

Kerry Decries GOP as 'Crooked' and 'Lying'

By Dan Balz
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Sen. John F. Kerry (D-Mass.) dueled with President Bush over taxes and the economy yesterday and then, in an offhand comment to factory workers in Chicago, called the Republicans "the most crooked, you know, lying group I've ever seen," triggering an angry denunciation from Bush's campaign.

Last night, Bush campaign chairman Marc Racicot called Kerry's statement "unbecoming of a candidate for the presidency of the United States of America" and called on Kerry to apologize. "On the day that Senator Kerry emerged as his party's presumptive nominee, the president called to congratulate him," Racicot said. "That goodwill gesture has been met by attacks and false statements."

Earlier, Kerry campaign spokeswoman Stephanie Cutter said the Democratic candidate had no regrets about his characterizations of the opposition. "Not at all," she said. "There's been a pretty high level of Republican attack machine working for the last four years for the sole purpose of smearing the Democrats. We're trying to make this campaign about issues; Republicans are making it about attacks."

The uproar threatened to overshadow two other events yesterday, Kerry's first face-to-face meeting with former Vermont governor Howard Dean since effectively wrapping up the nomination and a flurry of speculation about whether Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) might entertain the idea of joining Kerry on the Democratic ticket.

Kerry and Dean, at times bitter rivals for the Democratic nomination, met for about 45 minutes at Kerry's headquarters in Washington, where they discussed a probable endorsement by the former governor.

Sources familiar with the discussion said Dean is likely to endorse Kerry in the next few weeks, possibly around the time of a Democratic National Committee gala that will feature former presidents Bill Clinton and Jimmy Carter. But beyond the endorsement itself is the more important question of what role Dean will play in the Democratic Party's campaign to defeat Bush in November.

On March 18, Dean plans to announce more details of how he hopes to repackage his organization into a political force that will work on national, state and local issues and campaigns. Kerry in particular is eager to tap the huge fundraising network Dean created during his campaign, a network that raised about \$50 million, much of it through donations of less than \$100.

Dean has said he intends to maintain control of his list of donors, but party officials hope he will actively encourage them to help Kerry raise the estimated \$80 million he has set as a target over the next four months.

Dean issued a statement saying that while he and Kerry spent much of the past year focusing on their differences, they agreed on far more, starting on the need to change presidents. "I will work closely with John Kerry to make sure we beat George Bush in November and turn our country around," he said.

McCain stirred up a nest of speculation when, on ABC's "Good Morning America," he said he would consider an offer to become Kerry's vice presidential running mate. McCain said he doubted Kerry and the Democrats would accept a "pro-life, free-trading, non-protectionist, deficit hawk" on the ticket.

But when asked what would happen if Kerry asked him to think about it, he said: "John Kerry is a very close friend of mine. We have been friends for years. Obviously, I would entertain it. But I see no scenario, no scenario, no scenario where -- I foresee no scenario where that would happen."

It took a statement from McCain's top adviser, Mark Salter, to pop the balloon. "Senator McCain will not be a candidate for vice president in 2004," he said.

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