

Why he must woo

by The San Diego Union-Tribune

For decades, the norm for successful presidential candidates has been to secure their party's nominations by offering red meat to base voters, then shifting to the center for the general election. But in this most unusual campaign year, we're witnessing the reverse: Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., just wrapped up his party's nomination - and his very next step was to begin to woo the skeptical GOP rank and file.

That's why Thursday - after Mitt Romney's withdrawal effectively clinched McCain's nomination - McCain went calling on the National Conservative Political Action Committee, stressing his fealty to conservative orthodoxy on taxes, abortion and the threat posed by radical Islam.

And it's why we saw conservative stalwart Bill Bennett weighing in with an op-ed commentary delineating all the crucial issues - including Iraq, school choice, nationalized health care and spending reform - on which McCain was a true-blue servant of the right.

Alas, one speech or 50, one op-ed or 1,000, it's not going to be easy for McCain to win over his Republican critics. Even more than his unorthodox policy views, his combative personality is why.

Despite his strong pro-life views, evangelicals may not forgive his alternately nasty and patronizing attacks on evangelical leaders in the 2000 campaign.

Despite his strong support for the war on Iraq, many hawks are put off by what they see as his sanctimony in railing against U.S. interrogation tactics and the Guantanamo detention facility. Or consider comprehensive immigration reform. McCain and President George W. Bush were both crucial to the push for sweeping legislation that came up short last year. But GOP critics of the measure are far more likely to revile McCain than Bush, because of McCain's caustic attacks on opponents as nativist ignoramuses.

Or recall the 2002 McCain-Feingold law limiting political speech in the name of "keeping money out of politics." Some critics argued with great passion and considerable legal weight that the bill abridged the First Amendment. Others said it was silly to believe money could be kept out of politics. McCain suggested opponents of his noble crusade were beneficiaries of a corrupt status quo.

It's easy to see why those subject to such moralistic posturing might be slow to warm to McCain as Republican standard-bearer. But there is also an upside to this crusader's zeal: It can help get things done in a political culture dominated by inertia. And while McCain's choice of causes may be far from ideal for conservative purists, it is irrational for some GOP pundits to argue he might as well be the third pea in a pod with Democratic Sens. Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton.

We don't hear Obama or Clinton denouncing the prescription-drug benefit as a huge boondoggle. Or vowing to kill every last earmark. Or pledging to prosecute the Iraq war as long as it takes. Or ridiculing those who think diplomacy is more important than strength.

John McCain is many things - some positive, some less so. But the "liberal" label is ludicrous.

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