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JOHN FUND ON THE TRAIL | MAY 24, 2011, 1:49 P.M. ET

Pawlenty Makes It Official

With a straight-talk approach, former Minnesota Gov. Tim Pawlenty announced that he's running for president.

By JOHN FUND

Yesterday former Minnesota Gov. Tim Pawlenty announced that he was running for president, and the theme of his speech seemed to be straight-talk. He promised to end the era of bailouts and handouts if elected, including federal subsidies for ethanol. His remarks carried all the more weight because he was speaking from Iowa, a state heavily dependent on ethanol subsidies.

Mr. Pawlenty brings some real credentials to his pitch as a small-government champion. "There's only four governors in the country that got an A grade from the tough-grading Cato Institute for fiscal management," he told ABC News. "I was one of them," he told ABC News. But opponents will point out that his previous grades in Cato surveys were "B", "C" and "B." There are reasons for the uneven performance.

From a conservative standpoint, Mr. Pawlenty's eight years in office can be divided into three parts. In 2003 he came into office facing a huge budget deficit, which he closed by passing a no-growth budget. He signed laws establishing a 24-hour waiting period for abortions, creating tax-exempt zones for depressed rural areas and allowing citizens to carry concealed weapons.



Associated Press

Former Minnesota Governor Tim Pawlenty at a town hall meeting in Iowa Monday.

After his party lost ground in the state legislature in the 2004 election, he pivoted in a populist direction. He reversed course to back taxpayer funding for new sports stadiums, called for government health insurance to cover all children and embraced ethanol mandates. But nothing riled conservatives as much as his support for a regional cap-and-trade approach to global warming, which would require companies to pay for the right to make carbon emissions. He has since declared his support of such restrictions one of his policy "clunkers."

In the run-up to the 2008 election, during which he was a top contender to be John McCain's running mate, Mr. Pawlenty pivoted again and finished his second and final

term as a strong conservative who claims he didn't sign a tax increase even once. (A cigarette tax hike he did sign was later declared a "health impact fee" by state courts.)

All of this, he notes, was in a state that is rough sledding for fiscal conservatives. Minnesota is the only state that hasn't voted Republican for president in the past nine elections. For every year he was in office, at least one house of the legislature was controlled by Democrats and often with near veto-proof majorities.

That said, it's clear Mr. Pawlenty will be dogged throughout his campaign by a self-appointed scold who will question his record. Former Minnesota Gov. Arne Carlson, a Republican who served from 1991 to 1999, has already appeared on MSNBC and other venues to claim that Mr. Pawlenty's frugality at the state level resulted in property tax hikes totaling \$2.5 billion at the local level during his tenure. "The office of the presidency should go to our nation's best and brightest and not its most ambitious," Mr. Carlson wrote on his blog after the Pawlenty announcement.

Mr. Pawlenty says that while he regrets that the property tax caps he got the legislature to pass didn't prove as effective as he had wished, Mr. Carlson's critique is off-base. "Arne Carlson has become an Obama supporter and said he'd left the Republican Party some years ago, so I don't think he's an actual neutral or honest broker of anything," Mr. Pawlenty notes. That may be true, but you can expect Mr. Carlson to be routinely trotted out in coming months as the designated in-state critic of Mr. Pawlenty's record. But for most Republicans, that record holds up fairly well given it was made in the state famous for electing such liberals as Hubert Humphrey, Walter Mondale and even Al Franken.

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