

Election 2000



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Hagel, Maurstad endorse Sen. McCain

■ Republican presidential nominee hopeful's campaign is a quest for 'reform and freedom.'

BY BRIAN CARLSON
Staff writer

OMAHA - Republican Sen. Chuck Hagel on Sunday endorsed his friend and fellow Vietnam War veteran, Sen. John McCain of Arizona, for the Republican presidential nomination.

And in a split with Gov. Mike Johanns, who is supporting Texas Gov. George W. Bush for the nomination, Lt. Gov. Dave Maurstad also announced his endorsement of McCain.

In a press conference at Elliott Aviation, Hagel said he was supporting his Senate colleague because of their close friendship and McCain's support for Hagel in the past.

In 1996, McCain traveled to Nebraska to campaign for Hagel, who won a surprise election to the Senate that fall. Last fall, McCain split with GOP leadership to support Hagel in his unsuccessful bid for a party leadership position.

"(Hagel) has emerged, not only in my eyes but in the eyes of national observers, as a leader in the United States Senate, especially on issues of foreign policy and national security," McCain said. "I appreciate his support and will rely on his advice and

counsel, but most importantly on his friendship."

A fighter pilot during the Vietnam War, McCain was shot down and spent more than five years as a prisoner of war in North Vietnam. Hagel, who was wounded during his service in Vietnam, recently returned for the opening of a U.S. consulate in Ho Chi Minh City.

Hagel became the second Nebraska senator to endorse a dark horse candidate for president. Last month, Democratic Sen. Bob Kerrey endorsed former Sen. Bill Bradley of New Jersey, who is challenging Vice President Al Gore for the Democratic nomination.

Although Bush holds a substantial lead over his GOP presidential rivals, both in fund-raising and opinion polls, McCain said he is gaining ground and will be in a position to challenge Bush.

McCain said his campaign's polling shows him in second place in New Hampshire, a crucial early primary state. Although he had just 16 percent support compared to Bush's 40 percent in that poll, he said he would narrow that gap as the primary approached.

McCain said recent events have also raised hopes. Sen. Fred Thompson of Tennessee endorsed McCain, and Dan Quayle's South Carolina campaign staff defected to McCain's campaign following the former vice president's poor showing in this month's GOP presidential straw poll in Iowa.

McCain skipped the straw poll, calling it a "sham" and a waste of money. The two candidates who spent the most money on the poll, Bush and Steve Forbes, finished first and second.

McCain said he had a "fiduciary responsibility" to his contributors to not participate in the straw poll, in which Iowans paid \$25 to vote, and candidates paid for buses, food and voting fees to attract voters. By not participating in the poll, he did not damage his prospects, McCain said.

"It was the wisest non-investment of time and money I've ever made in my career," he said.

McCain's boycott of the straw poll and his support for a phasing-out of ethanol subsidies have fueled speculation he would downplay the

nation's first caucus in agriculture-intensive Iowa and focus on other early primaries.

In an interview, McCain said he would not downplay Iowa but had not mapped a strategy for the primaries.

McCain summarized his campaign as a quest for "reform and freedom."

"I want to reform our institutions so that the American people can attain more freedom," he said.

A longtime champion of campaign finance reform, McCain said he would focus on that issue in his campaign, as well as tax and education reform and the need for increased defense spending.

McCain, a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, was a vocal critic of the Clinton administration's policies during the air war over Kosovo. He argued that the United States should prepare to deploy ground troops in the Serbian province, a view that gained increasing support in the weeks before Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic withdrew from Kosovo.

McCain distanced himself from the controversy surrounding possible past cocaine use by Bush. In the past week, Bush has effectively denied using cocaine in the past 25 years but has refused to answer questions about possible drug use before then.

"I'd like to see the governor's privacy maintained," McCain said. "But at the same time, I'm fully aware that it's the media and the American people who will decide which questions are asked."

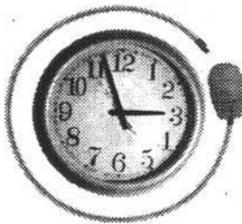
Maurstad said his support for McCain was not a sign of a rift between him and Johanns. McCain's character and integrity are beyond question, he said, and his support for increased defense spending and tax reform are in tune with Maurstad's beliefs.

"It wasn't a case of weighing the judgment of the governor versus the judgment of the senator," he said. "I expect John McCain to inspire greatness in the people of this country."

"He won't be tugged one way or the other based on polls or special interests."

Hagel hosted a fund-raising dinner for McCain on Saturday night in Omaha. About 250 people attended the event, which raised \$50,000.

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