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Huntsman speaks at...Brookings?

By: Reid J. Epstein

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The road to the Republican nomination does not typically run through the Brookings Institution.

Yet that's where Jon Huntsman found himself Monday afternoon, the first — and so far only — Republican candidate to accept the invitation.

“I come with great trepidation now, hearing that I am the first of the candidates to show up,” Huntsman told the 200 people who came to see him. “There must be a reason nobody else has been here.”

The speech at the center-left think tank was an out-of-theme kick-off to a week of conservative media outreach for the candidate, who's neither been getting much traction among the right wing Republican base nor trying to. The former Utah governor did 20 minutes on a RedState/Big Government podcast Monday morning and a Wall Street Journal forum for CEOs Monday evening. He is scheduling an appearance on Bill O'Reilly's Fox News program, his spokesman, Tim Miller, told POLITICO.

In his 45 minutes at Brookings, Huntsman criticized his fellow GOP candidates' tax proposals: Herman Cain's 9-9-9 plan would never pass Congress, Mitt Romney's 59-point plan is “nibbling” and Rick Perry's flat tax wouldn't work for anyone “gaming the system” who'd opt to keep using the existing loopholes.

“If you're going to take that step toward a bold proposal, you've got to at least pass the straight-face test in terms of what can be done with Congress so its not laughed out on day one,” he said.

Hitting the message of reasonableness that's anchored his campaign, Huntsman bemoaned the extreme political rhetoric that has marked the GOP presidential race thus far — a concern that's not high on the minds of the typical early-state primary and caucus voters.

“We're off camped out in the extreme ends of politics, finger-pointing and engaging in hyper-charged partisan rhetoric,” he said. “We're not doing the work of the people. So I say, you got to do the work of the people, you have to put something on the table that at least stands a chance.”

Brookings isn't the only Washington think tank that's been trying to get Huntsman to come speak. David Boaz, the executive vice president of the Cato Institute, said Huntsman was invited to address the libertarian think tank on foreign policy.

But the campaign never replied.

Boaz said appearing at Brookings follows a Huntsman campaign pattern in which he has "increasingly emphasized the areas where he does stand at odds with the perceived Republican base."

Boaz then compared Huntsman to a candidate who's been having even more trouble getting traction than he has.

"In some sense, it's the same thing that Gary Johnson is doing," Boaz said, referring to the former New Mexico governor and all-but-forgotten presidential candidate. "The fact that he has sent out snarky tweets about creationism, those things appeal to me but they may not appeal to Iowa caucus-goers or New Hampshire and South Carolina primary voters."

Miller said Huntsman spoke at Brookings because he was invited to. He said Huntsman "would be open" to doing so at Cato if it fits his schedule.

GOP strategist Rick Wilson, who worked for Rudy Giuliani's 2008 campaign, said Huntsman's moves are a staple of his chief strategist, John Weaver, who masterminded John McCain's 2000 and 2008 runs.

And if, like John McCain once joked, Huntsman's base is "the media," he may be in danger of losing ground there, too. On his MSNBC show Monday morning, Joe Scarborough and former GOP Chairman Michael Steele – hardly two bastions of conservative thought – lauded Huntsman but pleaded with him to hit his opponents harder.

"Huntsman is where the American people are, period, end of story," Steele said. "He's got to stop being the ambassador and start being the presidential guy."

Scarborough responded with specific instructions.

"Stop acting like an ambassador and start acting like a guy who is the governor of Utah," he said in an exasperated tone. "You weren't the governor of Massachusetts, you were the governor of Utah! 100 percent NRA rating, 100 percent pro-life rating, the most conservative economic program and you have been branded as a liberal. Explain that one! Can you guys believe that? Utah governor the most conservative state in the nation!"