



This is how tough guy Kasich dwindled into Huntsman 2.0

W. James Antle III

November 12, 2015

John Kasich had never been called a RINO before and he wasn't having it.

At the 1998 Ohio College Republican convention, speaker after speaker rose to defend the Gingrich Congress' new budget deal with Bill Clinton that conservatives were panning for hiking government spending. But none did so more forcefully than Kasich.

The college-aged critics were listening to Ivory Tower conservative think tanks and other ideological purists, Kasich said. The Republican Congress, in conjunction with Clinton, was achieving the first balanced budget since 1969.

Kasich had been Tea Party before there was a Tea Party. He was as opposed to corporate welfare as much as he wanted to promote welfare reform for the poor, as critical of the Pentagon purchasing bad weapon systems as he was of social programs.

He was also Paul Ryan before Paul Ryan, the backbencher with crazy ideas about how to cut spending and reform entitlements who rose to chairman of the House Budget Committee. Like Ryan, Kasich went from pushing budget blueprints that got few votes to promoting budgets backed by a majority in the House.

But Kasich has since transformed from one of the fiercest budget-cutters in Congress to a someone who says St. Peter doesn't care about limited government. He now waves aside principles and political philosophy as irrelevant distractions to a high-functioning executive, and defends Obamacare's Medicaid expansion, amnesty, minimum wage increases and bailouts on the Republican presidential debate stage.

There appear to be four milestones in Kasich's metamorphosis from Paul Ryan prequel to Jon Huntsman 2.0. The first was the 1995-96 government shutdowns. Newt Gingrich was the bad buy in Bill Clinton's budget standoff with Congress, but Kasich played a big role.

Clinton seized on the Republican plan to slow the growth of Medicare spending. According to one estimate, the Kasich proposal would save \$270 billion over seven years while the GOP tax cut was pegged at \$245 billion. Thus the Republicans were said to be cutting healthcare for senior citizens in order to fund tax cuts for the wealthy.

Republicans kept their congressional majorities in the 1996 elections even as Clinton maintained his grip on the White House. Yet they were never as bold on spending cuts again.

Kasich still advocated slower Medicare growth on the debate stage Tuesday night. But how much did this experience influence his decision to accept expanded Medicaid when he was governor of Ohio years later?

You don't have to wait until years later to ask the question. Republicans, with Kasich still running the House Budget Committee, grew slacker on spending after losing the shutdown PR wars to Clinton.

"In 1996 Republicans increased spending by \$48 billion; in 1997, by \$63 billion; and now the 1998 budget will rise by a minimum of another \$70 billion," Stephen Moore, then a Cato Institute budget expert, wrote at the time. "Domestic spending rises by 5.4 percent in 1998, or twice the inflation rate, under the bipartisan budget deal."

That budget deal marked the first time Kasich faced serious criticism from other fiscal conservatives. Prior to that, his biggest fights on the right were with national security conservatives who didn't think the self-described "cheap hawk" wanted to spend enough on the military. He didn't seem to like it.

Kasich began a short-lived campaign for the 2000 Republican presidential nomination, saying he and compassionate conservative George W. Bush were "soul brothers." Ironically, Bush had adopted the compassionate conservative moniker partly to distance himself from Kasich's Washington budget-cutting.

Nevertheless, Kasich campaigned on his record of fiscal conservatism to win election as governor of Ohio in 2010, after a hiatus from public office that included a stint as a Fox News host. Once in office, he initially tried to push public sector collective bargaining reforms that went beyond Scott Walker's in Wisconsin. He even took on the police and fire unions.

Ohio voted on Kasich's reforms in a statewide ballot initiative called Issue 2. Unlike Walker during the recall elections, Kasich lost. He got to remain in office as governor but his collective bargaining law was repealed by more than 60 percent of Buckeye State voters.

Like Arnold Schwarzenegger, the former California governor who spoke at a Kasich fundraiser last month, he became a less combative conservative after losing to the labor unions. He became better known for fighting limited government advocates on Medicaid. Also like Schwarzenegger, he was re-elected, appearing to validate the strategy.

Kasich never became quite as liberal as Schwarzenegger. Ohio isn't California. But now that he is running for president, he has taken the next step. In the run-up to the Republican primaries, he has often appeared to be campaigning against the GOP base, using rhetoric to the left even of his substantive policy positions.

One of Kasich's top advisers is John Weaver. Perhaps it's a coincidence, but there is a pattern of Weaver-advised candidates trying to appeal to New Hampshire independents at the expense of the broader Republican primary electorate. We saw this with Huntsman in 2012 and John McCain in 2000.

This strategy has yielded diminishing returns even in New Hampshire. McCain won the first primary in 2000, Huntsman finished a disappointing third behind Ron Paul in 2012 and Kasich is

currently in fourth place, according to an average of polls taken before he annoyed a focus group of New Hampshire voters.

McCain was clearly irritated when his erstwhile Reaganite allies turned against him after he started pursuing campaign finance reform in the aftermath of the Keating Five scandal. Huntsman may have been unhappy that conservatives ignored his record as governor of Utah after he accepted an ambassadorship in the Obama administration.

Kasich, then, becomes the latest candidate to re-test the possibility of winning the Republican nomination by alienating Republicans.

And now, Kasich, who so far is defending his conversion, and seems intent on testing once again whether alienating Republicans is a good way to win the GOP nomination.