

Rick Perry's America, Texas-Style

by JOHN BURNETT

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Texas governor Rick Perry was at the center of the political news cycle this week. He's promising to bring Texas-style prosperity to Washington, D.C. NPR's John Burnett takes us around the candidate's home state to see what Perry's supporters and critics think prosperity looks like.

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JACKIE LYDEN, host: You heard Ron mention Rick Perry's entry into the national scene this week. The Texas governor has started taking his story of the state on the road, presenting Texas to the rest of America as a sort of conservative Eden with coyotes. But which story would that be? As NPR's John Burnett reports from Austin, there are very different ways in which to look at the Lone Star State.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "TEXAS OUR TEXAS")

UNKNOWN MAN: (Singing) Texas, our Texas, all hail the mighty state. Texas, oh, Texas, you're wonderful and great

JOHN BURNETT: This is the official state song. A lot of people in this state believe it word for word. It's a good example of the inexhaustible pridefulness for which Texans are legendary. Texans fly their state flag like it's the national flag. They drive around with bumper stickers that say secede, and now the governor is running for President on the platform that the rest of the country needs to be more like Texas.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "TEXAS OUR TEXAS")

MAN: (Singing) God bless you Texas and keep you brave and strong

BURNETT: When he announced his candidacy in South Carolina a week ago, Rick Perry indicated that he'll wrap himself in the Lone Star flag like no Texan who's run for President before him.

Governor RICK PERRY: We have led Texas based on some just really pretty simple guiding principles. One is don't spend all of the money.

(SOUNDBITE OF APPLAUSE)

PERRY: You know, two, is keeping the taxes low and under control. Three is you have your regulatory climate fair and predictable. Four, is...

BURNETT: Perry invites intense scrutiny on the state of his state, a challenge his adversaries are only too happy to take up. Democratic Congressman Lloyd Doggett has become one-man campaign to sound the alarm.

Representative LLOYD DOGGETT: Well, you know, as a very proud Texan, as most Texans are, there are some things I would like the rest of the country to be more like Texas, but not more like Rick Perry.

BURNETT: Doggett is running for re-election in a difficult new congressional district that stretches

from his home base in Austin south to San Antonio. Doggett believes it was redrawn at Perry's behest in an effort to defeat him, so he's happy to talk about the other Texas.

DOGGETT: The Rick Perry Texas is a Texas that last year almost 40 percent of the new jobs were minimum wage and lower. The Rick Perry Texas is a Texas in which educational opportunity is being cut short by dramatic reductions in our support for public schools.

BURNETT: At Southern Methodist University in Dallas, there's an oft-quoted political scientist name Cal Jillson who's just written a book called, "Lone Star Tarnished: A Critical Look at Texas Politics and Public Policy." Jillson says he wrote the book to question the state's political ethos.

CAL JILLSON: The Lone Star model is touted nationally frequently in the press, and frequently in comparison with California to say that the old high-service model has failed and that the new small government low-service model of Texas has succeeded. My sense is that Texas boosterism is so rampant, that we need some sort of antidote to it, because the Texas model is insufficient.

BURNETT: In this ultraconservative state, Jillson posits the heresy that the Texas way is not necessarily the best way, and he does so at the precise moment when Rick Perry is proclaiming that it is.

JILLSON: It's a difficult state to be poor in. It's a wonderful state to be wealthy in.

BURNETT: Cal Jillson says the Texas model does some things well, such as attracting corporations, with its relatively low taxes and permissive environmental regulations. But he says it does some things very poorly like funding education and access to health care. Texas ranks 51st nationally, dead last, in the percentage of adults with high school diplomas, and Texas has the largest percentage of uninsured people in the nation. One in four Texans has no medical insurance.

JILLSON: But Texas has always stood for small government, low taxes, personal responsibility, and government staying out of your way as much as possible, and that's both a positive and a negative part of the Texas story.

BURNETT: If the Texas story has a brain trust, it's a conservative think tank called the Texas Public Policy Foundation located in a bank building in downtown Austin. So much does Rick Perry believe in its mission, that he has assigned profits from his book "Fed Up" to the foundation's Center for Tenth Amendment Studies which fights for states' rights. Perry said if he's elected President, he'll work every day to make Washington D.C. inconsequential.

TALMADGE HEFLIN: I would interpret that as saying you're not constantly looking over your shoulder to see whether the federal government is going to intervene in your life, of your daily affairs.

BURNETT: That's the foundation's Talmadge Heflin, who believes Texas' independent, conservative philosophy of government could hold a lesson for Washington.

HEFLIN: I think taking that Texas model and applying it is a good first step.

(SOUNDBITE OF STREET NOISE)

BURNETT: Up the street, on the sidewalk in front of the state capitol building, son and father Lance and Denny White, a day trader and a mining consultant, have driven down from their home in Round Rock for a visit.

So what do you think about Governor Rick Perry running for president?

DENNY WHITE: I think it's a pretty good idea. I think he's getting jobs for our state and everything. I think he's more aggressive than the other candidates.

LANCE WHITE: He's got a track record, he's walking his talk. He can stand behind what he's done.

(SOUNDBITE OF SIRENS)

BURNETT: The state's headstrong political culture is rooted in its history. After winning independence from Mexico, Texas existed as a nation - historians agree, disastrously - from 1836 to 1845. A tour guide leads a group through the pink-granite capitol.

UNIDENTIFIED TOUR GUIDE: Following that battle we became the Republic of Texas with our own army and navy and currency, as well as diplomatic relations with England, France, the Netherlands and the United States. And there's...

BURNETT: It's a statewide conceit - though constitutionally improbable - that Texans can up and leave the union anytime they please. Rick Perry sparked a firestorm two years ago when he quipped that if the federal government didn't back off, Texas just might secede. The rumpus over his now-infamous secession comment might be why Perry said this when he announced his candidacy last Saturday.

PERRY: Now I'm a Texan and I'm proud of it. But first and foremost, I'm an incredibly proud American.

(SOUNDBITE OF APPLAUSE)

BURNETT: Rick Perry's campaign for the White House is going to be many things; dull won't be one of them, gauging from just his first week on the stump. Perry suggested they'd hogtie the chairman of the Federal Reserve if he came to Texas, he doubted the existence of global warming, and he questioned the theory of evolution - speaking to a young man in New Hampshire.

PERRY: You know, it's a theory that is out there, it's got some gaps in it, but in Texas we teach both creationism and evolution in our public schools.

BURNETT: By the end of the campaign, will Rick Perry have made Texas an object of envy or a laughing stock? Or will people just be sick of hearing about it? John Burnett, NPR News, Austin.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "YOU CAN GO TO HELL (I'M GOING TO TEXAS)")

LONNIE SPIKER: (Singing) And if you ever make it down don't look me up. If you ever make it down don't look me up.

JACKI LYDEN, host: You're listening to NPR News.

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