

McCain Tests New Road to Nomination

2000's GOP Rebel Incorporates Support for Bush Into Quest for Change

By Dan Balz
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MEMPHIS, March 11 -- No one stole the show at the Southern Republican Leadership Conference here this weekend, but Sen. John McCain (Ariz.) demonstrated why every other prospective 2008 presidential candidate must figure out how to get around him.

More than any of his potential rivals, McCain found a way to balance embracing a weakened President Bush -- at a time when many Republicans are running away from the president -- while appealing to those in and out of his party who believe Bush and other Washington Republicans have lost their way. No other candidate could claim to offer continuity and change almost simultaneously.

The Arizona senator was full-throated in his support for Bush on Iraq, Iran and even the now-defunct Dubai seaports deal. In doing so, he continued to establish his bona fides as the Republican most likely to defend and extend the president's controversial foreign policy record. At the same time, McCain delivered a stern condemnation of fiscal profligacy and corruption in Washington that was rooted in his reputation as an advocate of change and an antagonist of pork-barrel spending.

McCain was one of six potential presidential candidates who came here to give activists a peek into the future of their troubled party. His Friday night speech offered a vivid illustration of the evolution that his advisers hope could take McCain from crusading outsider in 2000 -- whose campaign crashed when he picked one too many fights with pillars of the GOP coalition -- to the leader of all Republicans in 2008.

"We've learned from our mistakes," Sen. Lindsey O. Graham (S.C.) told reporters, "and if John does run, it's clear he's trying to be the leader of a party, not the leader of a movement, and there's a huge difference between being the leader of a movement and a leader of a party. That means you've got to take folks that disagree with you and bring them into the tent and try to broaden the scope of the party. If he does run, I think he feels very comfortable with the idea that this time around will be to lead the party."

As McCain left the Peabody Hotel on Saturday to tour the hurricane-damaged Gulf Coast, he was matter-of-fact about his steadfast support for the president. "We elected him, we need him, he needs to do well and the country needs him," McCain said in an interview. "With all the challenges, all of these things that are going on, including slow progress in Iraq, we need to show our support. It's easy to support somebody when they're up. That's why I did it. If he had been up, I wouldn't have emphasized it nearly as much. You've got to rally the troops."

At this early stage, the battle for the 2008 Republican nomination remains as wide open as it has been in anyone's memory. McCain has been making inroads with the party establishment and with Bush loyalists since backing the president vigorously in 2004. But there are still questions about whether he can truly win the hearts of a party, particularly its most ardent conservatives, that he offended so often as a candidate in

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2000.

Most of the nearly 2,000 delegates from the South and Midwest this weekend came for 2008 window-shopping -- with the exception perhaps of legions of home-state loyalists bused in by Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist (Tenn.), who was determined to win a nonbinding straw poll sponsored by the Hotline politics newsletter and avoid embarrassment on his home turf.

The delegates -- many party leaders in their home states and overwhelmingly backers of the president -- were in no mood for Bush-bashing, despite the battering the president has taken in the polls, in the media and from some within his own party. "I want Congress to stick with the president and Republicans to stick with the president," said Judy Batson of Madison, Miss. "We need to stick with the president."

When Senate Majority Whip Mitch McConnell (Ky.) called Bush "one of the great presidents in the history of the United States," the audience rose to applaud and cheer. Former Texas Republican Party chairman Fred Meyer made clear that anyone running for president in 2008 should forget about running against Bush. "Not supporting the president on the high percentage of issues would be a mistake, because people value loyalty."

The other prospective candidates generally followed that script throughout the weekend, finding ways to praise Bush on his judicial appointments or on his steadfast commitment to defeating the terrorist threat. But there were as many echoes of Ronald Reagan in their speeches as there were of George W. Bush, and the thread through many was that this Republican Party must return to the core values of limited government, strong national defense and traditional values that fueled the Republican rise to power since Reagan was elected in 1980.

In addition to McCain and Frist, four other potential presidential candidates spoke: Govs. Mitt Romney of Massachusetts and Mike Huckabee of Arkansas and Sens. George Allen (Va.) and Sam Brownback (Kan.). New York Gov. George E. Pataki, former New York mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani, former House speaker Newt Gingrich (Ga.) and Sen. Chuck Hagel (Neb.), all said to be mulling runs in 2008, did not attend. Rep. Tom Tancredo (R-Colo.), who might use the 2008 primaries and caucuses to promote his anti-immigration agenda, was not invited.

Romney offered a big-picture agenda for his party, from fighting Islamic jihadists to controlling spending to preparing for the coming economic competition with India and China. But he won his biggest applause when he condemned the decision by the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts allowing same-sex marriages. "Every child in America has a right to a mother and a father," he said.

Allen struck Reaganesque themes in his speech Saturday, denouncing what he called "criminal apologists" who make convictions more difficult and Washington bureaucrats. "We don't want to be dumbing down our [state] standards to federal levels and federal Department of Education bureaucrats in education," he said.

He criticized the United Nations, praised U.N. Ambassador John R. Bolton and parted company with Bush on immigration by saying, "Securing our borders is the first principal behavior of immigration reform, and the second principle is you do not reward illegal behavior with amnesty." Critics of Bush's guest-worker program call it amnesty in disguise.

The folksy Huckabee, who, like former president Bill Clinton comes from Hope, Ark., urged Republicans to quit wringing their hands about the party's problems. "Attitude is altitude," he told reporters who asked why he was optimistic when so many Republicans are pessimistic about the future.

"We're a party of real ideas, but we're also the party of idealism," Huckabee said in his speech. "I think we've got a better idea than John Kerry's misery index and Jimmy Carter's malaise. I'm one of those guys who believes that George Bush's 'Thousand Points of Light' and Ronald Reagan's 'Morning in America' really

resonate with America a lot more, and that's why we got elected and the other guys didn't."

Brownback, one of the party's leading opponents of abortion, stressed cultural issues, effusively praised Reagan, approvingly quoted the rock singer and anti-poverty advocate Bono but did not quote the president. His biggest applause came when he said, "I believe the core battle of our day is the battle to defend the core dignity of each person throughout their life."

Frist won the Hotline straw poll with 37 percent of the 1,427 votes cast, thanks to the fact that more than half of all the votes cast came from Tennesseans. Romney finished second with 14 percent, while Allen and Bush, who was not on the ballot, tied for third with 10 percent. McCain was fifth with 5 percent.

On Friday, McCain urged his supporters to write in the name of the president, saying that early straw polls are a distraction.

Frist claimed credit for blocking Democrats from filibustering Bush's judicial nominees by threatening to invoke a parliamentary change in the Senate rules. "By reshaping our judiciary, Republicans have helped President Bush secure a legacy that will impact your children's future more than anything else that we can possibly do," Frist said.

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