

September 8, 2007 Saturday 1:54 AM GMT

Romney Ups Stakes for Volatile GOP Field

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SECTION: POLITICAL NEWS

LENGTH: 963 words

DATELINE: BERLIN N.H.

Mitt Romney said Friday that presidential rivals Fred Thompson and Mike Huckabee need to raise a jaw-dropping \$20 million in the next few months to join him in the top tier of the Republican GOP field, raising the stakes in a nomination fight altered by a tumultuous week.

Feeling the heat of his rivals, the former Massachusetts governor dismissed the notion that a late-entering Thompson and an up-and-coming Huckabee were poised to squeeze into the GOP top tier now occupied by Romney and former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani.

"I think you're going to have to see what level of ground support that they have and what level of fundraising they have," Romney said in an interview with The Associated Press. "If Huckabee raises \$20 million this quarter, like we did in the (first) quarter, then he'll become a front-tier candidate."

"And I think from Thompson's standpoint, I think he certainly has to look at \$20 million as sort of the this is, if you will, the low hanging-fruit quarter for him," Romney said, adding that it's easier to raise money in the first weeks of a race when friends, family and allies are tapped.

Romney was trying to raise expectations. His \$20 million challenge assumes that Thompson and Huckabee would need as much money to compete in the final four months of the race as Romney needed to jump-start and sustain a yearlong bid.

That may be a false assumption.

Thompson, Huckabee and a crowded field of fellow Republicans including the not-to-be-underestimated John McCain argue that momentum is as important as money in the post-Labor Day push.

Thompson a former lobbyist, senator and actor announced his candidacy this week and hopes a cascade of attention carries him past longer-running candidates just as voters are starting to pay attention.

"Money may be the primary rationale of Mitt Romney's campaign, but the rest of us know this election is about ideas and who has the best conservative message," said Thompson spokesman Todd Harris. "Fortunately for us that is something money can't buy."

Huckabee, a Baptist minister and former Arkansas governor, is the turtle in a race of rabbits, hoping to sneak up on the competition after finishing second in Iowa's straw poll and capping a series of solid debates with a scene-stealing performance Wednesday night.

"Even if we lose elections," he told anti-war candidate Ron Paul, "we should not lose our honor."

New Hampshire GOP chairman Fergus Cullen said Romney seems to have the best political organization in the state, followed by McCain. He said Giuliani has not yet taken advantage of his potential in the independent-leaning state.

Huckabee is gaining traction, as evidenced by the endorsement Thursday night by Dan Philbrick, a leading Republican in northern New Hampshire who held a party for the former Arkansas governor that drew some of the top names in New Hampshire GOP circles.

As for Thompson, the newly minted candidate was greeted politely in Iowa on Friday, though the size of his crowds and the understated reception belied expectations of a celebrity's greeting.

Cullen said the Tennessee senator waited too long to enter the race. The best organizers are spoken for, he said.

The GOP chair noted that Thompson's first post-announcement stop in New Hampshire was scheduled for Saturday night at the home of Republican stalwart Doug Scamman a Giuliani supporter. Scamman, former speaker of the state House, is hosting an event for New Hampshire Republican women that Thompson will attend.

"Thompson can't even build a crowd," Cullen said.

"Maybe the times have changed, and the Webcast and his celebrity are enough. Maybe he and his tactics are the wave of the future," Cullen said, adding a stinging comparison between Thompson and the failed 1985 launch of a new Coca-Cola formula. "Or maybe he's the New Coke."

McCain, who won the 2000 New Hampshire primary only to lose the nomination to then-Texas Gov. George Bush, hopes to revive his campaign in New Hampshire. He turned in a strong debate performance at Romney's expense.

Shortly after Romney said the military buildup in Iraq is apparently working, McCain fired back: "The surge is working, sir, no, not apparently. It's working."

As he campaigned across northern New Hampshire on Friday, Romney told voters he expected Gen. David Petraeus to report this month that the surge is working.

He offered hope at every stop that U.S. troops will "slowly but surely" return home. He doesn't say how many troops will come back or when the reductions would start.

"It's probably not going to be 100,000 tomorrow, but it's a slow and steady reduction from playing the front-line role to playing more of a support role, which means logistical support ... ," he told The AP.

Romney's brief campaign speech focused on the economic and military challenges facing a nation undergoing a once-every-century type transition.

He is an able campaigner. What he lacks in charisma he tries to make up with an almost robotic discipline.

He can come off as a bit cold, as he did during the debate when he dispassionately apologized to a man offended by Romney's comparison of those serving in Iraq to his son's work on his presidential campaign.

In Conway, N.H., Romney claimed credit for reducing mercury levels in Massachusetts and struggled to remember the exact percentage of the drop.

"Was it 90 percent?" he said, scanning the crowd for aide Eric Fehrnstrom.

"I don't know the percentages, governor," the aide replied loud enough for the crowd to here, "but you reduced mercury emissions from the smokestack industries and also reduced mercury pollution in the environment."

Romney beamed. "Isn't this great? I've got a verifier over here. So we went after mercury ..."

As so happens, Romney enacted anti-mercury regulations initiated by his Republican predecessor.

LOAD-DATE: September 8, 2007

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

PUBLICATION-TYPE: Newswire