Crist and Mark Sanford.) Huntsman may be able to wriggle away from his service to Obama (a matter of "duty") or his ostensible support for an individual mandate. (Aides note that he ultimately supported "a free-market health care plan without a mandate.") He will have a harder time shaking the perception that he's a big spender, if that criticism sticks.

Huntsman will try to pair his economic record with a winning personality in an effort to emerge as the Establishment alternative to Romney. "I think what's going to drive this election, really, are two things — authenticity and the economy," [he told the New York Times magazine's Matt Bai](#). But critics doubt the authenticity component. "Without a doubt, in 2008 there were many Democrats that were supportive of the governor in his re-election bid because he had taken some positions of political courage," says Wayne Holland, the chairman of Utah's Democratic Party. Holland held a conference call with reporters on the eve of Huntsman's kickoff to accuse Huntsman of abandoning his moderate record. The Utah Democrats also released a video spoof of ad maestro Fred Davis's come-hither ad campaign for Huntsman, a series of cryptic spots that flash obscure facts – his membership in Wizard is one of them, naturally — as a man on a bike zooms through Utah's gorgeous Monument Valley.

In Holland's formulation, Huntsman has been "riding away from his record." Says the Democrat: "We saw him as a very moderate governor and public servant. So it is very disappointing and somewhat saddening to see a governor many respect ... to be pandering to what we call the 'tin-foil-cap crowd' of the Republican party." Huntsman, said Holland, "changed positions over the past few days it's enough to give Utah voters whiplash."

If you're Huntsman, it's probably a good thing that Utah's top Democrat is dismayed by the direction of your campaign. There's plenty of time to tack back to the center later on. The first task — convincing the conservative establishment that he's the real deal — begins in earnest on Tuesday.

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