

For Romney, a nuanced cry for change He promises new era, clings to Bush's base

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He's a Republican running to extend his party's eight-year grip on the White House. Yet Mitt Romney is increasingly casting himself as the "change" candidate, promising voters that he's the one who would bring conservative reform to Washington.

A new TV ad launched this week in Iowa shows Romney telling a cheering crowd after he won the Ames straw poll last weekend, "If there's ever a time we needed to see change in Washington, it's now."

The change argument, which Romney increasingly weaves into his regular stump speech, seems designed to distance himself from President Bush's dismal approval ratings and voters' dismay with the war in Iraq. And as a former governor who spent most of his life as a successful businessman, Romney would seem well positioned to run against the Washington political culture.

But portraying himself as the candidate of change carries some inherent awkwardness for Romney. He has been a strong supporter of the president across a wide range of policies, including Iraq, raising questions about the legitimacy of his "change" contention. At the same time, many hard-core GOP primary voters admire the president, leaving Romney vulnerable to accusations of disloyalty if he takes the argument too far.

John G. Geer, a professor of political science at Vanderbilt University and editor of *The Journal of Politics*, said that if Romney wins the Republican nomination, he or any other nominee will have an even more difficult time finessing the issue.

"The real dance that's going to take place," Geer said, "is how do they find a way in the general election to embrace Bush's base, but at the same time distance themselves to establish credibility among unhappy independents and very unhappy Democrats."

On the stump, Romney usually avoids direct criticism of the administration and goes out of his way to thank the president for "keeping us safe." Instead, he tells audiences that change is inevitable -- that America is at an "inflection point" where sweeping global political, military, and economic forces are going to force change, no matter what.

"You're going to see America change," he told about 200 voters in Londonderry, N.H., last evening. "The question is what will be the direction of the change."

The choice, he said, is whether the country will meet those challenges by taking "a sharp turn to the

left" and embracing Democrats -- or by returning to the Reagan ideology of individual responsibility, small government, and low taxes. Romney promises change on federal spending, immigration, healthcare, and other issues.

Whit Ayres, a GOP pollster and strategist who is not working for any of the Republican presidential aspirants, said Romney's argument is a smart one that plays up his résumé.

"He's a guy who has played on the world stage with the Olympics, he's played on the global stage with Bain Capital," Ayres said. "He can make a credible case that he understands these are large global forces at work and understands how to put America on the right side of those forces."

Americans are deeply dissatisfied with both the Republican administration and the Democratic-controlled Congress, giving an opening to Republicans such as Romney, former mayor Rudy Giuliani of New York, and former governor Mike Huckabee of Arkansas to cast themselves as Washington outsiders and would-be reformers, Ayres said.

Seizing on this opportunity, Romney has begun telling campaign audiences a folksy story to make the point.

"Ann says watching Washington is like watching a couple of guys in a canoe in a fast-moving river moving towards a waterfall, and they can see the waterfall, they hear it, and instead of paddling, they're arguing," he told an audience in Grundy Center, Iowa, last week, referring to his wife. "At some point, you get close enough to that waterfall that you decide to do something about it."

Romney is not the only Republican presidential hopeful to be talking about change this year. Giuliani is pushing his "mission of reform and change," a litany of proposals on energy, healthcare, education, and other issues. Senator John McCain of Arizona talks about what he has already done to change Washington, from cutting waste in government to working on addressing climate change.

Romney's campaign maintains that he is running against the capital's political culture, not Bush. Romney strategists and allies say the new ad is aimed at highlighting Washington's failure to address the concerns of ordinary Americans.

"One of the reasons that the Congress has a significantly lower approval rating than the president is because Congress proved to be an ineffective change agent," said Tom Rath, a Romney strategist.

Linda L. Fowler, a professor of government at Dartmouth College, said Romney may be better positioned to run as a Washington outsider than other candidates, particularly the long list of senators on the Democratic side, "but just because he's running ads and saying he's the change candidate doesn't necessarily mean people are going to buy it."

Still, Romney has had success before in running as a force for change despite his affiliation with the incumbent party. In 2002, he won election as Massachusetts governor, repeatedly vowing to "clean up the mess on Beacon Hill" even though Republicans had held the corner office for the previous 12 years.

Last evening in Londonderry, one voter said he was disappointed with the Bush administration and wanted a president who could fix the gridlock in Washington. It is too early to tell whether Romney fits the bill, said John Loker, a retired Methodist pastor, but "He exudes confidence. And we need confidence in our leaders."

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