

Voters Might Not Miss Jeb Bush, but Campaign Reporters Will

By **ASHLEY PARKER** FEB. 22, 2016

COLUMBIA, S.C. — By the time I was assigned to cover Jeb Bush, he was already becoming the exclamation mark that couldn't.

Even his gait — long-limbed and newly gangly courtesy of the Paleo diet — and the way he seemed to curl slightly into his 6-foot-4 frame told the story: A campaign that was supposed to be “joyful” had become a slog.

He had taken to handing out small toy turtles to children he met along the way, in what often felt like a parable intended just for him — maybe slow and steady could, still, win the race.

Ultimately, the end came painfully, as he finished fourth in the South Carolina primary on Saturday, yet another disappointment in a year full of them. The nation, simply, did not want what he was selling.

But his presence will be missed in the 2016 race among those of us who covered him.

Even as he stumbled as a candidate, he was, in many ways, a reporter's dream.

He held news conferences so frequently — nearly daily — that their absence felt newsworthy. And he seemed constitutionally incapable of not answering questions, even those he should not have. As aides tried to hustle him away, he would often pause and turn back, or roll down his car window, to give a final response, throwing political caution to the wind.

He gave out his email address easily and freely and, early on, even responded to queries sent there.

He could be curt with voters, and rarely coddled them. People who saw him speak in person almost always went away impressed, even if they were not convinced that they should vote for him.

He was your goofy dad, your awkward uncle. He bungled a policy rollout in Nevada when he called “Supergirl” “hot” (c'mon, Dad!), he was delightfully befuddled when his Apple Watch began ringing during a meeting with an Iowa newspaper, and he wiggled into a hoodie in a shaky YouTube video.

He talked with deep passion about space travel, and spoke to kids as if they were grown-ups, offering 8- and 9-year-olds treatises on the nation's debt.

He fumbled for basic expressions, and some of his references and jokes made no sense — and yet we loved them anyway. There was the time Jeb put a crab in a frog metaphor. And the one about being “the bacon in the breakfast experience, not the egg,” whatever that meant. (We assumed it was something Paleo.) By the end of his campaign, I had a whole mental subcategory of Bush stories that I had nicknamed Zany Jeb.

But, at the core, what made Jeb compelling to cover was that he was deeply, impossibly human.

In a cycle where so many other candidates were able to toggle effortlessly between soaring speeches and masterful debate performances, between well-rehearsed outrage and manufactured indignation, Jeb almost seemed to think aloud in real time, and we got to watch him muddle and bumble through, just like any real person.

He was deeply self-aware, talking openly about how bad he was at debates and explaining, honestly, that his problem was answering the moderators' questions too directly.

He was atrocious at bragging in a year when self-aggrandizement was king.

He was running a throwback campaign — of policy rollouts, of Bush family compassionate conservatism, of noblesse oblige — amid an electorate clamoring for raw revolution. As John Feehery, a Republican strategist, observed: “The voters don’t want nobility. They want off with their heads.”

Jeb recognized just how unruly running for president in 2016 had become. He spoke of campaigning with “a servant’s heart” in a cycle where the leading Republican talked of shooting people on Fifth Avenue and still not losing votes.

He devoted a portion of almost every speech to talking about a severely disabled girl he met while campaigning for governor of Florida. And he repeatedly stood up to Donald J. Trump for, he said, disparaging women, people with disabilities and Hispanics.

At one of his final events in South Carolina last week, a Times of London columnist who had been following the election stood to ask a question, but first offered an observation. “I haven’t heard any other candidate give a long period of their speech to talking about people with learning disabilities, people at the bottom of the pile,” the columnist said. “Whatever happens to your campaign, sir, that part you should be really proud of.”

By the end, Jeb’s candidacy took on an outsize poignancy. When, at an event in New Hampshire, he half-jokingly, half-imploringly asked the audience to “please clap,” the moment was imbued with an epic pathos, and quickly went viral.

But the crowd in the room laughed, and then it clapped, heartily.

Jeb was a flawed candidate, who ran a wildly imperfect campaign. But he struggled mightily and did it on his own terms, trying to talk about big, serious things. And for that, perhaps, he deserves a round of applause.

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