

The Marathoner's Race

NORFOLK, VA.—I think it's safe to say that the Republican establishment doesn't want Mike Huckabee to be the GOP nominee. Good. The blessing of party

panjandrums seems to be a kiss of political death.

Consider: Just a little while ago, the Republican establishment candidate was John McCain. Then last spring, McCain's campaign cratered, in large part because the Arizonan redoubled his bet on a key establishment priority, "comprehensive immigration reform." In a head-to-head contest between the establishment and a fully informed electorate, the electorate always wins.

Since then, the establishment split up in various ways. Rudy Giuliani, for example, picked up some big-state governors, such as Rick Perry of Texas, who was attracted to Giuliani's advocacy of a "virtual fence" along the Mexican border as opposed to a real fence. And of course, Giuliani won leading neoconservatives to his side, such as Norman Podhoretz and David Frum.

Meanwhile, Mitt Romney made a play for social and economic conservatives, bagging quite a few big shots, including Sean Hannity, Rush Limbaugh, and *National Review*. In addition, Romney gained a quasi-endorsement from George H.W. Bush, who invited the former Massachusetts governor to deliver his "important" religion-in-American-life speech last December at the Bush Library; at that event, "41" offered an effusive introduction. If things didn't work out for Romney, it wasn't for lack of trying.

And of course, if there were any not-nailed-down establishmentarians floating around last year, Fred Thompson picked them up. During his lazy cam-

paign, Thompson roused himself sufficiently to embrace *avant-garde* Republicanism, including a Bush 43-style partial privatization of Social Security. Such ideologizing made Thompson the darling of the D.C. think-tank set—but got him nowhere with voters.

Well, gee. Now Giuliani, Romney, and Thompson are all out of the race. To be sure, McCain is back, in a big way, but only after disavowing his previous "amnesty first" stance on immigration and shedding his big-budget inside-the-Beltway campaign in favor of a low-spending, straight-talk-expressing candidacy that returned him to his maverick roots. Now a resurgent McCain, having won a bunch of primaries, is being embraced by big-state governors and big-time operatives, from Arnold Schwarzenegger to Karl Rove.

Huckabee, of course, is almost entirely unburdened by establishmentarian support. Oh, he has a few big names in his camp, but upon close inspection, those endorsers are revealed to be outside the K Street mainstream. For example, Huckabee has the support of Rep. Duncan Hunter of San Diego, the ranking member of the House Armed Services Committee. That's an insider job, to be sure, but Hunter's prickly position on building a border-security wall—he has led the fight to build a no-bull double fence all along the U.S.-Mexico border—puts him well outside the establishment fold.

Huckabee is fully aware of his situation. "I have been an underdog all my life," says the son of a fireman, who

made ends meet back in Hope, Arkansas by working a second job as a mechanic. Huckabee is still an underdog, but he's an underdog with a distinct appeal to other underdogs—which is to say, the vast bulk of Americans. As he put it recently, his key constituency is "the invisible America"—the American middle class, the folks not rich enough to worry about polar bears and not poor enough to qualify for welfare. That is, those who work hard, pay their taxes, and play by the rules—which is to say, folks who live far outside of D.C.

Thus the obvious question: will the establishment's embrace help or hinder the Republican nominee this year? Would it help the Republican Party's prospects this November to tighten up its links to, say, the incumbent White House? Should the GOP nominee be closer to Congressional earmarkers? How about snuggling up to those K Street lobbyists?

I'm not so sure. I suspect the Republican Party would be better off, November-wise, nominating someone who is independent of the status quo, someone who has not been part of Republican Washington these past eight years. Just a hunch. And in fact, Huckabee comes from a different place, not Washington. He often quotes the Book of Isaiah: "Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug." That's the real Huckabee, who served as a governor for more than a decade but whose heart and soul dwell far outside the Beltway.

That's a big selling point to the country, and so that's a good thing for Republicans. If the GOP wants to win the election this year, it will need someone new. ■



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