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Meet Rick Santorum, Big-Spending Bush Republican

Ben Adler on January 4, 2012 - 3:50pm ET

Conventional wisdom holds that former Senator Rick Santorum, co-winner of the Iowa caucus, is indisputably conservative enough for the Republican base. “Santorum fits the mold of a tried-and-true conservative who has rarely compromised,” [writes](#) Aaron Blake of the *Washington Post*.

In fact, Santorum is a throwback to the Bush era: a big-spending, big-government conservative. He has had the good fortune to have lost re-election in 2006 and not been around to vote in favor of TARP, but time and again he voted for costly schemes that expanded the national debt. Many of the attacks that damaged Newt Gingrich could have been made against Santorum if he had been polling well enough to invite them.

Santorum voted for Medicare Part D, No Child Left Behind and the Iraq War. This is no way to shrink the government or balance the budget, especially when you simultaneously propose to cut taxes and increase defense spending.

Santorum’s own nephew put it best in his [endorsement](#) of Ron Paul. “If you want another big-government politician who supports the status quo to run our country, you should vote for my uncle, Rick Santorum.... My uncle’s interventionist policies, both domestic and foreign, stem from his irrational fear of freedom not working,” wrote John Garver, a college student. “When Republicans were spending so much money under President Bush, my uncle was right there along with them as a senator. The reason we have so much debt

is not only because of Democrats, but also because of big-spending Republicans like my Uncle Rick.”

So if conservatives and Republicans were really moved to protest big government during the Bush years, then Santorum might have a problem. Luckily for Santorum, most conservatives only oppose deficit spending when it's done by Democrats. As David Weigel [reports](#) for *Slate* from Iowa, “Tea Partiers did not demand much economic libertarianism from their GOP. Sixty-four percent of caucus-goers called themselves ‘Tea Party supporters,’ and 30 percent of them backed Rick Santorum—a social conservative who proudly defended his earmarks.”

Indeed, when Santorum started to rise in the polls last week Rick Perry [hit him with an ad](#) attacking his penchant for pork-barrel spending. It didn't pierce Santorum's bubble. Nor did Rand Paul's dubbing Santorum a big government conservative on the campaign trail in Iowa.

Actual Tea Party activists and conservative opinion writers are aware of these contradictions. Jane Aitken, the founder of the New Hampshire Tea Party, endorsed Ron Paul on Tuesday. Aitken tells *The Nation* that Santorum's big spending tendencies and his belligerent foreign policy concern her. “I don't like Santorum's record that much.... He's way too hawkish. We need to be vigilant over countries like Iran, but we must not appear to be the aggressors ever.”

James Poulos of the conservative *Daily Caller* [writes](#), “The Bush years proved beyond question how difficult it is to cabin off ‘good’ interventions in the minute details of our moral lives from ‘bad’ interventions in our finances, our health care, our education, and other similarly sweeping areas.” David Boaz of the libertarian Cato Institute [complains](#) that in 2006 Santorum campaigned on earmarks he delivered for Pennsylvania and articulated a big government ideology. “[Santorum] declared himself against individualism, against libertarianism, against ‘this whole idea of personal autonomy...this idea that people should be left alone.’ ”

But will critiques of Santorum from the well-informed activists and opinion-makers infiltrate the mass of Republican voters? Their [reassessment](#) of Jon Huntsman [never caught on](#) with rank-and-file conservatives. When it comes to average voters, the GOP may still be the unprincipled party of George W. Bush.