

Jeb Bush JUNE 15, 2015

With pressure on, Jeb Bush delivers forceful speech confirming 2016 presidential candidacy



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Jeb Bush, the son and brother of two former presidents, announced Monday in Miami that he is embarking on a journey to follow in their political footsteps — but on his own terms, promoting his record as a two-term governor of Florida, one of the nation’s biggest and most diverse states.

“Not one of us deserves the job by right of résumé, party, seniority, family or family narrative,” the former Florida governor told about 3,000 of his loyalists assembled at Miami Dade College’s Kendall campus. “It’s nobody’s turn. It’s everybody’s test, and it’s wide open — exactly as a contest for president should be.”

With pressure on him to prove his front-runner status after tripping up over the past few weeks, Bush spoke with unusual force and passion for a politician known for his command of policy details rather than his stirring rhetoric. Wearing glasses but no jacket or necktie, Bush showed the kind of energy and polish often absent from his remarks during the six months in which he “explored” a potential candidacy. Inside the venue, the production felt more like a rousing political-party convention than an upstart campaign launch.

His donors and supporters might have preferred a coronation. But Bush has accepted that he's got a GOP primary fight on his hands. He steered clear of talk of a Clinton political dynasty as problematic. Instead, he zeroed in on what he said was the country's true problem: the continuation of Democrats' policies.

"The party now in the White House is planning a no-suspense primary for a no-change election," Bush said. "To hold on to power. To slog on with the same agenda under another name. That's our opponents' call to action this time around. That's all they've got left. And you and I know that America deserves better."

"The presidency should not be passed on from one liberal to the next," he said. At one point, he referred to "Secretary Clinton," contrasting her with his support of religious charities that refused Obamacare for its staff.

Bush, 62, also took on the senators in the GOP field – chiefly Marco Rubio of Florida – by stressing his experience in Tallahassee.

"There's no passing off responsibility when you're a governor, no blending into the legislative crowd or filing an amendment and calling that a success," he said.

Bush's announcement drew inevitable comparisons to Rubio's at the Freedom Tower in April. Of the two Spanish-speaking Republican presidential contenders from Miami, it was Bush's program that featured more Hispanics and more phrases *en español*.

"Ayúdenos a emprender una campaña que les da la bienvenida," Bush said. Help us lead a campaign that welcomes you. His oldest son, Texas Land Commissioner George P. Bush, had directly invoked Latino voters, speaking into the camera to "*tú, hermano hispano*" – You, Hispanic brother.

Rubio, a one-time Bush protégé campaigning against unnamed candidates of "yesterday," welcomed Bush to the race.

"In politics, people throw around the word 'friend' so much, it often has little real meaning," Rubio said in a statement. "This is not one of those times. When I call Jeb Bush my friend, I mean he is someone I like, care for and respect. He and I have worked closely together for many years, on issues big and small. He is a passionate advocate for what he believes."

Despite his affinity for Hispanics – Bush's wife, Columba, is Mexican-born, and Cuban Americans in Miami consider Bush one of their own – the candidate had no plans to mention immigration reform, one of his signature issues that has put him at odds with the GOP's conservative base. But protesters interrupted him deep into his remarks.

Protesters stand against Jeb Bush on immigration reform at rally

Jeb Bush responds to a group of people who stood up and protested against him on immigration reform during his announcement for his presidential run on Monday, June 15, 2015, in Miami. Video by Jose Iglesias and Emily Michot/ Herald Staff

Though their chants were quickly drowned out by Bush supporters, the protesters' lime-green T-shirts conveyed their pro-citizenship message: "LEGAL STATUS IS NOT ENOUGH!" The group later identified itself as advocates for undocumented immigrants and gay rights from several Florida organizations; an earlier gaggle of immigrants had been asked to leave before the event began after the campaign learned they planned to be disruptive.

"By the way, just so that our friends know, the next president of the United States will pass meaningful immigration reform so *that* will be solved, not by executive order," Bush told the protesters as guards escorted them out.

The protesters' point, though, resonated less than it might have with other GOP candidates, considering how much Bush played up Miami's immigrant culture. The national anthem was sung by Cuban-American musical royalty: Willy Chirino, wife Lissette and their three daughters, who perform as the Chirino sisters. The menu of street food served outside the event after Bush finished included *arroz con pollo*.

Before the speech, Bush gathered about 200 "alumni" — longtime supporters, former aides and friends — to thank them and "get his crying out of the way," according to Jon Hage, founder of Charter Schools USA and a former Bush policy analyst.

"There's a new sense of urgency," said Al Cardenas, a former Florida Republican Party and American Conservative Union chairman, and longtime Bush family friend.

The program began with Bush's mother, former First Lady Barbara Bush, making her way to her on-stage seat. She received a standing ovation and soaked up the moment by spreading her arms wide in affection. Neither former President George H.W. Bush nor former President George W. Bush attended — a move seemingly intended to remind everyone that Bush was running as his own man.

In his remarks, Bush touted his achievements as Florida governor. He emphasized his education-reform policies that created the country's first school-voucher program, and tied the recent unrest in Baltimore over the death of a young African-American man in police custody to a lack of educational opportunities for youth. He also made a passing reference to backing higher educational standards, without naming the Common Core program detested by some Republican primary voters.

"I know we can fix this, because I've done it," Bush said of taking on the country's challenges.

Democrats who lived through Bush's tenure in Tallahassee ripped him Monday as an "extremist," blasting his track record in and out of office and lumping him with the rest of the GOP field — as well as his father and brother.

"Jeb Bush only looks out for himself and people like him," said U.S. Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz of Weston, the Democratic National Committee chairwoman. "He never has and never will fight for middle-class families. Maybe that's why we used to call him King Jeb here in Florida."

The voters who came to listen to Bush in person, though, had a different opinion. And not all were Republicans.

"If a Republican is elected in 2016, we want it to be Jeb Bush," said Michael Goodman, of Homestead, a dive instructor and contractor — and independent voter. He said he likes Bush's "Miami vibe" and "Latin connections."

Jeb Bush supporters explain why he is their candidate for president

Jeb Bush announced his candidacy for the U.S. Presidency at Miami Dade College's main campus in Kendall. He also addressed the crowd in Spanish. Video by Jess Bal/Miami Herald Staff

Maria C. Hernandez, a Cuban-born Hialeah resident, said she met Bush when he ran for governor and was handing out fliers at a shopping center.

"He floored me when he spoke to me in perfect Spanish," said Hernandez, 64, a retired real-estate broker. "He was a wonderful governor and did a lot for Florida and its citizens. As president, he will be able to solve a lot of problems."

Bush played to the friendly crowd, particularly on foreign policy. He lambasted President Barack Obama's push to reestablish diplomatic relations with Cuba — a position embraced by Cuban-American hardliners that's far less popular outside South Florida.

"Ninety miles to our south, there is talk of a state visit by our outgoing president. But we don't need a glorified tourist to go to Havana in support of a failed Cuba," Bush said. "We need an American president to go to Havana in solidarity with a free Cuban People, and I am ready to be that president."

Bush wrapped up his speech and was joined on stage by his wife, their three children and five grandchildren.

With the weight of the campaign launch off his shoulders, Bush scooped up one of his granddaughters and danced. He then disappeared into a sea of supporters, hugging and shaking hands with almost everyone in reach. His official quest for the White House was just getting started.

Miami Herald staff writer David Smiley and McClatchy correspondent Lesley Clark contributed to this report.

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