

Storm Disrupts Republican Plans for Convention

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ST. PAUL — Plans for the [Republican National Convention](#) were in jeopardy on Sunday as the presumptive Republican nominee, Senator [John McCain](#), announced that the thrust of the convention would change “from a party event to a call to the nation for action” to help residents of the Gulf Coast affected by the approaching [Hurricane Gustav](#).

Mr. McCain, speaking in Jackson, Miss., as he toured the federal disaster relief center there, said he would announce major changes later on Sunday for the Republican convention, which is scheduled to start Monday in St. Paul. Already, President Bush said he would not attend the convention on Monday because of Gustav, and the White House spokeswoman, Dana M. Perino, said Vice President [Dick Cheney](#) also would not attend it. Republican officials have said the four-day convention may shortened or delayed.

“We must redirect our efforts from the really celebratory event of the nomination of president and vice president of our party to acting as all Americans,” said Mr. McCain, appearing with his running mate, Gov. [Sarah Palin](#) of Alaska, and Gov. [Haley Barbour](#) of Mississippi. “We have to go from a party event to a call to the nation for action, action to help our fellow citizens in this time of tragedy and disaster, action in the form of volunteering, donations, reaching out our hands and our hearts and our wallets to the people who are under such great threat from this great natural disaster.

“I pledge that tomorrow night, and if necessary, throughout our convention if necessary, to act as Americans not Republicans, because America needs us now no matter whether we are Republican or Democrat.”

Convention planners and delegates arriving in St. Paul said it would be politically perilous to hold a four-day party as Americans were evacuating New Orleans and the Gulf Coast in advance of Gustav, a Category 3 hurricane, with winds of up to 125 miles per hour, that is expected to make landfall sometime on Tuesday. The Bush administration’s unsteady response to [Hurricane Katrina](#), which left New Orleans in ruins three years ago, outraged Americans and remains, for many, a stain on Mr. Bush’s record.

Among the options for altering the convention format, Republican officials said Sunday, were cutting back on the evening and prime-time hours of convention sessions in the hall over the four days, or delaying the start of the convention by a day or two and then compressing the main events over perhaps two or three days, instead of four. Party officials may also plan blood banks and Gustav relief fund-raisers.

Cancellations were announced steadily in St. Paul on Sunday: Delegates from Louisiana and Mississippi were making plans to head home because of Gustav. Separately, Gov. [Arnold Schwarzenegger](#) of California announced he would skip the convention to deal with a

continuing stalemate in Sacramento over the state budget. He had been slated to have a high-profile speaking role on Monday night.

Senator [Barack Obama](#), the Democratic nominee, said in Ohio on Sunday that he had no plans to travel to the Gulf Coast because he did not want to get in the way of emergency efforts there. Mr. Obama, speaking to reporters after leaving services at St. Luke's Lutheran Church in Lima, Ohio, said his campaign would mobilize its giant e-mail list of supporters to encourage them to volunteer or send contributions as soon as the impact of Hurricane Gustav becomes known.

"We can activate an e-mail list of a couple million people who want to give back," Mr. Obama told reporters. "I think we can get tons of volunteers to travel down there if it becomes necessary."

Asked whether he believed it was appropriate for Mr. McCain to travel to the Gulf Coast, Mr. Obama said: "A big storm like this raises bipartisan concerns, and I think for John to want to find out what's going on is fine."

"The thing that I always am concerned about in the middle of a storm," Mr. Obama said, "is whether we're drawing resources away from folks on the ground because the Secret Service and various security requirements sometimes it pulls police, fire and other departments away from concentrating on the job."

He added: "I'm assuming that where he went that wasn't an issue. We're going to try to stay clear of the area until things have settled down and then we'll probably try to figure out how we can be as helpful as possible."

He said he had talked by telephone to Gov. [Bobby Jindal](#) and Senator [Mary Landrieu](#) of Louisiana and Mayor Ray Nagin of New Orleans. Mr. Obama also is calling into a black radio station in New Orleans, aides said, amplifying the warning for any remaining residents to follow the evacuation order and leave the city.

President Bush, who was monitoring disaster relief preparations at the White House on Sunday, also spoke with Mayor Nagin, saying he was "checking in and getting ready to go through this again with him," according to Ms. Perino, the White House spokeswoman.

"We're working with governors to identify and secure out-of-state shelter for people in the path of the storm," Mr. Bush said during a news briefing at the Washington headquarters of the [Federal Emergency Management Agency](#). "Several states, including Missouri, Texas, and New Mexico, are preparing to and have accepted a lot of evacuees. People are leaving those areas that are of concern and we're working hard to make sure that they have a place to go."

Mr. Bush added: "In the coming days, I encourage people across our nation to help their neighbors in need. You can contribute to charities, such as the Red Cross. You can volunteer your time to help those in need. And, of course, you can pray for those who might be suffering."

While the National Hurricane Center said Sunday that Gustav had weakened from a Category 4 hurricane on Saturday to a Category 3, it could pick up strength later today.

New Orleans residents are under a mandatory evacuation order on Sunday, and other parts of the Gulf Coast are expected to clear out over the next 36 hours if Gustav continues on its current course.

Appearing on the ABC News program “This Week” news program on Sunday, Senator [Lindsey Graham](#) of South Carolina, a close ally of Mr. McCain, said it might make sense to postpone the convention depending on Gustav’s strength and direction over the next 24 hours.

“The goal is to make sure that you take the conservative approach, that we’re not seen to be out of touch with people who could have everything they worked for lost,” Mr. Graham said. “I’d advise Senator McCain to go down as is, today, to figure out what can I do?”

The potential for disaster along the Gulf Coast has overshadowed not only the Republicans this weekend: It has consumed media attention to the point of at least partially obscuring both the Democrats’ glow over their convention in Denver last week and their criticism and questioning of Governor Palin, who Mr. McCain introduced as his running mate on Friday.

The major television networks are pulling some of their top talent out of Minneapolis, promising to diminish, if not upend, coverage of the convention. [Katie Couric](#) will head to the Gulf Coast to open the “CBS Evening News” from there Monday night, instead of from the convention hall as planned. Charles Gibson of ABC News and [Brian Williams](#) of [NBC](#) are expected to do the same.

“Nightline” on ABC will also broadcast from the storm area as will CBS News, a sign that all of the major news programs will be focused on the hurricane zone rather than the convention floor adorned with Mr. McCain’s “country first message” — robbing him of the crucial perk of wide television coverage of his message that comes with a political convention.

As of now, the networks still expect to devote one hour a night to the convention, from 10 to 11 and the cable news channels will almost certainly juggle both stories.

Still, the networks’ decision is a potential blow to Mr. McCain, whose campaign is hoping to use the Republican convention to give him a burst of positive coverage into the final stretch of the campaign. And it has cut into the Obama campaign’s plans to portray Ms. Palin as inadequate to the job of the vice presidency.

Ms. Palin, now midway through her second year as governor, was by and large a surprise choice — Mr. McCain barely knew her before Friday, and she was not widely discussed as a likely vice presidential nominee. Democrats have been framing Ms. Palin as a purely political selection, based on her potential appeal to female voters who favored Senator [Hillary Rodham Clinton](#) over Mr. Obama during the primaries this year. But that message has largely been drowned out by Gustav’s approach.

Still, on ABC on Sunday, Senator [John Kerry](#) of Massachusetts, the 2004 Democratic nominee for president, said the selection of Ms. Palin reflected poor decision-making on Mr. McCain’s part.

“I think John McCain’s judgment is once again put at issue, because he’s chosen somebody who clearly does not meet the national security threshold, who is not ready to be president tomorrow,” Mr. Kerry said.

And he scoffed at the notion that one-time Clinton supporters would be wooed to the Republican ticket by the possibility of the first female vice president — one who opposes abortion rights and many other commonly held positions for Democrats.

“I mean, for heaven sakes, the people who supported Hillary Clinton are not going to be seduced just because John McCain has picked a woman,” Mr. Kerry said. “They’re going to look at what she supports.”

Senator Graham, echoing other Republicans on the Sunday talk shows praising Ms. Palin as a “bold” choice and as a reformer, said he believed Ms. Palin was ready to be commander in chief today.

“Oh, I think so, I think so. Compared to Barack Obama, absolutely,” Mr. Graham said.

Mr. Obama and his running mate, Senator [Joseph R. Biden Jr.](#) of Delaware, planned to spend Sunday campaigning together in Ohio and Michigan before parting ways to travel separately on [Labor Day](#).

Traveling with Mr. McCain and Ms. Palin in Mississippi, meanwhile, were [Cindy McCain](#), Mr. McCain’s wife, and two surprise guests: their sons Jack, 21, a midshipman at the Naval Academy, and Jimmy, 20, a Marine, according to a pool report.

The McCains were reunited with their sons at the St. Louis airport, where Mrs. McCain took the senator’s arm and excitedly pulled him toward them, and they embraced. Brooke Buchanan, a campaign spokeswoman, said the sons would be with the family for the convention week.

Michael Cooper and Jeff Zeleny contributed reporting.

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