

CAMPAIGN ROUNDUP

Headed into home stretch to election day, presidential candidates go on the offensive

By Ron Fournier, Associated Press, 10/28/00

WASHINGTON - George W. Bush called Al Gore "a man who has been in Washington too long," accusing him of divisively pitting one group against another, while the vice president's campaigners said Saturday they will make a key, closing issue of the Texas governor's lack of seasoning.

Gore is "so confident about his ability, he claimed he invented the Internet," said Bush, who labeled Gore "a man prone to exaggeration." Then he launched into a whimsical play on his own middle initial:

"But if the man was so smart, how come all the Internet addresses begin with 'W'? Not only one W, but three Ws."

With 10 days to go and Bush ahead in opinion polls, the pace of the campaign quickened and turned even more negative. Both candidates sought advantage from their rival's weaknesses: Polls show voters still harbor doubts about Gore's sincerity and Bush's intellect.

Behind the scenes, vice presidential allies were sounding alarms about the threat posed by third-party candidate Ralph Nader and Gore's struggles to gain traction against Bush. Republicans seemed more confident, with Bush declaring himself "on the cusp" of victory in traditionally Democratic Wisconsin and aides privately predicting a Nov. 7 win.

"There's a feeling of desperation. The Gore people are very concerned," said Pat McCormick, a Democratic political consultant in Portland, Ore., where Nader is cutting into the vice president's base.

President Clinton tried to defuse a rift with Gore advisers who don't want him on the campaign trail. "I'll do whatever I think is best in consultation with the campaign," he said during a White House news conference about a federal budget stalemate.

Clinton plans to travel to California and perhaps other battleground states on behalf of Gore and Democratic congressional candidates. The vice president doesn't want to be overshadowed by his charismatic boss whose impeachment left many swing voters, particularly women, cool to the Democratic ticket. Gore advisers met Friday at the White House with Clinton aides to negotiate the president's schedule.

A Newsweek magazine poll showed Bush ahead of Gore among likely voters 49 percent to 41 percent, similar to the magazine's findings last week. A consensus has emerged among most major polls giving Bush a lead of 4-to-8 percentage points -- a narrow but notable edge in a race that has seesawed since the summer conventions.

Bush also holds a small lead in the race for state electoral votes, according to state polls and analysts.

Top Gore advisers unveiled two new ads, one sponsored by the campaign and the other aired by the Gore-controlled Democratic National Committee.

The DNC spot accuses Bush of signing tax cuts for "big oil," weakening nursing home standards and letting polluters police themselves during his tenure as Texas' governor. "By favoring the few, George W. Bush would hurt the many," the ad says.

The second ad reinforces Gore's weeks-long attack on Bush's Social Security plan.

The ads were designed to fuel voters' doubts about Bush's seasoning, Gore adviser Tad Devine told reporters.

"It speaks very powerfully to the concerns we're hearing in focus groups and other research that Governor Bush in many ways is not up to the job of being president," Devine said.

The Newsweek polls showed Bush is considered more honest. Voters think Gore is more intelligent, but they are split on who would do a better job with international crises.

Gore stuck to his issue-a-day mandate, focusing Saturday on the Texas governor's health care policies that he said amounted to: "Wait four years and call your HMO in the morning."

He campaigned in Pennsylvania and Minnesota, rushing home between stops for his son's high school football game.

Bush campaigned at a minor league baseball park in north central Wisconsin with running mate Dick Cheney. Wearing a dark overcoat in the 40-degree day, the Texan twice gave his standard stump speech to rally Republicans to polling places and poke fun at Gore.

"I could barely contain myself" when Gore said he was opposed to big government, Bush said. "I knew the man was prone to exaggeration, but that one took the cake."

The governor said Gore is making promises he knows he can't keep without running the country into debt, which the vice president has vowed not to do.

"I want you to join me as we charge down the finish line!" he told Missouri Republicans.

Hoping to close the stature gap, Bush has campaigned with GOP stalwarts such as Arizona Sen. John McCain and retired Gen. Colin Powell. Another Persian Gulf warrior, Norman Schwarzkopf, has recorded telephone calls telling people not to believe Gore's Social Security ads.

Knowing voters do not like him as much as the affable Bush, Gore has banked on polls giving him the edge on top issues

such as health care and the economy. New polls suggest Bush has closed the gap on both topics, however.

Gore, who proposes expanding Medicare to cover prescription drugs, said Bush's alternative proposal is phased in over four years, offering no immediate aid to most seniors and would raise Medicare premiums so high -- by up to 47 percent -- that seniors would effectively be forced in HMOs.

"There is a very clear choice on health care in this election. My goal is to empower families so you have more choice and more control," Gore said. "The other side wants to leave families to the tender mercies of the big impersonal bureaucracies."