

Palin's reformer image tainted by history of ethical lapses

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When John McCain trotted out Sarah Palin as his vice presidential running mate, his campaign and much of the U.S. news media depicted the Alaska governor as an ethics "reformer" whose meteoric political rise came from her confronting corruption within her own state Republican Party.

But a closer look at Palin's short political career reveals that she committed some of the same ethical lapses that she has attacked, especially during her unsuccessful bid for lieutenant governor in 2002. She also has shown herself to be a thin-skinned politician quick to see herself as the target of conspiracies.

In 2002, Palin — still mayor of Wasilla with a population of about 6,700 — ran much of her campaign for lieutenant governor out of Wasilla City Hall on city time, according to documents first obtained in July 2006 by an editor for Voice of the Times newspaper in Anchorage. (I obtained some of those documents from former Wasilla city officials this week.)

The documents show that Palin used city computers to manage her campaign and billed taxpayers for mailings, phone calls and literature. Palin also had her city secretary, Mary Bixby, print 75 thank you notes to campaign donors and book a campaign related trip to Ketchikan in May 2002 while on city time.

Former city officials said Palin and her campaign staff worked upwards of 10 hours a day using Wasilla City Hall as her campaign headquarters where campaign faxes were sent and received, and campaign staffers used city phones to solicit donations.

On Palin's lieutenant governor candidate registration form with the Alaska Public Offices Commission, she used the e-mail account the city gave her — sarah@ci.wasilla.ak.us — for "campaign chairperson" contact information and the Wasilla City Hall fax telephone number for "candidate information."

Palin's mayoral schedule for June 12, 2002 showed that she met with Herold Advertising Products in her office at City Hall. Soon after, the company faxed the city's deputy administrator, John Cramer, "Sarah Palin Lieutenant Governor" artwork and an invoice for the work.

Former city officials said they were unaware whether Palin reimbursed the city for funds she used to promote her campaign. Neither spokesmen at the governor's office in Alaska nor McCain-Palin campaign representatives returned telephone calls and e-mails for comment.

Building the myth

Working at her city computer, Palin also sent three e-mails to Randy Ruedrich, the state's Republican Party chairman, complaining about several endorsements she did not receive.

Ironically, as chairwoman of the Alaska Oil and Gas Conservation Commission, Palin reported Ruedrich, a fellow commissioner, to Gov. Frank Murkowski's administration, accusing him of an ethics breach for conducting work for the state GOP on government time.

To obtain evidence of Ruedrich's alleged malfeasance, Palin hacked into his computer, an ethical lapse in its own right. In January 2004, she resigned from the commission in protest over what she billed as corrupt practices.

Palin's ethics complaint against Ruedrich gave her a reputation as an anti-establishment reformer at a time when the Alaskan Republican hierarchy was coming under scrutiny for corruption. Ruedrich paid a \$12,000 fine after an investigation revealed he had violated state ethics rules.

But in July 2006, Paul Jenkins, an editor for the conservative Voice of the Times, confronted Palin about her own apparent ethical breaches four years earlier. Her response was to insist, without explanation, that her situation was different than Ruedrich's.

"I asked how her using a city computer for her campaign business was any different than Ruedrich's use of a state computer at the AOGCC to do Republican Party business," Jenkins wrote in a column on July 7, 2006. "Not the same, she said, simply not the same.

"Then, she shifted gears and asked, 'Is this what they've got to destroy my campaign? E-mails from 4½ years ago?' We had barely hung up — and I was wondering if there was any story in all this — when her campaign fired off a 'news' release headlined: 'Palin Campaign Sees First Signs of Rumored Smear Campaign.' Good grief. Frankly . . . I've never seen a politician come unhinged so quickly as Palin when asked a few straightforward questions."

Jenkins excoriated his Alaska media colleagues for lapping up Palin's "reformer" talking points. He said her "campaign [was] rooted in one thing: the perception that Palin somehow wears a halo and is not your average, run-of-the-mill politician."

This editor for Voice of the Times, which bills itself as "A Conservative Voice for Alaska," concluded with a reality check that could very well apply to the GOP talking points being used today to sell Palin to the American electorate.

"When her goody-two-shoes act starts to crumble — and going nuts because of a few obvious questions seems a first crack — folks may see her for the rank politician she is, and not necessarily a good one at that," Jenkins wrote.

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