

After a Campaign That Fell Apart, a Second Act Is Still Possible
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By Ross Ramsey

Sarah Palin got a reality show. Hillary Clinton is secretary of state. Mike Huckabee is on television and the radio. Rudy Giuliani still has his name on the door of that giant law firm.

What will Rick Perry's second act be?

He has nearly three years, including another legislative session, left in his term as governor. He opened and closed his presidential run with a message that's still relevant in national politics and probably useful to the Republicans once their nomination battle is over.

It's not the jobs thing. It's the federalism thing. Mr. Perry's book, "Fed Up!," fueled his biggest applause line in his last debate: "I'm saying the state of Texas is under assault by federal government. I'm saying also that South Carolina is at war with this federal government and with this administration."

When the Republicans are through spitting at one another and ready to sling arrows at the Democrat in the White House, that line of thinking could be useful.

Before Mr. Perry joined the race, last spring and early summer, his line was that he wanted to cut the federal government's power and increase the influence of the states. He is still a leading voice in that federalism argument. Maybe that's a path he'll pursue after he rests.

It's hard to see any of that right now. The story of Mr. Perry's candidacy was a backward tale of someone starting at the top and ending at the bottom.

Go East, man!

Mr. Perry's best day in the polls preceded his campaigning. He looked so good on paper, remember?

This was the guy who was acceptable to the social conservatives, the fiscal conservatives, the religious conservatives, the Tea Party folks, the Southerners, the TV cameras. He was good-looking and a good speaker.

He was Ms. Palin, without the baggage.

There were some early concerns. George W. Bush, his predecessor as governor, had been out of office less than four years. Was America ready for another chief executive with boots?

Mr. Perry didn't have any significant foreign policy experience or knowledge. He started late and hadn't boned up on specific national issues. Sure, he had the federalism thing and Texas' job growth to brag about, but it doesn't hurt to know something about the specifics of the federal government's executive branch if you're asking voters to let you run it.

But Republicans were shopping, and with Mr. Perry they could check a lot of boxes on their wish lists.

The prevailing theory is that he had it in his hands and blew it. He started the race at the front of the pack. Voters weren't committed to anyone else and were more than willing to consider new faces.

And then came all of those little moments that moved him from the Ronald Reagan column to the Dan Quayle column. If he quit politics right now, he'd go into the record books as the "Oops" guy.

If that's all that went wrong with his campaign, and if this is the same Republican Party it was four years ago, or two years ago, then states' rights — everybody versus the federal government — could be important in the general election.

Mr. Perry could be useful to the eventual nominee.

He ran badly, but he departed well. He knew he wouldn't win South Carolina and did not want to be blamed — as Fred Thompson was in 2008 — for splitting conservative voters and giving the victory to a moderate. So he quit before the primary and threw whatever support he had left to Newt Gingrich, the front-runner in the Not Romney part of the race.

Now it's time to come back to Austin, lie low, rest up and plot his next step. Maybe he'll just keep quiet, do his state job and avoid national politics.

Or maybe this was just the beginning. He did not lose the race in a way that disqualifies him in the future, whether it's for another national race or a place in an administration or a pundit's chair on cable television.

While the governor who entered with an argument against federal authority and an assertion of state independence was announcing his decision to exit the race on Thursday morning in South Carolina, some state employees were enjoying a day off.

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