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Analysis: McCain talks unity while allies attack

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John McCain preached bipartisanship and unity from a stage retooled to carry him out to the Republican faithful. He didn't have to be biting: On the previous night, his attack dogs had paved the way.

For every McCain call for consensus Thursday night, there had been a missile aimed at Barack Obama on Wednesday night. For every call to fight as Americans for America, there had been a party comrade calling on the faithful to fight as Republicans for conservatism. For every insistence that he was not working for any one party, McCain's allies had already done his dirty work.

This conflict between smiles and swordsmanship undercuts his campfire-song message of a unified nation working together for change.

"Let's use the best ideas from both sides," the newly minted GOP nominee said.

"We're all God's children and we're all Americans," he said.

"I fight for Americans," he said. "I fight for you."

That was his night. More indirectly, though, Wednesday was too. On that night, reading from the McCain campaign script, convention speakers saved the candidate the political indignity of attacking Obama; they did so themselves with no fear of driving up their negative ratings or turning off independent voters. After all, they weren't running for president.

Rudy Giuliani: "He's the least experienced candidate for president of the United States in at least the last 100 years."

Mike Huckabee: "Maybe the most dangerous threat of an Obama presidency is that he would continue to give madmen the benefit of the doubt."

Running mate Sarah Palin: "We tend to prefer candidates who don't talk about us one way in Scranton and another way in San Francisco."

Her point about straight talk is a familiar one. In fact, McCain has spent nearly a decade building the notion into a political brand; he calls his campaign bus the "Straight Talk Express."

The McCain who delighted Republicans on Thursday didn't have to try too hard. He has always had a compelling personal story, and he used it at every turn. When he did drift into the reformist rhetoric that earned him the label of maverick which he embraced during the speech he had the luxury of being able to pull punches that his friends had already thrown.

"I've worked with members of both parties to fix problems that need to be fixed." McCain said. "I have that record and the scars to prove it. Senator Obama does not."

That was as direct as McCain got, at least when it came to Obama. His own party wasn't as lucky. In language that was careful but obvious, McCain took a healthy step away from President Bush and GOP members of Congress.

"I fight to restore the pride and principles of our party," he said. "We were elected to change Washington, and we let Washington change us."

Obama, the 2008 campaign's original candidate of change, chose a more direct approach last week in Denver. Rather than rely on his party colleagues to tote the negative party line, Obama owned his disapproval and mentioned both McCain and Bush by name. Some people would call that aggressive, even negative politics, while others would call it more honorable and direct.

"I've got news for you, John McCain. We all put our country first," Obama said, rejecting the Republican notion that he put himself first.

The fierceness of McCain's surrogates allowed him to serve up red meat to his partisan convention crowd while keeping his hands unbloodied. The next night he stood before the country as a statesman-in-waiting, pledging to reach across the same partisan divide that his allies had widened.

And he was able to call himself a maverick, and define the term without a whiff of irony: "What it really means is I understand who I work for. I don't work for a party. I don't work for a special interest. I don't work for myself. I work for you."

But this week, John McCain didn't have to work for his party. This week, his party worked for him just fine.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Ron Fournier has covered politics for The Associated Press for nearly 20 years.

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