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## GOP resurging as party of mavericks

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For John McCain and Sarah Palin, it was "mission accomplished" at last week's Republican National Convention.

The GOP senator from Arizona and his surprise running mate, the governor of Alaska, got the party's grassroots activists revved into fighting mode - and sent them out fully charged for battle against the Democrats.

But appealing to the true believers in the GOP arena was the easy part. Now comes the reality check for the brutal 60-day campaign sprint against the Democratic ticket of Sens. Barack Obama and Joe Biden.

Can McCain-Palin sell themselves as the agents of change - and distance themselves from their party's two-term hold on the White House under George W. Bush - in the urban and suburban enclaves where moderate and independent voters are worried about gas prices and the war in Iraq, the home mortgage crisis and health care?

"You never saw the word 'Republican' in the convention hall," said Democratic strategist Phil Trounstine, who noted the waving signs proclaiming "service" and "peace" but nothing regarding Bush or the GOP. "McCain is saying elect me because of who I am. Which might work, if they weren't so closely tied to the party that has been in power for the past eight years.

"They're trying to present themselves as the maverick party, not the Republican Party ... and John McCain is trying to position himself as if he were not the standard bearer for the GOP," he said. "He's running as an independent - and it's Palin's job to gin up the base. It's a two-pronged attack."

Indeed, Republicans are hoping that the magic formula was cast in St. Paul, Minn., last week, when a self-described "hockey mom" and mother of five added a jolt of excitement, a new saleswoman, and fresh appeal to a new swath of voters.

### 'A team with marketing savvy'

Mervin Field, the dean of California pollsters, said "her emergence changed the whole thrust of McCain's campaign from being a Republican one to being a war hero who will restore the country - and it all happened in 10 days."

"Republicans remain a team with marketing savvy," agreed Golden Gate University's Michal Ann Strahilevitz, a marketing expert. "They needed to rebrand - and rebrand they did," reshaping a new pitch and a new product in St. Paul.

And "they have taken what has been the old - if not really old - McCain image and added a youthful zinger, by picking Sarah Palin as VP," she said.

Republicans say that means an appeal to evangelicals and the women who had been looking at the Democratic ticket.

"Moderate GOP women who might be tempted to stay home are now engaged," said Ken Khachigian, a speechwriter for former President Ronald Reagan and senior adviser to the campaign of former Sen. Fred Thompson. "We won't get the 29-year-old Hillary Clinton voters. But we may get the 50-year-old Hillary Clinton voters. ... They get it when Palin talks about raising her kids. They identify with her."

### **'She's made for the territory'**

Sacramento State politics Professor Michael Semler also sees Republicans trying to make a new appeal to female voters.

"The GOP - also known as the non-George Bush party - are going after the suburban women once again. They're hoping she can relate to women and men who come from the heartland better than (Democratic vice presidential candidate) Joe Biden and Washington can."

California Secretary of State Bill Jones, the McCain campaign chair in California, said Palin will help where it counts: in fundraising, in party-building, and in generating excitement in rural America. "She's made for that territory, and she's the right candidate when paired with McCain," he said.

"I was a bit anxious," said GOP strategist Joel Fox before Palin's acceptance speech. "But we got a sense of the tiger who's there. ... She's tough enough for this campaign."

But with 80 percent of Americans believing that the country is on the wrong track, and Bush's approval ratings at an all-time low, Fox and other political observers said the sales job won't be easy. The party's convention was unabashed in its efforts to erase the memory of its standard-bearer, Bush, whose name was mentioned just twice the entire week by elected officials.

### **Gop wants obama-palin contest**

But by making Palin the campaign's attack dog - however charismatic - insiders said it's clear the Republicans are hoping to turn this into an Obama-Palin contest, a game which the Democrats say

they will not play.

"The McCain campaign would like the focus to be on Sarah Palin," said Field of the closing weeks of the presidential race. "But the issues still remain: housing, unemployment, energy, health care and most women and voters in the lower 48 ... will likely get beyond their fascination with her at some point - and turn to the basic issues driving the campaign."

It is likely that McCain - and Palin - will now have to put the exuberance of the first days of the campaign in the rear view mirror, and face some tough questions about their legislative records, and how those records square with the maverick image they want to portray.

### **Some tough questions for palin**

That includes an examination of the \$20 million deficit in Palin's term as mayor of Wasilla, Alaska, where she pushed for a sales tax increase. And also fodder will be her support of earmarks for the so-called "bridge to nowhere" before she flip-flopped on the issue - and kept the \$27 million so her state could construct a road leading to the bridge.

Palin herself doesn't look to be answering those questions any time soon. Obama, McCain and Biden are all guests on Sunday shows this morning, while Palin is the only candidate on the presidential tickets who is not.

"Sarah Palin is driving the presidential election right now," said Simon Rosenberg, who heads NDN, a Washington-based moderate Democratic advocacy group. "The McCain campaign is no longer in charge of their own campaign. They've hitched their ticket to a media superstar, and she could be the key to their victory - or the thing that takes them down. She could be a rocket ship or a train wreck."

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