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COMMENTARY: THE WEEKEND INTERVIEW

Mark Sanford

South Carolina's Contender

By BRENDAN MINITER

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"Our system was put in place in large part based on the fear that a black man would be elected governor. So traditional functions of the executive branch were diffused . . . to mean that if a black man was elected governor, it wouldn't matter anyway because he wouldn't have any responsibility . . . That is an insane operating model."



Ismael Roldan

South Carolina Gov. Mark Sanford speaks in a soft Southern drawl. But he doesn't soften his message or hesitate with his words. They come quickly and, at times, with a blunt force. As he talks, he reveals why he is on nearly every Republican strategist's shortlist for vice president this year.


Over the past six years, Mr. Sanford has amassed a political record that many within the GOP would like to see enacted in Washington: tax cuts, school choice, market-based entitlement reform and a long list of vetoes handed out to a profligate legislature. Newt Gingrich, Karl Rove and Sen. Lindsey Graham (a stalwart John McCain backer) have all floated Mr. Sanford's name for veep.

During our hour-long conversation on a recent afternoon in his office in the state Capitol, Mr. Sanford touches on the vice presidency, but focuses his comments on his prolonged fight against the political status quo in South Carolina. That is exactly why I came to see him. If he is under consideration for the vice presidency, we should know more about his governing record and his motivation in picking his political battles.

South Carolina isn't the first state many Republicans might think to find a running mate; it's likely to vote Republican no matter who Mr. McCain taps. But Mr. Sanford is popular on the right because he understands markets. "There are only two ways to raise the standard of living," he said, "through technology – one backhoe can dig more dirt than 50 men with shovels – and through brain power . . . And that's it."

At one point he asks me if he is speaking too softly and moves the recorder closer to himself, even

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while he delivers lines like this in response to a question about education reform: "I'm not one who believes that you simply get to parity by dumping more money into a Soviet-style delivery system."

Mr. Sanford's main governing problem is the state's constitution. It was drafted in 1895, and still bears the imprint of ardent segregationist Ben "Pitchfork" Tillman in allowing the legislature to dominate the state's politics. In South Carolina, the legislature appoints judges, is involved in the day-to-day operations of executive departments, and is relatively free to increase spending – all while the governor is forced to compete with more than a dozen other statewide elected offices in wielding executive power.

The result is that the secretary of agriculture, a superintendent of education, the lieutenant governor and others push agendas that often run counter to the governor's policies, while the legislature selects the executive policies it prefers. "You gotta be kiddin' me," was Jeb Bush's response when he visited the state a few months ago and was told about this political arrangement.

It is against this political backdrop that Mr. Sanford carried out a little theatrics, with an incident known inside the state Capitol simply as "The Pigs." Four years ago, Mr. Sanford walked into the House chamber carrying two squealing piglets in an effort to shame legislators over pork-barrel spending.

"The original pig thing was tied to a larger . . . constitutional issue, a \$155 million, unconstitutional deficit, and the sanctity of the balanced budget requirement. . . . I put my left hand on the Bible and raised my right hand and I swear to uphold the constitution. It doesn't say get close and declare victory and move on, which is what I'd been urged to do.

"Politics is about compromise, I get that. But it doesn't say that about the [constitution's] balanced-budget requirement. What is also forgotten about that is that [my strategy] worked." The legislature balanced the budget.

The incident made Mr. Sanford's national reputation as a fiscal conservative. But it still rankles, because critics say it proves he's a "it's-my-way-or-the-highway" governor.

"I think it's actually been the reverse," he says. The vast majority of his 400 or so vetoes have been overturned. In 2004, the year of the pigs, the House voted to override 105 of 106 of his vetoes in a mere 90 minutes. All of his vetoes would slice about 1% or less from state spending in a typical year.

But even as the state has leaned left on spending, he has managed to tilt it right on education, health care, hurricane insurance and taxes. This year, he proposed that South Carolina react to the economic downturn with a tax cut.

Over the past six years, he has helped shepherd through three big tax reforms: the state's first cut to its income tax; a grand tax swap that slashed property taxes and increased sales taxes; and the virtual elimination of grocery taxes. That last one is not the tax cut Mr. Sanford wanted to spur investment. But he took what he could get, explaining simply, "We're about returning money to the taxpayer."

On health care, he sums up his views succinctly: "Our contention has been that the fatal flaw with our health-care system is that someone else pays. And as long as someone else pays, there is

unlimited demand for a product . . . someone is going to cap it. It's just a question of who it is going to be? A government bureaucrat? An HMO bureaucrat? Or is it going to be you? But it is going to be somebody, because we can't keep growing health care at double digits and expect to be competitive. . . .

"So we were the second state in the nation to offer health savings accounts to all state workers and all state retirees. We got that one through. We are the first state in the nation to be offering the health care choice system [for Medicaid]. . . that offers everything from traditional fee-for-service to HMOs to PPOs, but the big one that I like is the individual health savings accounts."

At this point Mr. Sanford takes a surprising detour to bring up hurricane insurance, and ends up touching on another Republican touted as a possible running mate for Mr. McCain, Florida Gov. Charlie Crist:

"Even in the insurance crisis with hurricanes . . . we very much disagreed with the . . . Charlie Crist model [which makes the state an insurer of last resort]. Basically the taxpayer is going to be zapped in the long run in that model, when the next storm hits. . . . We said, No, let's rely on private markets and let's look for ways to attract private capital to our state. One of the most interesting features in [our reform] was hurricane savings accounts. To say look, if you just flat out hate insurance companies and think they're ripping you off and don't like the way that they're pricing risk, take the risk yourself. . . . That's why, in fact, we put in a provision here with hurricane savings accounts, where if you want to tuck money aside, tax free from the state standpoint – we can't do anything about the feds – from a state standpoint, go for it."

Perhaps the hardest thing to reform in any state is education. And in South Carolina it is more difficult than elsewhere, for two reasons. The first is that the state's history of racial segregation ensures that any school choice debate will be charged with emotion. The second is because local politics drives resources and attention to a limited number of schools in politically powerful districts. The results: a 50% dropout rate, SAT and ACT scores among the lowest in the nation, and a wide achievement gap between black and white students.

Nonetheless, Mr. Sanford has enacted a voucher system for prekindergarten students, created a statewide charter school district (local districts won't approve new charters), and has pushed for, though not won, vouchers for nearly every child in the state.

"My point is," Mr. Sanford explains, "you go to rural South Carolina and you say, 'Look guys, the big voting blocs in our state are Greenville, Columbia and Charleston. That's where the voters are. So guess where the money is always going to go. You can say that we have some form of enlightened new leadership that will send it to Hampton County or Allendale or someplace else, but that's not the way the system works. . . . So if you ever want to get to parity, go to a one coupon per child system, spend it where you like in the state, and you can get there. But you can't get there this way.' That's why I've become such an ardent supporter of school choice."

Is all of this then leading to a McCain/Sanford ticket? Mr. Sanford deflects the question – though he does allow that it is "flattering, surreal, all those different things" to be talked about as a vice presidential contender.

So I ask what he thinks about the office of the vice presidency. "[Dick] Cheney has revolutionized the role. He arguably has done more than most vice presidents by working as a partner with the president. . . . I guess, it's what you make of it. But at the end of the day there can only be one

boss and that boss is the president. I think what Cheney has done very, very well is to be supportive of the president's larger goals and aims. So I don't think it is a forum to say, 'I think this stuff is really cool. I think I'm going to go over here.' I believe in the military notion of a chain of command.

"I think privately you can have impact and have conversations in (the) direction that I think we ought to go, but when the orders are met, you have to salute and march forward in accordance with the orders. . . . And part of it is born out of my own experiences in the governorship. And so, there is a third component, having seen this from the inside as an executive, that you don't want a guy who is just randomly free-lancing in directions you don't want to go."

Would he accept the nomination for vice president?

"If that lightning strike comes, we'll deal with it when we get there."

Mr. Minter is an assistant features editor at The Wall Street Journal.

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