

Can Michael Williams

A rock-solid, bow tie-wearing conservative who's not yet famous, Williams is aiming for a seat in the U.S. Senate. Lots of Texans are paying attention.

By Tom Squitieri

IF ALL GOES ACCORDING TO MICHAEL Williams' plan, by fall, he'll be one of only two African-Americans in the U.S. Senate — and the only black Republican there.

But to look at this Texan is to see a minority of another sort: This guy sports a perfect bow tie.

Williams has been working hard to get the attention of GOP power brokers, including Texas Gov. Rick Perry. He has been lobbying to be appointed to the seat Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison said she would give up as part of her failed bid to challenge Perry in the gubernatorial primary.

Hutchison hasn't followed through on her retirement vow since Perry trounced her on March 2. But that hasn't kept Williams from making his case anyway, much to the delight of GOP insiders nationwide who see the 56-year-old Texas railroad commissioner as a sorely needed fresh voice of conservatism in a stagnating — and overwhelmingly white — pool of Republican candidates.

So, as Williams made his way toward the stage at the American Conservative Union's



“Williams ... can take back the Democrats' turf on issues like the environment, energy, education, and the economy.”

— Former House Speaker Newt Gingrich

Conservative Political Action Conference in Washington in February, he straightened a bow tie of startling royal blue (his favorite hue) and then prepared to wow the many conservative faithful.

“I don't worry if the crowd does not know me when I arrive,” Williams tells Newsmax. “I do want them to know me by the time I leave.”

Know him, they did.

His message on how America can become more energy secure — hardly the usual fare for political carnivals — brought the audience to its feet and fired up what had been a turgid second morning of events. Introduced as the next senator from Texas,

Williams wasted no time in slashing well-trodden ideas of climate change, dismissing fears of global warming as a “fantasy.”

“We've got to go and drill for American energy wherever we have American energy. We've got to drill for it on the West Coast, the East Coast, the eastern part of the Gulf of Mexico, the Rocky Mountains, and oh, by the way, drill in the ANWR,” he thundered, bringing a few thousand

conservative activists to their feet. And, he added, “We've got to bring the nukes back. We haven't built a nuclear power plant since 1979.”

Manna to the crowd. When he left the stage after his 15-minute speech, there was backslapping, photo-taking, and autograph requests.

Williams, who had been asked to speak on the esoteric topic of the future of energy (one of his specialties), gave a face and a personality to a name being embraced in the hot constellation of tea party-GOP-conservative activists.

He gets raves on political blogs, and he has picked up some high-profile endorsements in his quest for the Hutchison's Senate seat.

His supporters include such conservative icons as former House Speaker Newt Gingrich and Sen. Jim DeMint, R-S.C., who has been anointing conservative Senate candidates around the country, sometimes in defiance of other party leaders.

The influential Red State blog recently lauded Williams with praise, calling him “the rarest of political animals — an electable African-American conservative Republican,” adding: “There are a number of good men running, and most are varying degrees of conservative. But Williams is set apart from the pack by being extraordinarily articulate, unyielding in his conservatism, and unfailing in his ability to relate conservative ideals through an inspiring life story.”

GINGRICH/BRENDAN SMIALOWSKI/BLOOMBERG VIA GETTY IMAGES

Energize Texas?

Gingrich agrees, recently telling GOP donors: “Williams has the rare courage of someone who fought the tough fights at a young age. He can take back the Democrats' turf on issues like the environment, energy, education, and the economy.”

Williams and Perry have a good relationship, so a Williams appointment to the Senate is not far-fetched, insiders say. And it would offer Perry a chance at a legacy unlike any other governor: the state's first black senator. “Williams is well liked by the Republican establishment in Texas.

He is seen as very valuable to them,” says Cal Jillson, a political science professor at Southern Methodist University in Dallas.

“There are not many black Republicans and even fewer black Republican office holders. So they cherish Williams,” says Jillson, whose books include *Texas Politics: Governing the Lone Star State*.

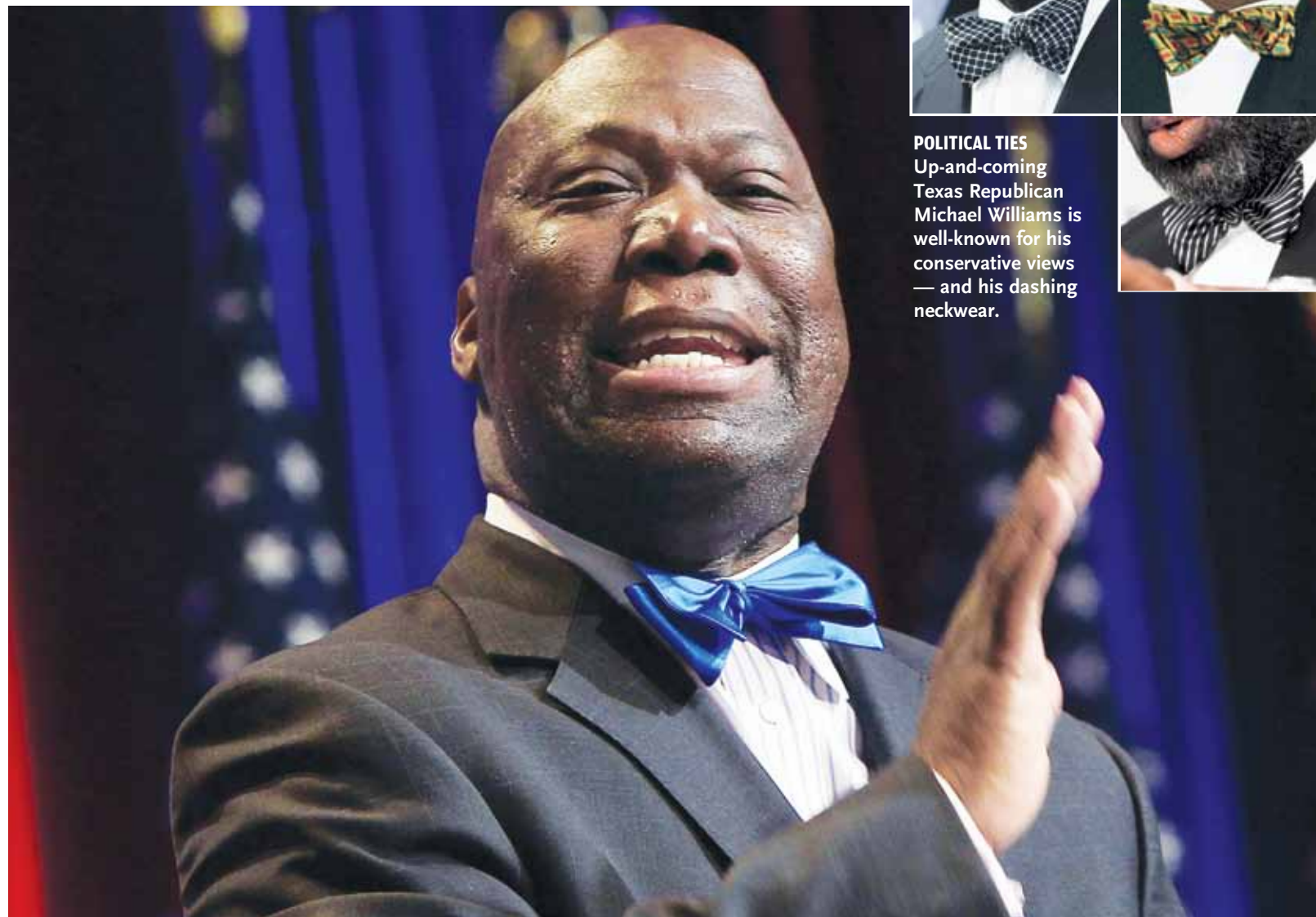
Williams has two key positives: being a favorite of the most important factions of conservatism and being a minority in a period

when the Republican Party is striving to show it is not just all white men, says political analyst Larry Sabato, director of the Center for

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POLITICAL TIES
Up-and-coming Texas Republican Michael Williams is well-known for his conservative views — and his dashing neckwear.



Politics at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville.

“Republicans desperately need to reach out to minority communities,” Sabato tells Newsmax. “By 2050, the U.S. population will be around 50 percent minority.

“The GOP is never going to get more than 58 percent of the white vote. Right now they get 10-30 percent of the vote of various minority communities. You can’t get a majority of the vote that way. Someone like Michael Williams, if prominent in politics, could potentially attract minorities to the GOP standard.”

Williams, the highest-ranking African-American in statewide Texas politics, talks the standard conservative line and adds a twist of personal accomplishment to his portfolio.

He was appointed to the state Railroad Commission by then-Gov. George W. Bush in 1998 and won re-election in 2000, 2002, and 2008. It is an important job that deals with energy issues — great credentials to go with his personality.

Before the railroad post, he was assistant secretary of education for civil rights at the U.S. Department of Education. In 1988, when he was a special assistant to U.S. Attorney General Richard Thornburgh, former Attorney General Edwin Meese awarded Williams the “Special Achievement Award” for the conviction of six Ku Klux Klan members on federal weapons charges. Williams was an assistant district attorney in his hometown of Midland, Texas, before serving as a federal prosecutor from 1984 to 1988.

“Most lives have defining moments,” Williams says. “For me, it was the period between 1967 and

1971. I learned I could compete, could succeed, and had value.

“Our folks are saying they want a reliable conservative — that happens to be what’s catching on with me. It just happens to be an added plus, me being an African-American.”

Voters are searching for someone who is solid on traditional conservative principles and someone in the Senate who can cut federal spending, develop an alternative to the Obama health-care proposal, and guard the nation’s security, he says.

“Every time there is an issue — such as the shootings at Fort Hood, or the crash on an airplane into the IRS building in Austin — they are reminded of 9/11,” Williams says.

Williams says he can help the process. “When I become a member of the U.S. Senate,” he tells Newsmax, “that will be a game changer.”

He seizes on a question about Texas being a leader in wind energy, boasting how the state known for oil produces more wind power than the next three states combined — and more than four other nations.

Whether Williams will get to use his own energy and ability as a senator remains to be seen, of course. He and other Senate hopefuls are engaged in Texas-style political Kabuki theater, waiting for Hutchison to resign, as she promised to do, after the March primary. She is being evasive, however.

“I have nothing to say, and I won’t for a while,” Hutchison said recently. If she does step down, Perry will



OH, KAY Sen. Kay Hutchison said she would vacate her seat as part of her failed bid against Gov. Rick Perry.

appoint an interim senator until a special election in November. Whoever wins will serve the last two years of Hutchison’s term and be up for re-election.

The November contest will require all candidates, regardless of party, to run against each other. If no one gets 50 percent of the vote plus one, the top two will face each other in a run-off.

In any of those scenarios, Williams likes his chances. Credit the hard work, experience, and dedication to conservative ideals . . . and perhaps, give a nod to the bow tie.

One more thing about that signature fashion statement: Shhhhhhh, don’t let on, but it was a Democratic idea — sort of.

Back when Williams worked for the Education Department, Democratic Sen. Paul Simon of Illinois grilled him mercilessly every time he testified before Simon’s Senate committee.

An associate suggested that Williams wear a bow tie, like the late Sen. Simon always wore, to soften the onslaught.

It did not help: Simon bludgeoned him again.

But afterward, Simon complimented Williams on the bow tie. Williams had a new trademark, and it came with a bipartisan flair. Not a bad way to return to Washington. □

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