



## Whisper Campaigns and “Zipper Problems”: How Jeb Bush’s Allies Tried — and Failed — to Stop Marco Rubio

An adaption from the forthcoming book, *The Wilderness: Deep Inside the Republican Party’s Combative, Contentious, Chaotic Quest to Take Back the White House*.



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*On the night of the 2010 midterm elections, a portly, silver-haired Jeb Bush stood on a stage in the courtyard of Miami's luxe Biltmore Hotel, appearing to choke back tears. The beloved former governor of Florida was there to introduce the young conservative insurgent who had just pulled off a remarkable underdog victory in the U.S. Senate race.*

*"Bushes get emotional, so I'm gonna try my hardest," Jeb told the ecstatic crowd of Republicans. "My wife told me, 'Don't cry, don't cry.' But Marco Rubio makes me cry for joy!"*

*At the time, it looked like the culmination of a sturdy alliance and deep friendship — the proud mentor presenting his protege. Five years later, however, the two men are locked in a fight for the Republican presidential nomination, and recent headlines suggest the relationship has soured. According to the New York Times, Bush's super PAC has threatened to spend \$20 million in a blitz of negative ads intended "to damage ... Rubio's reputation and halt his sudden ascent in the polls." And last month, an internal document leaked detailing the Bush campaign's efforts to cast Rubio as "a risky bet" for donors. "Those who have looked into Marco's background in the past have been concerned with what they have found," the document cryptically warned.*

*The Bush campaign didn't elaborate on its innuendo. But, as I detail in my new book, [The Wilderness](#), Jeb's allies went much further in a behind-the-scenes, last-ditch effort to keep Rubio from running in the first place.*

*Jeb and his team recognized the threat posed by Rubio nearly a year ago, and took aggressive action to knock him out of 2016 contention — with some in Bush's circle trying to smear the senator by allegedly circulating lurid, unsubstantiated rumors of infidelity.*

*Reached for comment Sunday, Bush spokesman Tim Miller said, "Our campaign has never said anything of this nature and doesn't believe it. The candidates will be graded on their records both in the private sector and public office, as well as their plans for the future."*

*But months before the campaign began, Republican donors, operatives, and politicians told a different story. The same day Mitt Romney bowed out of the 2016 race — marking the first and last real victory for Jeb's "juggernaut" campaign — a California bundler who was being courted by Bush's team told me, "They're going after Rubio next. It's like whack-a-mole. They're going to try to take out everyone before the primaries even start."*

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In March 2012, Marco Rubio charged Terry Sullivan — a loyal, salty-tongued aide out of South Carolina — with the task of running his political action committee, Reclaim America. The strategist's job was to lay the political groundwork for Rubio's next move, positioning him for either a spot on the 2012 Republican ticket or a future presidential bid of his own. And Sullivan knew immediately what his first priority would be: putting an end to the incessant drip-drip of damning intel on Rubio, and figuring out *exactly* what skeletons might be lodged in the senator's closet.

Ever since he began to make a name for himself in Tallahassee, Rubio had been trailed by a persistent series of unsubstantiated rumors about his sex life. Jilted mistresses, sordid affairs, secret love children — Rubio's team had heard it all, and the more seasoned strategists among them knew that such tittle-tattle was commonplace in every state capitol. But even as Rubio indignantly denied any suggestion of infidelity, the unconfirmed gossip had proved difficult for him to shake, popping up frequently on local political blogs and via the endless behind-the-scenes speculation of his loose-lipped legislative colleagues.

All throughout Rubio's 2010 Senate bid, his campaign aides had worried that their flailing primary opponent would go public with the gossip — but the rumors never managed to bubble up to the mainstream press. Now that Rubio had emerged as the most buzzed-about prospect in the 2012 Republican veepstakes, however, he had a fresh target on his back, and journalists were scrambling to find new angles on the young freshman senator. It started when *The Washington Post* published a story poking holes in the inspirational tale of Rubio's Cuban "exile" parents; a few months later, I reported at BuzzFeed News that Rubio had been baptized Mormon as a child. Neither revelation was particularly scandalous, but they served to rev up the D.C. rumor mill, and soon the "zipper problem" rumors were resurfacing in the gossip among politicians. Taking note of the chatter, conservative columnist Marc Thiessen wrote, vaguely, that a "malevolent oracle is at work in Washington ... seeking to undermine the ascent of a rising GOP star" by "suggesting that Rubio may look good on paper, but he cannot 'pass vet' for the vice presidential nomination." Of course, no one in the staid, starchy D.C. press corps was willing to explicitly lay out the rumors dogging Rubio — but they gestured toward them all the time with broad suggestions that "another shoe" (a stiletto, perhaps?) was still waiting to drop on the Floridian.

To lay this meme to rest, Sullivan sought out a Sacramento-based firm named MB Public Affairs, known in campaign circles for its "political vulnerability research" and tight-lipped discretion. Sullivan pulled more than \$40,000 out of the PAC's bank account to cover the company's fee, but before setting the researchers loose, Rubio's top aides had a

frank talk with the senator. They warned that the process they were about to undertake would be about as invasive and unpleasant as a prostate exam — but just as necessary to his political health. Rubio concurred. Though the senator had taken issue with the way the *Washington Post* handled the story about his parents, the truth was that the paper's findings had genuinely surprised him: He had never heard the full story from his mom and dad. He realized now just how much damage could be wrought by a single, seemingly benign secret — even one that wasn't his own.

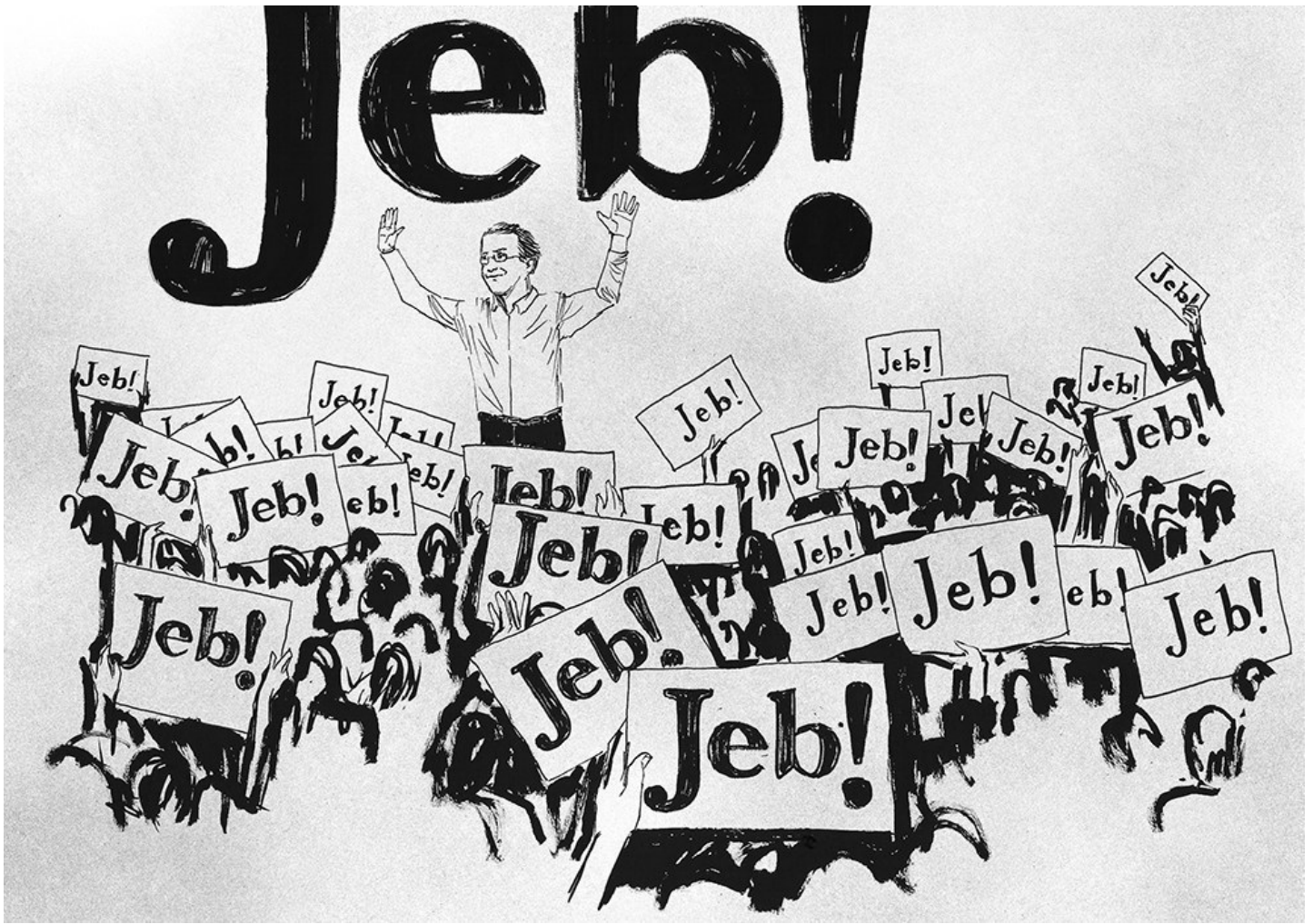
The political rectal probe started right away, with the firm's researchers eventually digging through Rubio's messy personal finances and rounding up every piece of paper that had passed through his office in Tallahassee. Field operatives fanned out across the country, descending on the tiny Missouri town where his now-defunct former college once stood, and showing up on distant relatives' doorsteps, from Miami to Las Vegas. Their mission was to dig up any and all dirt that political opponents might try to use against Rubio — especially anything likely to turn up in the vice presidential vetting process. That included quietly dispatching a private investigator to Florida to fully suss the extent of the infidelity rumors.

To Rubio's longest-serving aides, most of the stories they heard about their boss contained all the verisimilitude of *Fifty Shades of Grey* fan fiction — but they knew a couple of rumors were particularly persistent in political circles, and they targeted those for debunking. One that reporters in Florida had repeatedly tried to run down over the years dealt with a Tallahassee politico who Rubio had supposedly taken on several romantic out-of-state trips and paid for them with the state party's credit card. Another, even more pervasive rumor, held that Rubio was hiding a secret second family somewhere, and sending regular cash installments to support them (and keep them quiet). The details of this story varied substantially from one telling to another: sometimes the mother was a former Dolphins cheerleader; other times she wasn't. Sometimes there was one kid living with his mom in New York; other times there were two kids and they lived in Florida.

Rubio's operatives found these stories impossible to reconcile with the devoted family man and conscientious careerist they knew and admired. But they also knew that smoke routinely preceded fire in political sex scandals, and they needed to find out for sure if there was a "bimbo eruption" looming on the horizon. Acting on explicit instructions, the research firm investigated the rumors and determined that they lacked concrete evidence, which was enough to give Rubio's advisers peace of mind. But along the way, the firm encountered enough dishy Miami-Dade politicians hocking titillating gossip to fill the entire newsroom of a supermarket tabloid. The firm concluded that, in many cases, the rumors were being fanned by the same South Florida Republicans who claimed to be Rubio's supporters.

And unfortunately for him, many of those Miami gossips would, come 2015, join the cutthroat ranks of the Jeb Bush juggernaut.





*Clay Rodery for BuzzFeed News*

When new hires would show up for their first day of work at the Tallahassee offices of Florida governor Jeb Bush, they would find on their desks a bound copy of an 1899 essay titled “A Message to Garcia.” Even in its 19th century prose, the 1,500-word pamphlet was a breezy read that could easily be skimmed in the space of a coffee break — but the aides who wanted to thrive were expected to fully internalize its thesis.

In the essay, author Elbert Hubbard relates the story of a U.S. army officer assigned by President William McKinley to deliver an important message to the Cuban rebel general Calixto Garcia, deep in the island’s jungles. The exemplary officer takes the order “without asking any idiotic questions.” He dutifully sets off on a boat, disappears into the jungle, and emerges weeks later having executed his mission flawlessly. Praising the officer’s quiet diligence, Hubbard writes, “There is a man whose form should be cast in deathless bronze and the statue placed in every college of the land. It is not book learning young men need...but a stiffening of the vertebrae which will cause them to be loyal to a trust, to act promptly, concentrate their energies; do the thing — ‘Carry a message to Garcia!’”

Inside each pamphlet, the governor’s aides would find a handwritten inscription from their new boss: “Be a messenger.”

Some of the new staffers no doubt interpreted the gift as little more than a well-

intentioned bit of fortune cookie management theory. But the ones who would become the governor's most trusted aides were those who received it as it was intended: a new creed to live by, an invitation to convert. From those baptized into the Bush inner circle, Jeb demanded fierce obedience, a bullet-blocking sense of loyalty, and a monomaniacal drive to get the job done by whatever means necessary. Across Florida, allies and adversaries alike marveled at his Vader-like grip on his troops. "He instills something weird in you," David Johnson, one of Jeb's longtime loyalists, told me. "You really want to please him. It doesn't matter if you're 20 or 50. You want to make Jeb Bush happy with your work, happy with your competence." And often the fastest way to earn the boss's attaboys was with sharpened knives and a killer instinct.

Indeed, beneath the glossy exterior of his public profile — that of the compassionate conservative, the happy warrior, the good-natured reformer — Jeb possessed a hard-edged, often ruthless political style that ran through his entire rise and reign in the Sunshine State. "He's been the big, bad kid," Chris Smith, a leading Democrat in the Florida House, complained to [a reporter](#) toward the end of Jeb's term. "And he's wielded that power mercilessly."



Clay Rodery for BuzzFeed News

It wasn't until Rubio dazzled a roomful of donors at the Koch brothers summit in Rancho

Mirage that Jeb and his tight-knit 2016 team decided the young senator needed to be neutralized. For their new mission, they adopted a code name: “Homeland Security.” Few of Jeb’s lieutenants believed they would need to subject Rubio to too much browbeating in order to sideline him, and their commander agreed. All he needed was a gentle reminder of his place in the pecking order. And so the word went out to Jeb’s army of foot soldiers: Carry the message.

Over the next several weeks, Jeb’s messengers rallied his vast matrix of Florida allies in an effort to lock down support in his home state. They set up conference call pep rallies with hundreds of self-proclaimed “alumni” of the Bush gubernatorial administration (including many Rubio supporters) and ginned up excitement about getting the band back together. They moved swiftly to extract endorsements from state lawmakers — wooing them over brown liquor and red meat at the exclusive Governors Club near the capitol, and then encouraging them to make their allegiances publicly known.

Meanwhile, Jeb’s ever-expanding political operation made a big show of its fundraising supremacy, particularly in Florida. At an event hosted by his political action committee in Tallahassee, his team branded the donors like cattle, with large red stickers exclaiming “Jeb!” — and then they invited reporters into the formerly private meeting so they could *ooh* and *ahh* and tweet about the impressive herd of millionaires.

Nine hundred miles away at the Capitol Hill offices of Rubio’s Reclaim America PAC, the message came through loud and clear.

Rubio’s advisers had hoped to stay off Jeb’s radar entirely, quietly raising money and assembling a lean and nimble staff while the juggernaut blasted away at bigger targets and boasted about its gargantuan fundraising hauls. The loudmouth lieutenants on Jeb’s finance team were already bragging to reporters that they had set a \$100 million goal for the first quarter of 2015 — an astronomical sum that would shatter any and all fundraising records if achieved. By contrast, when Rubio had assembled his top donors in Miami Beach at the end of January, his advisers explicitly asked that they resist, for now, any urge to hype their contributions in the media.

“Don’t try to steal Jeb’s thunder,” one Rubio adviser instructed them. “It’s like a pendulum. Let them pound their chest and build themselves up, and when they don’t hit their goal, it’s gonna come crashing back [in] the other direction.” In the meantime, they would go about their business without Jeb’s interference, and when the fundraising totals were made public, Rubio’s haul would far exceed the low expectations.

Alas, the Bush brigade had Florida on full, threat-level-red lockdown, and with the exception of a few loyal backers, Rubio wasn’t getting anywhere in his home state. Meanwhile, as they tried fundraising outside of Florida, they began to notice a curious pattern among the Republican donors who were turning them down. Many of them seemed to like Rubio’s ideas and message, but when they explained their doubts about his 2016 prospects, they often used the same vague, coded language: concerns about the

wealth of “oppo” that could drag him down, or the “talk coming out of Tallahassee,” or the importance of nominating a “fully vetted” candidate. This, of course, was nothing new for Rubio. But it seemed oddly top of mind all of a sudden in certain quarters of the GOP money world.

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Eventually, word got back to the senator’s camp that Jeb’s close allies in Florida were working to revive the “zipper problem” meme in a last-ditch effort to freeze Rubio out of the race; they were circulating the rumors anew among donors and politicians and cautioning them to exercise due diligence before signing on with his campaign. From the scraps of intel Rubio’s team was getting from donors, it was difficult to tell how widespread or organized the whisper campaign might be, but some on Rubio’s staff believed they’d identified at

least two of the culprits. The first was Ann Herberger, a Miami-based political fundraiser now on Jeb’s payroll whom Rubio had axed from his Senate campaign for failing to bring in donors. “Marco fired her and now she’s bitter,” a Rubio strategist told me.

The second culprit they’d identified was Ana Navarro. Few people inspired more acrimony among Rubio’s aides these days than the First Lady of the Biltmore, who they regarded as a flighty and spiteful socialite masquerading as a political strategist for TV. They resented how she had allowed reporters to quote her as a “confidante” or “adviser” to Rubio for years, only to bolt to Jeb the second he decided to run for president. They now regularly heard about her dissing Rubio to the important power brokers and politicians who filtered in and out of her boyfriend’s hotel, and at least one of the senator’s advisers was convinced that she was fanning the infidelity rumors. “That woman couldn’t say nice things about her mother,” said the adviser. “She’s just gonna say acerbic things for the sake of saying them.” (Both Herberger and Navarro denied spreading rumors about Rubio.)

Meanwhile, in a series of off-the-record conversations, Jeb’s messengers tried to convince a number of influential figures in political media that they had the goods on Rubio. Among these was MSNBC host Joe Scarborough. A former Republican congressman from Florida who remained tapped into the state’s politics, Scarborough was skeptical whenever somebody tried to convince him that Rubio had an explosive career-ending secret lurking in his past. “Everybody who runs against him says he has girlfriends, or financial problems. They throw a lot of shit at the wall,” Scarborough told me. “It’s the same thing from the Jeb Bush camp. They keep telling me, ‘Oh, we’ve got the thing that’s going to take him down.’ But nobody’s ever produced anything that we all haven’t read in the *Tallahassee Democrat*.”

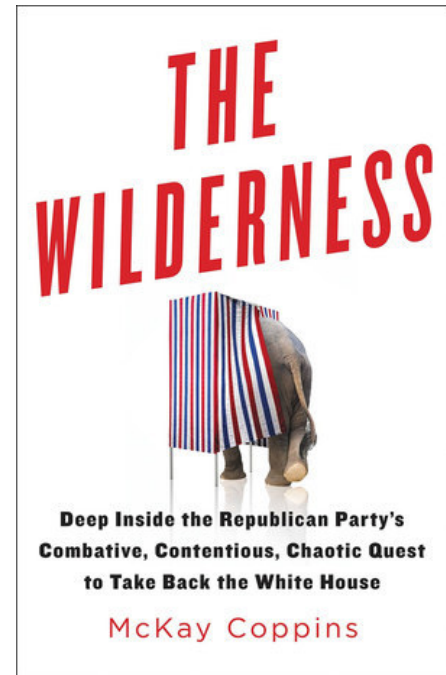
To many in Rubio’s orbit, the most maddening part of the unkillable zipper meme was not the thousands of dollars they’d already spent trying to debunk it, or even the fact that



Jeb's people seemed so dead set against a competitive primary that they'd resorted to shameless gossip-mongering: It was the double standard at work. After all, Jeb had faced his own rumors of adultery in his day. In one of the more enduringly bizarre episodes of his governorship, a reporter had confronted him at a bill-signing ceremony about rumors that he was having an affair with a former model who had worked closely with his administration. Jeb had indignantly, and emotionally, denied the "hurtful" gossip, but the incident gave a *Vanity Fair* writer who profiled him shortly thereafter license to detail the other unsubstantiated Jeb rumors swirling around Tallahassee. And yet no one in the GOP establishment seemed to be wringing their hands over *Jeb's* "zipper problem."

Some of Rubio's advisers came to believe that racial stereotypes were part of what made the speculation so persistent. "He's Cuban and he's from Miami, so of *course* he has mistresses," Sullivan once grumbled sarcastically to a colleague.

Still, most in the Rubio camp had trouble believing that Jeb would personally green-light such a brazen campaign of character assassination against someone who he had, just four years earlier, joyously introduced to the world while choking back tears (or at least pretending to). But one of the privileges of being Prince Jeb was his ability to give an order and then step back in blissful ignorance as a team of duty-bound lieutenants plotted, and strategized, and worked out all the gritty details that entailed "carrying the message."



As for Rubio, he found himself back where he always ended up: restless, and fidgeting, and bouncing on the balls of his feet as he impatiently waited for the bang of the starting gun. Maybe it really was crazy to give up his Senate seat and risk his whole career on an underdog bid against the Jeb Bush juggernaut. But he had only gotten this far on the power of perpetual forward motion. And he wasn't going to stop moving now.

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Adapted from the book ***The Wilderness: Deep Inside the Republican Party's Combative, Contentious, Chaotic Quest to Take Back the White House***, to be published December 1, 2015. Copyright © 2015 by McKay Coppins. Reprinted with permission of Little, Brown and Company. All rights reserved.

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