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An Early Look at GOP Bench for 2016 Race

By Matt A. Mayer

Even though the next presidential election is more than 2 1/2 years away, the early activity of presidential wanna-bes requires the political right to begin evaluating potential candidates now. With the weaknesses of President Obama growing each day, the right should measure potential candidates along five factors, using Obama's performance compared with President Ronald Reagan's. (No, there won't be "another" Reagan, but we can use his leadership qualities and experience to size up candidates.)

Factor No. 1: Does the individual possess deep executive experience? During the 2008 election, many on the left dismissed Sarah Palin's thin executive experience, while casually ignoring Obama's total lack of executive experience. That gap has resulted in Obama having to learn on the job and in weak leadership on key issues. In contrast, Reagan's eight years as governor of California and his time heading the Screen Actors Guild provided him with strong management skills that enabled him to hire the right talent, delegate the details, and get things done.

The strong GOP candidates on this factor: Former Govs. Jeb Bush and Mike Huckabee, and Govs. Christie, Bobby Jindal, John Kasich, Rick Perry, and Scott Walker.

Factor No. 2: Is he willing to make tough choices? Obama has become known as a president who can't make the tough choices. He drew a red line on Syria that was stepped over without consequences. He won't tackle

entitlement growth or federal spending in any way other than to have more of those things. Even on his signature legislation, rather than admit Obamacare is fundamentally flawed and reform it, he extends deadlines and ignores inconvenient requirements.

Reagan made tough choices that changed the world. He took a hard line with the Soviet Union, stuck with Paul Volcker's Fed policy despite the short-term pain, and walked away from an unprecedented arms-reduction deal at Reykjavik to protect America. He went to the Berlin Wall and demanded it be torn down. The next GOP nominee must have Reagan's toughness, as the mess he is inheriting will require it.

Strong candidates: Bush (immigration like Reagan) and Walker (public-sector collective bargaining).

Factor No. 3: Can he keep his team unified and persuade the other side on big issues? Obama has held his team together, but he may be the most partisan president in modern American history. Instead of reaching across the aisle, Obama invites his opposition to speeches and then lectures them ungraciously or uses executive orders to get his way. Reagan faced a hostile Congress during his presidency, but still managed to develop a strong relationship with Democratic Speaker Tip O'Neill that resulted in landmark legislation to cut taxes, strengthen our defense, and slow the growth of federal spending.

Strong candidates: Bush, Christie, and U.S. Sen. Rob Portman of Ohio.

Factor No. 4: Does he have a firm grasp of global affairs and human nature? Obama thought giving a few speeches abroad and more diplomatic exchanges would translate into a world tilted toward his views. Instead, his reset with Russia led to the invasion of Ukraine, his policies in Iraq have led to more violence, his leading from behind has saved Syria's ruthless dictator, and his equivocation in Asia has created growing tensions among the Chinese, South Koreans, and Japanese.

Reagan may not have been a foreign policy expert, but he understood the major global threats during his presidency and, more importantly, he understood human nature, both in its desire for freedom and its lust for power. As a result, he knew when to act (deploying Pershing II missiles in Europe), when to walk (Reykjavik), and when to talk (the Berlin Wall).

Strong candidates: Bush, Portman, and U.S. Sen. Rand Paul of Kentucky.

Factor No. 5: Is he a happy warrior for American Exceptionalism? Obama believes America is just another nation that happens to be a world power currently. He defines America by the stains on our national fabric rather than by the whole tapestry. Reagan believed fervently in America's greatness, as the city shining upon the hill. He defined America by its love of freedom and truly embodied the American Dream. With the challenges we face, we need more optimism and less pessimism.

Strong candidates: Bush, Huckabee, Jindal, Kasich, Paul, Perry, Portman, Walker,

U.S. Rep. Paul Ryan, and U.S. Sens. Marco Rubio and Ted Cruz.

Let me add a sixth factor unrelated to Obama and Reagan: How does the candidate impact the electoral math? Other than Bush and Rubio (Florida), Kasich and Portman (Ohio), and Ryan and Walker (Wisconsin), none of the other candidates increase the odds of capturing a battleground state. As we learned with Mitt Romney, you can have a decisive and optimistic candidate with strong executive experience and a history of working across the aisle, but, if he can't win enough battleground states those factors won't matter.

You may quibble with how I come down on each potential candidate, but I think it is hard to argue that, other than the potential toxicity of his last name, Jeb Bush is the strongest along the six key factors, followed by Rob Portman. After eight years of an unpopular Obama, voters will be looking for a stark alternative (as George W. Bush was to Bill Clinton and Obama was to Bush). They will want someone who is experienced, determined, less partisan, adept internationally, optimistic about our future, and can actually win.

That person looks most like Bush or Portman today, but much can happen in 21/2 years. If it doesn't though, don't be surprised if the right settles on a Bush-Portman ticket to win back the White House.

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