



Pawlenty Makes His Pitch as Top Fiscal Hawk in GOP Field

By Carl Cameron

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Trying to position himself as the model fiscally conservative Republican presidential candidate, Tim Pawlenty spoke at the libertarian-leaning Cato Institute in Washington and refused to either endorse or reject the budget proposed by House Budget Committee Chairman Paul Ryan, R-Wisc.

"In general the direction is positive, but I'm going to have my own plan," the former Minnesota governor said. "We're going to have some differences."

Pawlenty says he will have a budget proposal in the coming weeks and plans a different Medicare overhaul than Ryan, and unlike Ryan would also reform Social Security by raising the eligibility age and blocking cost of living increases for wealthier seniors.

It's been a bold rollout for Pawlenty. He announced his presidential candidacy on Monday in Iowa and told Hawkeyes their ethanol subsidies had to be phased out, then on Tuesday went to Florida where he told seniors Social Security needed to be adjusted. Wednesday brought him to Washington to talk about cutting the benefits and pay of government employees and he will end the week on Wall Street by calling for an end to bailouts.

Fiscal hawks complain that Pawlenty accepted Obama administration stimulus money for his state and backed cap and trade climate legislation, which he now says was a mistake.

Across town, Bill Clinton headlined an economic summit of top federal budget wonks with Indiana Gov. Mitch Daniels, who recently officially dropped out of 2012 GOP presidential contention, explaining his family is more important than a run at the White House. Daniels' decision not to run for president has the rest of the GOP field scrambling for the mantle of top economic conservative.

For now, Mitt Romney leads in most polls, but Tea Party activists, along with a powerful political action committee called Freedomworks, have sworn to defeat him. Their main problem with the man many consider to be an early frontrunner is the health care law he enacted as governor of Massachusetts, a program that resembles President Obama's national health care law.

Romney has said the Ryan budget sets the right tone, but has not discussed specifics because he too will soon come out with his own plan. Ryan's plan has come under withering attacks from Democrats for its call to convert Medicare into a premium assistance program for seniors to purchase their own insurance.

The first major candidate to embrace the House-passed federal spending plan is Jon Huntsman, who was the Obama administration's ambassador to China until last month. As governor of Utah he also passed state healthcare reform but without the kind of mandates that are central to Romney's version and Obamacare. However, Huntsman also accepted and defended Obama administration stimulus money and backed a cap and trade plan, which he now also now admits did not work.

Sarah Palin has not been seen or heard from much lately, outside of her appearances as a Fox News contributor and postings to Twitter and Facebook, her preferred modes of communication with the national media. However, the former Alaska governor and GOP Vice Presidential nominee will be coming to the silver screen. A new movie about her debuts in Iowa next month, designed to raise her profile and explain why she resigned as governor of Alaska two years ago.

Palin and GOP insiders tell Fox News they've begun building a shadow campaign in case she does decide to make a run in 2012.

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