



Pawlenty to Like

The former Minnesota governor could be a strong presidential candidate

BY RAMESH PONNURU

KEVIN KRAWCZYK is disappointed. A manager at the Family Christian Store chain, he is hosting a book-signing for Tim Pawlenty in Lombard, Ill. “We were expecting more,” he says. The shelves are lined with many untouched copies of *Courage to Stand: An American Story*. Under the author’s name, the book cover identifies him: “Former Governor of Minnesota.” Newt Gingrich, Sarah Palin, and Mitt Romney don’t need such lines on their book covers.

As Pawlenty prepares to run for the Republican nomination for president, his main problem is simple: Most Americans have never heard of him. Republicans tend to prefer known commodities: Every winner of the Republican nomination in the last 70 years had a national reputation a year before the primaries. *The Courage to Stand* is not selling well. Yet Pawlenty may just be the Republicans’ strongest presidential candidate for 2012. Compared with his competitors, he is either more conservative, more electable, or both.

Pawlenty, 50, has made no formal announcement, but his schedule—including the book tour, a second speech in two years at CPAC, and plenty of stops in Iowa—means he is running for president. His campaign will probably emphasize two colors: blue and purple, describing respectively the collar of his family background and the political alignment of his state.

The book, which is pretty good by the dismal standards of the genre, describes the South St. Paul of his childhood as a meat-packing town where the milkman (and the beer man) still went door to door. He has fond memories, but it was not an idyll. Ovarian cancer killed his mother when he was 16. His father lost his job with a trucking company soon afterward, and Pawlenty

had to work in the produce department of a local grocery store to make ends meet and pay tuition at the University of Minnesota. He was the first kid in his family to get a college degree. Pawlenty doesn’t peddle resentment of the rich. But he does want voters to know that he has seen hard times and struggled to succeed.

In high school, Pawlenty started to get interested in public affairs: reading *U.S. News and World Report*, arguing with his dad about Social Security. At college he handed out brochures for Ronald Reagan’s 1980 campaign, which he says led to people shouting at and, in one case, spitting on him. Still in college in 1982, he worked on Republican senator David Durenberger’s reelection campaign. Then it was on to law school, where he met his wife, Mary. By all accounts she is responsible for turning him from a dutiful but somewhat shallow Catholicism to a deeper evangelicalism. She became a judge, while he plunged headlong into politics.

He got in succession a top job in Durenberger’s 1988 campaign, a spot on the Eagan, Minn., city council, an advisory position with a gubernatorial candidate, and a seat in the state house of representatives. When Republicans took the majority in 1998—the same year Jesse Ventura won the governorship—he became the majority leader. Four years later, he sought to run for statewide office but found the road blocked. State party leaders favored a wealthy candidate who could fund his own bid for governor. The Bush White House wanted former St. Paul mayor Norm Coleman to have a free ride in the Senate primary. Pawlenty decided to seek the executive position, and narrowly prevailed in the primary even after a late start.

IMAZ/ZUMA/NEWS.COM

As that thumbnail sketch suggests—*U.S. News*, not *NATIONAL REVIEW*; Senator Durenberger—Pawlenty is not a movement conservative. But he was conservative, if not a conservative, to apply William F. Buckley Jr.'s distinction. He ran on liberalizing gun laws, tightening abortion laws, and opposing tax increases, and won a three-way race.

Governor Pawlenty dealt with a Democratic senate for his entire two terms and a Democratic house for his second one. But “dealt with” may not be the best choice of words. Pawlenty set a record for vetoes, partly shutting down the government during a budget battle in 2005. During another budget fight, this one in 2009, Pawlenty withstood pressure from the two previous Republican governors of Minnesota—both well to his left—to agree to raise taxes. He took on the transit workers’ union, which believed that the state should have to provide its members with health insurance for life after 15 years on the job. It went on strike, and lost.

Pawlenty guided Minnesota’s political culture firmly and sharply to the right. From 1960 to 2003, when Pawlenty took over, the state budget grew, on average, by 21 percent every two years. Under Pawlenty that average fell to 4 percent. Some fees rose, and so did cigarette taxes, but Pawlenty managed to resist all income-tax increases. He is one of four governors to get an A on the Cato Institute’s most recent “fiscal-policy report card.” Gov. Mitch Daniels of Indiana is widely lauded in Republican circles as a budget-cutter. But in each year they were both governor, Cato ranked Pawlenty ahead of Daniels.

Larry Jacobs, who studies politics at the University of Minnesota’s Humphrey School, comments, “In Minnesota, Pawlenty was always seen as the state’s most charismatic and politically talented politician. Here’s a guy who was a conservative fending off often large Democratic majorities and [he] consistently had over 50 percent approval and dominated public debate. He had a remarkable knack for appealing to people on non-political grounds. . . . Mostly it was the way he talked about public policy and politics. People who fundamentally disagreed with him on public policy found him appealing.”

For most conservatives, the biggest blot on Pawlenty’s record is his past support for cap-and-trade. He does not try to finesse the issue. “It’s fair to say I’ve had a change of position and change of view, and the reason is it’s a dumb idea,” he tells *NR*. “It was a mistake.” All public officials have a few “clunkers” in their record, he says, expressing the hope that voters will appreciate a straightforward acknowledgment of error. He adds, “I think my clunkers are fewer than others’.” This particular clunker is widely shared. Gingrich, Palin, Romney, and Mike Huckabee all once supported cap-and-trade—although not all of them are as candid as Pawlenty about their switch.

The theme of Pawlenty’s presidential campaign so far is that Americans, especially those of middle income, are losing faith in the country’s future. Rising debt, the disappearance of the “strong back” jobs his father and his father’s friends once relied on, the suspicion that free markets are giving way to “crony capitalism”: All have eroded Americans’ confidence in their system.

Pawlenty’s answers to these concerns do not, for the most part, set him apart from other Republicans. He thinks that entitlement spending—he calls it “autopilot spending”—needs to be reformed. Specifically, he wants to cap Medicaid spending and divvy it up among the states to spend as they see fit; alter

the Social Security benefits formula so that high earners get less; and—here he gets vague, which also makes him like most Republicans—reform Medicare’s payment system. Fannie and Freddie should be privatized. Obamacare should be repealed. The Fed should rethink quantitative easing, a “preposterous” idea that is “already starting” to create “massive inflationary pressures.” TARP should at the very least have been tougher on its beneficiaries and should not be repeated.

He is more concerned than other Republicans about the cost of college as an impediment to upward mobility. Higher education, he says, has a “personnel, tenure, and salary structure that isn’t as efficient and productive as it should be.” Too many colleges “try to be everything to everyone” instead of picking “areas of strategic significance.” He says he is excited about the possibility that technological change will allow more collegiate learning to take place in living rooms—thus cutting costs and increasing access—and encouraged such a shift in Minnesota.

Pawlenty sees the family as a force for social stability and economic mobility. So he also breaks with contemporary Republicans by suggesting that tax relief should strengthen families as well as promote growth. “The child tax credit could be doubled or tripled,” he says, and we should do what we can “to lighten the load for families more broadly.”

He does not agree with Governor Daniels of Indiana that we should call a “truce” on all issues other than fiscal ones—something most people have interpreted as a call for silence on social issues. He opposes abortion, same-sex marriage, and stem-cell research that destroys human embryos. On that last issue, he again hopes that science will come to the rescue, by making it even clearer that other types of stem-cell research hold at least as much promise of generating cures. His candidacy may provide an interesting test case of whether the combination of evangelicalism and conservatism plays differently with the public when it comes from a midwesterner and not, as it typically has in the Republican party, from a southerner.

IN an interview, Pawlenty volunteers that it is a mistake to multiply the categories of conservative. “People say, ‘I’m a tea-party conservative,’ ‘I’m a religious conservative,’ ‘I’m a compassionate conservative.’ But there [aren’t] 16 varieties of conservatism; there are some basic tenets of conservatism.” Those tenets, he believes, are “time-tested principles reflected in our founding documents. . . . The real challenge is to apply it to the challenges of our time.”

On paper, Pawlenty is a great candidate. He was a successful governor of a deep blue state—Minnesota last voted for a Republican presidential candidate in 1972—for two terms. And he’s from an electorally important region of the country, maybe the key swing region for Republicans.

Compared with their potential popular support, Republicans have badly underperformed in the six states from Montana in the west to Michigan in the east. George W. Bush tried and failed to win Minnesota and Wisconsin in both his runs. Even in 2004, when Republicans had their best presidential-election performance of the last 22 years, Democrats won more than four-fifths of the region’s electoral votes. At their mid-decade peak, Republicans held only three of the region’s twelve Senate seats. After the 2008 elections, they were down to one.

BUT Republicans may be about to make their long-awaited breakthrough in the upper Midwest. After the 2010 elections, they now have three of the region's Senate seats again. They also have both houses of the legislature in Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. They captured the governorships in Michigan and Wisconsin and came close to holding the one in Minnesota. They picked up congressional seats in these states, too. Nominating Pawlenty would increase the Republicans' chances of winning either Wisconsin or Minnesota. If they do that, they would still need to win back several of the states Bush won in 2004 but McCain lost in 2008. But they wouldn't have to win Colorado, New Mexico, Nevada, or Iowa. The path to victory would get appreciably easier.

Pawlenty is more electable than Palin, who is on the wrong end of a two-to-one split in public opinion; or Huckabee, who has never demonstrated any ability to win votes from non-evangelical voters; or Gingrich, who has enough baggage to open a Louis Vuitton store; or Haley Barbour, who, as a former lobbyist for tobacco companies and the governor of Mississippi, combines several Republican stereotypes to damaging effect. Electability would probably hand Pawlenty the nomination in a one-on-one race against any of these contenders.

He would probably beat Romney in a head-to-head race, too. Like Romney, Pawlenty was elected governor of a blue state in 2002. But there are at least five big differences between them that primary voters may find tell in the Minnesotan's favor. First,

of the pack is Pawlenty's challenge. The slowness of the current presidential race works in his favor. It's slower than the 2008 race for two reasons. Pawlenty is one of the few candidates without a Fox News contract. Most of the other candidates are waiting to declare themselves officially in the race because when they do they will lose the ability to reach a lot of Iowa and New Hampshire voters while getting paid for it. And the primary rules have been altered to encourage states to hold their contests later. These two factors could make Pawlenty a tortoise in a field of hares.

Pawlenty is confident that he can raise the \$30 million he needs to compete in the early primaries and to capitalize on a good showing there. Because Iowa is right next door to Minnesota, the national press is going to expect him to do well in its caucuses. What might help him more than proximity is that he has experience with caucuses, since Minnesota has them too. Iowa has an easily gamed "straw poll" in August, which is a sort of virtue: Success there is a good measure of organization. Pawlenty will have to place in the top three to stay in the race.

PAWLENTY'S speeches are plainspoken. They rarely include memorable lines. Some Republican insiders wonder if he is too "Minnesota nice" to excite primary voters. In person, though, he comes across as warm, intelligent, and committed. He shows the kind of interest in people that is hard to fake, lingering at campaign events to the consternation of his schedulers. He

Tim Pawlenty is more electable than Sarah Palin, who is on the wrong end of a two-to-one split in public opinion.

Pawlenty was elected as a conservative whereas Romney ran as a moderate. Second, Pawlenty pursued a more confrontational strategy: He didn't cut any grand bipartisan deal, as Romney did with Ted Kennedy on health care. Third, and as a result, Pawlenty's record does not include anything as likely to offend conservative voters as Romney's Massachusetts health-care law, which made the purchase of health insurance compulsory.

Fourth, Pawlenty won reelection in his blue state, even in 2006, which was a slaughterhouse of a year for Republicans. Romney, by contrast, left the governorship after one term: He was unable to position himself as a conservative for a presidential run while staying popular in his home state. Fifth, Pawlenty has an ability to connect to blue-collar voters that Romney has never demonstrated.

That leaves two other possible contenders, both of whom are also unknown to most Republican primary voters nationally: Daniels and South Dakota senator John Thune. (I'm excluding from consideration a few candidates running to promote a cause or themselves but with no shot at the nomination.) Either of them could be competitive with Pawlenty in a side-by-side comparison. But Pawlenty is a more impressive political figure than the other two, both of whom come from red states that will almost certainly vote for any Republican nominee in 2012. Pawlenty has been an executive, unlike Thune. And he has better relations with social conservatives than Daniels does.

If Pawlenty loses, then, it is likely to be because the primary never becomes a Pawlenty-Palín or Pawlenty-Romney race. Breaking out

didn't succeed as Minnesota's first and only conservative governor in modern times by being dull.

A bigger problem may be, however, that he is overcompensating in response to this conventional critique of him. At CPAC in 2010, he went on a tear against brie-eating elites that made him sound like someone trying hard to impress conservative activists without really understanding them. This year's speech got better reviews, but it too seemed designed to fend off charges that he is too "Minnesota nice" to deliver a slashing partisan speech. Pawlenty let Daniels corner the market in attendees looking for thoughtfulness. If he does not find a truer pitch, Pawlenty could find himself developing a reputation for being inauthentic far more damaging than one for being boring. He is likable and intelligent—as smart as Romney, says one political operative who knows both men well, but "coffeeshop-style smart" rather than "boardroom-style smart." Maybe he should campaign that way. On the other hand, as one adviser puts it, "You can learn to give a better speech. You can't get rid of an individual mandate."

One of the more engaging passages in *Courage to Stand* concerns hockey fights. Pawlenty summarizes it for a luncheon audience in Chicago: "There are rules. There is a code of ethics under the seeming thuggery." You don't take unfair advantages or pick on smaller players. You usually issue a warning before taking the first shot. Pawlenty surely understands that none of these rules apply in the fight he's getting squared away for. He may yet come out with the fewest bruises.

NR