

OP-ED

First round goes to Jeb

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IN UTAH: Jeb Bush arrives in Salt Lake City last month to meet with Mitt Romney before Romney bowed out of the 2016 primaries. *AP*

Some members of the punditocracy wondered if Jeb Bush had lost his campaign chops since he hadn't run for office in years. The answer is in and it's obvious. He's not only got 'em, he used 'em to chew up Mitt Romney.

Jeb's shrewd, early and preemptive campaign moves drove Mitt to impetuously say he was seriously thinking about running again — third time's the charm! — and then in the harsh light of day decide that he wouldn't. It was a very good decision for the GOP and the nominating process.

wouldn't you love to know what Jeb and Mitt said to each other when they met? I'm sure it was cordial and full of elaborate courtesies, as is the practice among the monied elite. But the message from Jeb must have been, not far beneath the surface, blunt: Run if you like, Mitt, but I'll take you out if you do; I've already signed up many of your 2012 donors and hired away some of your best staff. Go forward at your peril. This is a full contact campaign.

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Jeb, who will be 62 on Feb. 11, is not part of that younger generation, but he quickly becomes the odds-on favorite. Not that it means a whole lot this far out. We're still 19 months or so away from the GOP nominating convention for the 2016 election. About the only thing we know for sure at this point is that the Republican Party will not repeat its primary folly of 2012 by holding TV debates *ad nauseam* like the ones in 2012 that made their candidates, collectively, look a bunch of feckless boobs. And damaged Romney badly by the time he caught the brass ring. The last thing the Republicans need in the next go-round is another Herman Cain. Preserve us from the Herminator!

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But welcome Jeb Bush, who might bring the GOP back to the middle. He's certainly conservative — an excellent profile in the New Yorker recounts just how conservative he was as governor — but he's the antithesis of a tea-party flamer. He's a thoughtful policy wonk, even if you disagree with his policies. He says he won't cave to the wing nuts on two of them, support for Common Core and sensible immigration reform, and I believe him.

He also says he will only run a "joyful," optimistic campaign if he runs, and I believe that, too. Jeb learned a valuable lesson when he lost his first run for governor to Lawton Chiles. There was something of the stern, arrogant, avenging angel to his campaign persona in that 1994 race. After

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Democrats who stood up to him during his eight years in Tallahassee were pummeled. But even some of them came away with grudging respect for his intellect and discipline. Ask former state lawmaker Dan Gelber of Miami Beach.

Doctrinaire liberals who endured his governorship can't abide Bush. They make faces when you just mention his name, as if a foul odor had suddenly entered the room. The main reason for their dislike is the Terri Schiavo tragedy, where Jeb tried to have the state intervene and keep her on life support when that was always a private, family decision.

The other main objection from Democrats was Jeb's success in wresting Florida's public-education system from the grip of the state's teachers' unions, which had a lock on learning that perpetuated mediocrity. And also made it virtually impossible to fire incompetent teachers. Like pedophile priests, bad teachers were noiselessly transferred from school to school. Jeb pretty much stopped that. Education reform, which he has championed since leaving office, remains his signature issue.

Jeb's campaign theme is a clever one: "Right to Rise." It's alliterative, snappy and has a populist lilt. It's also ambiguous enough so that it can mean something to almost everyone. What's important, of course, is how Jeb defines it. It looks like it's shorthand for an equal-opportunity society where hard work and perseverance pay off for those who play by the rules and government gets out of the way. Except for the last, it's almost Obama-esque.

Judging by the speech he gave not long ago to the U.S.-Cuba Democracy PAC, Jeb's foreign policy will be muscular, realpolitik. He says America's principal problem is that our friends don't trust us, and our enemies don't fear us. Sadly true.

How ironic it is that Jeb's protégé, Marco Rubio, is also taking a serious look at running for president at the same time. He has some qualities and talents that Jeb lacks; Rubio is much the superior public speaker. He can really get an audience emotionally involved, especially when he gets going on his American exceptionalism riff. Rubio also has that shiny, new-car smell that appeals to voters who are tired of the same old brand names. Like Bush. Rubio's lucky, too, that he speaks accentless English and that his name is so ethnically neutral.

Would tea-party xenophobes be so willing to applaud José Velásquez Rubio? I doubt it.

Look for Jeb to formally announce his candidacy in the next few weeks. Then will come his biggest challenge: convincing voters who don't know him that he's not a younger version of George W.

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BY MARKOS KOUNALAKIS

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