

The Rise of Rubio

A first-term Florida senator sets his sights on the White House

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Miami – Five days before he would take the biggest step of his young political career, Marco Rubio called Bernie Navarro, a Miami real estate investor, to ask for a favor. Rubio wanted to have a small, low-key gathering to thank friends and family before his official announcement the next day, and he needed someone to host it. Navarro, like Rubio the son of Cuban exiles, asked permission from his wife. Although she had denied his repeated requests to host a Super Bowl party, there was no hesitation in approving this one.



At dusk on a steamy Sunday evening, Rubio, wearing khakis, a plaid oxford, and brown loafers, walked to the middle of the backyard of the stately suburban Miami home to address the group that had come to wish him well. Navarro had introduced him as “the next president of the United States,” though he apologized for scooping his friend’s own announcement. The crowd of approximately 150 people included family, friends, staff from his Senate office and political operation, Florida supporters, and a smattering of major contributors from around the country. Rubio’s wife and children were there. So were his siblings Mario, Barbara, and Veronica. Clyde Fabretti, a Tea Party leader from central Florida, brought his wife and daughter. Philip Ellender, an executive with Koch Industries, came from Atlanta. Warren Tompkins, the South Carolina Republican strategist who will be running a pro-Rubio super-PAC, was there along with some of those who will serve on his staff.

With the strong smell of steaks wafting from the commercial-sized grill just a few feet to his right, Rubio started with the obvious joke. “Thank you all for coming. I’m glad to announce my reelection for the Senate,” he said, with a broad grin.

“I’m not going to give you a long speech,” he promised. “I just want you all to have a good time.” Several children playing on the playground behind Rubio—including his youngest son—ignored Rubio’s words and continued leaping from swings and tackling one another as he spoke. Rubio offered a three-minute preview of the speech he would give the following day. “I’m excited about tomorrow, but I’m more excited about the future of our country,” Rubio said. “We’ve got some problems with our current leaders, making bad decisions, but the best way to change the decisions that we’re making is to change the people that are making them. And that’s what we’re going to start working on tomorrow.”

The announcement speech was vintage Rubio—equal parts lamentation and inspiration, at once a dismal accounting of the many problems facing the country and an upbeat, expectant promise to address them. The American people and their economy are driving global innovation and growth, Rubio said, but “too many of our leaders and their ideas are stuck in the twentieth century.” Those leaders—and it was clear Rubio was thinking in particular about one of them—“put us at a disadvantage by taxing, borrowing, and regulating like it’s 1999.” He sharpened his criticism of Clinton-era policies moments later with an allusion to Hillary Clinton’s declaration of her candidacy the day before.

“Just yesterday, a leader from yesterday began a campaign for president by promising to take us back to yesterday. But yesterday is over. And we are never going back.”

Before Rubio’s announcement, the conventional wisdom in the establishment media held that Clinton’s announcement would step on Rubio’s big day and inevitably overshadow it. But Rubio’s team liked the contrast.

In the weeks before Rubio entered the race, his team internally settled on April 13 as the tentative launch date. They told no one. Days later, and before they announced the date to the public or talked to television networks about coverage, Rubio’s campaign learned that Hillary Clinton planned to announce on April 12. Rubio discussed changing the date with his top advisers and decided that the potential upside of announcing immediately after Clinton would outweigh any negatives.

Rubio had long planned to frame the 2016 election as a “generational choice”—echoing the theme (and title) of the closing ad of Rubio’s 2010 Senate race. Announcing his candidacy the day after Clinton would highlight those differences and ensure that coverage of his announcement was paired with coverage of hers.

The differences between the rollouts of the two campaigns sharpened the contrast. Clinton announced via video, snuck off to Iowa in an extended van with tinted windows, interacted with voters only in highly choreographed events, and eluded the media attempting to cover her. Rubio announced in front of a teeming crowd of supporters and immediately gave a series of interviews to a wide variety of media outlets, including some that are not usually friendly to Republicans. He taped interviews with ABC’s George Stephanopoulos and NPR’s Steve Inskeep before the announcement and spoke with conservative talk radio host Mark Levin and Fox News’s Sean Hannity afterwards. In the days that followed, he spoke to NBC’s Matt Lauer and with reporters from a range of outlets including MSNBC, CNN, Univision, and, in an impromptu interview at the airport, TMZ. Rubio ends the week with several voter events in New Hampshire before joining Bob Schieffer on Face the Nation.

When he announced, Rubio ranked seventh among likely presidential candidates in the Real Clear Politics average—behind Jeb Bush, Scott Walker, Ted Cruz, Rand Paul, Ben Carson, and Mike Huckabee. In RCP’s national polling average, he registers 7.3 percent support from Republican primary voters. His numbers are less impressive in the three first states: 5.3 percent in Iowa, 6 percent in New Hampshire, 4.7 percent in South Carolina.

Some prominent election handicappers are skeptical. Nate Cohn from the New York Times, for instance, notes that Rubio’s low support is “less at this stage than any winning presidential candidate of the last 35 years, except Bill Clinton,” who “faced a far weaker field in a late-breaking race.” Cohn says Rubio’s numbers “suggest that he’s not some exceptional candidate who resonates with the rank and file.”

It’s hard to reconcile that claim with the response Rubio gets from the rank and file who see him. In January, Rubio attended a Koch brothers seminar in Rancho Mirage, California. He participated in a panel discussion along with Ted Cruz and Rand Paul, moderated by Jonathan Karl of ABC News. It wasn’t a debate, exactly, but among attendees, there was widespread agreement that Rubio performed well. Even so, his real moment came the next day, when he delivered a speech about the prospect of a post-Obama American renewal. “It was one of the best political speeches I’ve ever seen,” one attendee told me. “He’s the real deal.” Foster Friess, who bankrolled Rick Santorum’s super-PAC in 2012 and intends to do so again this cycle, told me he’d seen Rubio at a Koch event and found him “incredibly impressive.”

As Rubio spoke to attendees in a hallway after the speech in January, a woman approached him. “I just wanted to tell you that my husband had tears in his eyes throughout your speech,” she said. After Rubio thanked her politely, she grabbed his arm to emphasize the point. “You should know, I haven’t seen him with tears in his eyes for years.”

Rubio doesn’t have that effect on everyone, of course, but such stories are common. ABC News political director Rick Klein says Rubio is—for the moment—an “undervalued stock,” with attributes that could portend a rapid ascent.

He’s the best communicator in the Republican party—and probably in American politics today. Beyond his abilities as an orator, Rubio’s performance in the debates during his 2010 bid for the Senate demonstrated his ability to think on his feet. He’s conversant on a wide variety of policy issues and has a wonk-level understanding of the national security issues sure to be at the center of the 2016 race. (Three years ago, Rubio answered questions from foreign policy scholars and journalists in an off-the-record session after a speech he gave at the Brookings Institution. Several later commented that they were impressed by his detailed knowledge of the subject matter and the depth of his answers.)

For these reasons and others, Rubio was asked to provide vetting materials to the Romney campaign as it pondered a running mate in 2012. The request was more than just a courtesy. “We went through what I understand to be the full process,” Rubio recalled in an interview last week. “We provided an extensive amount of documents to them. And they followed up over an extensive period of time and did a lot of work on it—asked questions, got answers. From everything I understand since then, we were certainly in the last three or four names.” Indeed, he was. Romney called Rubio personally to let the young senator know that he’d picked Paul Ryan as his running mate.

Many top Republican donors see in Rubio the same qualities that led Romney to consider putting him on the ticket. And Rubio will have plenty of money for his own campaign. In the two weeks leading up to Rubio’s announcement, as it became clear that he would run, three unaligned Republican fundraisers told me that they’d seen interest in Rubio growing among high-dollar GOP donors. By all accounts, that shift accelerated last week. “They are buzzing about Marco in a way I haven’t seen in a long time,” says one top GOP fundraiser not aligned with any candidate who had previously expressed skepticism about a Rubio bid. “There’s an excitement and enthusiasm about him that surprises me.” Another top Republican fundraiser tells me that the Conservative Solutions PAC, the super-PAC supporting Rubio’s candidacy, has at least three donors who have pledged \$10 million or more to back their efforts. One of them, Norman Braman, former owner of the Philadelphia Eagles, has a net worth just short of \$2 billion according to an estimate by Forbes. “If he feels like Marco is competitive, the checkbook will stay open,” according to a GOP strategist familiar with his thinking.

At the heart of Rubio’s announcement, and his candidacy, is a story. It’s the story of his family and, in Rubio’s telling, the story of America. Rubio’s parents came to the United States from Cuba in the 1950s to build a better life. They worked long hours in blue-collar jobs to provide opportunities for their children.

“My father became a bartender—my mother a cashier, a maid, and a Kmart stock clerk,” Rubio said in his announcement speech. “They never made it big. But they were successful. Two immigrants with little money or education found stable jobs, owned a home, retired with security, and gave all four of their children a life far better than their own.”

He picked up the story moments later and said its lesson is the reason for his candidacy:

On days when I am tired or discouraged, I remember the sound of [my father's] keys jingling at the front door of our home, often well past midnight, as he returned from another long day at work. When I was younger, I didn't fully appreciate all he did for us, but now as my own children grow older, I fully understand.

My father was grateful for the work he had, but that was not the life he wanted for his children. He wanted all the dreams he once had for himself to come true for us. He wanted all the doors that closed for him to be open for me.

My father stood behind a small portable bar in the back of a room for all those years, so that tonight I could stand behind this podium in the front of this room.

That journey, from behind that bar to behind this podium, is the essence of the American Dream. Whether or not we remain a special country will depend on whether that journey is still possible for those trying to make it now:

The single mother who works long hours for little pay so her children don't have to struggle the way she has.
...

The student who takes two buses before dawn to attend a better school halfway across town. . . .

The workers in our hotel kitchens, the landscaping crews in our neighborhoods, the late-night janitorial staff that clean our offices . . . and the bartenders who tonight are standing in the back of a room somewhere. . . .

If their American Dreams become impossible, we will have become just another country. But if they succeed, the 21st century will be another American Century. This will be the message of my campaign and the purpose of my presidency.

Rubio told his story repeatedly on his way to winning the Senate seat he is now giving up to run for president. Rubio had served as speaker of the Florida house of representatives and decided to run for the U.S. Senate despite the likely candidacy of then-popular, then-Republican governor Charlie Crist. A Quinnipiac poll taken shortly before he announced found Rubio trailing Crist 54-8.

When Crist decided to run for the open seat, the Florida GOP establishment pushed Rubio hard to drop out, and the National Republican Senatorial Committee quickly announced its support for Crist. In a decision that was equal parts defiance and stubborn optimism, Rubio stayed in the race.

He built support slowly, driving hundreds of miles up and down the state to speak at sparsely attended fundraisers, sometimes leaving with a cash haul that barely covered his expenses. But those who attended Rubio's speeches told their neighbors about them afterwards, and the crowds began to grow.

Rubio's speeches tapped into the growing frustration with Barack Obama and the Washington Republicans who could do little to stop him. Charlie Crist had gone further, hosting a rally for Obama in Fort Myers as the president touted his \$800 billion stimulus. Crist gave Obama a hug after introducing the president, and the Rubio campaign used the resulting photo to devastating effect. Crist eventually dropped out of the Republican primary and, as

something of a pit stop on his way to becoming a Democrat, finished the race as an independent running “for the people.” In the end, Rubio won easily, with 49 percent of the vote, beating Crist (30 percent) and Democratic representative Kendrick Meek (20 percent).

In the late stages of that race, with polls showing Rubio likely triumphant, Bill Clinton attempted to convince Kendrick Meek to drop out of the race, leaving Crist the lone challenger to Rubio. Meek refused, Rubio prevailed, and soon the new senator began to consider a run for president. If Rubio emerges as the Republican nominee, Clinton may wish he’d tried harder to persuade Meek to quit.

Rubio’s challenge in the present Republican primary is considerably greater. Jeb Bush, the establishment favorite and a Rubio friend, is no Charlie Crist. Bush served two terms as Florida’s governor and earned a well-deserved reputation as a conservative reformer. When Bush announced on Facebook in December that he was strongly considering a presidential bid, he was quickly anointed the likely Republican nominee by the conventional wisdom set in Washington. In the months since, however, Bush has failed to establish himself as the frontrunner. Polls suggest concern among Republican primary voters about Bush’s name, and conservatives in particular have focused on his support for Common Core and immigration reform. If the establishment media were too quick to crown Bush the nominee four months ago, conservatives, viewing him largely through the prism of his two heterodox positions, are probably dismissing him too quickly now. Bush is a strong conservative on most issues, something that will be apparent as he revs up his campaign and participates in the debates.

Beyond Bush, the likely 2016 Republican field includes a number of candidates who can fairly be described as movement conservatives. Wisconsin governor Scott Walker, who sits comfortably near the top of polls both nationally and in states with early contests, has tremendous appeal among grassroots conservatives. Republican primary voters remember Walker’s battles against unions and like his successful budget reforms. Texas senator Ted Cruz also has a strong and loyal conservative following. He’s shown early fundraising muscle and strength that many establishment Republicans didn’t imagine.

Perhaps the question most frequently asked of Rubio in his week-one media tour likened his career path to Obama’s. Not long ago, after all, the country sent to the White House a young, inexperienced former state legislator with a knack for giving great speeches who ran for president during his first term in the Senate. Many Republicans point to Barack Obama as an example of the perils of electing anyone so young. When reporters pressed him about that, Rubio pointed to what he characterized as major differences in their early careers. As speaker of the house in Florida, he said,

you run the actual institution. You’re the chief executive of that entity, with millions of dollar budgets and hundreds of employees. . . . Beyond that, on the legislative side of the equation, despite the fact that we had Republican majorities, I had an uncooperative governor and an uncooperative Senate, and I had a pretty robust minority that I had to account for on votes, and so through that you learn the process that sometimes in order to get 80 percent of what you want or 70 percent of what you want, you’re going to have to accept that you’re not going to get the other 30 percent.

He continued:

I don’t think Barack Obama ever learned that, either in the legislature in Illinois, the time he was there as a backbencher, or as a U.S. senator, where he was really only there for two years before he started running.

And I think that shows in his presidency, where more often than not instead of working through the Republicans that we have, he's decided to demonize his opponents in a take-it-or-leave-it attitude that has left us with very little progress. Obamacare is the perfect example of it. Rather than trying to figure out a way to find a consensus in America behind improving the lives of those that were uninsured, he chose to shove down our throat an unpopular, controversial, ill-timed, ill-planned Obamacare bill—and I think it's poisoned his entire presidency.

There is one additional critical difference between Barack Obama and Marco Rubio: their ideas. As Rubio notes, no amount of experience would have made Obama's policies more effective.

Ignore the low poll numbers. Rubio has seen worse. He is an effective candidate, with a strong campaign team around him, and will almost certainly exceed expectations once again.