

Former governor, Baptist minister, runs for White House

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By Robert Marus

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WASHINGTON (ABP)—The latest long-shot presidential candidate is a Southern Baptist Baby Boomer from Hope, Ark., who served as governor of his home state. But this isn't Bill Clinton, and he isn't a Democrat. Instead, he's a Republican, an ex-pastor and former president of the [Arkansas Baptist State Convention](#).

Mike
Huckabee,
former
governor
of
Arkansas
and a
Baptist
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[Mike Huckabee](#), in a Jan. 28 appearance on NBC's *Meet the Press*, announced that he has formed a committee to explore the possibility of running for president on the GOP ticket. Forming an exploratory committee is the first formal step in any presidential bid and allows the candidate to hire campaign staff and raise funds.

"I think America needs positive, optimistic leadership to kind of turn this country around, to see a revival of our national soul, and to reclaim a sense of ... the greatness of this country that we love," Huckabee said on the program. "And also to help bring people together to find a practical solution to a lot of the issues that people really worry about when they sit around the dinner table and talk at night."

He recently completed 10 1/2 years as governor of Arkansas, during which he enjoyed high popularity ratings while working with a Democratic legislature to achieve several policy successes.

His mix of experience, communication skills, affability and policy pragmatism is causing some prominent political pundits to take note of his candidacy.

“Huckabee is the Republican to watch, especially if former Gov. Mitt Romney of Massachusetts doesn’t gain traction,” wrote E.J. Dionne in a recent *Washington Post* column. “Huckabee makes the case that he was as an effective governor who happens to be a serious evangelical, not the other way around.”

The son of a fireman, Huckabee was born and raised in Hope—also Clinton’s birthplace and boyhood home. He graduated from Ouachita Baptist University, the Arkansas Baptist State Convention’s flagship school, and the Southern Baptist Convention’s [Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary](#). After a few early years working in Christian broadcasting, he served as pastor of two sizeable Arkansas Baptist churches.

In 1989, while he was pastor of Beech Street First Baptist Church in Texarkana, Ark., Huckabee was elected president of the Arkansas Baptist State Convention. At the time—the height of theological conflict in the Southern Baptist Convention—Arkansas Baptist leaders considered Huckabee a moderate. He defeated Ronnie Floyd, who was pastor of the state’s largest church and an insider with the denomination’s fundamentalist leadership.

Huckabee entered secular politics as a conservative Republican in 1992 in an unsuccessful bid to defeat longtime Democratic Sen. Dale Bumpers. The next year, he won a special election to become the state’s lieutenant governor. That office catapulted him to the governorship in 1996, after an ethics scandal forced the resignation of Gov. Jim Guy Tucker (D). Huckabee was elected to two more terms.

He has embraced the policy positions of most conservative evangelicals on many social issues, like abortion rights and gay rights. But on *Meet the Press*, he downplayed his connections to some of the Religious Right’s more inflammatory rhetoric.

Host Tim Russert asked Huckabee about a past comment in which the governor said, "I hope we answer the alarm clock and take this nation back for Christ."

Russert asked: "Would you, as president, consider America a Christian nation and try to lead it ... into a situation as being a more Christian nation?"

Huckabee said he would not in his official capacity. "I think it's dangerous to say that we are a nation that ought to be pushed into a Christian faith by its leaders," he said. "However, I make no apology for my faith. My faith explains me. ... We are a nation of faith. It doesn't necessarily have to be mine. But we are a nation that believes that faith is an important part of describing who we are, and our generosity, and our sense of optimism and hope. That does describe me."

Pressed by Russert on how he would treat those of minority faiths given the "take this nation back for Christ" comment, Huckabee said, "Well, I think I—I'd probably phrase it a little differently today. But I don't want to make people think that I'm going to replace the Capitol dome with a steeple or change the legislative sessions for prayer meetings."

But, he continued, "What it does mean is that people of faith do need to exercise their sense of responsibility toward education, toward health, toward the environment. All of those issues, for me, are driven by my sense that this is a wonderful world that God's made. We're responsible for taking care of it. We're responsible for being responsible managers and stewards of it. I think that's what faith ought to do in our lives if we're in public service."

In response to a question about his opposition to abortion rights, Huckabee said that, while he opposed most legalized abortions, he also sought a broader understanding of what a pro-life ethic means.

“I think those of us in the pro-life movement, we have to do also some growing and expanding. We have to remind people that life, that we believe it begins at conception. It doesn’t end at birth. And if we’re really pro-life we have to be concerned about more than just the gestation period,” he said.

Huckabee cited anti-abortion legislation he had signed as governor, but he noted “we also did things that improved the environmental quality and the conservation issues that would affect a child’s air and water. We also made sure that he had a better education, that access to affordable health care would be better. So I think that real pro-life people need to be concerned about affordable housing. We need to be concerned about safe neighborhoods (and) access to a college education. That, for me, is what ‘pro-life’ has to mean.”

However, if he becomes the Republican nominee, Huckabee will likely deal with ethics questions that dogged him during his governorship. *Arkansas Times* columnist Ernest Dumas, who has been one of Huckabee’s most consistent critics, criticized him in [a Jan. 30 column](#) for exaggerations and misrepresentations in the Russert interview.

“It is itself not overly prized in politics, but there is one quality that a fresh and unknown candidate evades at considerable peril: truthfulness. The former governor has always had a problem with it when he seeks to embellish his record or clean up his mistakes,” Dumas wrote.

“The weakness was in full panoply in Huckabee’s short interview,” he continued. “Russert, who is not ordinarily a nervy interviewer, nailed Huckabee only once on a bit of flimflam —his role in the parole of rapist and murderer Wayne Dumond—and Huckabee may be lucky enough to avoid much contention over his exaggerations and diminutions of his Arkansas record. But his dissembling will catch up with him before the campaign moves far along.”

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