

## Mehlman, Rove boost McCain campaign

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**John McCain** is getting much more than President Bush's endorsement and fundraising help for his campaign. He's getting Bush's staff.

It's no secret that Steve Schmidt, Bush's attack dog in the 2004 election, and Mark McKinnon, the president's media strategist, are performing similar functions for McCain now.

But other big-name Bushies are lining up to boost McCain, too.

Ken Mehlman, who ran Bush's 2004 campaign, is now serving as an unpaid, outside adviser to the Arizona Republican. Karl Rove, the president's top political hand since his Texas days, recently gave money to McCain and soon after had a private conversation with the senator. A top McCain adviser said both Mehlman and Rove are now informally advising the campaign. Rove refused to detail his conversation with McCain.

The list could grow longer. Dan Bartlett, formerly a top aide in the Bush White House, and Sara Taylor, the erstwhile Bush political adviser, said they are eager to provide any assistance and advice possible to McCain.

Rove explained that he and McCain "got to know each other during the 2004 campaign." In a separate interview, Mehlman noted that "McCain was completely loyal to the president in 2004 and worked incredibly hard to help him get elected." According to Taylor, "The Bush Republicans here in town are excited for John McCain."

Despite the president's low approval ratings, there are clear benefits to McCain for this cozy relationship with the Bush team. They are seasoned operatives with a track record of winning back-to-back national elections in tough political environments. But there are obvious drawbacks. First and foremost, any association with the Bush administration helps Democrats make their case that McCain represents a clear extension of an unpopular presidency.

One of those making that argument is Matt Dowd, Bush's chief strategist in 2004.

"[McCain] has sided himself so closely to the administration, especially on Iraq, now having various Bush advisers — that doesn't sit well with the public," said Dowd, who has recently broken with the Bush inner circle. "The public wants the non-Bush candidate."

Dowd also argued that he believes that the proximity of Bush's advisers could lead McCain to a strategic mistake: refighting the 2004 campaign. "There is a real danger of that," Dowd added. "And I think some of the things John McCain has done, and how he's done it, has been a fight or a battle

that's gone. I don't think this is going to be a terrorism election or a national security election."

The McCain adviser said Dowd's concern is unwarranted, pointing to the campaign's belief that the economy will play a far greater role in the 2008 race than it did in 2004.

That hasn't stopped Democrats from seizing upon the Bush-McCain axis. When Bush and McCain met at the White House on Wednesday, a Democratic leaning group aired an ad that day in the swing states of Pennsylvania and Ohio titled "McSame," attacking McCain as a Bush clone with similar policies on taxes, health care and the war in Iraq. The Democratic National Committee quickly posted a video of the news conference on its website. Beneath the video, it read that McCain would carry on Bush's "failed economic and foreign policies."

The McCain campaign, for its part, has been coy about how — or whether — the senator will distance himself from the president.

McCain said that he intended to campaign with Bush but quickly added a caveat: only "as it fits into his busy schedule." The scheduling disclaimer followed each of the five times — in the 10-minute press conference — that McCain invited Bush to join him on the trail.

For now, said a senior adviser to McCain who spoke on the condition of anonymity, the "the No. 1 strategic goal" was "to solidify the base of the party." A strong majority of Republicans continue to approve of the president.

Yet independents and Democrats do not share Republicans' approval of Bush. And former Bush aides recognize the political exigencies surrounding the McCain-Bush relationship.

"We agree on far more than we disagree on," Bartlett said. "Everybody will do everything they can to help. And if part of being helpful means [to] stay away, I'm sure people will stay away."

At the moment, McCain's campaign seems to believe Bush's assistance is more valuable than not. But the McCain adviser noted that, down the road, the campaign will "reinforce that [McCain] is an independent."