

RUBIO'S

In the foyer outside Norman Braman's office, above his BMW showroom in downtown Miami where he sells Bugattis, Bentleys, and Benzes as well as BMWs, there's an impressive GOP power wall—of a certain era. There's a photo of Braman sprawled on a couch in the White House, opposite Gerald Ford. There's Jack Kemp, Henry Kissinger. Two shots of Braman shaking hands with Reagan, both inscribed, "To Norman Braman, with best wishes, Ronald Reagan."

It's not because the 83-year-old auto magnate has retreated from politics that the people on his wall are mostly in their 90s or deceased. In Miami, where until recently Braman was suing the city to block construction of a 1,000-foot-tall entertainment complex that looks like a giant toenail clipper, he remains a formidable tormentor and occasional ally of local politicians. But nationally, he said, nobody's been worth taking pictures with.

"I haven't had a cause, a political cause, since Kemp passed away," Braman said, referring to the former New York congressman, presidential candidate, and Compassionate Conservative 1.0. We were sitting in a conference room decked out in Revolutionary War memorabilia: a 240-year-old American flag, a framed letter by George Washington. Braman (BRAY-min) is tall, lean, and a bit creaky. His hair, formerly curly and sumptuous, is mostly white tufts now. "You're not going to find any major dollars in the [George W.] Bush campaign, and you're not going to find any major dollars in the Romney campaign from me," he said.

Then came Marco Rubio. The first-term Florida senator, Braman said, is "the first politician that has inspired, truly inspired" him in decades. Whereas Braman's local activism, which is mostly about defeating tax hikes, has a bloodless quality to it, his support for Rubio feels paternal. Braman has flown his protégé to Israel and has funded a university teaching gig. He also employs the politician's wife, Jeanette, at his family foundation. After Rubio's father died in 2010, Braman called him almost every day.

Their bond originated in 2005, when Rubio, a state representative, backed a favored Braman project that then-Florida Governor Jeb Bush had ignored. But beneath the transactional component of their relationship is a kind of May-December bromance. "I think Norman just really likes him personally," said former Florida House Minority Leader Dan Gelber, a Miami Democrat who's friends with both men. "Thinks he's charming. Likes his family."

Braman, who's donated \$6 million to Rubio's super PAC, is the senator's most generous benefactor. While Rubio's other moneyed friends skew reclusive—hedge funders Paul Singer and Ken Griffin are also major contributors—Braman maintains an unusually high profile for a mega-donor worth an estimated \$1.87 billion. His decades of Miami electioneering, combined with his close personal ties to Rubio, provided fodder to a *New York Times* piece last May that probed his influence on the senator's career.

In the season of The Donald, though, \$6 million from your favorite benefactor only buys table stakes. Without it, there's almost no way Rubio would have survived his face-plant on the New Hampshire debate stage, where he came off like a talking Ken doll with a battery issue, much less his disappointing Super Tuesday.

Yet as the GOP splits over Trump, Rubio may still represent the

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Republican Party's last best chance to derail him—and for its nominee to bear some ideological resemblance to the guys on Braman's wall.

Rubio remains alive for the same reason Braman adopted him in the first place: He's younger, fresher, and less terrifying than his opponents. But terrifying plays well these days. And after Trump's virtual sweep of the former Confederacy, Rubio appears to be in a win-Florida-or-bust situation. Conservative Solutions, the pro-Rubio super PAC Braman has contributed to, plans on spending \$5 million in Florida ahead of the winner-takes-all-delegates March 15 primary.

When I first interviewed Braman in December, nobody really expected the Trump thing to last. "I'm not losing any sleep about it," Braman said, sounding wise. "You always have that infatuation with a public figure who's been on television and so forth. I mean, this country does not embody the meanness and nastiness of Donald Trump. It's not what this country's about. That's why we have such great philanthropy."

It's unclear if Braman has begun to lose sleep over Trump's sustained dominance. He didn't answer follow-up calls and e-mails; he did have his secretary send me a link to an article about the \$10 million he gave Georgetown last month for Holocaust research. This much is clear: The Braman-Rubio dynamic carries with it a different implication than it did just a few months ago. When we spoke, Braman emphasized he wasn't expecting a quid-pro-quo post in a prospective Rubio White House. Now he seems like a potential liability. To win the GOP nomination, Rubio has to shed his image as a sputtering, empty-suit automaton propped up by establishment cash.

"I told you why I believe in Marco Rubio, [and] I do," Braman said. "There's been nothing in the world personally that Marco Rubio's ever done for me, my family, and I've never asked him. But I just don't like the idea that Marco Rubio isn't standing on his own two feet."

Like Rubio, Braman is a second-generation immigrant. His father, a barber from Poland, and his mother, a seamstress from Romania, lived in a poor neighborhood in Philadelphia. After college at Temple University, Braman worked as a market-research analyst for Seagram's distillery. He made his first pile of money selling his share of Keystone Discount Stores, a vitamin chain he co-owned. Rich and bored, he retired to Miami at 36. Gradually he grew less rich and more bored. He also made inroads in GOP circles.

In the early 1970s, with help from friend-of-GM Gerald Ford, he got into the Cadillac business. By 1980 "the Baron of Biscayne Boulevard" was among the biggest luxury-car dealers in Florida and was the vice chair for Reagan's Florida presidential campaign. When Reagan won, he rewarded Braman by nominating him to head the U.S. Department of Immigration and Naturalization Services. Braman's first act, before he was confirmed, was to storm the INS offices in Washington and announce his plan to fire 500 employees and computerize the whole



**Can
Norman Braman
save America
from Donald Trump?
By Simon van Zuylen-Wood**

operation. That instantly created problems. Complicating the process, according to an account by journalist Mark Bowden, was a false marriage Braman arranged in 1973 to save a Peruvian house maid from deportation. The Department of Justice, Bowden reported, balked at the idea of an INS nominee ripping loopholes in immigration law. Braman withdrew his nomination.

(When I asked Braman about the false marriage, he replied: “That’s nonsense. That’s the first I’ve heard of this in a very long time.” He said he withdrew “because my wife wouldn’t go to Washington with me, and also it was the height of the recession.” He needed to tend to his dealerships, he said.)

Braman, still rich, still bored, treaded water for a few years before deciding to buy his hometown football team, the Philadelphia Eagles, in 1985. His tenure isn’t remembered fondly in the city. “He bought the franchise and immediately showed himself to be the prototype of the rich, Scrooge McDuck guy who had a lot of money, let you know it, and wasn’t going to spend it on what he considered at the time to be ridiculous NFL salaries,” said former *Philadelphia Inquirer* Eagles beat writer Glen Macnow, who now does sports radio in the city. “He charged his players when they would take extra sanitary socks out of the locker room. So players would get, at the end of training camp, an itemized bill.”

Braman cut some of the best players, hiked ticket prices, and paid the coaching staff the lowest salaries in the league. Ed Rendell, then mayor, used his name in opinion polls as a kind of gauge of unpopularity. Eagles coach Buddy Ryan dubbed Braman, who had a summer pad on the Riviera, “the guy in France.”

In 1991, several months after he fired Ryan, Braman paid \$3.9 million for a 19,000-square-foot mansion on exclusive Indian Creek Island, which at the time was the priciest home purchase in Miami history. (Indian Creek Island is a speck of land in Biscayne Bay that has an historically anti-Semitic golf club ringed by 40 homes. Jay Z and Beyoncé lived there for a while.) Braman planted a Claes Oldenburg sculpture in a children’s nursery and turned a swimming pool into a wine cellar.

In 1994, Braman sold the Eagles for \$185 million, \$120 million more than he’d paid nine years earlier. Following the sale, he retreated to Miami for good and remade himself anew, this time into a civic vigilante with a passion for budgetary prudence.

“The parties are bulls---,” Braman said, panning the club scene at Art Basel Miami. Braman, who was instrumental in bringing the December art fair and celebrity bacchanal to Miami 15 years ago, wasn’t eager to discuss Paris Hilton’s DJ set at the W, or Adrien Brody’s debut painting exhibit, Hot Dogs, Hamburgers, and Handguns. What gets Braman off about Art Basel is all the fiscal responsibility. “Art Basel is like having a Super Bowl here every single year without one cent of taxpayers’ dollars,” he said, sitting on a folding chair in a lounge area at the Miami Beach Convention Center. “They pay the normal rent for this facility.”

Braman has passions. He’s building a museum that will borrow from his billion-dollar personal collection, which features works by Pablo Picasso, Jasper Johns, Alexander Calder, Mark Rothko, and Damien Hirst. And he has causes. He used to chair the Greater Miami Jewish Federation and helped erect a Holocaust Memorial in Miami Beach. (He’s also anti-hubris: When a group of local pols plastered their names on the memorial, Braman attempted to pry off the plaque with the back end of a hammer.) Higher education, medical research, opposition to casino gambling—the list goes on. “When it comes to nonelected civic leaders, it’s basically Norman Braman and everybody else,” said Miami pollster Fernando Amandi.

His fiscal monomania, though, is what’s made him a fixture in the city. “My father never earned more than \$75 a week. So I find it incredibly troubling that when there are dollars that are out there to address [real] problems, that people who are worth billions of

dollars steal the taxpayers’ dollars,” he said. “I don’t belong and give any money to Grover Norquist’s organization. I’m not in that antitax movement. It’s not my b----. My b---- is how the tax money is utilized.”

Braman waged his first battle in 1982, when Mayor Maurice Ferré proposed a 1¢ sales tax to retool the Orange Bowl. Braman heard the news, bought a bunch of radio spots, and debated Ferré one-on-one. The tax failed. In 1999, Braman jetted back from his home in France to fight another 1¢ sales tax that would have funded public transit. He won that one, too. In 2010 he initiated and bankrolled a vote to recall Mayor Carlos Alvarez, who’d supported a publicly funded, \$634 million stadium for the attendance-poor Miami Marlins. Alvarez lost, badly, and was last seen competing in bodybuilding competitions.

In certain ways, Braman resembles a South Beach version of Noah Cross, the John Huston character in *Chinatown*—an unelected tycoon who runs a city by controlling its public resources. And why not? Taxes, mass transit programs—these aren’t things auto dealers tend to support. Unsurprisingly, Braman has made enemies. “When people cross him, he does everything he can to eliminate them,” said lobbyist Chris Korge, who battled Braman during a separate stadium fight. Many Miamians, though, view him not as a villain but as a check against a corrupt political establishment. The year of the recall, a poll asked if Braman was “principled community activist” or a “wealthy troublemaker.” Just 12 percent went with troublemaker.

The perception that he operates out of principle rather than self-interest has inoculated Braman to some degree from criticism that he’s corrupted Miami’s democratic process. “Whether you agree with him or not, he’s his own man,” said Aaron Podhurst, chairman of the Pérez Art Museum Miami board of trustees. “He does what he wants to do. If a person criticizes Norman, it doesn’t matter to him.” Stephen Helfman, a lawyer for Indian Creek Village, concurred. “He can go about his life, and live his very nice life, and he’s not affected by pretty much anything. So he lives out his principles.” Ferré called him “a very sincere doctrinaire.”

The story of how Braman became Rubio’s sugar daddy and father figure, though, has a good deal to do with his personal agenda. At the start of this century, when Rubio was a freshman Florida legislator, Braman had a semiregular e-mail correspondence with then-Governor Bush. A typical message began with some patter about current events before giving way to an ask.

“Dear Governor,” Braman wrote in December 2003. “First I want to wish you and your family a wonderful holiday and a happy and healthy New Year. The final part of the year is something we can all rejoice in with the capture of Saddam Hussein, the revival of our economy, and the general positive feeling in the country.” He proceeded to ask Bush to restore an extended school-year program that was in place at a Miami public school Braman supported financially. “Thank God the philosophy of the school is one that believes in the principles of Booker T. Washington rather than Jesse Jackson,” he wrote. Bush instructed an aide to “please respond to Norm Braman who is a good man,” but he didn’t restore the funding. The pattern persisted. Braman would send long, cordial e-mails, requesting that some worthy cause be funded or that some acquaintance of his be appointed to a minor post, and he would usually get a polite response from Bush or from a staffer—but often no dice on the request.

After 2004, the e-mails stopped. The likely explanation is that Braman had lobbied Bush and the Florida legislature to approve a \$2 million grant for the University of Miami Health System’s Braman Family Breast Cancer Institute. (Braman’s sister-in-law would die of breast cancer a year later.) Bush vetoed the funding, and Braman went apoplectic. “As a very active Republican,” Bush said

at the time, “I’m ashamed of him.”

A year later, the funding was restored. “Marco strongly wanted the Braman Cancer money,” Bush wrote in an e-mail to a lobbyist. “And out of deference to his leadership, we let that stay as a one-time deal.”

Braman said he can’t quite remember when or how he met Rubio, but he believed they were introduced more than a decade ago by Republican Florida Representative Mario Díaz-Balart. From an ideological perspective, there aren’t obvious reasons he’d prefer Rubio to, say, Bush. When

I asked him to elaborate on his support for the senator, he got a little gauzy. “Marco,” Braman said, “has always believed that the best way to solve the problems of poverty was to give people the opportunity to advance out of poverty through the beauty of the system that we have in this country.” The statement could apply to any of the 16 other Republicans who’ve tried to run for president this year.

Then there’s the Florida GOP spending scandal of the mid-2000s, a spell of almost absurd public-sector profligacy. Among Rubio’s greatest hits, while serving as House speaker: bringing his minivan to—where else?—Braman Honda for repairs and charging the \$1,000 bill to the Florida Republican Party. Braman, fiscal hawk, doesn’t appear to have disapproved. In 2006, after the *Miami Herald* dinged Rubio for spending \$2.5 million on renovating the House chambers, Braman responded with a letter chiding the paper for “tearing him down just as he begins his new challenge.”

Florida election law prevented Braman from depositing super PAC-style lump sums into Rubio’s state House campaign kitty, but he found other ways to contribute. From 2005 to 2008, Braman, his companies, and his wife, Irma, donated more than \$560,000 to the Florida Republican Party. In 2007 and 2008, as Rubio laid the groundwork for his U.S. Senate run, Braman gave more than \$255,000 to Floridians for Property Tax Reform, an outside group Rubio used to push his agenda.

That agenda seems to have hewed closely to Braman’s. In 2007, Rubio fought then-Governor Charlie Crist to weaken a climate change proposal that would have penalized auto emissions, then embarked on a separate fight to kill a Crist casino plan—combating casinos is another Braman pet cause. In 2008 he helped secure \$80 million Braman wanted for a genomics institute at the private University of Miami. As the *New York Times* reported last year, Rubio was initially skeptical of the outlay. “But when Norman Braman brings it to you,” he said, “you take it seriously.”

Braman said he’s never asked Rubio for a political favor. The senator has said the same thing in the past. Alex Conant, Rubio’s spokesman, declined to comment on their relationship, and his campaign didn’t make the senator available for this article. Either way, that particular concern misses the point of their connection. However useful Rubio is to him, Braman has provided far more in return.

Beginning in the period when Rubio left the state House, in 2008, and entered the U.S. Senate, in 2011, Braman went from providing political support to direct cash transfers. In 2009 he made a \$100,000 donation to Florida International University to fund a seminar Rubio taught with FIU professor Dario Moreno, his regular pollster. In 2010, Rubio did seven months of



legal work for Braman’s auto business. Braman said he paid him \$51,315.38 for “employee situations” and franchise agreements. “I can tell you none of it, not one dime, was political,” Braman added. A year later, he hired Jeanette Rubio, an event planner and former Miami Dolphins cheerleader, to work at his family foundation.

It’s entirely plausible, as Braman insists, that his patronage stems only from warm and fuzzy feelings. As Gelber, the former Florida House minority leader, said, “I can’t tell you how many times I’d see

Braman, and he’d ask me how I’m treating Marco, like he’s telling me to be nice to his favorite child.” He added: “I think that’s very appealing to someone like Marco, whose parents are working-class, to have someone who can talk about politics, and art, and culture.”

This sort of personal bond only makes Braman closer than your average megadonor. Former Mayor Ferré has a story. In 2010 he’d been invited as a guest to the annual conference of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee. While waiting in line at a VIP entrance, he saw Braman and Rubio enter together. “It’s a luncheon, thousands of people go to this thing. Bibi Netanyahu was speaking,” Ferré recalled. “Braman knew exactly who he wanted Rubio to talk to and to meet. He literally grabbed him by the arm and pushed his way through. We were all waiting in line, and they went right past us. It was amazing.”

Jacob Solomon, one of Braman’s successors at Miami’s Jewish Federation, said Braman has a special knack for political bond-building. “He would chair a mission every January for several years, and on one of them we wanted to meet with Ariel Sharon. He was able to pick up the phone, call the prime minister’s office, and immediately we were in,” Solomon said. “He’s had relationships with these people. Candidates, elected officials. He’s very respectful of the democratic process. He’ll often chide me if I say, ‘politicians.’ He’ll say ‘elected officials.’”

Braman is paradoxical in that way. He bemoans the “catastrophic waste of money” that our presidential elections represent, yet defends the intentions of fellow *Citizens United* beneficiaries Sheldon Adelson and Charles and David Koch. He’s said to worship “the democratic process,” yet, as a private citizen, arguably wields more power than any pol in Miami. In other words, he’s a little ambivalent about the proper role of money in politics. And now he can’t decide whether his largesse will backfire on Rubio.

Talking in his office one afternoon, a few days into Art Basel, he launched into an unprompted comparison of Rubio and Kemp. When I pursued that thought, he cut me off. “This interview isn’t about Marco Rubio,” he said curtly.

Braman is certainly aware of the political danger to Rubio surrounding his personal finances. Braman has suffered some embarrassing reversals himself, losing more than \$27 million in the Bernard Madoff fraud. Last year it came to light that Rubio held between \$450,000 and \$1 million in mortgage and home-equity debt, took a loss on a bad real estate investment in Tallahassee, and, in an unconventional move, liquidated \$70,000 in retirement funds. Trump has seized on this, taunting Rubio for the “disaster on his credit cards.”

Which bring us back to the election. Braman said Rubio, like him, a child of immigrant parents, has borne personal witness to the wonders of free-market enterprise. That narrative, which underpins their two-man mutual adoration society, begins to look less convincing if one man is propping up the other.

“I’m a very small cog,” Braman insisted back in December. “I’m a very small factor in this.” Then he insisted some more. “No one’s going to swoop down from heaven. No one anoints a political leader, no one does. No one does. No one does.” **B**

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