

McCain game plan worries insiders

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Four months have passed since John McCain effectively captured the party nomination, and the insiders are getting restless. Top GOP officials, frustrated by what they view as inconsistent messaging, sluggish fundraising and an organization that is too slow to take shape, are growing increasingly uneasy about the direction of the McCain presidential campaign.

While the practice of second-guessing presidential campaign decisions is a quadrennial routine, interviews with 16 Republican strategists and state party chairmen — few of whom would agree to talk on the record — reveal a striking level of discord and mounting criticism about the McCain operation.

“It’s not just message or not having just one single meta-theme to compete with Obama,” said a veteran Republican strategist with close ties to McCain’s top advisers. “It’s not just fundraising, which is mediocre. And it’s not even just organization, which is [just] starting or nonexistent in many states.”

“McCain’s campaign seems not to have a game plan. I don’t see a consistent message,” said Ed Rollins, a veteran of Republican presidential campaigns. “As someone who has run campaigns, this campaign is not running smoothly. But none of this matters if they get their act together.”

Indeed, some Republican officials who spoke to Politico noted that there is still time for the campaign to find its footing and that no campaign is without its detractors. But the bulk of those interviewed expressed serious concern about what has appeared to be an aimless campaign so far, one that has failed to take advantage of a four-month head start on Democrats and has showed little sign of gaining traction.

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“Here is where the problem is: We had a nomination gap between when McCain was nominated and the Democratic race completed,” a swing state Republican Party chairman said. “I think [campaign manager] Rick Davis and his team did not have an understanding of how the grass-roots, organizational part of the party works. They did not use what the [Republican National Committee] had done, or how groups like the [National Rifle Association] could have helped the McCain campaign locally.

“They are just now opening up campaign operations in most states. The RNC was ready to go in most states in March,” the state chairman continued, listing off grievances ranging from the campaign’s “dictating” the members of various RNC committees to the state party’s having been “threatened” that, though McCain “couldn’t afford not to play in our state,” the campaign would not “recommend us for resources” if the state party did not abide by its requests.

One frequent criticism surrounds the widely held perception that the campaign has failed to define or convey a consistent narrative against Obama — something that many Republicans insist should have begun right after Obama captured the nomination.

“What’s the political strategy when you allow your opponent, who has just had a grueling four months, time to catch their breath, regroup, fundraise and start to define himself?” asked a Republican strategist who helped lead a past presidential campaign. “It’s politics 101.”

Several consultants from past GOP campaigns were even more frustrated by what they viewed as a reluctance to attack — textbook strategy for an underdog.

One GOP consultant said that if McCain wanted to define Obama as “too inexperienced, too liberal and too risky” then “why wouldn’t your message every day have something to do with these three problems?”

Other insiders expressed frustration that there is a lack of consistency in defining McCain as well, pointing to the recent launch of an ad touting his challenge to the president’s position on global warming — at the same time that McCain traveled to Texas to advocate lifting the federal moratorium on offshore oil drilling.

“It’s hard to see a thematic message,” said another GOP strategist who has worked on past presidential races. Several Republicans said it remains unclear whether McCain will run on experience or attempt to redefine Obama’s message of change.

Some critics cite a litany of minor but nevertheless maddening incidents as evidence that the McCain campaign is failing to execute the basic blocking and tackling maneuvers that mark successful teams.

They point to the late February McCain appearance in Cincinnati, where a conservative radio talk show host repeatedly invoked Obama’s middle name, Hussein; the controversies surrounding endorsements from two conservative megachurch pastors; an event last week in Santa Barbara, Calif., where McCain sat on stage between California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and a local activist who ended up deriding McCain’s energy policy; the orchestration of a poorly received June 3 New Orleans event held the evening Obama earned the nomination.

All are mentioned as examples of the campaign’s inability to get even the little things — such as basic vetting or event staging — right.

It’s “a lot of embarrassment that is mechanical,” said the strategist close to the McCain campaign.

Part of the frustration comes from inevitable comparisons to the precision-engineered Bush-Cheney 2004 campaign — an almost impossibly high standard to meet, since that organization had four years to prepare and considerably more resources at its disposal.

The Bush campaign had methodically spoken to state Republican chairmen prior to the 2004 general election, going so far as to inquire what lessons learned from 2002 should be applied in 2004. The level of communication this year, said several GOP state leaders, did not reach that standard. The McCain campaign had not included some key state chairmen in political planning, and a few were anxious over what they said were lax swing state preparations.

"Rather than trying to pull me in and make me an intricate part of the team they just told me what they wanted done, and said if you don't play ball we won't play ball," one state chairman said.

Those chairmen noted that the conservative base is far less riled, and significantly smaller, than its liberal counterpart. For this reason, GOP leaders generally believe they will have to be more efficient to overcome Obama's advantages.

"You are going to hear a lot of complaints from state party chairmen," one chairman said of his colleagues. "They are used to the Rove-Mehlman model. They were very good at finding the place they needed to win, down to the county they needed in Ohio.

"They are used to millions being raised for them, they're used Karl Rove and Ken Mehlman providing a lot of infrastructure for state parties," the chairman continued. "What people are being told is we are all on our own."

A few state chairmen, including Jim Greer of Florida and Rob Gleason of Pennsylvania, two key battleground states, said they were satisfied with the McCain campaign thus far.

"They jumped right in here, and they have been very receptive to our ideas, as we have been to them," said Gleason, though he added that Pennsylvania could be more the exception than the rule because of its position as the largest blue state that could turn red.

For its part, the McCain campaign argues that the growing pains are unremarkable and reflect both the shift from a state-by-state operation to a national campaign and typical armchair quarterbacking.

"Rick [Davis] is getting exactly the same heat from state chairmen that presidential campaigns get at this period of time in the race," said a McCain senior adviser.

But the campaign has also acknowledged some mistakes. In an effort to lessen the load on Davis, communications guru Steve Schmidt has been called off the trail to help manage the Arlington, Va., headquarters.

The move of Schmidt to a more hands-on role has been well-received within the GOP consulting community. "It's the smartest move they've made in months," said Chris LaCivita, a Republican strategist. "Schmidt knows you've got to be aggressive in campaigns, and he knows how to get the job done. I just hope it's not too late."

At least one veteran GOP strategist said McCain still has time to straighten out his campaign. Stuart Spencer, Ronald Reagan's longtime political consultant, said that "now is the time frame when you have to get your house in order."