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## Rubio, Eye on 2016, Hires a Coveted Former Aide to Romney

By Jonathan Martin, February 9, 2015

Senator Marco Rubio has hired a coveted former aide to Mitt Romney to oversee his political activities in the Northeast and probably in a New Hampshire campaign, signaling that he is serious about a presidential bid.

Jim Merrill, who directed both of Mr. Romney's New Hampshire primary bids, is joining Mr. Rubio's political action committee as a senior adviser, a position that would put him at the helm of the Florida senator's campaign in the first-in-the-nation primary state.

In landing Mr. Merrill, Mr. Rubio has not only brought on a strategist with deep experience organizing in New Hampshire, but also someone who was being pursued by other Republican presidential hopefuls. Mr. Merrill, who is based in Manchester, was sought out by a number of potential candidates, including Jeb Bush.

Mr. Merrill, who had indicated he would support Mr. Romney again, represents the first high-level adviser to the former Massachusetts governor to sign on with a campaign-in-waiting since Mr. Romney said last month that he would not run again. Tensions have been high between Mr. Romney's loyalists and those in Mr. Bush's orbit since the former Florida governor began moving aggressively in December to woo Republicans who had backed Mr. Romney. The strains only grew worse over time, and burst into public view just days before Mr. Romney announced that he would forgo a third White House bid, after Mr. Bush hired Mr. Romney's former Iowa director, David Kochel, as his likely national campaign manager.

In an interview, Mr. Merrill did not criticize Mr. Bush or any other candidate, but did echo Mr. Romney's pointed comment on his announcement conference call that Republicans should look to a younger candidate as their next nominee.

"What Mitt said was right: It's time for the next generation of Republican leadership," Mr. Merrill said, calling Mr. Rubio, 43, "the most exciting candidate in the field," with substance to match charisma.

There has been considerable speculation about whether Mr. Rubio, who faces re-election in 2016, will go through with a presidential campaign against his fellow Floridian Mr. Bush, who is 61. But Mr. Rubio has shown few signs of pulling back, and it is highly unlikely that an

operative such as Mr. Merrill would commit this early in the primary without an assurance that his client was nearly certain to run.

Mr. Rubio is visiting New Hampshire later this month to sign copies of his new book, "American Dreams: Restoring Economic Opportunity for Everyone," and one of his top advisers suggested that he would play to win in a state that has a tradition of upending expectations.

"Marco has always been well received in New Hampshire, and should he run for president, he would be very competitive there," said Terry Sullivan, who runs Mr. Rubio's political action committee, Reclaim America. "Jim certainly knows how to win in New Hampshire and in the Northeast, and will be a great addition to our team at Reclaim America."

Asked if Mr. Rubio could win the New Hampshire primary, which is scheduled to take place one year from today, Mr. Merrill said: "I wouldn't be doing it if I didn't think he could. He knows what it means to engage voters, do town halls, run personal, door-to-door campaigns. I've never seen a more talented guy."