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Don’t Mess With Texas

What Gov. Rick Perry's hard-right turn says about America in the age of Obama.

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The myth of the once and future king is as old as Camelot, as ancient as the Bible. If only someone could pull the sword from the stone and free the land, restore it to its former greatness! If only Bonnie Prince Charlie could sail back from across the sea and drive away the English oppressors! If only a new Saladin could sweep away the infidels and restore the Muslim Caliphate! If only Bobby could vanquish the usurper Lyndon Johnson and restore the mythical Kennedy Camelot! If only the Messiah could come again! In dark times, the memory of a lost golden era beckons, and the people look for their redeemer.

In Texas, his name is Rick Perry. Raised in a ranch house with no running water in the West Texas town of Paint Creek, yell leader at Texas A&M, Air Force pilot, longest serving governor in Texas history. Ruggedly handsome in a Marlboro Man sort of way, with a rich mane of brown hair, slightly tinged with silver gray. Perry, 60, stands for less government and more growth, for freedom and against bureaucracy, for Texas and against Washington. It's a message that has made him a very popular politician in Texas, particularly among conservative white males.

And if he's good for Texas, why not America? Could Perry be the second coming of Ronald Reagan, the plain-spoken man from the West who presided over a new "Morning in America" by cutting taxes, reducing government (well, promising to), and standing tall against the nation's enemies? As the tea-party movement gains momentum, as more Americans are mad as hell and not going to take it anymore, Perry is their kind of hero, an avatar of a lost age that could come again, if only Washington politicians and other undesirables were put in their place.

These days, people leave California—seemingly ungovernable, staggering under taxes and debt—and come to Texas. More people moved to Texas than any other state between 2008 and 2009, a time when Texas somehow avoided the worst of the Great Recession. "I'm willing to tell anyone that will listen that the land of opportunity still exists in America, and it's in Texas," Perry declared on the campaign trail last fall as he was on his way to crushing his opponent in the Republican primary, U.S. Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison. Once thought to be a political powerhouse in Texas, strongly backed by the Bush dynasty, Hutchison was fatally tarnished by her ties to Washington.

Perry's Democratic opponent in November will be Bill White, the popular three-term mayor of Houston. White couldn't be more different from Perry. He went to Harvard. He speaks fluent Spanish. He's pasty white, with a bald pate and big ears. He talks in an even, slow monotone and refrains from gunslinging rhetoric. He's kind of like President Obama without the good looks and charisma—a cerebral man who craves consensus and relishes tackling problems by gathering a roomful of smart people with diverse views to hash things out. In an interview with NEWSWEEK at his home in Houston last week, White cast the upcoming election as a choice between the past and the future. "Perry is likely to appeal to those who think Texas's best days are behind us," said White. "I'll get the support of Texans who think our best days are ahead of us."

But not a few Texans wish the past to be their future—if only Rick Perry can show the way. As these people see it, America is turning into a multicultural hodgepodge, sapped of moral strength, run by government bureaucrats. But Texas, they believe, is different and always has been. "We don't want to become like them," says Shuck Donnell, general manager of Coyote Lake Feedyard in Muleshoe, Texas. (By "them" he means people living in big metropolitan areas, especially on the East Coast.) "Out here, we're the kind of people where if the world fell apart, we would still eat. I would hate to be living in an apartment in New York City...People think that meat comes from a Styrofoam tray."

In an interview last week with Evan Smith, editor of The Texas Tribune and a NEWSWEEK contributor, Governor Perry insisted that he was focused on Texas and would not run for president under any circumstances. "I don't care about going to Washington, D.C.," he said. "The reason I agree to do interviews with national publications is so that people will pay attention to what is going on in Texas...I want people elected to Congress, to the United States Senate, and to the presidency in 2012 with the express message that we are going to Washington to try to make

Washington as inconsequential in your life as we can…I want to get this country back."

Still, Perry is tapping social and political forces that extend well beyond Texas, and he clearly sees himself as a national politician. President Obama, he says, "is hellbent on taking America towards a socialist country." That kind of catchy talk plays well with a certain—and growing—segment of the American population. According to a new Rasmussen Reports poll, 24 percent of U.S. voters now say they consider themselves to be part of the tea-party movement (up from 16 percent a month ago). According to a Harris Interactive poll, two thirds of Republicans believe Obama is a socialist, while 57 percent believe he is a Muslim, and almost one in four suspect he's the Antichrist.

The forces of suspicion and anger may be exaggerated in the Lone Star State. They're also compounded by a strong streak of Texas exceptionalism. It dates back to the War of Independence against Mexico and the founding of the Republic of Texas in 1836, says historian David McComb, professor emeritus at Colorado State University. Texans have a "kind of macho, frontier, independent attitude of 'I can do what I damn well please and nobody else can tell me,' " he says.

The independent strain has a racial dimension. Conservative, rural whites embrace it most fervently, says McComb. In 2004, Texas became the fourth state in the union (after Hawaii, New Mexico, and California) to be "majority minority"—to have a population that is less than 50 percent white. The less dominant whites become in Texas, the more some of them cling to a mythical past of the cowboy and oilman. "A lot of these conservatives don't want to change. The ground is moving underneath them, and they don't want to recognize that and don't know what to do about it. So they join a tea-party group and strap on a six-gun and strut around," McComb says.

Hispanics comprise about 37 percent of the state's population—but only 22 percent of Texas's registered voters, and on Election Day, the percentage who turn out is lower. In time, the demographics will translate into real muscle for Hispanics at the ballot box. The question is when. "Is it 5, 10, 15 years?" says Robert Stein, a political-science professor at Rice University. "I think it's less than 15 but more than 5."

That gives Perry time to get reelected to a record third term. Perry does not appeal to Latinos in the way of his predecessor, George W. Bush, who won about half the Hispanic vote as governor. By one set of estimates, Perry garnered only 13 percent of the Hispanic ballots in his 2002 race and 24 percent in 2006. But the governor is careful not to overtly alienate Hispanics. He appointed the first Latina to the state

Supreme Court, signed into law a measure that allows undocumented college students to qualify for in-state tuition, and has generally shied away from incendiary rhetoric about illegal immigration.

Indeed, he has disappointed some tea partiers. "Governor Perry has really not done anything to secure the border," says Phillip Dennis, founder of the Dallas Tea Party. "I just think that Governor Perry is viewed as a slick-talking, good-looking guy." Some detractors call Perry "Governor Goodhair" or complain, as the Texans say, that he is "all hat and no cattle." But he is a crafty politician with good timing. He was a Democrat until 1989, but as the party was becoming more urban and liberal, he switched to the GOP. According to Texas Monthly, he was encouraged to make the switch by former senator Phil Gramm, who told potential converts, "It's the last copter out of Nam, and you'd better get on it."

Perry was early to see the potential of the tea-party movement. A year ago, at a "Tax Day Tea Party" in front of Austin's City Hall, Perry suggested that Texas could legally leave the union. As some of the tea partiers shouted "Secede!" Perry said he didn't want that to happen, but "if Washington continues to thumb their nose at the American people…who knows what might come out of that?" Perry told the crowd that he didn't regard them as extremists, "but if you are, I'm with you." He was immediately embraced by right-wing talk-show hosts Glenn Beck and Rush Limbaugh (whom Perry made an honorary Texan).

Perry loves to boast about the economic prowess of the Lone Star State. More Fortune 500 companies are headquartered there than in any other state, he says. Long before Perry became governor, Texas was welcoming to business. It is a right-to-work state, meaning nobody can be required to join a union or pay union dues, with no income tax and a large pool of semiskilled workers willing to take low wages. Perry made a big show of turning down a half-billion dollars of federal money to help pay for unemployment benefits, saying it would only lead to higher taxes on business. But he did not turn down about $16 billion in federal stimulus money voted by Congress last year. The money helped Texas stay in the black for 2009–10. Economic experts are predicting a shortfall of at least $15 billion in the coming year. Perry, it seems, is against big government, except for when he isn't.

With Anne Belli in Dallas and Eve Conant in Washington