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## Right Place, Right Time

**An exquisite sense of timing—and a good deal of luck—has helped transform Rick Perry from an unknown Democratic state legislator into a swaggering Republican who’s spent more years in the Governor’s Mansion than anyone in Texas history. Is it enough to carry him past Kay Bailey Hutchison and all the way to the White House?**

by Paul Burka

One year ago, I wrote a story about the upcoming Republican gubernatorial primary between Governor Rick Perry and Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison. At the time, Hutchison had recently announced her intention to form a committee to explore a race for governor, and her campaign had released a poll showing her 24 points ahead of Perry, 55 percent to 31 percent. The governor’s political career appeared to be in deep trouble. Among Hutchison supporters, 58 percent had a “very favorable” opinion of her. Only 30 percent of Perry supporters felt the same way about him. She led him in every geographical section of the state.

What a difference a year makes. Since then, their fortunes have gone in opposite directions. Perry has held a lead, typically in the low double digits, in almost every poll taken since early summer, and now it is Hutchison’s political career that is in peril: Her Senate term expires on January 1, 2013, and she has said she will not seek reelection. Meanwhile, Perry’s prospects have never been rosier. Just a year after it appeared that he was on the brink of his last race, he is poised to become one of the leaders of his party. His travel schedule, speaking engagements, and television appearances in recent months give every indication that he and his team of advisers are looking beyond Texas to national politics. If Perry defeats Hutchison in the March 2 Republican primary and goes on to win a third full term in November, he will immediately join the crowd of potential presidential aspirants in 2012—if he hasn’t done so already.

Throughout his career, Perry has always benefited from an uncanny knack for being in the right place at the right time, and once again, his luck seems to be working. The Republican field for 2012 is not deep. Mitt Romney and Mike Huckabee are the leftovers, Mark Sanford self-destructed, Sarah Palin is too polarizing, Newt Gingrich is old news, and that leaves . . . well, why not Rick Perry? Who among the contenders has a better conservative record? Who better expresses the anger of the average Republican voter? Who has a more robust fundraising base? Of the governors commonly mentioned—Tim Pawlenty, of Minnesota; Haley Barbour, of Mississippi; Bobby Jindal, of Louisiana; Mitch Daniels, of Indiana—whose state has weathered the recession more successfully?

Most people who follow Texas politics know by now the conventional wisdom about Perry: that he is an accidental governor who inherited the job when George W. Bush became president; that he is “Governor Goodhair” or “Governor 39 Percent” or some similar appellation of mild disrespect accompanied by a twist of humor; that he doesn’t really do anything well except win elections, which he has done with regularity. There is truth in the conventional wisdom, but there is also blindness. Perry has been so often viewed as a caricature that many Texans have failed to recognize his talent. The fact is that no Republican has so ably surfed the wave of populist anger that has swept through the party in the past year.

That Perry has both the potential and the plan to aim higher than the Governor’s Mansion is underscored by the contrast between his campaign and Hutchison’s. Last fall, I attended events at which each candidate appeared. In October, I watched Perry address the Texas Association of Realtors in a banquet room on the second floor of the Hyatt Regency Hotel in central Austin. TAR is one of the largest and most politically active trade associations in the Austin lobby and one of the biggest financial contributors. Its members are exactly the kind of folks a Republican candidate for governor would want in his corner—individual entrepreneurs and hustlers offering the good life in the suburbs to those who seek it, for a 6 percent commission. And Rick Perry has them in his corner.

As I watched him speak I could appreciate the skills that he has acquired during what is now nine years in office, foremost among which is his ability to connect with his constituency. Early in his remarks, he began an anecdote by saying, “I don’t know how many of you watch Fox News,” before adding, in a knowing tone, “but I suppose most of you do.” Later in the speech, he interrupted himself to urge the people in the audience to take out their cell phones. In an instant he transformed himself into the Aggie yell leader he once was. “Put in that you’re fed up,” he prodded them. “No, put in that you’re *fired* up. Then text it to 956-13. It comes directly to me.” And, of course, there was the inevitable jab at Washington: “It’s frustrating to deal with the federal government. They are supposed to provide a strong military, secure our borders, and deliver the mail.” He paused for effect. “Well, one out of three ain’t bad.”

Several weeks later, I drove to San Antonio, where Hutchison was making an appearance at the Young Women’s Leadership Academy to talk about education, following an earlier stop in Houston, where she spoke on the same subject. The academy is part of a promising but controversial educational experiment—single-sex public schools for girls—that some women’s and educational advocacy groups have condemned as discriminatory. The person who made schools like this possible was Hutchison herself, through an amendment to the No Child Left Behind Act, in 2001.

The event took place in the library. Hutchison spoke from a lectern on the floor, surrounded by girls from the school. Most of them were black or Hispanic. They wore uniforms of white blouses, pleated plaid skirts, and blue cardigans. The rest of the people in attendance were from the school and the school district. No Hutchison supporters were in evidence; no refreshments were provided. This was not a rally; it was a media event, the object of which was to get free airtime in the state’s third-largest TV market. The most important people in the room were not the school officials but four television reporters with tripods.

Hutchison has been critical of Perry’s record on public education—a dropout pandemic, stagnant test scores—and her remarks were primarily about her support of more innovations. “Single-sex schools are very close to my heart,” she said. She also embraced charter schools, magnet schools, and accelerated high schools. She wants the state to switch to electronic textbooks and provide students with a hybrid device similar to the Amazon Kindle.

The two campaign events seemed to have been part of entirely different races. Perry’s speech to the realtors evoked national themes and aimed to tap into a powerful feeling of discontent toward Washington. Hutchison’s appearance in San Antonio, on the other hand, was designed to portray her as a smart policy maker on an important state issue. She did it well. If you didn’t know they were in the same race, you might conclude that they were running for different offices, Perry for president (or perhaps the second spot on the national ticket), Hutchison for governor or lieutenant governor. The problem for Hutchison is that the energy in the Republican party today is not directed at how to make government work better. It is directed against government, and no one channels that anger better than Rick Perry.

That Perry has his sights set on Washington, the place he professes to loathe, would explain a lot—for starters, why he decided to seek four more years as governor, despite rumors that he had told many of his key supporters that if they stuck with him in 2006 (when Hutchison was openly considering running against him) he wouldn’t run again. Hutchison declined to challenge him, no doubt expecting a clear field in 2010, and Perry became Governor 39 Percent after a four-way race. Following this poor showing, most people, myself included, thought there was no way he could face the voters again. He would become Texas’s longest-serving governor, take a victory lap, and make easy money on the boards of companies that had benefited from his governorship.

But that is not how events played out. Perry’s inner circle, particularly his consultant Dave Carney, has believed that he has had national potential at least since 2006. Carney made that point during an interview I had with the Perry team that summer for a story about the upcoming governor’s race. Carney is from New Hampshire, the incubator of presidential ambitions, and he knows what it takes to succeed on a national level. The rest is my hypothesis: Sometime in 2007, after Perry had been sworn in for his second term, his team surveyed the Republican field and the wreckage of the Bush presidency and recognized that 2008 was destined to be a Democratic year. They saw no one in the GOP field who was capable of defeating Hillary Clinton or Barack Obama. (Best not to mention John Edwards.) But they also saw that the two leading Democrats were destined to be unpopular with older white males, the core constituency of the Republican party. The Democratic winner in 2008 was at risk of being a one-term president.

This scenario may explain why Perry, against all expectations, opted to sacrifice a comfortable retirement to run for a third term at a time when his prospects, even for reelection, were not great. It’s not about 2010; it’s about 2012.

I pressed Carney on this hypothesis when I met with Perry’s top advisers in early December. He acknowledged again his conviction that Perry has the political talent to run for president, but then he added, “He doesn’t want to go to Washington. He doesn’t want to live that life.” That’s probably true. Who does? Even George W. Bush had second thoughts. “I’m not sure that I want to live the rest of my life in the bubble,” Bush told me once, before he jumped into the pool. But as Perry’s career attests, politics is all about timing, and if you’re a politician and the timing is right, you have to go for the brass ring.

The paradox of Rick Perry is that, although he is the state’s longest-serving governor and he has a following that reaches beyond the borders of Texas, he has never gotten a lot of respect at home. This is true even inside the Capitol and even among Republicans. Once, during a prolonged battle over school finance reform, the Republican-led House voted down Perry’s plan 124 to 8, amid whoops and hollers and horseplay. Considering his long tenure in office—six years as state representative, eight as agriculture commissioner, two as lieutenant governor, and a record nine years (and counting) as governor—Perry has had little to say about the critical issues facing Texas, in particular, education and health care. When he has gotten involved, it is usually on ideological grounds, such as support for vouchers, merit pay for teachers, and privatization of state health services. (These experiments have been flops. A proposed voucher program died in a House floor fight; a merit pay program for teachers was abandoned after it failed to show improvement in student performance; and the privatization contract was a fiasco.)

But Perry has one overriding asset: good timing. It has propelled him, over the past 25 years, from unknown Democratic state legislator to credible Republican presidential contender. His ability to figure out where Texas politics was headed and to get out in front of the parade has been the essential skill that has enabled him to stay in sync with the state Republican party as it has evolved over the years.

Until Ronald Reagan came along in 1976 to challenge President Gerald Ford for the Republican nomination, the GOP in Texas had typically been run by rich folks from Dallas and Houston. Reagan’s insurgency caused a rift, on one side of which were the state’s best-known Republicans, U.S. senator John Tower and former congressman George H.W. Bush, who were loyal to Ford, and on the other, grassroots populists, who embraced Reagan. The struggle between the GOP establishment and the more-conservative populists has been a major theme of Republican politics ever since.

Perry’s ability to anticipate the mutations of the party and to capitalize on them reveals an aptitude for politics that he rarely gets credit for. One of the reasons that he rose steadily through the GOP ranks is that his arrival as a freshman Democratic legislator, in 1985, was perfectly timed to take advantage of the tectonic shifts in Texas politics, as the state was evolving from blue to red. The Democratic party was becoming more urban and more liberal; Perry’s allegiances were rural and conservative. The Democratic party was moving away from his political comfort zone, the GOP toward it. He aligned himself with newly elected U.S. senator Phil Gramm, who was proselytizing in the Democratic ranks, trying to get conservative Democrats to switch parties, as Gramm himself had done in the early eighties. “It’s the last copter out of Nam, and you’d better get on it,” Gramm would warn potential converts.

Gramm understood that as long as Texas politics remained a three-legged stool—liberal Democrats, conservative Democrats, and Republicans—the GOP would always be a minority party, but if conservative Democrats could be prevailed upon to switch parties, the Democrats would be left with liberals and minorities. And that’s what happened. As the Democratic party became more liberal, conservative Democrats, who accounted for a little more than a quarter of the electorate in the eighties, began to melt away; today, their share of the spectrum has shrunk to 9 percent. Perry knew he had no future as a Democrat, so in 1989 he changed parties. His timing was exquisite. A general election was right around the corner. Republicans were looking for candidates for down-ballot offices. They needed someone to run for the unglamorous office of agriculture commissioner. Perry had grown up on a farm. No one gave him much of a chance to defeat the incumbent Democrat, Jim Hightower, but Karl Rove was Perry’s consultant, Hightower was overconfident, and Perry won.

The party mutated again in 1994, and it was to Perry’s advantage once more. Bush was the gubernatorial nominee, but the evangelicals who had swelled the Republican ranks in the eighties and early nineties didn’t consider him one of their own. At the convention that year, evangelicals led by Tom Pauken, a Dallas lawyer and party activist (and current Perry appointee as chairman of the Workforce Commission), ousted chairman Fred Meyer, who came from the establishment wing of the party. The convention elected Pauken to replace him. (Party rules stipulate that the delegates, not the party hierarchy, control the state convention.) This was advantageous for Perry, because as long as urban establishment types controlled the party, which they had always done, Perry was going nowhere, stuck as agriculture commissioner. He was not their kind of guy, too rural, too ideological, too rough around the edges. But with the grassroots types in charge, it was a different story. He could be as partisan and ideological as they were.

As Perry finished his second term as agriculture commissioner, in 1998, luck and timing did not desert him. The most prominent Democrat in Texas, lieutenant governor Bob Bullock, was reaching the end of the road that year. In failing health and recognizing the Republican landslide that was looming as Bush sought a second term, Bullock decided to retire. Perry entered the race to succeed him. Like most agriculture commissioners, Perry had a low profile, and under normal circumstances he would have had opposition in the Republican primary. But with Rove calling the shots for the Republican ticket, he was assured of a clear field. Again, timing worked in Perry's favor. Bush and Perry had never been close, but Bush had a substantial stake in Perry's success. If Perry were to lose to the Democratic nominee, state comptroller John Sharp, and Bush were to be elected president, Sharp would become governor. The GOP would forfeit the governorship of the second-largest state, and right before going into redistricting. Bush's rivals for the 2000 Republican nomination could use this scenario against him. So the Bushies had no choice but to work for Perry's election.

Still, there were serious differences between the Bush and Perry camps over strategy. The Perry camp was furious that Bush, in order to demonstrate his broad appeal, was turning out Hispanic voters who would vote for him—and, in all likelihood, Sharp. The Bush camp didn't want their winning margin to be jeopardized by negative campaigning by other Republicans, but Sharp was running a devastating ad that featured a Texas Ranger saying that Perry was soft on crime, and Perry's campaign team decided to hammer back. Their response blunted Sharp's criticism and allowed Perry to prevail in a close race, with 50.04 percent of the vote. Bush won reelection by a huge majority, 68.23 percent, but between the two camps there had been a falling out, the aftershocks of which continue to the present day. (Members of Perry's inner circle have derided the Bushies for being "country club Republicans.")

Perry was now one step from the governor's office, and the person on that step was the favorite to be the Republican nominee for president. Two years later, when the United States Supreme Court ruled in favor of Bush following the long Florida recount, it not only made Bush president, it also made Rick Perry governor.

The Bush presidency, as we now know, proved to be the undoing of the Republican party. Running largely on an anti-Bush platform, Democrats won control of both houses of Congress in 2006 and, using the same argument, extended their majorities in 2008 with the election of Barack Obama. Bush had veered sharply to the right in his two campaigns for president and stayed there, but now some Republicans were seeing him in a different light—perhaps the problem with Bush was that he hadn't been conservative enough (Perry himself made this point while campaigning for Rudy Giuliani in Iowa in 2007). After a mammoth tax cut, the White House had abandoned fiscal discipline with a vast new entitlement program to subsidize prescription drugs for the elderly. In Congress, spending bills had been freighted with earmarks by the thousands. An unpopular war and a botched response to Hurricane Katrina did nothing to help his legacy, and neither did the subprime mortgage crisis. As Bush left office, it seemed as if he had made it impossible, at least in the foreseeable future, for any Republican governor from Texas to seek the White House.

When Hutchison first announced her intention to challenge Perry, in December 2008, the race was seen as a proxy fight for the war between moderate and conservative Republicans struggling to rebrand the party in the post-Bush era. (Hutchison is regarded as a moderate because of her pro-choice views; otherwise, she is a mainstream conservative.) Such was the theme of articles about the race that appeared in major newspapers around the country. This was the *New York Times*' take last April: "The battle shaping up in the Texas Republican Party over whether [Perry] deserves another four years mirrors the larger conflict between the Republicans' moderate and conservative wings on the national level." But this is not how the campaign has played out. The "conflict" became a rout, and the conservatives won. The zeal of the tea parties stiffened the backbones of Republicans in Congress and produced a near-unanimous opposition to every Democratic initiative. Instead of symbolizing the showdown between the party's far right and its middle, the Perry-Hutchison race has become a fight for the allegiance of the conservative base. Advantage Perry. Since the first quarter of 2009, Hutchison has been trying to make the case that she, not Perry, is the real conservative in the race, which thus far has had the same effect as Colt McCoy trying to score a touchdown by running headlong into Ndamukong Suh.

Perry is a better politician today than he has ever been. He spends little time in Austin; four to five days a week he is on the road campaigning. He possesses the confidence of a man who has found his calling—to be the advocate for an angry constituency who fears America has lost its way. At night, he likes to surf the Internet, reading newspapers and blogs, staying in touch with the tea parties, and forwarding stories to people on his e-mail list (which is reputed to be huge) about federal intrusions or overreaching by Democrats. "He likes to keep up with what is going on in other states," says a friend. "He's very disciplined about it."

It has become his life, down to the books he reads. One is Friedrich Hayek's classic indictment of socialism, *The Road to Serfdom*. "The choice open to us is not between a system in which everybody will get what he deserves according to some absolute and universal standard of right," Hayek wrote, "but between a system where it is the will of a few persons that decides who is to get what, and one where it depends at least partly on the ability of the people concerned." Perry's reading list also includes *The 5000 Year Leap: A Miracle That Changed the World*, by W. Cleon Skousen, which posits that 28 specific principles of freedom enunciated by America's Founding Fathers brought about more social progress than anything in the previous five thousand years, and Amity Shlaes's *The Forgotten Man: A New History of the Great Depression*, which revives the argument about whether the New Deal was a triumph or a tragedy. No question which side Perry comes down on. Last summer he described the Obama administration as "one of the great Frankenstein experimentations in American history," then segued into a shot at Roosevelt and the New Deal: "We've seen that movie before. It was from 1932 to 1940."

Statements like this have, not surprisingly, made him popular with the tea party movement, which itself represents yet another mutation of the Republican party that has been perfectly timed to work in Perry's favor. Smack in the middle of his most difficult election season, the tea parties pushed the GOP toward political territory that Perry had already staked out. Last summer, during a trip to Washington, I interviewed Republican congressman Kenny Marchant, from Carrollton, about the Perry-Hutchison race and the changes taking place in the Republican party. I said that I thought the party had become unrecognizable since 2006, when Perry and Hutchison both ran for reelection. "It's unrecognizable since April," Marchant said. He told me about the town hall meetings he holds back home. The crowd used to number about a hundred, he said, and he knew most of them by name. This year, the regulars showed up—and so did four hundred others, most of whom Marchant had never seen before.

Perry's political antennae quickly picked up on this phenomenon. In early April he endorsed a nonbinding House resolution that invoked the Tenth Amendment in rejecting certain federal laws that threatened states with the loss of funds if they failed to comply. In a video of the event, Perry charged that the federal government "has become oppressive in its size, its intrusion into the lives of our citizens, and its interference with the affairs of our state." The Drudge Report quickly responded with an all-caps headline: "WAKE UP CALL: TEXAS GOV. BACKS RESOLUTION AFFIRMING SOVEREIGNTY." Under the headline "Rick Perry: Tea party darling," Politico declared, "Texas Gov. Rick Perry's star is rising among a new constituency—the anti-tax 'tea party' crowd." The story went on to say that Perry had promoted the tea parties on Sean Hannity's radio show and in an interview with CNBC's Larry Kudlow. "Since then," the story continued, "his political stock has soared." Even Rush Limbaugh weighed in. "The governor of Texas . . . he's all upset about the bailout money, TARP money, the stimulus money," he said on his talk show during the tea party frenzy. "This is great stuff." (By January, the video of Perry speaking about the Tenth Amendment had been viewed 274,211 times on YouTube.)

And then, of course, on tax day, at a rally in front of Austin's city hall, he made his most famous, or infamous, remark. As shouts of "Secede!" rose from the crowd, Perry hinted that secession might not be such a bad idea. "We've got a great union," he said in response to a reporter's question. "There's absolutely no reason to dissolve it. But if Washington continues to thumb their nose at the American people, you know, who knows what might come out of that."

Crazy? Or crazy like a fox? His comment became national news, a fresh milestone in the culture wars. To those who see themselves as enlightened, it was a gaffe; to those who loathe the cognoscenti, it was a call to arms. In the end, he got away with it. Voters who were horrified by Perry's flirtation with the s-word were never going to be for him, but people who view the federal government as oppressive now see Perry as their champion.

And why not? Perry refers to those who attend tea parties as "patriots," sounding a revolutionary note. He told an Austin rally that he didn't regard its participants as right-wing extremists, as their critics charge. "But if you are," he assured them, "I'm with you." No one has said anything like that in American politics since Barry Goldwater uttered, "Extremism in defense of liberty is no vice," in 1964. In November, Perry told supporters in Midland, "This is an administration that is hell-bent on taking America toward a socialist country. And we ought not be afraid to say that, because that is what it is." He challenges the ability of the federal government to nullify state laws: "I happen to believe that the Constitution does not empower the federal government to overrule state laws without restraint." (Of course, this is nonsense: As anyone who has taken a high school government course knows, Article VI, Section 2 of the U.S. Constitution—known as the Supremacy Clause—reads, "This Constitution, and the laws of the United States...shall be the supreme law of the land.")

The current political climate is so volatile—who could have imagined, one year ago, that states' rights, secession, and the New Deal would be part of the debate?—that it is hard to tell what is mainstream and what is extreme. But it is safe to say at this point in the race to 2012, that since Sarah Palin resigned the governorship of Alaska, no Republican in elected office is more outspoken than Rick Perry when it comes to criticizing the federal government and the culture of Washington.

If Perry's presidential prospects hinged solely on exploiting the populist rage that has exploded inside the Republican ranks, that alone would not be enough to make him a serious contender. But unlike Palin, another tea party darling, Perry can make an entirely different case for why he should be elected, to an entirely different constituency. That case is how Texas has become the best economic success story in the country and what the rest of America can gain by following Texas's example. People vote with their pocketbooks. If Texas's economy continues to lead the nation—and if Perry is able to claim credit for this while at the same time whipping up populist anger—watch out.

Perry has always made the state's economy his top priority. Even when faced with a \$10 billion budget hole in 2003, he asked the Legislature to provide almost \$300 million for a deal-closing fund to attract companies and jobs to the state. Last summer, the conservative journal *National Review* published an article under the headline "Going Alamo: Why Jobs and Companies Are Flocking to a Big Small-Government State." The article began with the observation that "renting a 26-foot U-Haul truck to go from Austin to San Francisco this July would cost you about \$900. Renting the same truck to go from San Francisco to Austin? About \$3,000. In the great balance of supply and demand, California has a large supply of people who are demanding to move to Texas." The reason? According to conservative economist Arthur Laffer, it's that low-tax states enjoy greater prosperity. The story finds that "by one estimate, 70 percent of the new jobs that were created in the United States in 2008 were created in Texas." And the growth in Texas shows no sign of slowing down: In December, the U.S. Census reported that between July 2008 and July 2009, more people had moved to Texas than to any other state.

How much of this can Perry take credit for? Some, but far from all. Texas has been a low-tax, low-service state for at least half a century, most of that time under conservative Democratic leadership. Then, as now, a good business climate was the first objective of state fiscal policy. The Legislature, not the governor, determines the level of spending, and the elected comptroller serves as a watchdog who can refuse to approve spending that exceeds available revenue. Perry's role has been to oppose tax increases (with one exception, a new business activity tax that offsets a court-mandated reduction of school property tax revenue); to require state agencies to reduce their spending requests in years when revenue is down; to seek hundreds of millions of dollars in funding to lure companies and jobs to Texas (some of his choices have been controversial); and to insist that lawmakers set aside money from energy taxes in the state's Rainy Day Fund rather than spend it. You can see where this is headed. The message of Perry's presidential campaign will be, Do what Texas did—cut taxes, limit spending—and your state can enjoy prosperity too.

He has already been taking this message to the country. Speaking at the NASDAQ closing bell last October, he said, "We all know that the global economy is still struggling and that our country is going through one of the toughest economic cycles in our lifetimes. However, we come here with a message of optimism, with word that there is still a place where jobs are welcome, where taxes are low, regulations are predictable, and frivolous lawsuits a rare occurrence. That place is Texas, and we are all proud to be here to sing her praises." A couple of years earlier he delivered a similar message to the California Republican convention during the malaise of the Bush presidency: "We must reconnect to the values that made our party and our country great. And we must restore conservative principles as the basis of our approach to governing . . . And if anyone needs proof of the effectiveness of conservative governing principles, you need look no further than the Lone Star State."

Speeches like this have made Perry a favorite of the Rupert Murdoch news empire. Consider his Fox News appearance, a few days after the 2009 legislative session ended, on Neil Cavuto's *Your World*. At the bottom of the screen, white capital letters spelled out "TEXAS CUTS TAXES, STILL BALANCES BUDGET, AND SOCKS AWAY \$9 BIL." "Governor, how'd you do that?" Cavuto asks, with a note of wonder in his voice. Perry answers, "We set the table for that in 2003, when we had a ten-billion-dollar budget deficit. We were able to cut that deficit without raising taxes." (What Perry did not mention was that he was able to avoid a tax increase by shifting the cost of higher education and highway construction to Texas families by deregulating tuition and building toll roads.) When Perry tells Cavuto how he rejected the federal offer of unemployment stimulus funds because he would have had to raise taxes, his host says, "So you're saying, don't buckle to the trend, fight it." As the segment comes to an end, Cavuto says, "All right, Governor Perry. We'll be watching you closely, as will a lot of people across the nation. Thank you very, very much."

The *Wall Street Journal* did its part in August with a fawning profile. A sample: "But do Mr. Perry's pro-business, low-tax policies mean that Texas' investments in education and other crucial areas are lagging behind?" The correct answer is yes. But the story says, "Just the opposite: While California slashed education funding this year, Mr. Perry notes that a Texas grant program for kids to go college and university . . . expanded by 44% this last session. That same session, the Lone Star State cut taxes for small businesses."

This message of economic success and opportunity is uniquely Perry's. But timing, his ally throughout his political career, could turn against him, assuming he is reelected. Texas made it through the 2009–2010 budget cycle thanks to \$12 billion in stimulus funding from those bad ol' feds. The state is facing a certain budget deficit in 2011–2012, which has been estimated to be as much as \$17 billion. The Rainy Day Fund can provide about half that. If Perry is running for president, it is a safe bet that he will not hesitate to insist on spending cuts. A tax increase? Not a chance.

Perry's advantages as a Republican presidential candidate extend beyond his connection with the insurgent base of the party and the relative strength of his state's economy. Here are some of the other assets he can claim. This list indicates how hard Perry has worked to build himself into a presidential contender. It is not a case for why Perry *should* be president. It is a case for why he *could* be president.

*Fund-raising potential.* Perry has an extensive fund-raising apparatus in Texas and is now in charge of finance for the Republican Governor's Association, which he previously chaired. Texas is a great state in

which to raise money. Leading politicians from both parties come here in search of cash. Perry has been a prodigious fund-raiser on the state level, but national fund-raising is far more difficult. Just as Bush had an advantage over his potential rivals in 2000 because he had access to his father's nationwide network of contributors, Perry's position as finance chairman for the RGA provides him access to the GOP's big national donors. Romney, Huckabee, and Gingrich have been raising money for years, but the RGA connection can be the equalizer for Perry.

*The importance of being Texan.* Perry is the governor of the biggest red state in the country. Texas will send more delegates to the Republican National Convention than any other state, and the more the Republican party dominates a state—legislative and congressional majorities, for example, or voting Republican for president—the more delegates a state gets. Texas qualifies for all the extra delegates that are available.

*The benefits of incumbency.* Another potential advantage for Perry is that if he wins in March and November he would be one of the few top contenders for the GOP nomination who is actually in public office. Palin, no; Huckabee, no; Romney, no; Gingrich, no. Why does being in office matter? Because it gives a candidate a chance to augment his record. The books are closed on Palin, Huckabee, Romney, and Gingrich. Look at the 2009 legislative session. Perry was able to add a tax cut for 40,000 small businesses to his résumé and a constitutional amendment protecting private property rights. He has not been a strong advocate for education, but he can still point to a large increase in the Texas Grants college scholarship program that happened on his watch. (Of course, things can also go sour in hard economic times.)

*A strong conservative record.* Over nine years in office Perry has compiled the sort of strong conservative record that will be required of the 2012 GOP nominee. The highlights include a tough tort reform bill, which has reduced litigation, particularly in the medical malpractice area; a 50-cent reduction in school property taxes; two reductions in general revenue spending; rejecting strings-attached stimulus funds for unemployment insurance; and efforts to enhance border security. During his tenure as governor, the Legislature has been active in passing social legislation, including a strong abortion bill in 2003 and a constitutional amendment prohibiting gay marriage. There is another side to this record, of course: the most adults without a high school diploma of any state, the most children without health insurance, tuition deregulation that has made college unaffordable for the middle class. But Perry's record touches the bases a Republican candidate for president's has to touch.

*Alliances with prominent Republican activists.* Perry's dance card includes Grover Norquist, of Americans for Tax Reform, who is best known for his desire to reduce the size of government until you can "drown it in a bathtub." His relationship with Norquist dates back at least to 2004, when Perry, some of his major donors and political allies, and Norquist went on a lavish (and much criticized) three-day retreat in the Bahamas over the Presidents' Day weekend. In an interview with the Washington-based *National Journal* in January 2009, Norquist named Jindal and Perry as his top two choices for the 2012 presidential nomination, but Jindal blew his chance at stardom with his lackluster response to Obama's first State of the Union address. (Perry has said that Norquist will come to Texas this year to campaign for him in the Republican primary.) Then there's Rush. On the last weekend of the 2009 legislative session—crunch time in the Capitol—Perry blew into Houston, where he made Limbaugh an honorary Texan. William Bennett, who was Secretary of Education during the Reagan presidency and now hosts the *Morning in America* talk show, has also endorsed Perry for reelection.

None of this will matter if Perry can't get by Hutchison in the March 2 primary. The state's senior senator is a formidable candidate, but once again, timing has been on Perry's side. The anger of the Republican base toward Washington has had a cruel impact on Hutchison's campaign. She has been a good senator for Texas. As a senior member of the Appropriations Committee, she has brought in billions of dollars for local communities, military installations, and universities across the state—only to find the Republican base inflamed over excessive spending and her efforts ridiculed as earmarks and pork by the Perry campaign. But her problems run much deeper than the day-to-day exchanges between the two campaigns. Hutchison never appreciated the resistance among Republicans to the idea of a sitting senator's returning to the state to run against the sitting governor. She had a low opinion of Perry and assumed that most Republicans did too—and according to the first polls in the race, many did. She has never been able to articulate why she wanted to make such an unusual move and why Republicans should support it.

This was painfully evident when she spoke to the Texas Federation of Republican Women in Galveston in November. The first two things she said she wanted to do were lower school property taxes and address the problem of illegal immigration. On both issues, Perry had gotten there first. After wrestling with the school finance issue for three years in mid-decade, the Republican leadership at the time (Perry, Lieutenant Governor David Dewhurst, and Speaker Tom Craddick) cut school property taxes by \$15.7 billion. As for immigration, Perry has sent Texas Rangers to the border; he has doled out money to border sheriffs; he spent \$2 million to place cameras along the border that could be viewed on a Web site with the goal of catching illegal activity, all accompanied by considerable fanfare. I am not praising these decisions—far from it. The property tax cut has been disastrous, creating a structural deficit in future state education budgets. On the border, his actions were mainly for show. As Brandi Grissom, of the *Texas Tribune*, noted, "Reports from the first year of the border camera program show it fell far short of its initial law enforcement goals." But the potential advantage in the primary lies with Perry. He was on the record as having already addressed what Hutchison said she wanted to do.

Likewise, Hutchison's attack on Perry's conservative bona fides has focused on three issues, all of which have thus far failed to rouse much passion from the voters. One was Perry's 2007 executive order to require girls entering the sixth grade to be given a cervical cancer vaccine. This is a hot-button issue in Republican circles; many Republicans regard mandatory vaccinations as an interference with parental rights. But the Legislature quickly invalidated the order, Perry dropped the plan, and the whole flap disappeared from the radar. Her second line of attack was Perry's support in 2006 of a new tax on business to bring in more revenue for schools after the Legislature slashed property taxes. The tax was unpopular with small businesses, and Hutchison told business interests that she wanted to repeal it. But she never offered a plan to replace the lost revenue. The third issue was the Trans-Texas Corridor, Perry's controversial attempt to privatize highways. The Corridor and TxDOT, the agency responsible for it, deserve their share of criticism, but like the vaccinations and the business tax, the Corridor is a mess that is several years old. Republican concerns today are much more about what is going on in Washington.

Most campaign strategists would have told Hutchison not to attack Perry at all. She would have been better advised to run some positive TV in the spring of 2009, reintroducing herself to the voters at a time when Perry was occupied by the legislative session and prohibited from raising money. She had a considerable lead in fund-raising at the time. Perry was going nowhere. She should have ignored him and talked about her own plans for Texas. Instead, after three months of trying to paint him as not a real conservative, she had lost all but six points of her lead.

When I asked Hutchison staffers at a meeting several months ago about her strategy of trying to outflank Perry to his right, their explanation was that most of the voters in the Republican primary will be conservatives who have voted for both Perry and Hutchison before and she has to compete for those voters. This challenges the conventional wisdom about this race, which is that the conservative base favors Perry and that Hutchison needs to attract moderate voters to win. Recently, a former GOP political consultant showed me some numbers from the 2008 elections. In Harris County that year, 171,108 voters cast ballots in the Republican primary. Compare that with the general election, in which the lowest-polling GOP candidate in Harris County, scandal-tarred sheriff Tommy Thomas, got 495,246 votes. There are a lot of Republican voters out there who typically don't vote in primaries. Hutchison needs to enlarge the primary electorate if she is going to win, but so far, her campaign has made strategic decisions that alienate rather than attract mainstream Republicans, such as trying to out-conservative Perry and using Dick Cheney as the spokesman for her conservative credentials.

Nevertheless, the race is not over. Despite the Hutchison campaign's strategic blunders, despite her own hesitancy to decide when and whether to resign her Senate seat, despite a dreary initial TV spot in which she attempted to explain her indecisiveness rather than what she hoped to achieve as governor, what has happened so far is mostly material for insiders. The public is only now beginning to pay attention to this race. Most of the cross fire between the two campaigns has thus far taken place on Web pages and in e-mail press releases, largely out of sight of ordinary people. The race is going to be a sprint, from now to March 2. Hutchison's best hope is that a silent majority of November Republicans is suffering from a bad case of Perry fatigue and will take the cure by showing up at the polls in March. But the usual effect of negative campaigning is to depress turnout rather than stimulate it.

Should Perry get past Hutchison, his next hurdle, in November, is sure to be ex-Houston mayor Bill White. Texas has not seen a general election that mattered since 1994, when Bush defeated Ann Richards and ushered in an era of Republican dominance that still prevails. It will see one this year. White is no patsy. He was the popular mayor of a city of four million people for three terms. He has crossover appeal to Republicans. He has a track record of being able to raise a lot of money. His main problem—the problem facing any mayor who tries to make the jump to statewide office—is that he is not well-known outside his home media market. In 2002 Dallas mayor Ron Kirk and Austin mayor Kirk Watson ran for U.S. Senate and attorney general, respectively, on the Democratic ticket. Like White, both were popular mayors based in large media markets. Neither came close.

As it has been since 1985, Perry's advantage in this race is timing: 2010 is shaping up as a Republican year, possibly a huge Republican year. Perry's team believes that the tea party movement has significantly increased the numbers—and the passion—in the hard-right Republican base. Mike Baseline, his pollster, says that Republicans currently enjoy a six-point edge in party identification, but he expects it to increase to eight points after this election cycle. Perry is vulnerable on a lot of benchmark issues—insurance rates, utility rates, student performance, the Corridor, the list is long—but his ace in the hole is that Republicans are significantly more energized than Democrats this year.

And then, if everything goes right for him, the last hurdle for the man who has always been in the right place at the right time might be another man who has always been blessed with a good sense of timing: Barack Obama. You just know how much Perry would love to take up that fight—the champion of the right against the champion of the left, the chance to turn back the clock, to undo the New Deal, to chase the socialists out of Washington, to one-up Bush. And who knows? If the timing is perfect, he just might win.

Heaven help us all.

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