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MICHAEL

March 12, 1995 Publication: *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette (Little Rock, AR)* Page: *1D* Word Count: *2555*

Not lonely at the top as the state's highest Republican office holder, Mike Huckabee finds his faith stands him in good stead at the Statehouse and the church house.

Some people think Lt. Gov. Mike Huckabee appeared on the political scene out of nowhere. Others say he's contemplated a career in public service most of his life.

So did he fall off the moon --or reach up and grab it?

Huckabee made a foray into national politics a little more than three years ago when he challenged 18-year-incumbent Dale Bumpers for a seat in the U.S. Senate.

Southern Baptist minister Huckabee was a stranger to most voters outside the Arkansas Baptist State Convention, which he had served as president. Bumpers carried 69 counties, winning 60 percent of the vote.

Conventional wisdom decreed that would probably be the political end of the Texarkana preacher with the communications background. But conventional wisdom didn't know much about Huckabee, another son of a place called Hope.

His politically active friend of more than 20 years, Jonathan Barnett of Siloam Springs, attests to that. Barnett was chairman of Huckabee's campaign against Bumpers.

"Mike's not afraid," he said. "He can go up against the big boys, with all the pressure, good talent and better funding the other team has, with all the pressure in the world, and he does a great job. You can't scare him off, you can't shake him up. He's a constant."

During a special election in July 1993, a carefully cultivated grass-roots effort won Huckabee the lieutenant governor's race, making him the second Republican since Reconstruction to hold the title. In November, he was elected to his first full four-year term.

On a recent winter morning, seated in his office on the second floor of the Capitol, he reflected on the three races he's run in three years. In his characteristic relaxed, engaging manner, he said he's a little awed that he's arrived here. But the familiar greetings he exchanged with senators and staff members on a walk from the Senate chamber indicate he's making a place for himself among the Democrat-heavy leadership in the Legislature.

He's also putting a personal stamp on the traditionally low-profile lieutenant governor's office. The state constitution asks only that he open Senate sessions and stand in when Gov. Jim Guy Tucker is out of the state, but Huckabee fills his time with a fuller agenda.

The first few hours of his day are reserved for directing the foot traffic that passes through his office suite. He greets visitors interested in meeting the people they've elected to office, as well as people with ideas to pitch or problems they hope Huckabee and his staff can solve.

For instance, someone who's come up with an invention may seek Huckabee's advice on finding a manufacturer, while a disabled person who's had trouble getting a disability payment might ask his help in tracking the check.

He often finds himself having lunch with a group that's invited him to give a speech, which he loves to do. Huckabee said he's addressed "every kind of group imaginable." His oratory style is smooth -- he used just a few notes during a recent 20-minute speech to the Downtown Little Rock Rotary Club -- an asset some attribute to years of polish in the pulpit.

To bring the Senate to order every weekday at 1:30 p.m. Huckabee wields a hefty wooden gavel, chipped around the edges. A Senate staff member joked that it was used to pound Republicans before Huckabee's arrival.

Huckabee is a speed reader who peruses three newspapers every day and subscribes to about 30 periodicals. "I feel like you don't ever waste time if you're reading something," he said. "You can always be absorbing some information."

So at night he absorbs whatever's on the minds of the people who write him. Since he's "not much of a party animal," he said, he usually passes up the rounds of parties to which he's invited. Instead, he takes home to his apartment all the letters that came across his desk during the day.

Huckabee's wife, Janet, and their children -- John Mark, 18; David, 14; and Sarah, 12 -- live in Texarkana. While Huckabee lives in Little Rock most of the time, he joins his family on the weekends and occasionally on a weeknight.

With the help of his staff, Huckabee has also developed programs such as the Service to the Citizens Award, which recognizes outstanding public employees.

"I can't imagine anyone running for public office on a statewide basis, getting into office and seeing how little he or she could do just to get by," he said. "That defies the very sort of savvy and drive it would take to put your name on the ballot."

And few know more about the drive and savvy it takes to win an election than Huckabee. He was the picture of an underdog -- seeking a statewide office as a Republican, and a pastor to boot. But those who sized him up solely on these factors failed to see there was more to Huckabee.

As a teen-ager, he got involved in student government and was elected student body president at Hope High School. He also won the governorship of Boys State in 1972 -- where he was sworn into office by then-Gov. Dale Bumpers.

Barnett, chairman of the Benton County Republican Committee, met Huckabee when the two were Boys State delegates. He remembered Huckabee's win in the governor's race, 820 votes to 380.

After the results were announced, the audience "stood up and cheered and cheered and cheered," said Barnett. "I served as a counselor at Boys State for 13 years after that, and in all of my years of being involved with the Boys State program, there's never been a candidate that won the governor's race with the margins and enthusiasm Mike won it."

Dr. Dan Grant, president emeritus of Huckabee's alma mater, Ouachita Baptist University in Arkadelphia, said Huckabee was a standout at Hope High, particularly excelling in debate. So Grant recruited him for the university's forensics program.

Huckabee "had this dual interest in the broad field of public affairs, as well as taking his Christian faith very seriously," said Grant. "Mike and I would talk about the application of his Christian faith to the entire world of public affairs. I was always impressed with the level of sophistication of that interest."

Grant said Huckabee's convictions were about more than voting. "It was being active in political interest groups and political parties, and making one's influence felt in a whole range of parts of society. The image of Mike as a preacher in politics is too narrow. It does not do him justice."

A magna cum laude graduate of OBU, Huckabee completed his degree in 1975, packing his education into a little more than two years and "feeling that my ministry was going to be Christian communications and radio and television. I backed into the pastorate."

After a few years of doing freelance radio and television production, public relations, writing and working with Christian organizations, Huckabee agreed to preach at Immanuel Baptist Church in Pine Bluff until a permanent pastor was hired.

The church asked Huckabee to stay full time in 1980, and he did for six years. While he was there he brought ACTS, a Christian television network, to Arkansas. He moved his family to Texarkana when he became senior pastor at Beech Street First Baptist Church.

He thought pastoring a church might prevent him from running for public office. "But I've always been one who felt life is not about this fixed-in-concrete agenda. Life is about responding to opportunities that come your way."

Huckabee encountered a challenging opportunity in 1989, when he was elected president of the nearly half-million-member Arkansas Baptist State Convention, which was experiencing a pull between feuding factions, mirroring problems at its national level.

"I was uncompromising as a conservative and one who believed that we really need to be clear in our convictions and directions as a denomination. But I also believed that you should never use your convictions to beat other people over the head," Huckabee said.

Grant served as a convention vice president under Huckabee -- who, he said, "was interested in bringing people together."

Watching him help bring peace among Arkansas Baptists during a troubled time, people began to approach Huckabee to ask if he'd ever considered public office.

"It was something that had been so put out of my mind for such a long time, yet I couldn't get it out of my mind," Huckabee said. Too, "my wife and I started growing in our convictions that something was terribly wrong with our society --that morally and economically our country was falling apart, and we had come to a place of genuine comfort in our lives."

He called his years at Beech Street "the prime of my ministerial life," a church where he enjoyed a large staff, a large congregation, and a degree of prominence in his community.

But, he said, "I didn't want to be a person who came to a place of comfort and felt that God's ultimate call was to be comfortable. I have a real high disregard for those who forget (Christians) are not called to get as comfortable as we can get, and to be as safe as we can be. We're called to be salt and light."

Visits over several years to Yad Vashem, the principal Israeli memorial in Jerusalem to victims of the Holocaust, also had a profound effect on Huckabee. He said Nazi Germany carried out much of the Holocaust "while people would get up and comfortably go to their churches and absolutely ignore what was happening to the Jewish people around them. And it happened in a very educated, enlightened kind of German environment.

"Any kind of corporate collapse of the national conscience takes place when people who know better choose not to do better, and choose instead to remove themselves from the risks associated with seeking to change the direction of their nation. (The Holocaust) really was not so much the result of the meanness of the Nazis as it was the apathy of people of conscience. And that really shook me."

In the fall of 1991, he began organizing his campaign against Bumpers. Many of his friends supported his decision, which meant resigning from Beech Street. At the same time, "The most vicious, hostile criticism I have had about getting into politics has come from church people," he said.

"I get letters from people saying, 'I can't believe you've left God's will,'" he added, stiffening in his chair. "Isn't it interesting that someone who's never met me knows more about God's will for my life than I do? ... I would never presume to know what God wants you to do with your life to that level, that I could just sit here at long distance and judge it, unless I'm God. That's the only way I'd know that."

He said, "It's far more important to be consistent in character than to be consistent in vocation. These people who think ... the only way to serve God is to pastor a church or be a foreign missionary, what nonsense. Where is that written down? It's cultural, but that's not biblical."

Huckabee wouldn't let himself be daunted by the personal or public challenges of the race. Judge Jim Gunter, 2nd Division Circuit/Chancery Court, 8th Judicial District, said perseverance was present in Huckabee even when he was a little boy. Gunter, who administered the oath to Huckabee after he won his first election, also coached Huckabee's Little League baseball team in Hope.

He asked Huckabee to come in from the outfield one summer and become the team's catcher, "one of the most difficult positions to ask a child to play. Children are often afraid of a baseball." The catcher risks being beamed by the ball or popped with a bat during every play. But Huckabee "stepped in there and overcame any potential fear that might have been there. His determination and resolve were amazing for a kid who was 10 years old. ... That determination I could see in him at that time is still present and working overtime." For those who believe a clergyman betrays the trust of his church when he enters politics, Huckabee said, "I've never presented myself, as a pastor, to be God. I always felt the most important thing a pastor did was to help people connect. He's like the long-distance operator who took two parties and connected them together, but it was not his job to try to dictate the terms of the conversation."

Grant said Huckabee has "a very broad understanding of the doctrine (of separation of church and state), and he believes in it. What people don't understand is that everyone applies their values to their involvement in public affairs. It just happens that his values are a natural outgrowth of his Christian faith."

Too, Huckabee said, a representative form of government is intended to represent everyone, and ministers shouldn't be excluded. "Pastors are probably more in touch with the realities of a broad spectrum of life than anyone else in the community."

Some professions require focusing a narrow scope on society -- banking, medicine and law, for instance. Ministers, however, "deal with people in every realm of their lives," Huckabee said. "Name a life situation, a pastor's touched it -- incest, homosexuality, he's counseled with people who abused their own children, people who've been abused as children -- there's not a single social pathology I've ever heard or read about that I didn't deal with firsthand as a pastor."

A background in ministry gives a person the ability to understand life principles, but to understand people, too. And to find common ground when dealing with issues such as welfare and social responsibility.

Huckabee said, "I call it Republicanism with a heart."

Speculation about his plans to someday win higher office surrounds Huckabee. But for now, he seems to be occupied with the matters at hand, focusing on his duties as lieutenant governor. That focus, he said, can be attributed to his learning at a young age what's important to him.

He and Janet married after their first year at Ouachita. Within about a year, doctors found a tumor in her spinal column that was pinching off her spinal cord. The couple was told Janet might not live, and if she did, she'd probably be paralyzed.

When she pulled through surgery, Huckabee drove her from Arkadelphia to Little Rock every day for six weeks for radiation therapy that, they were told, would eliminate the couples' chance of having children.

"Then we'd drive back. I'd go to class and work (as a disc jockey at KVRC-FM) and she was in a hospital bed. We had a little duplex, \$40 a month. It was real nice -- you can imagine, all the roaches we could entertain," he laughed.

But the couples' three children are a testament to Janet Huckabee's recovery.

"When people say what makes your life, it's not your great moments," Huckabee said. "It's the tough times when no one is there, nobody sees you. It's your losses, not your victories, that shape your character, that determine where your boundaries are. When you lose everything, you realize you can get by without all the things you later have; that those aren't that important because you've been without them before."

That realization was liberating, Huckabee said. "You don't feel so bound to the conventions that other people are living by, like, 'I've got to be a CEO by the time I'm 40,' (or) 'I have to be this sort of elected official and walk all over whoever it takes to get there.' You think, so what? If I win, I win. If I lose, I lose. And life goes on.

"This is just a little blip on the radar screen."

Arkansas Democrat-Gazette (Little Rock, AR)

Date: March 12, 1995

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