

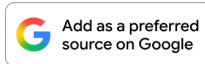


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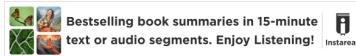
Bush looking more confident in campaign appearances

By MARK KUKIS



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COLUMBIA, Mo., Oct. 28 -- On the stump in Wisconsin and Missouri, Republican presidential candidate George W. Bush on Saturday rallied supporters with speeches peppered with slights toward his Democratic opponent, Vice President Al Gore.

Addressing a crowd of roughly 5,000 Wisconsinites in Grand Chute, Bush worked a new riff into his repertoire of jabs at Gore for once claiming to have played a role in creating the Internet.

"He is so confident about his abilities, he claimed he invented the Internet," Bush said. "But if he was so smart, how come all the Internet addresses start with 'W'?"

Later, in the Missouri university town of Columbia, Bush repeated the line at an airport rally of about 2,500 supporters, adding, "Not only one 'W' but three!"

Republican campaign aides said Bush wrote the line himself after he and staffers had toyed with ways to introduce the new Bush victory salute, a three-finger W-sign that Bush flashed throughout the day to crowds and reporters.

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Saturday's events followed a week of solid stump speeches by Bush onstage as he blitzed Florida, the East Coast and the Midwest on the final legs of campaigning before Election Day, Nov. 7. Veteran campaign reporters who have heard Bush speak hundreds of times were struck by the ease and poise of the candidate's recent speeches.

Karen Hughes, the campaign's chief spokeswoman, said Bush is adept at campaigning in the late stages of a race.

"He's hit his stride," Hughes said. "He's just reflecting the way the I think that he feels, which is very comfortable, very enthusiastic."

She said Bush has been "upbeat" and in "great spirits" since his televised debates with Gore. In the debates as well, the Texas governor had offered strong performances after many assumed he would do poorly against an experience debater such as the vice president.

The turnaround comes after a year of frequent verbal gaffes by Bush on the campaign trail. The flubs have been dubbed "Bushisms" and have circulated widely enough to rival the well-documented bloopers of former Vice President Dan Quayle.

Aides to Gore who have been watching Bush from afar also have noticed the difference, but were unimpressed.

"The man is running for president of the United States," said Kym Spell, a spokeswoman for the Gore campaign. "I would hope that he would be able to get through a few rallies without stumbling."