

Decision 2016

Cruz Opens WH Bid; Targets Conservatives

BY PHILIP ELLIOTT
Associated Press

LYNCHBURG, Va. — Launching his bid for the Republican presidential nomination, Sen. Ted Cruz of Texas asked Christian conservative voters to imagine a United States without the IRS, Obamacare or abortion rights — and to imagine they can make that happen by supporting him.

His aspirational appeal on Monday, aimed at America's most conservative voters, could quickly run into challenges in winning over moderate voters — and eventually deep difficulties in governing should Cruz win the White House.

But it's a message that Cruz, the first major 2016 contender to declare himself a candidate, is expected to forcefully emphasize in the coming year before voters start to pick nominees.

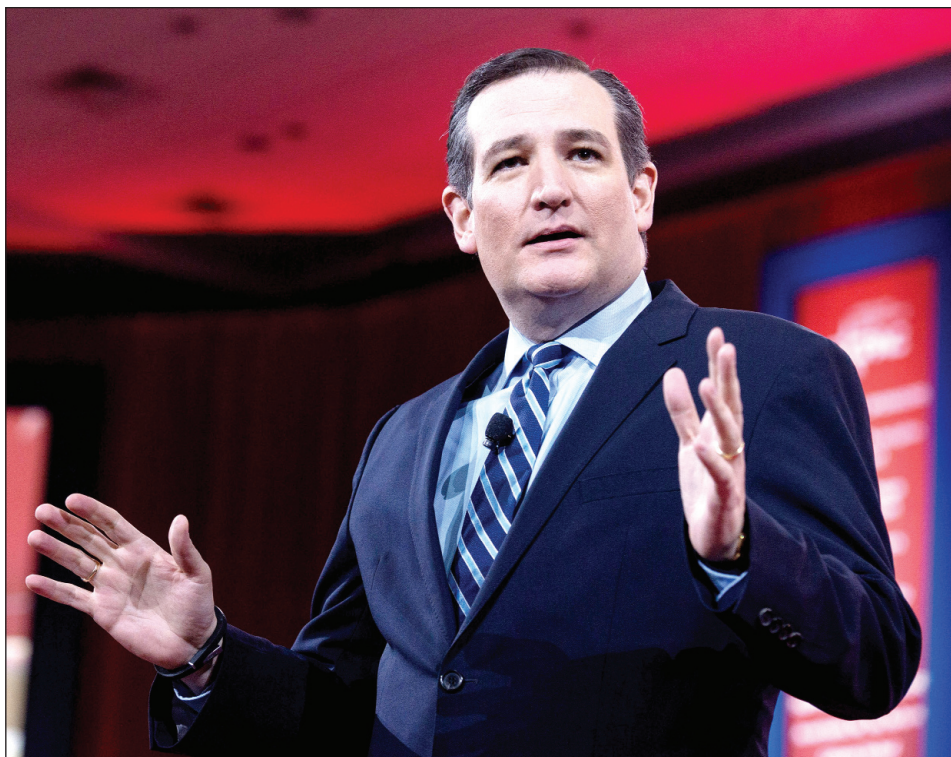
"God's blessing has been on America from the very beginning of this nation, and I believe that God isn't done with Americans," Cruz declared at Liberty University, a Christian school founded by the late Rev. Jerry Falwell.

"I believe in you. I believe in the power of millions of courageous conservatives rising up to reignite the promise of America. And that is that is why, today, I am announcing that I am running for president of the United States of America."

Cruz won't be the sole GOP contender for long. Two Senate colleagues, Kentucky's Rand Paul and Florida's Marco Rubio, are eyeing campaign launches soon. And former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush, Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker and former New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie, are expected to follow, among others. The 44-year-old Cruz is betting his White House hopes on profoundly conservative voters and their opposition to policies they find abhorrent.

Within such circles, there is deep distrust of the IRS, which was revealed last year to have been scrutinizing tea party groups' nonprofit status.

Scuttling President Barack Obama's health care legislation, called by some "Obamacare," is a rallying cry, as well. And abor-



OLIVIER DOULIERY/ABACA PRESS/TNS
U.S. Sen. Ted Cruz (R-Texas) is shown speaking at the 42nd annual Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) Feb. 26 in National Harbor, Md. Cruz announced his presidential bid Monday.

tion is a major issue for Christian conservatives who have tremendous sway in the lead-off caucus and primary election states of Iowa and South Carolina.

During his 30-minute kickoff speech, delivered like a sermon without notes or cue cards, Cruz made clear he sees electoral potential in his unbending advocacy.

"Today, roughly half of born-again Christians aren't voting — they're staying home," Cruz said. "Imagine, instead, millions of people of faith all across America coming out to the polls and voting our values."

Following his election to the Senate in 2012, the former Texas solicitor general quickly established himself as an uncompromising figure willing to take on Democrats and sometimes Republicans, too. Divisive within his own GOP, he won praise from tea party activists for leading the effort to shut the federal government during an unsuccessful bid to block money for the health law.

He spoke on the fifth anniversary of that law — legislation that prompted Cruz to stand for more than 21 hours in the Senate to denounce it in a speech that delighted his supporters and other Obamacare foes.

Cheers rose Monday in the hall when Cruz reminded the crowd that Liberty University filed a suit against the law right after its enactment.

But the partial government shutdown was not widely popular, and Democrats signaled that it would be central to their criticism of the first-term senator.

"His reckless approach to governing would make life worse, not better, for Americans and he isn't the type of fighter that America's middle-class families need," Democratic National Committee chair Debbie Wasserman Schultz said in a statement.

The son of an American mother and Cuban-born father, Cruz would be the first Hispanic president.

To the enthusiastic crowd, he urged students to "imagine a president that finally, finally, finally secures the borders."

He also nodded to the tea party, which emphasizes limited federal spending and a libertarian-leaning view of government.

"Imagine a simple flat tax," he said. "Imagine abolishing the IRS."

He left unexplained how the government would collect taxes without the Internal Revenue Service. The flat tax has never gone anywhere in Congress because the only way it can work is either by dramatically cutting spending or significantly increasing taxes for most low- and middle-income families. Now, wealthy families in general pay federal income taxes at higher rates than the rest of the population.

On abortion, Cruz said: "Imagine a federal government that works to defend the sanctity of human life."

House Dems Unveil Own Budget Plan

BY ANDREW TAYLOR
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — House Democrats Monday unveiled a \$3.7 trillion budget plan for next year that mirrors President Barack Obama's call for \$1.8 trillion in tax increases on wealthier people and corporations over the coming decade. But it would add almost \$6 trillion to the national debt over that time.

The plan by Maryland Democratic Rep. Chris Van Hollen rejects deep cuts proposed by Republicans to social safety net programs and would keep the health care law intact.

The plan calls for a wave of new spending for infrastructure like roads and bridges and additional funding for education and medical research. It would make modest curbs on the rapid growth of the popular Medicare program. As a result, deficits would grow from a projected \$378 billion next year to \$717 billion in 2025. The national debt would grow from \$19 trillion to more than \$25 trillion over 10 years.

The Democratic plan has no chance of being adopted during House debate this week but draws a contrast between the competing fiscal priorities of the two parties. The GOP measure manages to project balance but promises unrealistic cuts to domestic programs like transportation to do so. It also would leave in place revenues consistent with keeping more than \$1 trillion in tax increases from so-called "Obamacare" in place.

The House will debate several different budget plans this week.

GOP leaders say they will amend the budget to add \$38 billion more in funding for overseas military and diplomatic accounts to the \$58 billion requested by Obama. They will have to overcome opposition from deficit hawks who sought to hold the line against new spending that would increase next



Van Hollen

year's projected deficit. In the Senate, Lindsey Graham, R-S.C. won approval of a plan to add \$38 billion in additional war funding as a way to try to get around binding budget caps on the Pentagon. But the measure also contains language that leaves the money vulnerable to a procedural challenge that would require a 60-vote supermajority of the Senate's 100 members to waive. Democrats argue that means Graham's move amounts to a pyrrhic victory on defense spending.

Meanwhile, a group of

GOP conservatives released a budget plan in hopes of balancing the budget within six years instead of the nine years envisioned by a measure approved by the Budget Committee last week. It relies on deeper cuts to attack red ink.

The Republican Study Committee proposal, which will be voted on later in the week by the full House, includes savings of \$184 billion from Social Security, in part by holding down annual cost of living increases in benefits. It calls for gradually raising the age of eligibility of Medicare to 67 from its current 65, and envisions other savings from other benefit programs that exceed House Budget Committee proposals.

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Investigation: No Evidence Of Gang Rape

CHARLOTTESVILLE, Va. (AP) — A five-month police investigation into an alleged gang rape at the University of Virginia that *Rolling Stone* magazine described in graphic detail produced no evidence of the attack and was stymied by the accuser's unwillingness to cooperate, authorities said Monday.

The article, titled "A Rape on Campus," focused on a student identified only as "Jackie" who said she was raped at the Phi Kappa Psi fraternity more than two years earlier.

It described a hidden culture of sexual violence fueled by binge drinking at the college. Police said they found no evidence of that either.

There were numerous discrepancies between the article, published in November 2014, and what investigators found, said Charlottesville Police Chief Timothy Longo, who took care not to accuse Jackie of lying.

The case is suspended, not closed, and the fact that investigators could not find evidence years later "doesn't mean that something terrible didn't happen to Jackie," Longo said.

3 Dead In NC Scaffolding Collapse

RALEIGH, N.C. (AP) — Workers were dismantling a scaffold at a high-rise construction project when a piece of it fell to the ground in downtown Raleigh, killing three men and sending another to a hospital.

Jeffrey Hammerstein, community outreach chief for Wake County EMS, said three men died and a fourth was seriously injured in the accident at the glass and steel building called Charter Square in downtown Raleigh. All four men were involved in the construction project, Hammerstein said.

The accident happened around 11 a.m. as a subcontractor called Associated Scaffolding was in the process of dismantling the scaffold on the building's exterior, said Mike Hampton, the chief operating officer for the building's general contractor, Choate Construction Company. The equipment known as a mast climber scaffold rises up and down to take workers to different floors.

"We are finished using it. They actually were dismantling that piece when it happened," Hampton said. "It wasn't as if it was business as usual, they went to work and it collapsed."

Choate issued a statement saying the company is "deeply saddened by the loss of life and injuries."

Does West Bank Occupation Hurt Israel?

JERUSALEM (AP) — Is Israel a democracy? The answer is not so straightforward, and it increasingly matters given the diplomatic fallout over hardliner Benjamin Netanyahu's reelection last week.

The displeasure felt in some quarters over his win has placed front and center the world community's unwritten obligation to accept the results of a truly democratic vote. It is a basic tenet of the modern order which has survived the occasional awkward election result — as well as recent decades' emergence of some less-than-pristine democracies around the globe.

For Israel, the argument is especially piquant, because its claim to be the only true democracy in the Middle East has been key to its branding and its vitally important claim on U.S. military, diplomatic and financial support. Israel's elections, from campaign rules to vote counts, are indeed not suspect.

But with the occupation of the West Bank grinding on toward the half-century mark, and with Netanyahu's election-day suggestion that no change is imminent, hard questions arise.

Republican Sen. John McCain reflected the traditional appreciation of Israel when he advised President Barack Obama to "get over it" — a reference to reports that the United States was reassessing relations with Israel in the wake of the result. McCain told CNN that "there was a free and fair democratic election" in Israel — "the only nation in the region that will have such a thing."

WHO Defends Ebola Declaration

LONDON (AP) — The World Health Organization denied Monday that politics swayed the decision to declare an international emergency over the spread of the Ebola virus last year, despite evidence senior staffers repeatedly discussed the diplomatic and economic fallout of such a move.

A year after WHO declared that Ebola had been found in Guinea, the agency is on the defensive over reports that it dragged its feet when raising the international alarm over the disease. Internal communications published by The Associated Press last week documented senior agency staff discouraging the move about two months before the international alert was finally raised, citing diplomatic relations, mining interests and the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca.

WHO spokeswoman Dr. Margaret Harris said Monday that "political considerations did not play a role" and that notions to the contrary were due to a misinterpretation of the leaked documents. Harris did not respond to follow-up questions about how the documents should have been interpreted.