

## Potential presidential candidate Jon Huntsman makes a stop in St. Petersburg

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ST. PETERSBURG — Maybe what it takes to shake up the humdrum Republican presidential contest is a super-rich foreign policy ace who rides a Harley, cuts taxes and supported legislation to allow civil unions for gay couples.

Meet Jon Huntsman Jr., diplomat and Utah's reform-minded former governor, whose potential as a presidential candidate has long worried Barack Obama's advisers. Fresh off his stint as the president's ambassador to China, Huntsman is preparing to challenge his old boss. Tuesday night, he courted Republicans in St. Petersburg.

"I had the trade minister in China sit down as we were preparing for trade negotiations. He said, 'Please don't let people in the United States lose their confidence because when you lose your confidence, the rest of the world suffers,' " Huntsman recounted to several dozen Tampa Bay Republican leaders and fundraisers at the Snell Isle home of James and Suzanne MacDougald. "The reality, sitting 10,000 miles away, is that we remain the country that inspires. We remain that shining city on a hill."

It was Huntsman's debut of sorts on the presidential trail, or at least the first time any reporter has seen him give a political speech since he returned from China last week to start exploring a campaign. Huntsman made a point of noting that his wife, Mary Kaye Huntsman, is an Orlando native who lived in Florida until age 14 and that his daughter married someone from Dunedin.

"I never thought I'd be standing in somebody's living room with my Florida better half talking about these things," he confessed. "This is a surreal moment, I've got to tell you that. Normal people don't just wake up in the morning and say I think it'd be a good idea to run for president of the United States."

A slim and youthful 51, Huntsman hardly fits the obvious profile of someone likely to win over tea party conservatives: He served in Obama's administration and called the president a "remarkable leader." As Utah's governor, he embraced the stimulus package and supported cap and trade policies to combat global warming.

"Practically every candidate in the race has a similar history if they served as governor," he told the St. Petersburg Times. "That's what governors do, they wrestle with the issues, they find solutions and they move the agenda forward. At the appropriate time we'll talk about all of these issues, while remembering that our party is a big tent party. We lose when we try to become exclusive to one particular set of issues."

Huntsman enjoyed sky-high approval ratings in conservative Utah, shrinking government, turning the state's income tax into a flat tax and passing what was called the biggest tax cut in state history.

The Pew Center graded Utah the best managed state in the nation under his tenure, while the conservative Cato Institute gave him the nation's No. 1 ranking in tax policy.

"He's not going to be judged against a so-called perfect candidate. He's going to be judged against other people in the primary and ultimately against Barack Obama," said senior adviser John Weaver, who, like much of Huntsman's political team, previously advised Sen. John McCain of Arizona.

In a prospective field that includes former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney, former Minnesota Gov. Tim Pawlenty, former House Speaker Newt Gingrich, Texas congressman Ron Paul, former Pennsylvania Sen. Rick Santorum, celebrity businessman Donald Trump and Indiana Gov. Mitch Daniels, there is no heavy favorite at this point. "People are hungry for someone that can share a majority of their conservative values and — this is important — who can beat Barack Obama," Weaver said.

Two years ago, Obama strategist David Plouffe acknowledged to a reporter that a Huntsman campaign made him a "wee bit queasy" and not long after that Obama nominated him as ambassador to China. (Huntsman learned Mandarin Chinese during a two-year mission trip to Taiwan at age 19.) The nomination was widely seen as a shrewd move to get rid of a possible tough challenger, though it didn't work.

"It's a wide open race," said Tom Loeffler, a top Republican fundraiser and former congressman from Texas, who helped recruit Huntsman to run. "I have not seen anyone really that in my judgment could win a primary and a general election. He can. His style and his personality, direct and unflappable, is what's needed now."

Romney and Pawlenty have more or less been running for president for half a dozen years, while Huntsman on Tuesday night sounded like a candidate one week into it. Confident but understated, he tended to speak in meandering paragraphs rather than red meat sound bites or even quotable sentences.

"My sense is that we're ready for another industrial revolution in this country. The great minds and innovators of Silicon Valley would come through China and say, 'The pipeline is full of ideas' — there's personalized medicine, biotechnology, new forms to power ourselves, clean energy, etc., etc.," he intoned, as spectators shifted on their feet. "They're in the pipeline but we need some sense that there's a green light and we're ready to go and the marketplace is going to accept capital formation that will sustain the development of these ideas — which is predictability, which is creating that safe haven for capital, as opposed to some other marketplace."

Huntsman is the only candidate with extensive foreign policy experience, and he hinted that he supported scaling back American deployments and engagements abroad.

"We need to reset our position in the world in ways that would speak to affordability and speak to core national values," he said, declining to elaborate for now.

The former governor is selling his electability, but Republicans in 2010 often were more taken with uncompromising fiery conservatism than pragmatic, electability arguments.

Erick Erickson, editor of RedState.com, this week compared Huntsman with former Florida Gov. Charlie Crist and essentially called him unpatriotic:

"The reason I will never, ever support Jon Huntsman is simple: While serving as the United States ambassador to China, our greatest strategic adversary, Jon Huntsman began plotting to run against the president of the United States. This calls into question his loyalty not just to the president of the United States, but also his loyalty to his country over his own naked ambition," Erickson wrote.

Huntsman shook his head at the suggestion.

"There was no gearing up for a campaign, whatsoever," Huntsman said, explaining that the campaign structure had been put together without his input.

"I didn't even know these people," he said, pointing to several campaign staffers nearby.

"I did not know them until I got off the plane. ... These are all new friends."

Huntsman is scheduled to meet with party leaders and fundraisers in Coral Gables today and in coming days will be doing the same in California, New York and Pennsylvania to "get a sense of the marketplace."

The marketplace may determine whether he ultimately jumps in, but his heart apparently is ready.

"He's got the fire in the belly, and his family's behind him," Mrs. Huntsman said. "The only thing I hope is that nobody tries to change him."

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