

Mike Huckabee's Healthy Ambition

The GOP Presidential hopeful is battling obesity on the campaign trail with tales of his own 110-pound weight loss

Business Week – July 3, 2007

By Joseph Weber

“While health care is climbing near the top of the agenda in the U.S. Presidential race, one Republican hopeful is arguing that the issue isn't really care but rather the unhealthy state of the average American. Former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee, speaking to a group of weight-management professionals, argued that the nation could extend lives, improve the quality of life, and save some \$700 billion annually if Americans lost weight, exercised more and quit smoking.

“We don't have a health-care crisis. We have a health crisis,” Huckabee said at a World Congress meeting on workplace weight-management strategies June 28 in Chicago. “We are an overfed and underexercised nation.”

The former governor, one of at least 11 GOP hopefuls jockeying for the limelight, is using his personal epiphany about health as a rallying point in his campaign. He lost 110 pounds after being diagnosed with diabetes in 2003 and is now training for his fifth marathon. His fastest time was four hours eighteen minutes, a respectable clip for someone who says elementary school coaches often seemed like little more than sadists for their insistence that he run even as much as a mile.

Change in Attitude Needed

Huckabee now argues that Americans need to create a “cultural shift” to battle obesity and unhealthy lifestyles. He likens such a shift to the public's shift from littering, thanks to Lady Bird Johnson's campaign against it in the 1960s, the acceptance of seat belts at the urging of Ralph Nader, and revulsion at driving under the influence because of Mothers Against Drunk Driving. Attitude changes come first, he says, then laws follow suit (though he's proud of laws banning smoking widely in Arkansas).

Peppering his talk with statistics, Huckabee argued that obesity is killing 700,000 Americans each year. Overloaded ferry boats have sunk, he said, even though they carried fewer passengers than the mandated maximum, simply because adult American males now weigh an average of 185 lbs., instead of the 142 lbs. common when the capacity standards were set in 1962. Stadium and airline seats seem smaller now because they were designed for far lighter passengers, he added.

“The crisis is real,” the GOP hopeful argued. He insisted that the nation could sharply cut the 17% of gross domestic product now spent on health care if we simply improve our health. A reduction to 11%, he said, would save \$700 billion annually and would sharply drive up worker productivity on the job.

Potluck Rite of Passage

Huckabee, 51, a former pastor of several southern Baptist churches and former head of the Arkansas Baptist State Convention who served as governor of Arkansas from 1996 until this year, joked that his personal fondness for fatty foods was culturally based. Growing up Baptist, he cracked, meant that “a casserole and a covered dish” were significant religious symbols for him. The potluck dinner, he said, was a rite.

Like another famous Arkansan with chronic weight problems and related health issues—former President Bill Clinton—Huckabee hails from Hope, Ark. Both men were reared in a culture where county fairs offer such delicacies as fried Twinkies and fried Snickers bars. “We fry everything,” Huckabee said, arguing that adding useless and inexpensive calories is a common response to food needs in poorer areas. Huckabee says he himself grew up poor and relied on such unhealthy foods.

Portable Coverage

In an interview after his talk, the former governor said he would seek to focus on helping Americans slim down and get healthier. But he also said he would try to change the health-insurance system so that coverage was not dependent on where one works, but would be portable. Individuals also would have incentives to reduce health-care costs, such as not undergoing magnetic-resonance-imaging and other costly procedures when they're not needed.

On perhaps the leading issue troubling Americans, the war in Iraq, Huckabee said he expects the U.S. to have troops on the ground for a while yet. “The people of America wanted the war to end in 1,000 days, but the people we're fighting are willing to fight for 1,000 years,” says the former minister. “It's a theological war.” However, he wants to see Iraq's neighbors step in with military and other support, after they're persuaded that stability is in their interest, so the U.S. can gradually scale back its involvement.

Huckabee also said he expects the GOP nominee, which he hopes will be himself, will likely face off against Senator Hillary Clinton (D-N.Y.). While Senator Barack Obama (D-Ill.) has been commanding much of the public attention lately, Huckabee argues that the Democratic Party machinery will rally behind the New York senator. “Britney Spears also gets a lot of attention, but she doesn't get the Oscar,” he says.