

As Daniels considers White House run, supporters venerate, critics unload

By [Alexis Levinson](#) - The Daily Caller 2:13 AM 03/18/2011



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Mitch Daniels is cheap.

The Indiana governor and former Office of Management and [Budget](#) director for President George W. Bush who is now spoken of as the favorite 2012 candidate of the Washington elite used a gardening glove when he first learned to play golf, unwilling to spend the money for a real golf glove.

“He had the same raincoat, which I always thought was too short for him, for about 20 years,” a former aide said, recalling another tale of Daniels’ frugality.

“He doesn’t like to spend his money, and he doesn’t like to spend the people’s money,” Al Hubbard, who headed up the National [Economic](#) Council during Bush’s second term and is considered part of Daniels’ inner circle, explained.

That stinginess, which may seem extreme in his personal life, is what has prompted some to call for Daniels to run for the Republican nomination for president, in the hopes that he will apply that same level of parsimony to the federal budget. Daniels said Sunday on NBC’s “Meet the Press” that he has agreed to “consider” the possibility of a run.

Talk to too many people about Daniels and you start to wonder if you've been lied to all your life about how many hours there are in a day. Governor Daniels writes his own speeches and designs his own campaign ads. Described as in phenomenal shape, he is an avid runner and golfer, as well as a sports fan. He seems to stay in touch with just about everyone he meets, from old colleagues at Eli Lilly and the Hudson Institute, to Bush administration officials, to people he met on the road — and many of them will tell you just how surprisingly easy it is to get on his schedule. He's also known as a policy wonk, who can wrap his head around an issue with surprising speed and ease.

Neil Pickett, who worked with Daniels at the Hudson Institute, of which Daniels was president and [CEO](#) from 1987 to 1990, and later served as senior policy director during Daniels' first term as governor, called Daniels extremely intelligent, the first quality most people mention when speaking about the governor.

"I worked for Herman Kahn — he's a futurist who founded the Hudson institute. He's generally thought of as one of the smartest people ever in the world," Pickett said. "Nobody in my mind equals Herman Kahn. But Mitch Daniels is pretty darn close."

"He is both quantitatively, not just literate but expert, and one of the most articulate and effective communicators, especially in writing, that I've ever seen," Pickett continued.

But he was initially skeptical that Daniels would be successful in politics. As a candidate, the former colleague expected Daniels would be "maybe a little stiff and not effective."

"That proved to be absolutely wrong," he said. "He's an incredibly effective retail politician."

As governor, Daniels has continued to earn the praise of colleagues and staffers.

"He's just remarkable in that he can write speeches like Peggy Noonan writes speeches, create ads like Roger Ailes creates ads, and he knows policy as well as any policy nerd around," said Hubbard.

"What was really helpful for me was how quick of a study he was on things that he frankly didn't know much about before talking them through," said Ryan Kitchell, a part of Daniels' administration for six years, first as public finance director for two and a half years, and then as OMB director. "You can imagine — anyone at that level — it's hard to get hours and hours of his time to go through stuff."

"He doesn't need much help," said Pickett, laughing. "When you can't do anything better than he does, it's kind of intimidating to try to work for him."

"He's like the chess player that's always 12 moves ahead of you," said Pete Seat, communications director for the Indiana Republican [Party](#). "The moves that he makes may not make sense in today's context, or tomorrow's context, but six months down the road, you go 'holy moly, this guy knew what he was talking about.'"

Not the typical candidate

Daniels is certainly not the prototypical presidential candidate. Short and balding, many have noted that Daniels just does not look the part. Daniels himself has even jokingly [acknowledged](#) that this could be an issue.

Another potential issue that has been [raised](#) regards Daniels' marriage, a subject the governor is exceptionally reluctant to speak on and into which he has never allowed much scrutiny. When Daniels and his wife, Cheri, divorced in 1993 or 1994 (there are conflicting reports of the dates, and the governor's office did not respond to requests for the answer), she moved to California and married another man, only to divorce the man four years later and remarry Daniels. Though the divorce is often mentioned by the media, little has been said about it beyond the fact that it happened. This is likely owing to the fact that Daniels has mentioned it publicly only once, saying, "If you like happy endings, you'll love our story."

Despite the Daniels' reluctance to talk about that period, it is something that other candidates would certainly bring up in a presidential primary — if not directly then perhaps through intermediaries. Some have speculated that this is the reason behind Mrs. Daniels' hesitance about her husband's potential presidential run, a sentiment she has publicly expressed. Daniels, for his part, has [acknowledged](#) that his own indecision about entering the race stems in part from his wife's concerns.

If Daniels runs, he will also have to contest with social conservatives, who he angered recently by calling for a "[truce](#) on social issues" in order to focus on the nation's economic problems. An important demographic in the Republican primary, it is unclear that Daniels could win the nomination without their support. Since his comments about a truce, Daniels has made a point of emphasizing that he is personally a social conservative while refusing to backtrack on the substance of his statement.

Kitchell says that questioning Daniels' credentials as a committed social conservative is "bogus."

"Before every cabinet [meeting](#), the governor would ask someone pray," said Kitchell, who left Daniels' administration in September.

While in the private sector, Daniels, along with other members of his Tabernacle Presbyterian church, also helped found The Oaks Academy, a Christian school located in a very bad neighborhood in Indianapolis.

"Of all the things life has brought, this project is the most important human endeavor, I've been privileged to be part of," Governor Daniels [said](#) of The Oaks in 2008.

Supporters enthusiastic about a possible presidential run

Should Daniels decide to run, those who know him are confident that he would make an excellent president.

“The percentage of people who know Mitch who want him to be president is exceedingly high because when people get to know him, they’re just so impressed with his talent and character,” said Hubbard, who opined that Daniels would make “a fabulous president.”

“He’s the only guy running right now... [who] would be very specific with the American people about what our problems are and what we’ve got to do to solve them,” Hubbard continued, “particularly about our fiscal challenges, our big deficit, and economic growth... He’ll just say, ‘do you want to do that? Then we’ve got to do the following.’”

Supporters also praise Daniels for trying to avoid the partisan fray.

“He’s kind of a little bit of a throwback to that day when you could have opponents not enemies,” said Pickett.

“It was always about what was the best thing for the state, regardless of what the consequences were to him personally or politically,” said Kitchell. “It was really easy to do your job well because you knew that if what you were doing was in the best interest of the state, he always had your back.”

Daniels is not without his critics

But not everyone is quite so taken with the governor.

“He has a perception as being a really wonkish, deep thinker on these policy issues, but I think that’s extremely exaggerated,” said a former Daniels administration official. “He’s actually quite, quite political, politically minded. Certainly in my experience with developing policies, most of what I was involved in had more to do with appearances and politics and than any sort of deep rooted ideological or philosophical agenda.”

This criticism is echoed by some in Indiana who feel that Daniels has not accomplished enough to justify the acclaim. There is a perception that perhaps he avoided taking on certain arguments that he felt he would not be able to win, playing politics instead of sticking to principles.

He has also come under attack for one of his first acts as governor: raising taxes on those making over \$100,000 a year in the interest of balancing the budget. The move [drew fire](#) from many of the same people who had supported him in his campaign for the office. Daniels got results, however, turning Indiana’s deficit into a surplus by the end of his first term, and earning praise for streamlining the state government.

Tad DeHaven, a budget analyst at Cato Institute who used to work in Daniels’ Office of Management and Budget, has questioned some of the claims made about the governor’s record.

In a profile of Daniels in The Weekly Standard, Kitchell recounted a story of how the governor’s office put pennies in the tires of government owned cars to see which ones never actually left the parking lot, as a way of eliminating unnecessary waste in government. But DeHaven says that though the governor gets credit for this, he was utterly unhelpful in the effort.

“That was an initiative undertaken by my dept in OMB and we couldn’t get any support from the governor’s office to do anything about all those state vehicles,” said DeHaven.

He also said that while Daniels gets credit for having reduced the size of the state government, much of that was just smoke and mirrors. He explained that many agencies have in their budget extra positions that no person actually fills. Those positions get funded, and “it gives the agencies flexibility.” The governor, DeHaven said, “finds out there are these thousands and thousands of budgeted positions... and says ‘get rid of them.’ The agencies of course don’t want to... They get rid of some of them. Next thing you know he’s talking about his reductions in the state workforce.”

DeHaven said he has requested data on that issue in his capacity as an economist at Cato and has received no response. “Until I see the data and the names,” he said, “he’s misrepresenting his position on that.”

Others have criticized Daniels’ management style and the way he runs his administration.

“He’s very ego driven,” the former Daniels administration official said. “He struck me as incredibly insecure; extremely competitive. He was always wanting to be filled in on what other governors and states were doing.”

“He doesn’t like to be questioned on his policies or asked to explain in detail,” the former official continued. “He definitely doesn’t like to be challenged and he does get defensive.”

As a result, the former official said, “policy staffers were often afraid to tell him what exactly what was going on. We were often instructed not to give him bad news.” For instance, if “somebody says something bad about him in the press, or if there was going to be a show on the 11 o’clock news that found something bad in the state government, you know, they didn’t want him to know. The ideal is to tell him things are fine and dandy.”

For the most part, the former administration official said, the people who work for Daniels complied with this.

The “biggest disappointment was the people that Daniels surrounded himself with,” the former official said. “I don’t know if that’s ‘cause they were loyalists or people he could intellectually dominate from an intimidation standpoint, but I think that was disappointing.

“I would point to a weakness in his [management style](#): putting too much faith in some of his lieutenants.”

“There’s definitely a loyalist mentality among staff,” the former administration official continued. “So yeah, if you start to stray from the reservation, your time might be short. Or else you could start to get black listed, kept out of things. And they just don’t go and get rid of you because of concerns about you going to the press and saying bad stuff.”

Indeed, Daniels has gotten very little bad press of late; in fact, the Republican establishment seems to think quite favorably of a Daniels run. Conservative intellectual George Will has praised Daniels in his columns, and David Brooks penned a column entitled [“Run, Mitch, Run.”](#) The new [National Journal insiders poll](#) ranks Daniels as the presidential candidate whose stock has risen the most over the last several months.

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