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Jeb Bush and Republican amnesia

Presidents the party would rather forget

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With the Republican presidential nomination almost in his grasp, Mitt Romney rolled out a notable endorsement last week, from a former governor of Florida. It was notable not because it's likely to change the mind of any voter, but because it required the Romney campaign to utter a four-letter word it has been loath to use: Bush.

The presidential candidates never tire of reminding us theirs is the party of Ronald Reagan and Abraham Lincoln. That the modern version is, more than anything else, the party of Bush is something they prefer to omit.

The last two Republican presidents were members of the clan. Someone named Bush has been on the national ticket in six of the last eight elections.

But after spending eight years rallying behind every scheme of George W. Bush — the Medicare prescription drug program, No Child Left Behind, a trillion-dollar war based on false claims — Republicans now act as though they never met the guy. He's gone from Conquering Hero to Invisible Man.

If some Republicans had their way, however, there would be another Bush on this year's ticket, namely Jeb. Whenever speculation bubbles about a deadlocked convention turning to a unity candidate, his is the name at the top of the list of potential saviors.

Why? Because Jeb Bush makes any of the people who competed in the GOP primaries this year look like they should be running for coroner. He's an accomplished former two-term governor of a large swing state who is admired by the party's more conservative elements as well as its slightly less conservative ones.

He was rated the second best governor in America on fiscal matters by the Cato Institute, and he reaped plaudits for supporting charter schools, vouchers and other educational reforms. He won a place in the hearts of social conservatives by signing a law to keep Terry Schiavo from being taken off life support. He is popular among Hispanics, and not just because he married one of them.

But he has a huge liability: that unfortunate family connection, which is borderline radioactive. The only reason he could be taken seriously at all is that he can be portrayed as strikingly different from his delinquent brother: more serious, more intelligent, more able, less Texan. In their younger days, Jeb was always known as "the smart brother." George, says biographer Robert Draper, was "the family chucklehead."

That creates a strange dynamic. When Bobby and Teddy Kennedy ran for president, they did everything they could to evoke memories of brother Jack. If Jeb were to run, he'd have to treat George W. like the crazy uncle at Thanksgiving dinner.

But the Bushes have some experience with that approach. When George W. made his White House bid, his campaign encouraged the perception of him as the true son and rightful heir — of Reagan, not George H.W. Bush. He confided, "I'm more like Ronald Reagan than my dad."

He said that "the biggest difference between me and my father is that he went to Greenwich Country Day and I went to San Jacinto Junior High" — omitting other notable differences, like his father being a decorated combat veteran, UN ambassador, CIA director and vice president.

But the old man lost his re-election campaign after disenchanting many Republicans by breaking his "read my lips" pledge not to raise taxes. So W had to convey an unmistakable message to voters: I'm not like that other Bush.

Though it may have been unfilial, the tactic was effective. But now it has been generally adopted by Republican candidates, who blame Barack Obama for the TARP program, the General Motors bailout and stimulus-caused deficits — all of which began under his predecessor.

But the need to disassociate from one Bush or another is not just Jeb's problem; it's the entire party's problem. W left office with the lowest approval rating of any president since Jimmy Carter — another president whose party pretends he

never existed. GOP members of Congress, who were happy to enable Bush's spending binge while he was in office, have been forced to reinvent themselves as fiscal skinflints.

In this campaign, Republicans are doing all they can to disassociate themselves from the Bush years. But what's true of trees is also true of political parties: by their fruits you shall know them.

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