

POLITICO

McCain vs. Huck: A S.C. civil war

By: **David Paul Kuhn**

January 14, 2008 05:58 AM EST

CHARLESTON, S.C. — You wouldn't know it to look at JoAnn Cantrall, a "woman of faith," as her denim shirt reads. But she's a near-perfect illustration of the conservative civil war that's erupting in South Carolina — an ideological battle that could decide Saturday's GOP primary and, quite possibly, the Republican nomination.

A regular at Cathedral of Praise, a megachurch that can draw as many as 3,000 congregants on an average weekend, Cantrall, a local Christian broadcaster, is agonizing about the choice between [Mike Huckabee](#) and [John McCain](#).

"Huckabee is a Christian, and he seems to be a bona fide Christian," she says as golf carts ferried in parishioners from the parking lot. "We have to have someone who is guiding our country that is listening to God."

But in almost the same breath, she then uses the word "experienced" to characterize McCain. "And I think he's right on as far as the military is concerned. We've got to have somebody with guts," Cantrall adds.

"McCain, bless his heart, he's been there. ... He'll do what he can do to destroy them."

See Also:

- **Mitt pins hopes on home state to save him**
- **Hillary Clinton attacks Barack Obama**
- **Mitt-Huck brawl blazes**

Competition between two of the modern Republican party's most essential impulses — strength on national defense and conservative stands on issues of values and faith — have seldom been put in starker relief than in the McCain-Huckabee showdown here.

Other GOP candidates, particularly former Tennessee Sen. [Fred Thompson](#), may play a significant role. But chats with conservative faithful find that many seem torn between Huckabee's charismatic embrace of social conservatism and McCain's rugged appeal on national security, particularly in a post-Sept. 11 world.

Both campaigns have been explicit in emphasizing the image they think can win here. On his first day campaigning in South Carolina after his New Hampshire victory last week, McCain was flanked by cadets at the Citadel. Huckabee, on the same day, stopped by a pregnancy center aimed at talking women out of abortion and also converting clients to Christianity — 56 last year.

The recent Fox News/Opinion Dynamics poll of the state found that 27 percent of Huckabee supporters said social issues were their most important concern. Only 2 percent of McCain supporters said the same.

Meanwhile, 42 percent of McCain supporters said either Iraq or homeland security were their most important issues — twice the amount of Huckabee's supporters.

Both campaigns also feel they have the winning hand. Huckabee's slogan: "Faith, family, freedom." McCain's: "Best prepared to lead from day one."

"If this vote comes down to the appearance of a social conservative to someone who is just national security," said former South Carolina governor David Beasley, an early supporter of Huckabee, "there's no doubt that Mike Huckabee can win."

The McCain camp disagrees. "It doesn't matter whether you are an evangelical Christian or a retired Marine in Charleston," says South Carolina Sen. Lindsey Graham (R), a staunch McCain supporter. "You really feel threatened by Islamic terrorism."

Huckabee and McCain alternate leads in most polls and it remains very unclear, particularly given the remarkably fluid nature of the 2008 cycle, which argument is winning in a state filled with both active and retired military as well as evangelical Christians.

The Gallup Organization found that 58 percent of South Carolinians attend church weekly, tying two other states for the highest attendance levels in the nation. Militarily, the first shots of the Civil War were fired here and Parris Island, the Marine Corps boot camp, is here. South Carolina has more veterans than Iowa and New Hampshire combined.

For his part, Huckabee finds himself reaching for the Baptist preacher he once was. Sunday morning, he spoke at two services. In a speech in Columbia on Saturday, he emphasized social issues. As in Iowa, he has a loose coalition of support from Christian conservative activists.

The co-chairwoman of Huckabee's Faith and Family Values Coalition, Janet Folger, said the group will use voter guides, emails and broadcast this week to starkly differentiate McCain from Huckabee.



"John McCain thinks it's perfectly OK to use embryos for spare parts," the longtime social conservative activist said, referring to McCain's support for stem cell research.

Secondly, "he wants to shut down freedom of speech," she continued, referencing McCain's support for campaign finance reform. She also cited his opposition to the "marriage protection amendment."

A Folger staff member is speaking at a meeting of pastors on Wednesday in Columbia to, as she phrased it, "encourage people to get out and vote. And they can even let people know who they are going to vote for as long as they are not standing behind the pulpit."

Huckabee, however, has yet to send out direct mail making these points. McCain has sent three: on abortion, defense and border security.

McCain is relying on veterans and his military experience to try to take South Carolina — a state that essentially ended his insurgent bid against George W. Bush in 2000. He is counting on the hawkish positions of Christian conservatives to compensate for any inclinations they may have to back Huckabee.

This weekend, two teams of McCain veteran supporters drove the state, stopping by one veterans' hall after another. One McCain field organizer Wes Pass, a 28-year-old who has been back from Iraq long enough for his hair to now reach his eyes, said that his primary goal is to convince veterans to campaign for McCain. But he also asks veterans to "stand the polls." Pass believes that the mere reminder of a man wearing a "veterans for McCain" T-shirt will ferment support on primary day.

Huckabee and McCain don't totally cede ground to each other. Huckabee reminds voters he was the "commander in chief" of Arkansas' national guard. Last week at the debate in Myrtle Beach, he warned that if Iran targeted U.S. vessels in the Persian Gulf, Tehran's sailors should be "prepared that the next thing you see will be the gates of Hell."

On the same day, Republicans who oppose abortion received a postcard from the McCain campaign. It read in large type: "Pro-life, not just recently, always, never wavering." The card bears a picture of McCain and his wife, Cindy. On the back it explained that McCain learned the value of life as a POW, touts a "0 percent rating from pro-abortion groups" and showed a picture of Cindy walking with their adopted daughter.

Still, the central debate for many conservatives continues to be between McCain's years of national security strength and Huckabee's faithfulness on social issues.

Saturday evening, at Cathedral of Praise, Robert and Beth Parish were split between the two men.

Robert: "I like McCain's integrity and his record."

Beth, leaning toward Huckabee, hesitated. "I can't describe it," she said. "I just like what he stands for."

Robert looked over at his wife and asked if it was "because he's a former pastor."

"That's partly it," she quietly replied, nodding affirmatively as they walked into church.