

Commentary

When Conservatives Play the Purification Game

By Peter Wehner
June 5, 2014

In a recent New York Times profile of former Florida Governor Jeb Bush, we read this:

“There is skepticism that maybe Jeb Bush wants too much government in people’s lives,” said Greg Mueller, a Republican strategist who has advised the president campaigns of Pat Buchanan, Steve Forbes and Bob Dole. “I don’t know that he will ever win over the limited-government conservative.”

I want to address the comments by Mr. Mueller for two (related) reasons, the first having to do with the Bush record and the second having to do with a somewhat troubling mindset among some on the right. Let me take them in order, starting with Bush’s record as governor of Florida.

Jeb Bush was not only a very popular two-term governor; he was also among the most successful and conservative governors in decades. That is true if one is talking about his record on taxes, where he cut taxes every year he was governor (a period covering eight years and totaling nearly \$20 billion). It’s true if one is talking about Bush’s fiscal record, where he reduced the number of state government employees, kept state government spending growth lower than personal income growth, vetoed over \$2.5 billion in new spending initiatives, and even won high marks, particularly in his first term, from the libertarian Cato Institute. (Bush’s spending in his second term went up in part because Florida was hit by eight hurricanes in less than two years.)

Governor Bush instituted medical liability reforms that capped non-economic damages; overhauled and modernized Florida’s civil service system, including allowing state workers to be terminated for cause; did away with quotas and preferential pricing advantages in procurement and eliminated race or ethnic advantages in admissions policies; and championed an overhaul of Medicaid that allowed beneficiaries to choose from a menu of private insurance options rather than force them into a centrally managed public system. He was a strong advocate of school choice and charter schools, enacted tough standards, required testing of all students, and graded all schools. As a result of these accountability steps, his state experienced a dramatic increase in student achievement, with Florida students well outpacing national average increases in standardized test scores. Bush’s record also includes Florida’s bond rating being upgraded to the

highest possible grade (AAA) and the greatest job creation in the country during the time he served as governor.

I cite Bush's record at length not to convince anyone he should be the GOP presidential nominee in 2016 (especially since he may not run). It's to illustrate why the idea that he should alarm limited-government conservatives strikes me as not just unpersuasive but unserious. As a point of comparison: Bush's record in two terms as governor was in many key areas more conservative than Ronald Reagan's record in two terms as governor. Two examples: Under Reagan, spending in California rose from an annual budget of \$4.6 billion to \$10.2 billion – an increase of more than 120 percent. Mr. Reagan also signed into law what his biographer Lou Cannon called “the largest tax hike ever proposed by any governor in the history of the United States” – one four times as large as the previous record set by Governor Pat Brown. (Even those on the right who fault Governor Bush for his stand on immigration have to deal with the fact that, as president, Reagan spoke out in defense of the idea of amnesty, saying, “I believe in the idea of amnesty for those who have put down roots and who have lived here even though some time back they may have entered illegally.” President Reagan also signed into law legislation that granted amnesty to millions of illegal immigrants.)

What if Greg Mueller (or those whose views he claims to be describing) applied to Reagan the standard he's applying to Bush? The greatest conservative politician in the 20th century and one of the greatest presidents in American history would have been deemed a RINO, unprincipled, in favor of far too much government in people's lives, and unable to win over limited-government conservative.

This is the problem when conservatives engage in a purification game. To be sure, public officials should be judged by their record and in the totality of their acts. But it's unwise, and deeply un-conservative, to judge lawmakers against some mythical standard of perfection. It was Reagan himself who warned against those who want to go over the cliff with all flags waiving.

It's important that those of us on the right resist falling into lazy habits; that we avoid the trap of paying less attention to reforms and measurable achievements than we do to fierce anti-government rhetoric. It's easier to bemoan government's role in education than it is to institute reforms that actually improve education.

At this stage in the political process it's perfectly appropriate for people to analyze the records and the strengths and weaknesses of potential presidential nominees. And for a variety of reasons, we are drawn to some politicians more than others. But those who believe someone with Jeb Bush's record is somehow suspect on conservative grounds are entering a world detached from reality and injurious to conservatism.