

The Commentator
January 13, 2012

Time for Marco Rubio – and everyone else – to get serious
By Lawrence J. Haas

Republican Mitt Romney's strong showing in New Hampshire, combined with the absence of a clear-cut challenger to prevent his speedy coronation, will focus growing attention on Romney's need to strengthen his support among the GOP's conservative base – and on which potential running mate could help him do that.

Ask a Washington insider and the overwhelming choice is Florida's freshman senator, Marco Rubio. He's young and handsome, charismatic and articulate, and a Tea Party favorite who, as a Cuban-American, could presumably attract votes from America's fast-growing Hispanic population – whose large role in pivotal states will go a long way to determine whether Romney unseats President Obama.

The only significant knock on Rubio is controversy over whether he embellished his personal story in the hopes of making it more compelling. The *Washington Post* reported recently that, despite the senator's contention that he's the "son of exiles" who fled Cuba after Fidel Castro seized power, his parents came to the United States two-and-half years before Castro took over.

The political cognoscenti seem to think that "the 40-year-old senator with the boyish smile and prom-king good looks," as the *Post* described him, can weather that storm. Scratch the surface, however, and you discover problems that raise more serious questions about whether Rubio is ready to be a heartbeat from the presidency.

In a letter this month to President Obama, for instance, Rubio promised that he will not vote to raise the nation's federal debt limit unless such an increase is accompanied by "a real plan to tackle our debt."

"America deserves leaders who will stand front and center, level with the American people about our challenges and offer real solutions to solve them," Rubio wrote, responding to reports that Obama would soon ask Congress to raise the debt limit.

Yes, America deserves leaders like that. Unfortunately, based on his stance on the debt limit, Rubio isn't one of them. Here's why:

The federal debt limit, which Congress established during World War I, is an historical oddity. The United States may be the only major industrialized nation with something like it. It sets a limit on total outstanding federal debt and forces the President and Congress to enact legislation to raise the limit when the debt bumps up against it.

Politicians routinely vow that they won't vote to raise the debt limit – unconditionally or, in Rubio's case, unless the legislation includes a plan to tackle America's fiscal problems – because

they don't support higher debt. Those who explain the issue that way, however, are either confused or demagogic.

By raising the limit, America's leaders are not voting for more debt. They previously did that when they enacted tax cuts or spending increases. They are merely letting the government pay its bills as they come due. It's akin to a family choosing to pay its mortgage or American Express bill at the end of the month.

As with a family, the alternative to paying the bills is defaulting on them. For the United States and the world, which relies on the dollar as its central currency, a U.S. default would prove cataclysmic. No longer would U.S. federal debt be viewed as the world's safest investment, as it is today. That would boost interest rates on all U.S. debt and, in turn, all U.S. credit overnight, threatening the fragile U.S. and global recovery from the Great Depression and roiling global credit markets.

Washington's down-to-the-wire problem in raising its debt limit in time over the summer – driven by the rising numbers of lawmakers who, like Rubio, had vowed not to do so – made default a more serious possibility than ever before. The mere spectacle of gridlock over the debt limit as the clock ticked toward default prompted Standard & Poor's to downgrade U.S. debt for the first time, from AAA to AA+, soon thereafter.

That embarrassing fiasco and the resulting downgrade should serve as a wake-up call to every one of America's elected leaders that, while they battle one another politically, they should no longer threaten America's financial standing.

Rubio, however, apparently doesn't see it that way. That, alone, raises questions about whether, in the world of governing, he's ready for prime time.

Lawrence J. Haas is Senior Fellow for U.S. Foreign Policy at the American Foreign Policy Council. Haas was Communications Director and Press Secretary for Vice President Al Gore.