

McCain using Ottawa as a backdrop?

U.S. Republican presidential hopeful insists visit not a 'campaign ploy,' just a chance to tout trade

Jun 17, 2008 04:30 AM

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WASHINGTON BUREAU

WASHINGTON—John McCain says his trip to Canada this week is no "campaign ploy."

But by delivering in Ottawa a partisan message he could deliver in Omaha, the presumptive Republican presidential nominee is about to use the Canadian capital as a convenient backdrop in the U.S. election campaign.

It's a move as rare as it is curious.

He brings to Canada his message that Barack Obama's desire to unilaterally renegotiate the North American Free Trade Agreement damages relations between steadfast allies and he will highlight the benefits of the trilateral deal in his speech Friday at an Ottawa hotel.

The Conservative government in Ottawa and the Canadian Embassy in Washington are seeking as much cover as possible from the McCain visit, but the optics hurt Prime Minister Stephen Harper and everyone around him. Having the man most Canadians would see as the embodiment of the third George W. Bush term extolling your policies is no favour for the Conservative government.

And having the visit revolve around NAFTA only reminds voters how the overheated Conservative reaction to Democratic pandering in the U.S. Midwest inflamed the issue. And it reminds all of the leaked Canadian memo accusing Obama, McCain's presumptive Democratic rival in the Nov. 4 U.S. presidential election, of playing politics with the issue and damaging him in the Ohio primary.

"If I go to Canada it will be to thank them for their participation in the struggle against radical Islamic extremism, (and) for the benefits of trade in our relations," McCain told reporters yesterday.

He also held out the possibility of travelling to Colombia, another nation where a proposed trade agreement has become a campaign issue.

"I do not intend to use any foreign travel as ... a campaign ploy," he said. "But I have travelled constantly in my years in the United States Senate and in the House of Representatives before that, and I do know these leaders, and I know the issues. And that will be part of this campaign, how we look at free trade."

McCain has stronger Canadian ties than Obama. He has a daughter living in Toronto, he has a strong knowledge of border issues, some of it fostered during meetings with Liberal Senator Colin Kenny during visits by the Canadian's national security and defence committee.

He has even watched the Fourth of July fireworks from the Canadian Embassy.

Whether Canadians will appreciate being cast as extras in his campaign is another question.

Some analysts here whose expertise straddles the border believe any Canadian visit by a presidential candidate will help bilateral relations, even if they are not certain of the political value for him.

"I think it's great he's going to Ottawa," says former U.S. ambassador to Canada Gordon Giffin.

"There are only two people who can become president and when he or Senator Obama recognizes the value of the relationship with Canada, whether it be NAFTA or NATO or NORAD or our contribution to Afghanistan, I think that's terrific."

But Giffin, a Democrat, doesn't necessarily see the political value of Obama making a similar journey.

"I'm not sure it moves the ball substantially because you are running for president of the United States, you're not running for the president of Ontario," he said.

Paul Frazer, a former Canadian diplomat and consultant on Canada-U.S. relations in Washington, said Canadians could be better served if the majority leader of the Senate came to Canada to offer assurances about NAFTA.

"The president is constrained by the power of Congress," Frazer said, "and Canadians know a lot will happen between now and November and a great deal of what will happen depends on the results of congressional elections."

McCain will ratchet up the pressure on Obama on his trade stance.

"The fact is that Senator Obama said that he would unilaterally renegotiate the North American Free Trade Agreement," McCain said.

"I think we have to retrain and educate our workers."

McCain said Obama is wrong to try to unilaterally renegotiate a "solemn treaty," and earlier in the campaign he even raised the spectre of Canadian withdrawal from Afghanistan in retaliation for a renegotiation of NAFTA.

Obama addressed free trade in a speech yesterday in Flint, Mich.

"I have said before, and will say again, I believe in free trade," said Obama, who was endorsed yesterday by former vice-president Al Gore. "It can save money for our consumers, generate business for U.S. exporters, and expand global wealth. But unlike George Bush and John McCain, I do not think that any trade agreement is a good trade agreement."