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1 God Won't Save Cruz's White House Bid
JACOB LUPFER

2 Ann Coulter's Anti-Semitism Runs Deep
CATHY YOUNG

3 Sharon Osbourne: I've Left Ozzy
TIM TEEMAN

4 Lost Leg in War. Next Mission: Everest
NATHAN PLACE

5 Cameron Embarrasses the Queen—Again
TOM SYKES

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Religion Won't Save Cruz's White House Bid



JACOB LUPFER



The Texas senator is about to learn that evangelical appeal only takes you so far in the GOP.

Given that Ted Cruz formally announced his candidacy for the Republican presidential nomination in the most overtly religious way possible, pollsters, pundits, and the public will quickly begin to speculate about the role of faith in the 2016 GOP nominating contest.



Unfortunately for Cruz, there is little reason to believe that the Republican Party is going to nominate someone who looks and talks like a televangelist. Yet evangelical elites' stature within the GOP coalition assures that the party will cater to some—though not all—of their priorities.

Cruz announced his candidacy to a packed convocation at Liberty University. Founded by Jerry Falwell, the famed fundamentalist pastor and political operative who died in 2007, the Lynchburg, Virginia, campus is a bastion of cultural conservatism. The optics of Cruz's speech, which reporters likened to a sermon, were clearly designed to highlight his evangelical bona fides.

Americans, and especially Republican primary voters, will now take a closer look at Cruz.

Well-known in political circles for his Tea Party-fueled campaign for Senate in 2012, Ted Cruz defied the Beltway expectation that freshmen senators should learn the ropes,



quietly deferring to and learning from party elders. Instead, Cruz quickly jumped headlong and uninvited into high-profile political fights, taking it upon himself to help sabotage the Senate's relationship with the Obama administration and with the House of Representatives.

Never missing an opportunity to grandstand, Cruz has shown that he has the ambition and sense of self-importance to think himself the best person for the job, but only his most ardent supporters could possibly think he seems "presidential."

Cruz's path to the GOP nomination (if there is one) centers around one goal: becoming the conservative movement's alternative to the party establishment's candidate of choice. Unfortunately for Cruz, it will not work.

With varying degrees of success, GOP presidential aspirants titillate conservative evangelicals with the idea that someone who shares their values could become president. A generation ago, Pat Robertson and Patrick Buchanan gave voice to grassroots longing for rhetoric about faith and values in Republican politics. In 2008, Mike Huckabee won eight states and more than 4 million primary votes before withdrawing in March. A motley crew of characters split evangelicals' allegiances in 2012. Rick Santorum, a Roman Catholic, received vital evangelical support in winning primaries in six conservative states.

Evangelicals often prefer GOP primary candidates who end up losing the nomination to whoever the party establishment prefers. The nominee ends up being someone the party feels is a safer bet for the general election but whose religious commitment evangelicals greet with private, and sometimes public, skepticism.

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Pundits overstate the notion

that evangelicals "hold their noses" to vote for candidates like John McCain or Mitt Romney. But it is clear that evangelical leaders harbored doubts about recent GOP nominees' personal faith and commitments to evangelicals' core issues.

McCain somewhat overcame his failure to win over evangelicals by adding Sarah Palin to the 2008 ticket. Romney's Mormon faith was an issue because a majority of evangelicals do not consider Mormons to be Christians.

But McCain's and Romney's success ironically points to the reasons for Cruz's pending failure. Political science research points to the outsized and unseen power of party insiders in presidential nominations. Less scientific but no less true is the oft-made observation that the GOP in particular defers not only to the establishment, but also to whichever candidate has "paid his dues" and seems to be "next in line."

Cruz has repeatedly defied and alienated the Republican establishment, and no candidate has ever won the nomination without significant support from party insiders.

After the Liberty University speech, a Cruz staffer employed a March Madness metaphor,

claiming that the senator is the top seed in the Tea Party bracket and in the evangelical bracket.

Unfortunately for Cruz, whichever candidate wins the establishment bracket will almost certainly win the nomination.

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Activating a key GOP constituency like anti-government libertarians or conservative evangelicals is only a viable strategy if it is combined with significant establishment appeal. For this reason, Jeb Bush, Scott Walker, Marco Rubio, and even Rand Paul

are better positioned than Ted Cruz.

In previous Republican nominating contests, Cruz's outspoken evangelical faith could have been a political advantage. But white evangelicals are now so used to working with Catholics on sex-related issues that a candidate's evangelical identity hardly matters.

This cycle's GOP nominating contest features a large number of [Catholic candidates](#). Given evangelicals' primary support for Newt Gingrich and Rick Santorum at various points in the 2012 race, Catholic GOP politicians who share evangelicals' opposition to abortion and concerns about religious liberty should feel secure in their ability to attract and retain evangelicals' support.

Fears that Ted Cruz would be trounced in November 2016 like "[a Republican George McGovern](#)" are vastly overstated. But Ted Cruz's fervent evangelical faith, however sincere, does nothing to advance his credibility as a contender for the nomination.

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