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Revenge of the GOP Nerd

By **David Paul Kuhn**



What do these three Republican rising stars have in common: Paul Ryan, Mitch Daniels and Bobby Jindal? You can imagine all at a Star Trek convention.

For Republicans, the nerd might not be the new jock. But the GOP jocks are increasingly letting the nerds in on the party.

Rick Snyder's "One Tough Nerd" ad tells the story. The former chief of Gateway computers hopes to be the next Michigan governor.

The ad, which ran during the Super Bowl, begins with a voiceover: "We've tried career politicians. We've tried happy talk. And we're 50th out of 50 – dead last."

Cut to Snyder: "It's time for a nerd."

Soon we see Snyder pictured as a precocious boy – glasses, suit and tie.

Voiceover: "Rick Snyder started reading Fortune magazine when he was 8."

We see Snyder as a young man. He's wearing big-rimmed glasses. He looks like someone George W. Bush picked on.

Voiceover: "By 23, he completed college at the University of Michigan – and his MBA, and his law degree."

It's enough to make the Prof-in-Chief jealous.

Snyder has gone from political zero (polling at 3 percent) to a potential-nerd hero. The ad is one big reason. And this story gets nerdier.

The Michigan firm EPIC-MRA recently polled likely primary voters. Only the contenders' names were first read. Snyder placed third among the GOP candidates, at 12 percent. Then pollsters read candidates brief biography. The Gateway geek rose 10 points and took second place. Among "strong Republicans," Snyder's biography moved him from third to first place.

Today's anti-Washington spirit is a factor. Outsiders have an advantage. Republicans have always fallen hard for businessmen. And the jock-GOP culture certainly remains strong (e.g – the popular moose killing, basketball star, beauty queen gone governor, Sarah Palin). As the president of the

Michigan firm, Bernie Porn, said: "The folks who are passionate NRA members, I just don't see them partying with nerds."

But increasingly, nerds appear to be the life of the party.

Paul Ryan, the top Republican on the Budget Committee, used his nerd skills last week to "unpack" the Senate health care bill numbers. No less than George Will has imagined Ryan as a future vice president.

Indiana Governor Mitch Daniels, a potential presidential candidate, previously served as the director of the Office of Management and Budget. It's a job only a nerd could love. Consider the current OMB chief, Peter Orszag.

Orszag personifies "nerd cool" in exceedingly nerdy Washington. At first, as Obama's brand of smart-cool took hold, Washingtonians denied they were still nerd-tastic. But only in "Hollywood for ugly people" could Orszag be hot. And in DC, this geek is chic. From Orszagasm.com – a recent post, "you had me at 'infrastructure'" – to the fixation on his love life and love child (different women). Orszag's DC popularity evokes Intel's ad: "Our rock stars aren't like your rock stars."

Perhaps in this era of the professorial president, Republicans decided to put forward their wonkish rock stars. It helps to have number crunchers on the main stage when it's all about the economy.

But this is also the GOP. Its jocks have beat up nerds since the word "nerd" entered our vocabulary – from general Ike versus "egghead" Stevenson to W versus Kerry.

W was the onetime cheerleader who became both swell and jock. After W fell out of favor, the GOP's new young star was tellingly a skinny Rhodes Scholar. Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal is so nerdy that he's **compared** to Kenneth the Page. And Jindal too might run in 2012.

Some GOP nerd-stars remain in denial. Mitt Romney favors the cookie-cutter executive image. But Romney is a guy who **quotes** Star Wars and recently **told-on** a rapper who did not have his airplane seat in the "upright and locked position." There is also the young Illinois GOP Rep. Aaron Schock. Schock attempts to portray cool. He recently wore couture suits in GQ. But behind the constructed image many see TV prodigy Doogie Howser and the guy who opened his own Individual Retirement Account at age 14.

So are the nerds taking over the GOP?

I posed that question to a friend of mine, Benjamin Nugent. He wrote the book on nerds, really, "**American Nerd: The Story of My People.**"

"It's funny that you should spring this on me. I live in Iowa City now. And Iowa City has this diner where I write every morning, where basically every politician in the country comes to," Nugent told me. "I was minding my own business and suddenly these Republicans come in and start setting up

posters and they hand me the little postcard about Branstad. And it's a muskrat with glasses. The youngest person to ever become governor. He is the nerdiest!"

That's former Iowa Gov. Terry Branstad. He wants to be governor again. Classic over-achiever.

"The entire tone of the event could not be more different from Sarah Palin-land or Mike Huckabee-land. Branstad had these huge glasses and looked like he got the shit kicked out of him in college," Nugent recounted. "And he makes a speech. It is the nerdiest speech. No mention of 9/11. No mention of military anything. No Palin-esque Fox News language. It was entirely jobs, balancing the budget, how responsible I am. And as president of Des Moines University, how effective I was.

"And the GOP hardliners were eating this up," Nugent added. "It made me think that my people have their moment in the GOP."

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