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## McCain, Huckabee Assail Romney

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Mike Huckabee says John McCain is a hero. McCain says Huckabee is a good man. And they both seem to agree on this: Mitt Romney is neither.

The Republican rivals joined Sunday to criticize Romney McCain in New Hampshire called him a waffler and Huckabee in Iowa questioned whether he can be trusted with the presidency, a sign of Romney's strength in both states.

Romney's camp accused the hard-charging Huckabee of "testiness and irritability," a reflection of the brass-knuckles phase of the most open presidential race in half a century. Much is at stake: Iowa kicks off the election process Thursday with Democratic and Republican caucuses that could propel two candidates to the nomination.

"Whoever wins Iowa could be the next president of the United States," said Democratic consultant Stephanie Cutter, adding that a compressed election schedule may put a premium on momentum this year "and Iowa can be a rocket booster."

New Hampshire votes just five days after Iowa.

The dynamics aren't quite the same on the Republican side, but GOP consultant Scott Reed said Iowa "is going to make or break three-quarters of all the candidates."

Polls show Democrats Hillary Rodham Clinton, Barack Obama and John Edwards tied for the lead in Iowa. Clinton and Obama are closely bunched in New Hampshire, too, where voters are often influenced by the results in Iowa.

The Democratic winner here will be hard to stop, especially if it's a well-funded Clinton or Obama.

As six candidates offered their closing messages on the morning talk shows, Obama acknowledged that the criticism about lack of experience in Washington might be taking a toll.

"That may have some effect, but ultimately I'm putting my faith in the people of Iowa and the people of America that they want something better," Obama told NBC's "Meet the Press."

Playing the experience card, Clinton told ABC's "This Week" that as first lady from 1993-2001 she was "intimately involved in so much that went on in the White House, here at home and around the world."

While she was one of the most influential first ladies in history, Clinton had her limits. She did not attend National Security Council meetings, did not receive the presidential daily briefing on terrorism and other threats and did not have a top level security clearance.

She is married to one of the most popular figures in the Democratic Party, Bill Clinton, and his return to the White House as first spouse would break new ground.

"He will not have a formal, official role, but just as presidents rely on wives, husbands, fathers, friends of long years, he will be my close confidante and adviser as I was with him," Sen. Clinton said, adding that attending NSC meetings "wouldn't be appropriate" for her husband.

Edwards said he couldn't imagine Bill Clinton staying out of the mix.

"I think it's a complete fantasy," he said with a laugh on CBS.

In an interview with The Associated Press, Edwards said he was trying to ease fears about his electability by arguing that his sharply populist message is not polarizing. "It's not divisive at all," he said, "it's uniting."

A former president as the White House spouse would make history, a common denominator of the 2008 contest. The last wide-open race came in 1952 after Harry Truman opted not to run for re-election and his vice president, Alben Barkley, bowed out because of doubts raised over his age.

A new poll of the Republican race in Iowa suggested that Huckabee's surprise surge in Iowa may have stalled his lead over Romney evaporated. A victory here for Romney would send the former Massachusetts governor to his neighboring New Hampshire with a head of steam.

That explains why Huckabee, strongest in Iowa, and McCain, winner of the 2000 GOP primary in New Hampshire, both criticized Romney.

Huckabee said he may have been hurt by Romney ads and mailings criticizing his record as governor of Arkansas. He accused Romney of running a "very desperate and, frankly, a dishonest campaign."

Romney has been less than candid about his record and campaign plans, a fact seized upon by Huckabee.

"If you aren't being honest in obtaining a job," Huckabee said, "can we trust you to be honest if you get the job?"

Huckabee defended McCain against negative ads by Romney.

"I felt like that when Mitt Romney went after the integrity of John McCain, he stepped across a line," Huckabee told NBC. "John McCain's a hero in this country. He's a hero to me."

Huckabee scrapped a public appearance at an Iowa church, his only open event of the day, in favor of attending a private service and taping new ads perhaps to counter Romney's.

United by a common foe, McCain spoke up for Huckabee. "Look, I'm flattered that (Romney) would be attacking me. He's attacking Huckabee in Iowa, who's a good man. And it shows that they're worried," McCain said.

Airing ads that suggest Romney is a phony, McCain said that's not a word he'd used, but "I think he's a person who's changed his positions on many issues."

Romney said there's nothing wrong or unusual about pointing out differences on issues. "In this process, people have a real battle for success," he said during an Iowa campaign stop, "but I consider these guys friends."

His spokesman, Kevin Madden, didn't sound so friendly about Huckabee and his record as governor.

"It's a record that is tough to defend, so his testiness and irritability when being questioned about it is obvious," Madden said.

Indeed, Huckabee's poll numbers have declined as voters learned about his record of raising taxes, ethical lapses and clemencies for convicted murderers in Arkansas.

He hasn't helped himself with a series of foreign policy gaffes, not the least of which was expressing "our sincere concern and apologies" for the assassination of former Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto.

Former Tennessee Sen. Fred Thompson told Fox News that Huckabee's comments "are not consistent with someone who understands the nature of the world that we live in ... ."

Trailing in Iowa and New Hampshire, former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani scolded GOP rivals for name-calling. "My view is we should be here not attacking each other," he said in New Hampshire. "I don't think you get very much out of it."

Associated Press Writers Holly Ramer and Glen Johnson in New Hampshire and Mike Glover, Amy Lortzen and Liz Sidoti in Iowa contributed to this report.

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