Republicans must now learn to love John McCain

by The Detroit News

Now that Arizona Sen. John McCain will almost certainly carry the GOP banner in this fall's presidential campaign, the Republican Party needs to learn to love him.

The departure from the race of former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney Thursday leaves the way clear for McCain to claim the nomination. The remaining candidates, former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee and Texas Congressman Ron Paul, can neither catch him in the delegate count nor block him from getting the numbers he needs.

McCain's triumph is remarkable. His campaign, starved for cash, nearly died last summer and struggled throughout the fall. For a while, his name wasn't even mentioned among the front-runners.

But McCain persevered and prevailed, trusting that his message of pragmatic conservatism, independence from special interests and a commitment to fiscal discipline would resonate with Republican voters.

McCain has positioned himself as the Republican who can win in November. And that apparently is what GOP voters want. His critics on the right of the Republican Party should take note of that.

McCain has the broad appeal a candidate must have to win the general election. GOP voters appear to understand that better than the mouthpieces of the right, who are viciously attacking him. But McCain neither stole the nomination nor bought it. It was given to him by rank-and-file Republicans.

He won in states with both open and closed primaries, and in caucus states. Still, his attractiveness to independents, disenchanted Democrats and moderates should be seen as an asset. The GOP can't win in November without capturing a large share of those voters.

Nor can McCain win without healing his party. If the Republican Party's base stays home out of pique, the White House will likely go to the Democrats. The senator began the unification process Thursday with an appearance at the Conservative Political Action Conference 2008 gathering in Washington, D.C. He offered assurances that he would govern as a conservative president, and there's no reason to think otherwise. McCain has enjoyed high rankings from conservative groups throughout his Senate career.

With Romney gone, McCain will have the opportunity during the remainder of the primary season to hone the strategy he'll take into the fall campaign, and to begin speaking to a national electorate. That ought to

give him an advantage over the Democratic candidates, who remain locked in a virtual dead heat that shows no signs of breaking.

As for Romney, he should be commended for a vigorous race. He got a lot of votes, and won some key states, including Michigan, where his defense of the automobile industry was a welcome departure.

Romney has an important role to play in his party, and would serve the GOP well by helping to quash the anti-McCain revolt. The two men must set aside any personal grievances and work together.

The road ahead won't be easy for McCain. He has to sell himself both to the general electorate and to certain segments of his own party. But the road he just traveled wasn't so smooth, either.

If there's one thing McCain has proven, it's that he can ride out the rough spots.

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