

Thompson debuts, voters have déjà vu

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Davenport, Iowa — Fred Thompson walks into an old fast food joint.

“I miss you on ‘Law & Order,’” Kim Clarey yells.

“There are reruns,” Thompson replies.

“Well, senator or governor, whatever,” she smiles, “you’ll be good at anything.”

As Clarey munches her french fries at Bob’s Drive-In in northeast Iowa, she notices how Thompson looks like he does on television — tall, avuncular, a little grayer but also a little thinner. She laughs about the horde of cameras trailing him and watches as he takes a seat at another booth.

Thompson leans forward and says to the couple he is sitting with: “Everybody needs to do something and this is something I can do.”

As of last week, that something is a presidential candidacy. And while Thompson as an actor would be the perfect choice to play a presidential candidate on film, this is for real. And somewhere, between fiction and fact, voters already have a sense they know this man, even though they hardly could. His campaign is just getting under way with this first tour of Iowa.

Americans have seen this movie before.

A quarter century ago when Ronald Reagan ran for president, many voters felt they had grown up with the Gipper. From Reagan’s films to his Saturday night show on “General Electric Theater,” the onetime actor ran as the all-American boy. His character on the campaign trail mimicked the character he played in the movies.

“Thompson’s got that Reagan appeal — a homey guy you would sit down and have a coffee with,” says Ray Randall, a retired real estate entrepreneur. “Just an average guy.”

One crucial difference: When Reagan sought the presidency he had been off the small and big screen for decades. But Thompson is still with us. Each night TNT shows reruns of “Law & Order,” in which Thompson plays the Republican district attorney Arthur Branch.

“Oh gosh, it’s enormously valuable. It creates an individual that people like who ... they feel they already know,” says Thompson’s campaign manager Bill Lacy, who also worked on Reagan’s campaigns. “[His acting roles are] a huge advantage.”

Thompson campaigns as the heir to Reagan — two small-town boys gone big, but never gone big city. He even included a photo of himself with Reagan in the biographic video that plays before most of his stump speeches, taken when the two met shortly after Thompson graduated from law school.

After the bus rolls out of Bob's Drive-In, Thompson sits back in the leather armchair.

"It's like I know these people," he says, as the bus speeds past a flat horizon of cornfields. "It's like where I grew up. It feels good. I enjoy it. This is the part of this process that I enjoy the most."

Thompson, though, had little time for such personal conversations with voters. He sprinted from town to town over four days, driving nine hours on Friday and ending his Iowa trip where Reagan began his entertainment career as a sports announcer, in Davenport. There was little room for the impromptu conversations, the moments when Thompson not merely spoke to voters but met them.

The crowd in Mason City is heavier than at earlier stumps, perhaps 500 strong. Sandra Stone, a cafeteria worker at a local elementary school, stands on her tiptoes.

I ask what brought her to Thompson's speech.

"I liked a lot of his positions on 'Law & Order,' a lot of his positions come through," she replies. She doesn't mention his years in the Senate, nor his time as the Senate Watergate committee minority counsel.

Stone's eyes tilt upward as she recalls what she liked about Thompson on the show. "There was a guy who got off because of some of the stupid laws we got." And Thompson, she says, "took care of that."

Beside her is Karl Shaber. He leans toward me, with a big smile and big teeth and blurts, "I first heard him substitute for Paul Harvey," the popular conservative radio host. "He's got his head screwed on right," Shaber adds.

Thompson is after the gut check. In his stump speech, Thompson says one can't predict all the issues a president will face, so voters have to trust the candidate's character. In fact, they seem to trust the man based on the surreal relationship they have with his character on television.

Thompson takes advantage of that familiarity. His video begins by referencing his movie roles and concludes with the presidency. "A role only Fred Thompson can play," a low voiceover says, as if it was a film trailer.

Then the man himself takes the stage. Thompson references "Law & Order." He says the hardest part in "landing that job was to convince them I was from New York City." The conservative crowds never fail to laugh.

For some voters, the theatrics mean little. They bring their real concerns to Thompson.

After the speech, local farmer Les Nelson cuts through the crowd. He has a crewcut, wears worn jeans, holds out his thick hands, and says: "Kill the terrorists, secure the border, and give me back my freedom."

Thompson looks to him, and says, deadeye, "you just summed up my whole speech."

Thompson campaigns as the constant conservative. He tells those at his rallies that securing the border is more "a matter of will than it is ability," talks of protecting gun rights

and of how seeing the sonogram of his daughter turned him against abortion.

Though Thompson lacks Ronald Reagan's glow, he is intently optimistic. When a reporter asks him if the large job losses in August are signs of a coming economic downturn, he chuckles. "Oh my goodness, I will not be predicting a recession," Thompson says. "Let's look at the glass half full," he says, touting consecutive growth and a year of near-record low unemployment.

And the familiarity Thompson already has with voters often allows him to transcend the very issues that could undercut his bid to be the conservative saving grace.

In Sioux City, the regional representative of the Iowa Christian Alliance, Steve Carlson, asks Thompson whether he would support a constitutional amendment banning gay marriage.

Thompson responds that he would support an amendment that releases one state from recognizing a same-sex marriage legal in another, an amendment saying only legislatures can define marriage. Thompson is a federalist who hesitates to make what has always been state law, federal law.

After the address, Carlson tells me he was leaning toward former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee, a social conservative. But Carlson now places Thompson "on equal footing," even though he stopped short of supporting a national gay-marriage ban.

Carlson says Thompson is conservative enough. And besides, he's watched him on television.

"His character reflects his person, or his person reflects his character," Carlson says, laughing, unsure which is which.