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CAMPAIGN 2008

Return To Waterloo

By [Carrie Dann](#), NBC News/*National Journal*
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COLUMBIA, S.C. -- The path to the Republican presidential nomination is anything but clearly marked at this point, but **John McCain's** circuitous campaign journey has led him back to his own Waterloo. Even though Republican contenders are carefully picking their battlegrounds this year, the senator from Arizona is risking another serious bid for South Carolina, a state that **Rudy Giuliani** has bypassed.

In 2000, McCain's insurgent candidacy was wrecked by his devastating loss here to

Armed with establishment support that he lacked in 2000, John McCain risks another battle in South Carolina.

establishment darling **George W. Bush**. Already at odds with much of the state's GOP base because of his support for campaign finance laws and his declaration that the Confederate flag was a "symbol of racism and slavery," McCain had his fate sealed by a vicious 11th-hour whisper campaign. In the end, the Palmetto State upended the 2000 White House hopes of the man who had won New Hampshire.

McCain lost the 2000 South Carolina primary by 11 percentage points overall. Among GOP primary voters who identified themselves as conservatives, Bush beat him by almost 40 points. Among voters who called themselves members of the Religious Right, Bush's winning margin was 44 points.

But not long after Bush was sworn into office seven years ago, the McCain faithful in South Carolina began evaluating their mistakes and weaknesses, and started trying to heal political wounds -- readying themselves and their candidate for another round. "Establishment" is generally not a word associated with McCain, whose defiance of party leaders has long since

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earned him a reputation as a dogged and sometimes cantankerous maverick. But in the same state where he was once painted as a brash outsider, he now boasts the kind of legislative and entrenched organizational infrastructure that Texas Gov. Bush enjoyed in 2000.

McCain's 2008 South Carolina leadership team is chaired by state Attorney General **Henry McMaster**, state House Speaker **Bobby Harrell**, and U.S. Sen. **Lindsey Graham**. Almost half of the original members of McCain's 2008 finance team in the state, including top finance committee guru **Bob Royall**, were Bush backers in 2000. A majority of Republican members of the state Legislature have endorsed McCain, as has [South Carolina's biggest newspaper](#), *The State*, which gave its nod to Bush last time.

McCain's foothold within the old guard was hard-won. Soon after the 2000 election, the leaders of his South Carolina team -- former national field director **Trey Walker** and lead South Carolina strategist **Richard Quinn** -- began to plant the seeds of a new political apparatus. In the years that followed, McCain made countless visits to the state to campaign for Republican candidates. He attended a parade of dinners, fundraisers, meetings, and rallies in his effort to woo longtime party activists. By January 2007, more than a year before Saturday's do-or-die day, many of them were ready to sign on.

Now, Quinn estimates, at least 70 percent of the state's Republican Party structure has endorsed McCain. His state steering committee is peppered with titles -- state representative, mayor, county commissioner, solicitor, sheriff -- that illustrate the depth of his support, at least among the political class. "We've done a lot of homework this time that we didn't do last time," Quinn says.

Having carried New Hampshire on January 8, McCain finds himself once again competing in South Carolina against a Southerner who won the Iowa caucuses -- former Arkansas Gov. **Mike Huckabee**. Perhaps to McCain's advantage, Huckabee isn't the only son of the South vying for votes. He's joined by former Sen. **Fred Thompson** of Tennessee. Plus, Michigan winner **Mitt Romney** has now focused his attention on this state.

Not everyone in South Carolina is impressed by McCain's operation. Some McCain critics discount much of the establishment infrastructure assembled by political carpenters Walker and Quinn, saying that the flurry of early backing from South Carolina politicians was merely a function of the bandwagon effect when McCain was widely expected to coast to the nomination.

"What they were selling at the time was inevitability," says **Drew McKissick**, a longtime Christian activist in South Carolina and an adviser to Romney's campaign in the state. "And a lot of those guys bought it."

McCain's supporters, though, point out that his South Carolina organization weathered the campaign's darkest days, when opposition to his support for a

path to citizenship for illegal immigrants reached a fever pitch last summer. There were no significant defections, even as the national news media began to characterize the financially strapped candidate as a dead man walking. "With any other candidate," Quinn adds, "they would have all jumped ship."

During the seven years that McCain's team spent mending fences with the conservative establishment in South Carolina, its often-rebellious candidate complicated its task by butting heads with national conservative interests in Washington. He bucked the GOP on torture, campaign finance, judicial nominees, and immigration.

McCain's wrestling with national conservatives has hardly been lost on South Carolina's Christian conservatives. McKissick, an officer in the national Christian Coalition who has seen his organization's politics take root in his home state, says that he hears the same refrain again and again: "He's still the maverick. He's still the guy who shoots at his own party whenever it behooves him."

In addition to clashing with the Republican base on policy issues in the years after 2000, McCain faced fallout from having declared -- a mere nine days after his 2000 loss in South Carolina -- that evangelists **Jerry Falwell** and **Pat Robertson** were "agents of intolerance." Evangelical voters in the Palmetto State and throughout the country saw the smoke of burning bridges.

McCain's advisers immediately recognized how those severed ties to the Christian community could leave the senator isolated if he returned to the state again as a presidential candidate. They set about rebuilding. Religious leaders in South Carolina describe a repentant McCain visiting influential Christian groups in the state as early as 2006 to explain his conservative views on stem-cell research, abortion, and gay marriage.

In August of that year, McCain welcomed the possibility of speaking at Bob Jones University, a conservative Christian institution in Greenville that he'd roundly criticized in 2000 for its opposition to interracial dating and attacks on Catholicism. In February 2007, he spoke at a rally in Spartanburg that promoted abstinence-only education for youth. His political action committee contributed to conservative groups in the state, including to an effort by the Palmetto Family Council, the state's branch of Focus on the Family, to amend the state constitution to ban same-sex marriage.

Council President **Oran Smith** says that McCain's efforts to reach out to evangelicals during the initial stages of his 2008 campaign were vigorous and well received. But he adds that, like many other aspects of McCain's campaign, those overtures were mostly put on hold when the senator's national team imploded last summer. "There seemed to be a coming together or at least a better understanding of each other's position, and some traction was being gained," says Smith of McCain's meetings with evangelical leaders. "It was about to happen, but maybe got lost at the point that his campaign started to diminish."

Despite that falloff, the campaign's focus on South Carolina religious leaders is clear. A new list of religious conservative backers is scheduled for release soon. And a new direct-mail effort touts McCain's opposition to abortion rights in a way that conjures the ghost of the "push poll" that ravaged his campaign in 2000. It features a photo of McCain's wife holding the infant the couple adopted from Bangladesh in 1993, the daughter whose existence was used to fan rumors that McCain had fathered an interracial child out of wedlock. "Today," it reads, "Cindy and John work together to promote adoption and women facing crisis pregnancies." The front of the piece declares: "Pro-Life. Not just recently. Always. Never wavering."

The 2000 race pitted McCain against a single opponent, Bush, who enjoyed more institutional support and a more natural connection to social conservatives. This time, the evangelical vote may be so fractured -- having been heavily courted by Huckabee, Thompson, and Romney -- that its impact is muted. "Conservatives are divided among those candidates," McKissick says. "That's an optimal situation for John McCain."

McCain supporters don't expect to win a plurality of evangelical votes, but Graham says that "we'll get our share" because they will see him as able to grapple with the threat posed by Islamic radicals. "People of faith, particularly," he adds, "are worried about the spread of this radical Islamic doctrine. And that resonates with evangelicals."

Last week, fresh from his New Hampshire victory, McCain bounded off his packed campaign bus to greet hundreds of South Carolina supporters outside a Mount Pleasant diner. The recharged "Straight Talk Express," the chants of "Mac Is Back," the rollicking strains of *Johnny B. Goode* showed not a trace of the scars that this 71-year-old sustained here. "I think we showed them what a comeback is all about!" he triumphantly told the crowd.

Quinn can't help but smile at McCain's **Lazarus**-like rise and exultant return to South Carolina. "That's another reason that Senator McCain appeals to evangelicals," he said. "They believe in miracles."

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