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May 12, 2011

Is Christie or Daniels Really Mr. Right?

By **David Paul Kuhn**



Voters often play hard to get. Eager candidates court their base. This is the common mating dance of presidential primaries. But sometimes the electorate doesn't like her options. She asks, where have all the good men gone?

Then he's spotted. Or found. He's exactly what she needs. The girlfriends, the media, encourage him. He makes his move. They talk, dance, maybe go on a few dates. But something soon goes awry. She found him hotter from afar. He's not the man she thought he was. Mr. Right goes wrong.

Chris Christie and Mitch Daniels are being wooed. They should also be wary. Flattery is deceptive.

The GOP has given up on finding the **perfect man**. Time to be pragmatic. Republicans seek the serious sort, a provider, someone who can balance those books, that good (enough) man.

But Daniels and Christie could face the rough side of this siren's song, that rocky shore.

These are substantial prospects. Not her usual type. One is overweight and brusque. The other is short and nearly bald. We say she's ready to overlook the superficial. But there are larger issues. And they're more than skin deep. Both men risk personifying the adage, true in courtship and in politics, that right on paper is not always Mr. Right.

Among GOP Mr. Maybes, conservatives have seemingly fallen hardest for Christie. There he is, jacket off, microphone in hand, in Middletown, N.J. A state worker, in a baseball cap and sweatshirt, asks how he can afford \$8,000 more for his new health care costs with an annual salary cap of 2 percent?


"You're not. You're not going to afford it," Christie replies. "You're going to have to make choices among medical plans . . . like everybody else is going to have to make choices in this economy." Christie has conservatives at "you're not." Middletown was a microcosm. Conservatives adore his lucid candor, his budget-cutting brinkmanship.


Radioman Rush Limbaugh: "Is it wrong to love another man?" MSNBC's Joe Scarborough said Christie "reduces me to a 14-year-old girl at a Beatles concert." Commentator Ann Coulter termed him the "magnificent Christie."



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"If we don't run Chris Christie," Coulter said at CPAC, the premier conservative conference, "Mitt Romney will be the nominee and we will lose." Don't make us settle, she warns.

How blind love is (in the beginning). Christie supports gun control. He backs "an orderly process" for illegal immigrants "to gain citizenship." "Being in this country without proper documentation is not a crime," Christie said at a Latino community forum in 2008. Potential opponents will surely remind conservatives of the occasions Christie stepped out on them.

Perhaps Christie is realistic about where this relationship would lead. He insists he's not interested. He tells reporters, "Short of suicide, I don't really know what I'd have to do to convince you people that I'm not running. I'm not running." But then the New Jersey governor goes to Washington to discuss national politics. He tells National Review that he could "win the White House." He agrees to meet a bevy of Iowa powerbrokers in late May. Monday, on a radio show: "You have to feel in your heart you want to be president more than anything else, and I am not there right now." Note that "right now." Tease!

Christie is a man of mixed signals. But Republicans can't wait forever. Their biological clock is ticking. So they look elsewhere. And there in Indiana is Mr. Right Now. He lacks Christie's command of a room. Mitch Daniels is an even more adult love. He's practical.

Many writers, including [myself](#), have said they would make a great couple -- Republicans and Daniels, that is. Some flaws were mentioned: looks, unproven in the money race, his spat with social conservatives. Columnist Ross Douthat was an [early](#) matchmaker. Andrew Ferguson's smart [profile](#) laid out the good guy's case. The more silly flirtations, the more this suitable man stood out. David Brooks headlined his [column](#): "Run Mitch, Run." GOP strategist Mark Salter [agreed](#). He might be exactly what you need at this point in your life, the chorus sings.

Yet like many middle-aged men, Daniels carries baggage. I'm not talking about his divorce and subsequent rapprochement with his wife. As George W. Bush's budget director, Daniels low-balled the Iraq war bill at \$50 billion to \$60 billion. George Packer [reported](#) that officials in the U.S. provisional government in Iraq "faulted the OMB man back in Washington for nickel-and-diming their every request for money."

There was a budget surplus of \$236 billion when Daniels began with Bush. There was a \$400 billion deficit when Daniels left. Fox's Chris Wallace asked him: "Do you think it was wise -- at a time when we were fighting two wars -- to have two tax cuts and launch a huge new entitlementment?"

Daniels said the terrorist attacks changed the calculus. He added, "Don't look at 2 1/2 years when I was in the supporting cast." He urges us to look at his leadership in Indiana instead. The competition will hardly oblige.

That's when high expectations are tested. We have, after all, seen hot prospects flop before. Sometimes, as she gets to know him, the electorate loses interest. She did with John Glenn and Wes Clark. They're occasionally seen as insufficiently committed. Ted Kennedy initially balked. Fred Thompson never cared enough. Some candidates are unable to escape their complicated pasts. These deal-breakers caught up to Kennedy (Chappaquiddick) and Rudy Giuliani (his liberal side). Many a romance cannot survive such drama. And in time, the electorate could wonder what she ever saw in him.

[«Previous Page](#) | [1](#) | [2](#) |

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