

Reason

Why Not Huntsman?

Huntsman has a record more conservative than his moderate image suggests

Steve Chapman | November 21, 2011

He's a responsible, well-spoken adult with a good record in office, a soothing style, bipartisan appeal, and ample knowledge of the world beyond our shores. But Jon Huntsman, a candidate for the Republican presidential nomination, somehow imagines he can overcome those handicaps.

He's running at 2 percent in the polls, but working in his favor is that his rivals have defined themselves mostly by their lapses, failures, and gaffes. At the moment, Republicans seem doomed to choose between the fraudulent (Mitt Romney) and the incompetent (almost everyone else). One contender after another has risen to challenge Romney, only to self-destruct in the most mortifying possible way.

That leaves an opportunity for someone who can avoid the exploding cigar, as Huntsman has. Besides being a telegenic master of the complete sentence, he was the highly popular governor of the most Republican state in the country, Utah.

As a family man, he qualifies as an overachiever, with seven children, two of them adopted, and nary a whiff of scandal. His hobbies include such approved Republican activities as shooting and motorcycle riding.

More to the point, Huntsman has a record more conservative than his moderate image suggests. He worked for Ronald Reagan. He wants to repeal President Barack Obama's health care reform, decries the Environmental Protection Agency's "regulatory reign of terror," endorsed Rep. Paul Ryan's Medicare plan, and favors a constitutional amendment to "ensure legal protections for the unborn."

When the candidates were asked about a hypothetical package consisting of \$10 in federal spending cuts for each \$1 of tax increases, he joined the others in a chorus of rejection.

In *The American Conservative* magazine, Michael Brendan Dougherty wrote, "For the past two decades a 'moderate' Republican was one who generally didn't side with his party on three issues: taxes, guns and abortion. Huntsman's record on those isn't just to the right of other moderates, it is to the right of most conservatives."

His centrism is mostly a matter of temperament. His record in office stands up well by conservative standards. He pushed through big cuts in income and sales taxes. He cut state employees' retirement benefits.

In the libertarian Cato Institute's 2008 fiscal ranking of the nation's governors, he came in fifth—tied with Rick Perry. He also can argue that he knows how to foster a sound economy. During his time as governor, by one measure, Utah ranked first in the country in job creation, while Romney's Massachusetts ranked 47th.

He hasn't had to spend a lot of time fighting off major parts of his record. The phrase he uses to describe Romney—a "perfectly lubricated weather vane"—doesn't apply to Huntsman.

He did, however, have the gall to say, "I believe in evolution and trust scientists on global warming." He also has parted with GOP dogma on civil unions for gays and granting in-state college tuition to foreign-born children brought here illegally by their parents.

But those are mild deviations compared to, say, Romney's Obama-like health care program, Cain's wild incoherence on abortion or Newt Gingrich's sale of his soul to Freddie Mac.

More offensive to rabid Obama-haters is that Huntsman accepted when the president asked him to be ambassador to China. Never mind that firsthand acquaintance with our biggest creditor and most formidable potential military rival (he even speaks Mandarin) would be an asset in a president. Never mind that his service would appeal to independent voters who distrust fierce partisanship.

Never mind, either, that he has attacked Obama for his policy on Libya, which was "not in our core national security interest," and on Afghanistan, which he regards as "nation-building." Republicans wary of extravagant, open-ended foreign entanglements now have an alternative to Ron Paul.

And who else has had the nerve to say what should be obvious about our most questionable ally? "I'm here to tell you, folks," Huntsman declared at one event, "we can't do a damn thing about Pakistan. Only Pakistan can save Pakistan."

If Republicans are looking for the most conservative candidate, they won't settle on Huntsman. But if they are looking for the most conservative candidate who can beat Obama, he may yet get his day in the sun.

The process of elimination is on his side. New Hampshire political consultant Paul Collins, who is now working for the campaign, told The New York Times, "When I signed on, someone said to me, 'Oh, you've met Huntsman?' And I said, 'No. But I've met all the other guys.'"