



The "rescue" of Elián González in Miami last year; this image is likely to haunt Janet Reno in a race for governor of Florida. But columnist Bill Press doesn't believe anyone should rule out the former attorney general.

RENO: A RARE BIRD AMONG POLITICIANS

BY BILL PRESS

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WHAT ARE Florida Democrats thinking? Are they really serious about nominating Janet Reno as their candidate for governor in 2002? Does anybody in his right mind think Reno can beat incumbent Gov. Jeb Bush?

Reno, who announced her candidacy last week, is a sure bet to win the Democratic nomination. She's a celebrity, she enjoys 95 percent name recognition, she can raise substantial funds from Democrats nationwide, and she's a hero in heavily Democratic southern Florida because of her close association with Bill Clinton.

But those same advantages are huge disadvantages in GOP-owned northern and central Florida, where any Democrat must pull enough votes to prevent a Republican landslide — and where liberals like Reno are even less welcome than an alligator on the front porch. Plus, Reno has enough political baggage to fill a fleet of UPS trucks.

Reno is famous, but mostly for screwing up. Her opponents are sure to run ads showing the deadly inferno at Waco. Cut to a video of armed Justice Department troopers hustling Elián González out of his great uncle's house. Fade to Reno standing tall alongside Bill Clinton, a reminder of every scandal of the last eight years, including a fund-raising scandal

for which she refused to name an independent counsel.

And, of course, there is one other problem. Reno has Parkinson's disease. People may not talk about it, but it's bound to be a factor in the election. When she speaks, Reno's hands visibly shake, raising the question of whether she's really up to the pressure of such a demanding job.

At first blush, it seems Janet Reno is a gift from heaven for Jeb Bush. Republicans certainly see it that way. The fiery Republican Congresswoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen couldn't resist crowing on "Crossfire" this week: "She is the dream candidate for us, because she is the poster child for liberal politics."

Janet Reno a big loser? Don't be so sure. For every one of her apparent negatives, there's an equally obvious and positive spin.

Does she have Parkinson's? Yes, but, even with Parkinson's, she outworked everybody at the Justice Department. And attorney general of the United States is a much more demanding job than governor of Florida. Besides, Jeb Bush wouldn't dare attack a woman because of her health. That would backfire, big time.

Did she refuse to call for an independent counsel to investigate White House fund-raising as Republicans demanded? Yes. But she also defied her own boss by appointing seven independent counsels to investigate other White House scan-

dals. In other words, every time Republicans said yes, Reno said no. Every time Clinton said no, she said yes. That kind of stubborn independence is unusual in a politician, and voters like it.

Was she attorney general when the FBI stormed Waco? Yes, but even though she was not in the field and was in fact, as we later learned, lied to by FBI agents, she took full responsibility for the fiasco. That, too, is seldom seen among politicians. Most of them quickly blame somebody else for their problems.

Did she send agents in to rescue Elián González? Of course. But the fact is, Elián's Miami family was breaking the law. Armed mobs were surrounding their home, defying the law. Reno decided to enforce the law and return a kid to his father — a bold move that everybody but Florida's Cuban-Americans, who would never vote for her anyway, applauded. And, once again, she demonstrated her willingness to make tough decisions — which is what voters want most of all in a politician.

For all her supposed liabilities, Janet Reno is a rare bird among politicians. She is tough, honest, independent and owned by nobody. She has all the qualities Jeb Bush is lacking.

And that's the real story in Florida. The issue in next year's race will not be Janet Reno's record as attorney general. It will be Jeb Bush's rec-



Reno: Her mother wrestled alligators for fun; can she wrestle Jeb Bush?

ord as governor: his failure to improve schools, protect the environment and grow the economy. But, most of all, his chicanery in last year's election, when he refused to guarantee an accurate statewide count and instead worked behind the scenes to prevent a full count and thus hand deliver the state to his brother. It was a disgraceful performance. It brought shame to the entire state. Now he will be held accountable.

Bottom line: Anything can happen in Florida, but don't count Janet Reno out. She's stronger than she looks. Her mother used to wrestle alligators for fun. Now it's Janet's turn.