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Can a Huckabee change its spots?

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Pastor Mike Huckabee knows his Scripture. So no doubt he's familiar with Jeremiah 13:23: "Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots? Then may you also do good who are accustomed to do evil." Huckabee should think of that as he tries to sell himself as a conservative after governing as a moderate, if not a liberal.

Former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee announced he's running for president this week, becoming the sixth Republican to do so. Now here's what's funny: As a presidential candidate, he may talk a lot about his time as a Fox News talk show host, but he won't talk much about his time as governor. He can't.

The truth is that while serving as the 44th governor of Arkansas, from 1996 to 2007, Huckabee built up a record that Bill Clinton, another Arkansas governor, would have been proud of. Like Clinton, Huckabee is remembered as a pragmatic populist politician, not the doctrinaire conservative he parades around as today.

Politico's Alan Greenblatt has reported that, just days after Huckabee won election to his final term in 2002; the Arkansas Supreme Court ruled that the state's schools were woefully underfunded. Rather than make political hay out of fighting the court, Huckabee proposed raising sales taxes to pay for school improvements. And that wasn't the end of it. The higher sales tax proposed, he told reporters, was "the starting line, not the finish line."

That's not the only tax increase on his watch. He supported a tax on beds in nursing homes. He also sponsored a ballot measure to raise gas taxes to pay for building new roads. While he cut income taxes, the state's overall tax bill increased while he was governor, as did state spending and the number of state employees, which earned him the title of "the biggest big-government conservative" from the Cato Institute.

A couple of measures also earned Huckabee the reputation as a "compassionate conservative." In 1998, he ordered that Arkansas's share of a \$206 billion settlement against big tobacco companies be entirely dedicated to improving health care. And later, in 2005, when 75,000 victims of Hurricane Katrina sought refuge in Arkansas, Huckabee arranged to shelter, house and feed them in Christian summer camps, closed for the season. Even today, Huckabee refuses to

join his fellow Republicans in attempting to cut or eliminate Social Security. In a video announcing his candidacy, he says Washington “has done enough lying and stealing. I’ll never rob seniors of what our government promised them and even forced them to pay for.”

Equally surprising, perhaps, is that this outspoken opponent of immigration reform today was once a pro-immigration reformer. As governor, he supported in-state tuition and scholarships for students who were brought to this country illegally by their parents.

Like President Obama, Huckabee’s signature achievement was health care. In his first full year in office, he created ARKids First, which expanded health coverage to kids, whose parents earned too much to qualify for Medicaid but who still couldn’t afford private insurance. Under ARKids First, the number of uninsured children dropped from 22 percent to 6 percent.

Of course, there’s a reason why Mike Huckabee doesn’t talk about any of those programs today. They would drive his base — the tea party, evangelical crowd — crazy. And he needs that crowd in order to win the primaries. After all, evangelicals make up 60 percent of those who take part in the Iowa Republican caucuses, which Huckabee won in 2008, and 65 percent of Republican primary voters in South Carolina.

They don’t want anybody reasonable. They’d never vote for a former governor who once raised taxes to pay for schools and roads or sponsored his own early version of Obamacare. They want their favorite Fox News flame-thrower. They want a candidate who says crazy things, like wanting to post a “Product of Kenya” label on President Obama’s forehead; like blaming the Sandy Hook massacre on the fact that “we have systematically removed God from our schools;” like claiming same-sex marriage will lead to polygamy; like accusing Democrats of insulting “the women of America by making them believe they are helpless without Uncle Sugar coming in” and providing them birth control, which they need “because they cannot control their libido or their reproductive system.”

What a difference between Mike Huckabee then and now. As governor, he built a strong, progressive record. Too bad he can’t, or won’t, run on it.