

Politics

Stressing his experience as governor of Fla., Jeb Bush enters 2016 race

By Ed O'Keefe and Philip Rucker June 15 at 6:45 PM

MIAMI — Jeb Bush, son and brother of former presidents, formally launched his campaign for the White House on Monday with a sweeping call to reform Washington and expand economic opportunity.

Against a diverse tableau at a boisterous rally here in the state he governed for eight years, Bush offered himself as a compassionate and tested chief executive who would fix a broken federal government and disrupt the country's political brinkmanship.

"We will take Washington — the static capital of this dynamic country — out of the business of causing problems," he said. "We will get back on the side of free enterprise and free people. I know we can fix this. Because I've done it."

With his mother, former first lady Barbara Bush, sitting in the front row, Jeb Bush directly confronted the family history that is both an asset and a liability. His father and brother, George H.W. Bush and George W. Bush, were not present, but he invoked them by saying that he met his first president the day he was born and his second when he was taken home from the hospital.

Still, he said that he did not believe his lineage should grant him the Republican nomination.

"Not a one of us deserves the job by right of résumé, party, seniority, family or family narrative," he said. "It's nobody's turn. It's everybody's test, and it's wide open — exactly as a contest for president should be."

Addressing hundreds of supporters inside a Miami college gymnasium, Bush spoke in aspirational terms about what he called a "nation filled with charitable hearts." He seemed determined to present a new, welcoming face for the Republican Party, looking as much to the general election as to the primaries.

He did not mention any GOP opponent by name, but he directly attacked Hillary Rodham Clinton, saying that the Democratic presidential front-runner sits atop "a no-suspense primary, for a no-change election" to succeed President Obama and would "slog on with the same agenda under another name."

"The presidency should not be passed on from one liberal to the next," he said.

Bush focused heavily on his record as Florida's governor, the office he held between 1999 and 2007. Under his leadership, he said, the state led the nation in job creation, income growth, balanced budgets and tax cuts.

"We don't need another president who merely holds the top spot among the pampered elites of Washington," he said. Later, he said, "I was a reforming governor, not just another member of the club."

As president, he said, he would "think big" about overhauling the tax code, undo Obama-era federal regulations and "get serious about limited government."

Bush laid out an ambitious goal of 4 percent economic growth, which he said would bring 19 million new jobs. "It's possible," he said. "It can be done."

But he had nothing in his prepared remarks about immigration reform, an issue that he has championed for years but which is particularly divisive for die-hard Republican base voters. Only when two dozen protesters stood in the rafters to interrupt him — they stripped off a layer of clothing to reveal neon T-shirts spelling out "Legal status is not enough" — did Bush weigh in on the subject.

"The next president of the United States will pass meaningful immigration reform," he said, departing from the text in his teleprompters.

Monday's event was strikingly different from most Republican campaign rallies this year, which have drawn overwhelmingly white crowds. Bush spoke at a campus of Miami Dade College, a system that boasts the largest Hispanic student body in the nation, and packed the gymnasium with cheering Asian American, black and Latino supporters, young and old, who held up campaign signs in Spanish and English.

Before Bush took the stage, a family of Cuban singers performed regional classics. A black Baptist minister called Bush "a man of deep conviction." The Colombian mother of a disabled daughter defended his record, in Spanish. Bush's former lieutenant governor looked across the big crowd and said: "It looks like family. The Bush family — the *big* Bush family."

State Sen. Don Gaetz told the crowd that Bush is "the new Florida. He is the new America. He is the new Republican Party."

The message Bush hoped to convey was clear: In a crowded field of candidates, he is the seasoned Republican who can broaden the GOP's appeal among minority voters who long have voted for Democrats.

Bush, who returned over the weekend from a five-day visit to Europe, earned some of his loudest applause by assailing the Obama administration's foreign policy record.

“With their phone-it-in foreign policy, the Obama-Clinton-Kerry team is leaving a legacy of crises uncontained, violence unopposed, enemies unnamed, friends undefended and alliances unraveling,” he said.

The announcement capped six months of aggressive travel and fundraising for Bush, 62, a regimen that suggested a presidential bid was never in doubt. Testing the boundaries of modern campaign finance law and tapping a donor network first cultivated by his extended family more than 30 years ago, Bush has stockpiled tens of millions of dollars for an allied super PAC that will operate independently of his campaign operation and attack his opponents as he seeks to build support in early primary states.

Bush enters a fluid race for the Republican nomination, where an array of younger rivals, including a onetime protege of his, Sen. Marco Rubio (Fla.), are posing strong challenges. Bush signaled that he would use his executive experience to draw a contrast between him and Rubio and other first-term senators.

“There’s no passing off responsibility when you’re a governor, no blending into the legislative crowd or filing an amendment and calling that success,” Bush said. “As our whole nation has learned since 2008, executive experience is another term for preparation, and there is no substitute for that.”

Gaetz used sharper language in introducing Bush. “The presidency of the United States does not come with training wheels,” he said, adding, “Jeb Bush is the Florida Republican who can win.”

From Miami, Bush planned to fly Monday night to launch a whirlwind four-day tour in New Hampshire, a state that will be critical to his early chances. On Wednesday, he is scheduled to visit Iowa, where conservatives remain deeply skeptical of his bid. In South Carolina on Thursday, he is expected to detail more of his military and foreign policy agenda. He plans to be in Washington on Friday for his first official campaign fundraiser, then return to Florida to headline a GOP fundraiser in Tampa.

Monday’s Miami rally took on the feel of a Bush family reunion. In addition to his mother, John Ellis Bush — nicknamed “Jeb” by his mother, for his initials — was joined by his wife, Columba, their three children and their own young families, plus his younger siblings, Neil Bush and Doro Bush Koch. The candidate’s extended political family was also present: Nearly 400 former staffers and supporters from campaigns past cheered in the arena.

“I’ve been waiting 30 years for Monday,” said Jorge Arrizurieta, a Miami businessman and longtime friend who has known Jeb Bush since the 1980s.

Since leaving office in 2007, Bush has launched a lucrative business career, including work with his youngest son, Jeb Jr., on investment and real estate ventures. Until last year, he also served as a special adviser to the British bank Barclays.

Politically, Bush remained an active proponent of an immigration overhaul and education standards commonly known as Common Core. His support for both issues is considered a disqualifying factor by conservatives opposed to easing of immigration laws or possible federal intervention in local education policy.

But on Monday, Bush's intended audience was far broader than the conservative base. He pledged to take his campaign "everywhere, speaking to everyone."

Near the end of his remarks, he broke into fluent Spanish and directly appealed for the support of Latino voters. In English, he explained, "In any language, my message will be an optimistic one."

"I will take nothing and no one for granted," he said. "I will run with heart and I will run to win."

Ed O'Keefe is covering the 2016 presidential campaign, with a focus on Jeb Bush and other Republican candidates. He's covered presidential and congressional politics since 2008. Off the trail, he's covered Capitol Hill, federal agencies and the federal workforce, and spent a brief time covering the war in Iraq.

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