

McCain's 'Electability'

BREMERTON, Wash. — It was the tail-end of a very good Wednesday for John McCain, the day after his twin victories over George W. Bush in Michigan and Arizona. The "Straight Talk Express" had gone to sea for the first time, filling a ferry with supporters for a trip from Seattle to this Navy port city, where a crowd of thousands, one of the biggest of the campaign, waited in a steady drizzle to cheer him.



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Aboard the bus, headed back to the airport, McCain said, "It feels like the closing days in New Hampshire," the site of his first win over Bush. But an hour later,

his chartered jet veered off the runway as it began its takeoff for Sacramento, and after a screeching halt, was mired ignominiously in the mud for five hours, robbing the candidate of needed rest.

That's the way it has been in this remarkably unpredictable, start-and-stop battle for the Republican presidential nomination — a race in which McCain media adviser Mike Murphy says, "The pundits have been wrong at every turn."

McCain is sticking to his belief that, after Tuesday's contests here in Washington and in Virginia, the final verdict will be delivered on March 7, in the 13 primaries and caucuses where 59 percent of the delegates needed for nomination will be chosen on a single day.

Bush strategists say that no matter what happens on March 7, the battle will go on to the March 14 contests in Texas, Florida and other Dixie states,

where they feel confident of Bush's chances. McCain demurs. "If we win big enough" on March 7, he said, "what does it matter if Bush wins Texas," his home state?

But McCain says he agrees "absolutely" that to "win big" on March 7, he will have to increase dramatically his support among Republicans, who have been much cooler to his candidacy so far than independents and crossover Democrats. Only at home in Arizona has McCain been able to win decisively over Bush among registered Republicans. In New Hampshire, they broke even, but in South Carolina and Michigan, McCain won barely a quarter of the GOP adherents.

On March 7, Ohio, Georgia, Missouri and most New England states will allow independents and (in some cases) Democrats to help pick the Republican nominee. But in California, New York and Connecticut — states that provide half the hoard of potential winnings that day — only registered Republicans' votes will count in the battle for delegates.

McCain cites encouraging polls among Republicans in the Northeastern states that, like New Hampshire, he says "don't respond too well to Pat Robertson," the Christian Coalition leader, whose anti-McCain preachings damaged the senator badly in South Carolina. But New England is hardly the heartland of the modern GOP.

In his Arizona races, McCain never has had to prove his Republican credentials. But because he has marketed himself in this race as the scourge of "the establishment" in Washington and because he is so publicly disliked by most of his Republican Senate colleagues, Bush has not found it difficult to plant doubts about where McCain really stands.

No real Republican would settle for the meager tax cuts McCain wants, Bush says. No real Republican would waffle on the abortion plank, Pat Robertson chimes in.

In response, McCain has taken this week to proclaiming himself "a proud Reagan conservative." Sometimes, as in his Arizona radio ads and a speech at Gonzaga, the Jesuit college in Spokane, Wash., he inserts the adjective "pro-life" into the phrase, and sometimes, as in his nationally televised victory statement Tuesday night and his talk to Rotarians in liberal Seattle, he omits it.

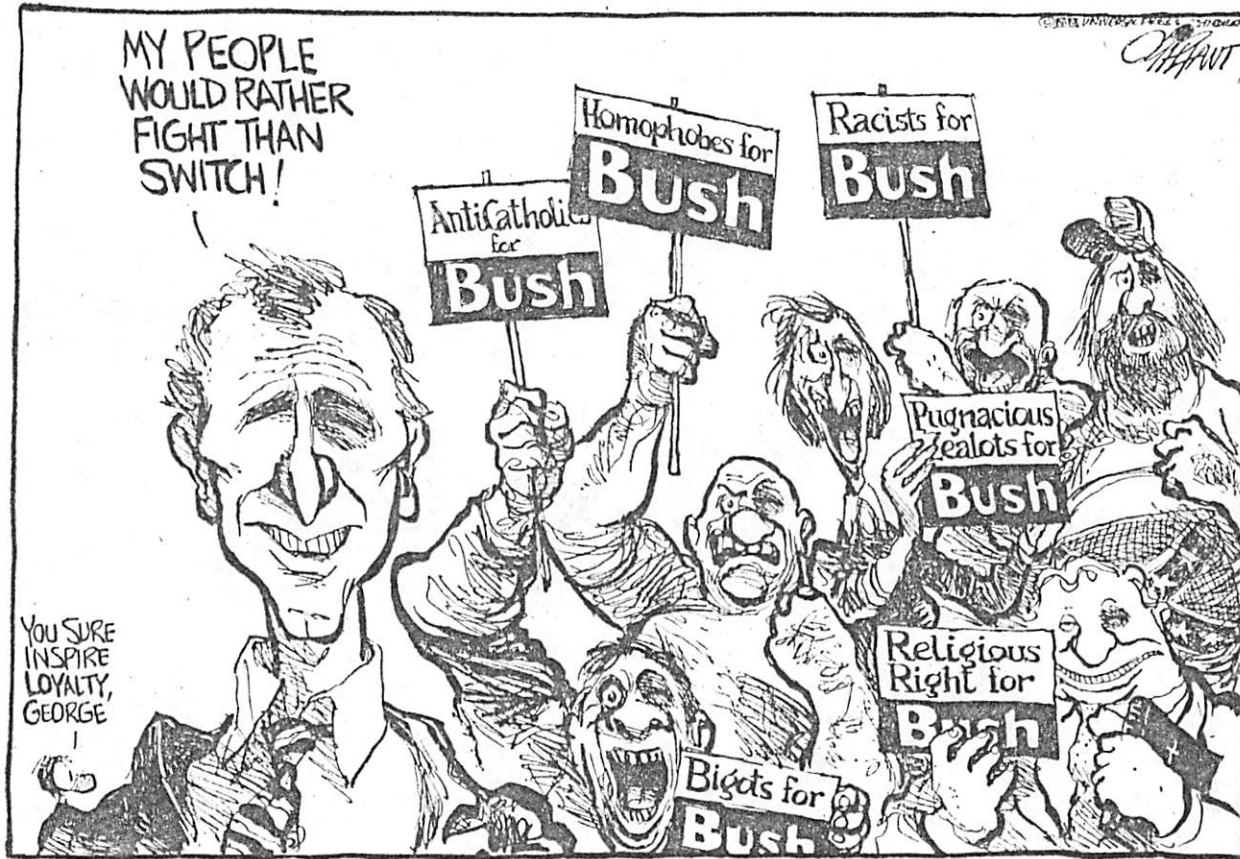
Though his overall Senate record is reliably Republican on economic and social issues, McCain's deciding just at this moment to slip the cloak of conservatism over his old costume as passionate crusader for reform looks as contrived as Bush's effort, post-New Hampshire, to recreate himself, not as the "compassionate conservative," but as the "reformer with results." Neither man looks good in the other's clothes.

More promising, in the light of polls showing McCain running stronger than Bush against Al Gore, is the senator's effort to persuade Republican partisans that "if they want a winning combination, they ought to be attracted to my candidacy."

His hope, in short, is that electability will trump ideology. That was the same argument Bush used in the months before New Hampshire to woo Robertson and a great many other staunch conservatives away from Steve Forbes, Dan Quayle and other candidates who easily passed all the litmus tests but looked shaky in the polls.

Go with the guy who can win in November, Bush argued. Now, it's McCain who hopes they will.

• Washington Post Writers Group



2/24

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