

Don't forget about Jeb

By Jennifer Rubin, Updated: January 14 at 8:45 am

In terms of a potential presidential run, former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush is both hurt and helped by being out of office. Unlike current office holders, Jeb can't hold the public attention and be credited with carrying the GOP banner in current fights with Democrats. He isn't in the flow of the rat-tat-tat of political combat. However, that may also be to his benefit. He is not burdened by mistakes, missteps and potential scandals that befall contenders currently in office. He does not have to weigh in on every issue, nor does he have to cast any votes. And unlike the present office holders, Jeb can maintain some presidential reserve, riding above the fray.

Moreover, Jeb and GOP wonkish conservatives maybe drawing closer together as the tea party loses steam. Jeb in office and in the years since has worked on the very issues that the party is now debating — school reform, upward mobility and health care. As a governor, his conservative agenda was nevertheless focused on obtaining tangible results for Florida residents, not carrying on a seminar on the Founders.

He was (and is) plain-spoken, forgoing appeals to ideology yet championing tort reform, health-care reform, educational choice and tax cuts. (In 2006, the Cato Institute's report observed, "He has proposed and signed into law a tax cut virtually every year of his tenure, ranging from cuts in property taxes to a phase out of the intangibles tax—a levy on certain financial assets like stocks and bonds that makes Florida's tax code hostile to capital formation.")

Likewise, Jeb was once the target of anti-immigration reform hardliners. However, when his book on immigration came out, he actually supported only legalization, not citizenship for those here illegally. And now the House Republicans are moving their own bills, which conservative Rep. Bob Goodlatte (R-Va.) has said could include legalization. If the House proposals look a lot like Jeb's ideas, he surely can't be painted as some wide-eyed radical pushing "amnesty."

It is still not clear whether Jeb has the yen to run. But sometimes events come together in just the right sequence. Over the last year Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.), for whom Jeb is a mentor, has hit the skids. This raises the real possibility that Rubio might not run in 2016 or if he does, could fade fast. Jeb would therefore not feel compelled to defer to his junior senator. Meanwhile, the government shutdown undermined the credentials of far-right senators, immigration reform is back on the radar and the party is searching for an affirmative agenda. Jeb may not have moved closer to the party, but the party is moving closer to him. And, most importantly, it may need a seasoned pro to take on the Clintons.

What about the Bush name? Well, Bush 43 has favorability ratings higher than the president. If Hillary Clinton is going to be the Democratic nominee, the elite media can hardly whine about “dynasty” politics. “Bush” may not be the hardship it once was for Jeb.

There is also something to be said for someone with experience who has been elected twice in a swing state, but who is still a fresh face for many voters. (If he runs and wins in 2016, he will have had a decade sabbatical from public office.) He’s adept at dealing with the media and speaks fluent Spanish. He is certainly comfortable in his own skin.

There is no doubt he would have a network of fundraisers and supporters should he decide to run. He could wait until well after the 2014 mid-terms to make his decision, thereby minimizing the time he is vulnerable to incoming fire and allowing other candidates nick each other up while he waits for a propitious moment to enter the race. The only question then is whether he really wants to get back in the fray. On one level, you can understand why someone with an interesting post-gubernatorial life would not want to reenter the fray and incur the scrutiny and vicious attacks that are now par for the course. And yet, sometimes the time is right and the opportunity is there.