Politics

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Does Mike Huckabee Have a Prayer?

He’s Absurdly Likeable. A Favorite of the Faithful. But...

7 “Truths” About Women Voters—That Are Flat-Out False

What Still Haunts Mike McCurry

Dick Morris: Why We Should All Circle January 29
By Kerry Howley

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Pick an issue—any issue—

being debated in the United States of America as we approach the 2008 elections, and Mike Huckabee can find a way to tell you that it won’t matter until we collectively slim down. Education? “Kids can’t learn,” he told Charlie Rose in November, “because they’re sick.” The economy? Obesity “will bankrupt this country,” he said in the same interview. The War on Terror? “National security,” he told me in November, “isn’t going to mean much if we have a generation of kids so physically incapacitated they can’t go to war.”

As campaign strategy, weight maintenance talking points are weirdly effective. Issues like global terrorism, failing public schools and the fragile economy are diffuse, impersonal, seemingly uncontrollable. In an election cycle where all of these issues figure prominently among Republican primary voters, Huckabee intimates that Americans can help allay their greatest anxieties by choosing salad over bacon. In the able hands of a former pastor, a story about overcoming obesity becomes one of shame, sacrifice and redemption.

Like everything else with Mike Huckabee, this is personal. Back in 2003, during a meeting of his cabinet in the Arkansas State Capitol, then-Gov. Huckabee famously began the session by smashing his prodigious frame though an antique chair. A lesser fat man would have simply tried to forget the incident. Huckabee dropped 110 pounds and wrote a diet book recounting the experience in excruciating detail. “If I can do it, anybody can!” he writes in “Quit Digging Your Grave With a Knife and Fork.”

There’s a reason Mike Huckabee is the only candidate with a book in the self-help section. Throughout his life, conservatives have deemed him too liberal and liberals have deemed him too conservative, but Huckabee hews to no political philosophy so closely as he hews to the redemptive, empowering philosophies of Tony Robbins, Oprah Winfrey and any particular edition of “Chicken Soup for the Soul.”

Mike Huckabee is trying to turn his own candidacy into yet another inspiring, media-ready story about an affable David slaying an establishment Goliath. Along the way, he is struggling to convince his party that a preacher who wants to institute a national smoking ban, jack up funding for public school music programs and abolish the IRS is the one Republican who can lead a beleaguered party to victory.

It’s a crazy idea, but not nearly as crazy as it was a few months back. The last time official fundraising numbers were released, on Sept. 30, Huckabee was trailing Iowa Republican frontrunner Mitt Romney by tens of millions of dollars. Huckabee seemed irretrievably stuck in the vicious circle of a third-tier candidacy: He couldn’t raise money because he wasn’t seen as viable, and he wasn’t seen as viable because he couldn’t raise money.

But Huckabee has reached voters anyway, capitalizing on free publicity and happily embracing the 24-hour bounty of Fox News. In a single day in October, Huckabee was a guest on The O’Reilly Factor, Hannity & Colmes, and Your World with Neil Cavuto. The same day, he appeared on Fox Business Channel—twice. Huckabee’s very first campaign commercial, an endorsement by Chuck Norris, was savvy and odd enough to warrant constant replay on the major news channels the day it was released, and garner continued buzz in the blogosphere thereafter. By late November, having released the single campaign ad he could afford at the time, was polling among Iowa voters just a few points behind Romney and well ahead of the national frontrunner, Rudy Giuliani. By press time, he had surged to a double-digit lead over Romney in several Iowa polls.

Huckabee’s numbers have risen in other states, too, and may continue to strengthen, given the enthusiasm of his supporters. In an ABC News/Washington Post survey taken in mid-November, 50 percent of Huckabee’s supporters said they were “very enthusiastic,” as opposed to just 28 percent of Romney supporters. Campaign watchers are beginning to ask whether, in a compressed campaign cycle, Huckabee has a chance of converting potential January wins in Iowa and perhaps South Carolina into substantial national support.

Not a prayer, says Bill McIntyre, executive vice president at Grassroots Enterprise, a high-tech Democratic communications firm. “He can become the darling of the media with a couple of wins, but it’s very difficult to convert that attention and spotlight into real, practical soldiers on the ground. Huckabee is really looking more and more like the best man at a wedding. Everybody likes him, but nobody is going to go down the aisle with him.” McIntyre argues that Huckabee’s campaign simply won’t have the time to take the funding and media boost he is likely to get after Iowa and convert them into real wins elsewhere, given the blitzkrieg primary schedule.

But not everyone agrees. Republican political consultant Wayne Johnson thinks the schedule is Huckabee’s greatest hope. In the old cycle, Huckabee would be forced to sustain momentum between wins, space that would normally be filled with paid media ads he doesn’t have the money for. He didn’t have to worry about that in 2007, and he just might ride the wave of earned media—the free kind—from win to win. “You come out of a victory and a couple days later you’re right back in another election,” says Johnson. “Earned media is going to be much more important in that string of primaries. Somebody could come from nowhere and bootstrap that into a victory.”

Huckabee, says Johnson, “is the kind of candidate who can jump 20 points overnight.”

No kidding. Observers marveling at Huckabee’s scrappy rise in the polls haven’t been paying attention; this is classic Huckabee, emerging out of nowhere and getting by on pure charm. “Critics called me the ‘accidental governor,’” he is fond of saying, “until I asked them whose accident had caused me to be governor.” As the son of a gas company clerk
The candidate found his Oprah when he won the endorsement of tough-guy movie icon Chuck Norris, here with his wife, Gena, at a Huckabee press conference in Washington, D.C.

and a firefighter in Hope, Ark., he grew up in a family where none of the men in memory had completed high school. He describes his home as a place of stern discipline, little luxury and—inevitably—empty calories. "I grew up on fried chicken, fried okra," he writes, "fried green tomatoes, fried catfish, fried pork chops, chicken fried steak, fried potatoes, fried onion rings, fried pies, fried squash and fried ham."

But from the start, his ambitions were far from ordinary. "Prior to coming to politics," Huckabee told the Family Research Council's Values Voters Summit in October, "I was a pastor." And prior to being a pastor, he was a teenage politician. His peers elected him governor of Boys' State at 17, president of Hope High School at 18. And even before that, Huckabee found a way to broadcast himself and build a constituency. He started working for a local radio station at 14, a career that eventually flowed into advertising, public relations, and television work. And he's founded and headed an Arkansas television station and run an Arkansas communications firm. All of which tends to get de-emphasized in press coverage that plays up his time as the pastor of several Arkansas churches and head of the Arkansas Baptist Convention.

"He is uncommonly articulate and glib," says John Brummett, a political columnist with the Arkansas News Bureau who has been covering Huckabee since his first campaign. "Some people attribute that to the pulpit, and I think that's part of it, but more of it is radio. If you'll notice his inflection, his enunciation, it's radio, not preaching."

H is media experience left him master of the heartwarming anecdote and the snappy sound bite. "From Hope to Higher Ground," his campaign manifesto, offers 12 "stops" to restoring America's greatness, as in "stop thinking horizontally" and "stop being a selfish citizen." These are followed by

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Along with a dramatic rise in the polls has come a surge in media interest—a blessing or a curse, depending on how Huckabee handles the scrutiny.

Bullet-pointed lists of helpful advice such as “eliminate fried foods from your diet” and “don’t use profanity.” This is politicizing strained through the confessional culture of women’s magazines and late-afternoon talk shows, and it’s a formula he used to rise through the ranks of state politics in Arkansas.

Huckabee entered his first political fight in a senatorial election against Democrat Dale Bumpers in 1992. Everyone expected him to lose, and he did. When Arkansas governor and Hope native Bill Clinton ascended to the presidency in the same election cycle, Huckabee decided to run for the newly vacated office of lieutenant governor. Once again, everyone expected Huckabee to lose. He won, becoming only the second Republican since Reconstruction to have filled the position.

Re-elected in 1994, Huckabee launched another bid for a Senate seat two years later, but when Gov. Jim Tucker went down with a Whitewater felony conviction and promised to hand the reins over to his lieutenant, Huckabee dropped out of the race. Tucker, apparently unaware of just how loathed he was in Arkansas in July of 1996, changed his mind and announced that he was keeping his position the very day Huckabee had planned to ascend to the office. So Pastor Huck, as an Arkansas Democrat-Gazette columnist called him, went to where he was most comfortable—television. “My friends, let me tell you, this is one of the most painful decisions that I’ve ever had to make in my life,” he told the people of Arkansas, just before threatening to launch impeachment proceedings against his boss. Tucker resigned hours later, marking Huckabee’s first day of 11 years as governor.

As the holder of the most visible high-status position in the state, Huckabee never stopped casting himself as the underdog, the insurgent, the populist fighting a hostile establishment. Nine, ten years in the mansion, he still conceived of himself as the opposition under siege. On a chapter on “cynicism,” in “From Hope to Higher Ground,” he reports receiving nasty letters for banning alcohol and smoking from the governor’s mansion. No act of opposition is too trivial to recount. “One neighbor,” he writes, “actually put out not one, not two, but seven yard signs for my opponent in the front lawn of his home.”
“I’m not the best-funded candidate,” he told Iowans before the Ames straw poll. “I can’t buy you. I can’t even rent you.”

Huckabee was confronted with 14 complaints from the state ethics board, mostly for improperly accepting gifts, and he compared journalists who investigated the violations to Janet Cooke and Jayson Blair. He wrote an op-ed for the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette questioning the integrity of one of its investigative reporters. According to Brummett, Huckabee has expressed disdain for any kind of ethics regulation, considering any such investigation “simply an opportunity for your political opponents to dredge up complaints to try to smear you.”

On the campaign trail, Huckabee’s self-narrative was always that of the little guy who could overpower entrenched authority through optimism and determination. “He made a career running against the quote-unquote Democratic machine and corrupt machine politics,” says Janine Parry, a political scientist at the University of Arkansas. “It’s not an image that rings really true among observers on either side—Arkansas is no Louisiana. But it’s a tactic and profitable to run against that imagery.” As one Huckabee gubernatorial campaign ad put it, “We can unplug the machine and empower the people.”

One of those cynics Huckabee was talking about might counter that the governor was building his own machine. But that would be wrong. “He didn’t build the party,” says Brummett. University of Arkansas political scientist Andrew Dowdle agrees. “He has run not on ideology or partisanship, historically. He’s run on being Mike Huckabee.”

This is what Bill McIntyre is talking about when he quips “Mike Huckabee looks good from far but is far from good.” Anyone pining for a fiscally and socially conservative Republican is bound to be half-disappointed with Huckabee. In place of a Republican platform, Huckabee unleashed his own clean-living, egalitarian enthusiasms on the people of Arkansas with the zeal of a personal trainer. He had an agenda for improving institutions: He poured money into public schools and raised taxes to fix the state’s dilapidated highways. But he also had an agenda for improving people: He signed the Clean Air act, banning smoking from all workplaces just as he had banned it from his own, and launched a “Healthy Arkansas Initiative” to combat smoking, obesity and physical inactivity. He started ArKids First a multimillion dollar plan to insure poor kids. The governor, who plays guitar in his band, Capitol Offense, passed legislation providing arts and music education for every public school kid in grades one through six.

Huckabee clearly had a vision, and he did not endear himself to the state’s conservatives by jacking up taxes to make that vision reality. Randy Minton, a former Republican legislator from Cabbot, calls him a “pro-life, pro-gun liberal.” The governor clashed with Republicans over the tax hike he wanted to fund the highway overhaul. “He made promises, appointments and grants to Republicans to get them to pay for the increase,” says Minton. “I said I won’t pay for your tax increase,” and he said, “I don’t care if y’all have to drive on gravel roads.” He split the caucus in half.

That profligacy as governor may be leading to Huckabee’s funding troubles today. “I’ve been surprised that Huckabee hasn’t raised more money in Arkansas,” says Norman Ornstein, a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute. But Huckabee never built up a Republican donor base in that traditionally Democratic state. “Huckabee really worked this state through about the first seven or eight months,” says Dowdle. “Hillary Clinton came to Arkansas and in less than a week caught up to Huckabee in terms of money raised in Arkansas.”

Huckabee is more than happy to talk about his funding woes—after all, his half-empty war chest is driving his appeal. “Some of these candidates brag about how much they’ve raised,” he told me. “I’d be ashamed at how they’ve spent it, with so little to show for it. They hire every consultant who waves a contract at them, it would appear. And you can see it in the entourage, when people show up with 20 people as if they’re already the president.”

He was more succinct with the Iowans who voted him second, after Romney, in the August straw poll. “I’m not the best-funded candidate in America,” he said. “I can’t buy you. I can’t even rent you.” The implication, of course, being that another candidate will try to buy you, and he might look suspiciously like a Massachusetts CEO straight out of Central Casting.

If Huckabee takes Iowa and does well in South Carolina, a scenario that seems increasingly plausible, he’ll have to wage a campaign built on something more than personal charisma and O’Reilly appearances. The other candidates have anticipated this moment, building organizations in states that will matter beyond January. Huckabee has not. He’ll be a little-known candidate with a shoestring budget relying on dated grassroots political strategy as an air war rages between better-funded candidates.

It’s a recipe for failure. It’s also a set-up for a feel-good story about a passionate underdog who—spurning cynicism, godlessness, and fried food—overcomes every disadvantage to achieve the unthinkable.  

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