

Marco Rubio Has the Spotlight, and the Target

A mix of charm and eloquence have taken him to politics' biggest stage. Now he'll be scrutinized like never before.



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On a November evening four years ago, Marco Rubio's new Buick was cruising up West Miami's Ludlam Road when, less than a mile from his house, right after the Coronet Barber Shop and just before the Disco Fish Restaurant and Grill, it blew a red light.

An automated camera caught the infraction, resulting in a traffic citation that, earlier this year, found its way into a *New York Times* article about the Florida senator and his wife's traffic ticket woes.

Rubio, now running for the Republican presidential nomination, declined the *Times's* request for comment. His campaign similarly did not respond to *National Journal* questions about the incident—including whether it was even Rubio behind the wheel at the time. But days after

the *Times* article, Rubio laughed off the whole thing in a brief MSNBC

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interview. “Let me just say, I really don’t like red-light cameras,” Rubio said. “That’s a big scam. But that’s another topic for another day.”

Red-light running is not unique to Rubio, and it’s not likely to be a disqualifying mark against a would-be president. But neither does it seem so trivial as to merit nothing beyond a laugh. Some 800 people in the country die each year because of red-light runners—81 died in Florida in 2011, the year of Rubio’s ticket.

Nevertheless, Rubio was not only able to defuse criticism, but he turned the article into a net positive for his campaign by joining in the mockery of the piece with the Twitter hashtag “#RubioCrimeSpree”—and then using it in a fundraising email: “The Times really went into overdrive searching for these kind of ‘scandals’ in Marco’s rearview mirror.”

The episode encapsulated perfectly Rubio’s charmed political trajectory to date—a seemingly effortless ability to deflect criticism as he raced, in a mere decade and a half, from city commissioner to state representative to state House speaker to a U.S. senator running for president.

But all of that has come before Rubio’s recent rise in polling, meaning the next 15 weeks are likely to bring more scrutiny from the media and rival candidates than he has seen over those 15 years—possibly threatening his carefully cultivated image as an engaging but serious policy wonk and the Republican Party’s face of the future.

“This is a contact sport,” said fellow Floridian and former Gov. Jeb Bush in a recent interview with ABC News. “I’ve been vetted like nobody’s business. And every candidate will go through that same process.”

Almost from the day he won his Senate seat in 2010, conservatives in Washington D.C., including the conservative media, saw in Rubio an answer to their prayers. He was instantly dubbed the “Republican Obama”—a fresh, young talent with a command of policy, who spoke well and looked even better, who also happened to come from the swing state of Florida. And to cap it off, he was a Latino, offering the promise of repairing the party’s damaged standing with that key constituency.

Within days of his victory, *The Weekly Standard* published a 5,000-word profile that quoted then-Sen. Jim DeMint of South Carolina predicting Rubio would be president in five years. A few months later, a *Washington Post* columnist called him “brainy” for his understanding of trade policy.

All of the adulation made sense to those of us who covered Rubio’s years in the Florida legislature—except for the part about his knowledge of

policy. Because in the Florida statehouse, Rubio was known as someone who spoke fast, who spoke exceedingly well, but who frequently said very little of substance, relying instead on moving oratory and personal charm to win over his audience.

Rubio could speak with authority on the virtues of West Coast hip-hop or the challenges facing the Miami Dolphins secondary. But when it came to details about public policy—including proposals that Rubio was personally supporting—he would often beg off and refer journalists to other legislators or staff members, explaining that he was more of a big-picture person.

Rubio conceded his lack of experience with substantive responsibilities in his 2012 autobiography, *An American Son*. “But for a brief stint as chairman of the House Claims Committee, I hadn’t much experience running a committee,” Rubio wrote. “I had always been in leadership, and hadn’t needed a committee to acquire influence in the House.”

Former Florida state Rep. Don Brown had been on Rubio’s leadership team before he was forced out over a disagreement on a politically charged property-insurance bill. He told *National Journal* that Rubio as House speaker was never immersed in details the way Bush had been during his two terms as governor. “Marco seemed to be more of someone who would formulate a team, formulate a big picture, and then delegate to technicians the policy details,” Brown said.

“He recognized that he couldn’t do everything, that he couldn’t be expert on everything, and he definitely relied on the talent in the people around him,” said Joe Pickens, another of Rubio’s inner circle during his speakership. “It’s the mark of a good leader.”

Rubio did pull strings in 2005 to try to help the Marlins baseball team receive a \$60 million state subsidy for a new stadium (it did not pass that year). And in 2007, his first real year as speaker, he put into the state budget \$800,000 for new artificial turf at a Miami sports facility—where Rubio himself happened to play flag football (Gov. Charlie Crist vetoed the money).

In terms of legislative accomplishments, Rubio got more attention for what he didn’t do. In 2004, he failed to block a change to the school-funding formula that took millions of dollars away from schools in high-cost areas like Miami. The state Senate president who had been pushing the change to help his north Florida counties said at the time that it had

been easier than he had anticipated because Rubio needed support from House members from those same North Florida counties to become speaker

speaker.

“He sold the people in his own community out to benefit himself,” said Mike Fasano, who as House majority leader in 2001 appointed Rubio to the majority-whip position. “He pursued his future more than he pursued any issue that he cared about.”

Fasano, now the elected tax collector in Pasco County, Florida, is supporting Bush for president—as is Al Cardenas, the former Republican Party of Florida chairman under Bush who gave Rubio his first job out of law school.

Cardenas said that given Rubio’s ambition to seek the speakership right from when he was first elected to the legislature, staying out of policy debates let him avoid antagonizing the people he needed to vote for him. “The safest way to run for these jobs is to not take a position on anything,” Cardenas said. “It was pretty much a perfect plan.”

Even after becoming speaker, though—and despite regular assertions that he was interested in policy, not politics—Rubio’s level of interest in policy details did not seem to change. Crist was similarly considered a policy lightweight, and during their first few months in their new capacities, Crist would occasionally visit Rubio’s suite on the Capitol’s fourth floor, ostensibly to discuss issues like property insurance or property-tax relief. But typically the sessions—with reporters in attendance, as is required by the state Constitution—were spent on small talk, discussing the Dolphins, or the various Florida college football teams (both men played briefly in college).

Fortunately for Rubio, the main policy issue for Florida Republicans in the 2010 Senate race was opposition to President Obama, and on that front, Crist was in trouble from the start, having embraced Obama’s economic stimulus package as well as literally hugging the new president during a 2009 visit to the state.

Once in Washington, though, Rubio and his advisers immediately began a rebranding effort to market Rubio as a policy wonk. Part of this included having Rubio bone up on federal issues, particularly foreign affairs, a process that included tutorials from experts at conservative think tanks.

Part of this was carefully managing media access. Unlike in Florida, where Rubio even as speaker was typically available to reporters a few times a day during legislative session, his encounters in Washington have been far more tightly controlled, with Rubio generally avoiding the

have been far more tightly controlled, with Rubio generally avoiding the hallway interviews in the Senate that many of his colleagues regularly engage in. (This strategy has continued on the campaign trail; for more than an hour and a half this August, Rubio would not acknowledge hearing follow-up questions regarding his statements on birthright citizenship, even as he gave TV interviews about his favorite foods and rides at the Iowa State Fair.)

And part of this has been Rubio being Rubio—that is, using his charm to befriend everyone he meets, including the journalists whose coverage, while perhaps not mattering to Republican primary voters, is followed in detail by Republican political donors.

Like many big-name Republicans, Rubio appeared frequently on Fox News, even before he began his presidential run—but he has also done select interviews with “mainstream” outlets, too, including the major TV broadcast networks and *Time* magazine.

During a 2013 appearance on conservative firebrand Mark Levin’s radio show, he was asked why he put up with “stupid interviewers.” He answered that a good warm-weather sports team still had to play away games in the cold.

The following year, after a taped interview for NPR, he thanked the host for allowing extended answers, which he called a refreshing change from his cable TV interviews, where all they cared about was that he say “three outrageous things in 45 seconds.”

It’s unclear, though, how deep of a policy expert Rubio has actually become on all the various subjects on which he has offered his pronouncements.

Last year, following a speech outlining his views on tax policy, Rubio was asked how his plan might differ from that of then-House Ways and Means Committee chairman Dave Camp. Rubio answered: “I haven’t read it.”

Rubio’s campaign declined to discuss its image-making strategy for this article.

In any event, Rubio’s grasp of policy is not likely to matter nearly as much in the coming weeks as his explanations about his various financial difficulties. And in this area, Rubio’s practiced ability to talk his way

around questions he doesn’t like to answer may actually invite more scrutiny, not less.

In the Colorado debate last month, for example, Rubio answered a question on that topic by claiming that the issues were all “discredited attacks

from Democrats and my political opponents.” In fact, all of moderator Becky Quick’s statements were well-documented through the years. Rubio did liquidate a \$68,000 retirement account to pay for, among other things, a \$3,000 refrigerator—a move that likely cost him at least \$24,000 in taxes and penalties. The house he co-owned with a longtime friend and now disgraced political ally was nearly foreclosed upon because of missed payments. Rubio did use his Republican Party of Florida American Express card for thousands of dollars in personal expenses that he later had to repay.

During the debate, Rubio, to applause from the audience, used his answer to suggest that his problems managing money actually allowed him to empathize better with most Americans.

Whether this approach will continue to work is unknown. Most middle-class Americans don’t have a second home to be foreclosed upon. True, many Americans do worry about monthly cash flow, but most have not recently received over \$1 million in book deals that allow luxuries like an \$80,000 fishing boat. Neither have they had to worry about mixing business and personal expenses on a corporate credit card because most have not had access to one.

“He very rarely takes responsibility,” said Tampa GOP consultant and former Rubio supporter Chris Ingram. “It’s always somebody else.”

Still, it might be unwise for Rubio’s opponents to underestimate his political skills, said Miami lawyer Dan Gelber, the Democratic leader in the Florida House when Rubio was speaker. Gelber said he disagrees with Rubio politically, continues to like him personally, and calls him the most disciplined, “on message” politician he has ever seen.

Bush, who has supported Rubio’s political career from the West Miami city commission to his Senate run, found that out last month, when Rubio delivered a stinging retort to Bush’s criticism of his missed votes. It’s something Crist learned at a debate five years ago, when he attacked Rubio on the credit-card issue. “I’ve never had a heckler at the debate,” Rubio said to cheers. “I’ve always had them in the audience.”

“He’s like a very methodical quarterback,” Gelber said of Rubio. “He doesn’t throw interceptions.”

And, if that red-light ticket is any indicator, Gelber may be right. The ticket was dismissed in 2012. West Miami Police Department chief Nelson Andreu said in an email that he doesn’t know the reason why.