



The Unshackling of Bobby Jindal

An undervalued and often overlooked potential 2016 candidate seeks to seize the moment by embracing a more aggressive posture.

By David Catanese

March 19, 2014

NASHUA, N.H. -- Bobby Jindal is the funniest guy in the room.

He's not Irish, and doesn't even drink, but standing on the dais of the 23rd Annual Wild Irish St. Patty's Day breakfast inside the Radisson hotel ballroom here, the 42-year-old Louisiana governor is showcasing a wicked sense of humor not usually associated with his dry, wonkish image.

"You may not know this, but your governor and I are both Brown graduates. I'm a little browner than she is of course," he zapped, referring to his Indian descent.

New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie was supposed to be here too, Jindal mused, "but the traffic, no ... that joke's too easy."

"I read here in New Hampshire you guys have like 1,000 legislators, pay them about \$100 a year," Jindal said, pivoting to local sensibilities to set up another punch line. "It's great to be in a place that actually pays legislators what they're worth."

The room erupts as applauding attendees seated at assembled white-clothed tables turn toward each other gesturing nods of approval. The laughter lingers, a telltale sign that Jindal has made the most of his opportunity and successfully connected. Landing a couple of minutes of rapid fire jokes on a frigid morning two years before 2016 voting commences is enough to earn the interest of the fiercely open-minded Granite State voter.

"He impressed me more than I expected him to. He is smooth. He seems to be broadly aware. I think he's going to connect with a lot of different kinds of people," says Republican Ron Conard afterward.

"He came prepared for the moment," surmises Jay Dinkel, another approving GOPer in attendance.

Jindal finds himself at a unique moment in Republican politics and he appears eager to seize it, with a chance at capitalizing on the stumbles and distractions of his potential future rivals for the presidency.

On the list of Republican governors eyeing the White House, Jindal's name usually appears toward the bottom. He lacks the edgy attitude of Christie, the magnetic backslapping charisma of Gov. Rick Perry, R-Texas, and the freshness of Gov. Scott Walker, R-Wis.

Polling bears out Jindal's second-tier status. He dwells in the single digits in the early primary states of Iowa and New Hampshire and captured just 2 percent at this year's Conservative Political Action Conference straw poll, good enough to tie for eighth place. In last weekend's Northeast Republican Leadership Conference straw poll – where he was the featured Friday evening dinner speaker – he mustered only enough support to finish sixth.

Nationally, he's probably most famous for his disastrous State of the Union response in 2009, when he endured months of derisive comparisons to the dweeb on “30 Rock” and Gomer Pyle.

A Rhodes Scholar who ran the Louisiana's Department of Health in his 20s, Jindal has long lived with the reputation as the brainiest guy in the room. Former Florida Gov. Charlie Crist writes in his new book that at a retreat for prospective vice presidential candidates at Sen. John McCain's ranch in 2008, Jindal quickly turned idle small talk into a serious policy discussion. Columnist Kathleen Parker has dubbed Jindal “the intellectual equivalent of a nuclear power plant.”

After the 2012 presidential election loss, it was Jindal, after all, who prominently chided that Republicans needed to “stop being the stupid party.”

He still stands by that decree, and nobody would mistake Jindal for stupid. It's just that now he's seeking to pair up his smarts with some sizzle.

It's meant a more dynamic, aggressive, acerbic Jindal, who appears to be attempting to shed his overrefined appearance to demonstrate to the GOP base he can hurl partisan vitriol with the best of them. With Christie wounded, Walker preoccupied with re-election and Perry shouldering the reputation of a one-trick pony, this is Jindal's chance to step up and shine.

President Barack Obama's not only wrong or adrift, he's the worst president in recent history. He's waving “the white flag of surrender.” He presides over the “minimum wage economy.” Oh, and for a Harvard guy, he may not be that smart after all. All are among the caustic verbal assaults Jindal has launched in recent weeks.

In a wink and a nod to cultural conservatives, he even bestowed the Governor's Award for Entrepreneurial Excellence to the stars of Duck Dynasty, after going out of his way to defend their right to make inflammatory remarks about gays.

At the NRLC, hosted at the Crowne Plaza a few miles away, he refined these themes for the first-in-the-nation audience.

“There is no freedom of speech if there is no freedom of religion,” he said of the Dynasty controversy.

And while Kelly Ayotte, the freshman senator here is one of the nation’s best senators, according to Jindal, Democrat Jeanne Shaheen is one of the worst.

Unabashed pandering may be unseemly, but it’s surely not dumb.

His broadside against Obama was combined with a shrewd swipe at Hillary Clinton.

“Are we witnessing the most extremely liberal, ideological administration in our country’s modern history? Or are we witnessing the most incompetent administration in our country’s modern history?,” he asked, earning applause just by posing the options.

“Well, to quote Secretary Clinton, ‘What difference does it make?’”

Rapturous thunderclaps fill the ballroom. Again, Gomer Pyle’s commanded their attention.

In an interview with U.S. News in the spacious presidential suite on the eighth floor of the hotel, Jindal says he’s not performing an act.

“I’ve grown increasingly frustrated with this president. Like many people, I thought he was a good speaker to begin with. But after you’ve heard the same speech over and over, and you don’t see results . . .,” he trails off before finishing his thought, a symptom of how swiftly Jindal speaks. “Now he’s been in office for over five years and tomorrow never comes. It’s always I’m going to get to it tomorrow. It’s always give me another stimulus bill, the economy’s going to grow, give me one more chance, give me a little more time and I’ll get to balancing the budget, give me a little more time and I’m going to stimulate the economy. And it just hasn’t happened. So I think at some point you get frustrated and say, enough is enough.”

Jindal’s aides say to frame him as a typical partisan is a misread; that while he’s certainly ideological, he has a history of working for and with those willing to cross the aisle.

The governor’s latest more biting turn on the trail, they assure, is merely evidence that he can throw a punch.

“He’s not a dog who’ll take a kicking,” one adviser says. “He bites back. So smart that smart aleck is his natural casual voice. We are not hiding it any more.”

Jindal’s first policy jobs were for then- Rep. Jim McCrery, R-La., and then-Gov. Mike Foster, a Democrat turned Republican. Both men boasted bipartisan credibility during their tenures.

Jindal did a Capitol Hill internship with McCrery, who recalled him as mild-mannered and courteous as he was driven.

A couple of weeks into the job, Jindal asked McCrery's scheduler permission to chat with the congressman in his personal office. "My door was always open. But that's just Bobby, he was very polite," McCrery recalls.

Jindal was in search of a challenge considerably more rigorous than rudimentary internship duties, so he asked McCrery if he could research a topic of interest for him – work that he'd happily complete after regular hours.

"I said, 'Alright, how about doing a paper for me on the challenges of the Medicare system and how we deal with them?' His eyes lit up and he said, 'That'd be great.' I thought I'd never see him again. Two weeks later he plops down a manuscript, beaming. He wanted to know what I thought," McCrery says.

The paper became the template for what's now commonly referred to as the premium support model.

"I knew then that he was pretty special," says McCrery, who is convinced Jindal will run for president in 2016. "He will throw his hat in the primary ring and make a run for it. It's the next logical step. I don't know anyone who has the breadth of experience that Bobby does."

The nation's foremost conservative columnist George Will is also impressed with Jindal's intellectually rigorous experience and says his expertise on health care "marks him as conspicuously qualified on one of the great issues of the day."

Furthermore, Will brushes aside the concern about Jindal being perceived as not new enough as Beltway blather.

"For you and me he doesn't seem like a fresh face but, for 98 percent of the rest of the people who aren't as neurotic about politics, he'll be a fresh face," he says.

This year appears to be the optimal time to make that face a bit more familiar.

While Jindal made [just three stops](#) to early presidential primary states last year, his national travel continues to ramp up. On the books during the next six weeks are trips to the Alabama Policy Institute in Mobile, the Civitas Institute in Raleigh and the National Rifle Association meeting in Indianapolis. Additionally, due to Christie's political predicament, Jindal's vice chairmanship at the Republican Governors Association has become immeasurably more valuable, making him the go-to spokesman for the nation's marquee 2014 contests.

During his 24 hours in New Hampshire, he met privately with legislative leaders, Manchester Mayor Ted Gatsas and longtime political hands Tom Rath and former Gov. John Sununu.

Democrats contend Jindal's unbridled national ambition has diverted his attention from the state that overwhelmingly elected him governor twice. With his approval numbers having fallen into the 30s, he now languishes as one of the nation's most unpopular governors.

But in order to take the next step, impressions in Nashua mean more to Jindal than opinions in New Orleans. Considering the large size and increasingly uncertain trajectory of the 2016 GOP field, his only move is to go bold.

Bradley Beychok, a Democratic operative with Louisiana roots who now works for the liberal watchdog group Media Matters in Washington, views Jindal's hardened posture with skepticism and bemusement.

“Rand Paul, Ted Cruz and Chris Christie are all fire-breathing, no-fear Republicans that are generating real excitement with the Republican base. Jindal hasn't had his moment and it feels more like he has been running since 2007 a permanent VP campaign or auditioning to take over CATO or the Heritage Institute,” he says.

In other words, Jindal may look like a tiger alone in front of a podium; but put him on the stage with the lions, and it's a different dynamic.

Jindal acknowledges he's always going to be tagged as the policy guy, which suits him just fine, and says part of the reason his biting wit is getting noticed is because the media's just starting to pay attention to him.

“I've always had a sharp sense of humor and that's just my personality,” he says. “But ... I think, you're right, there is a sense that I've done some things in the policy world, a sense of my record, of my resume. I don't know [if] there's as much a sense of who I am as a person. I don't think people necessarily see that human side of me.”

But after two public stops in Nashua – one decidedly funny, the other policy-driven and sharply partisan – Jindal seems to have helped elevate himself as an option. One not as hot or odious as Christie or Ted Cruz and not as risky or erratic as Perry or Sen. Rand Paul, R-Ky.

And then there's the unspoken potential attribute that one Republican was willing to address unprompted: Jindal's race and the opportunity to reach a population of people who never think about Republicans.

“Here we have Barack Obama, the first black president of the U.S. that has, in my mind, absolutely destroyed this country,” says Susan Horwitz, a Massachusetts native who crossed the border to hear Jindal. “Wouldn't it be wonderful if who followed him was another person of color who actually put things back together?”

Corrected on Mar 19, 2014: This story has been updated to include a full quote from Bradley Beychok that was inadvertently left out.