

GOP Presidential Candidates Urged To Attend Minority Forums, Debates

DEBATES, From A1

sion network in the United States. The event was eventually postponed.

"For Republicans to consistently refuse to engage in front of an African American or Latino audience is an enormous error," said former House speaker Newt Gingrich (Ga.), who has not yet ruled out a White House run himself. "I hope they will reverse their decision and change their schedules. I see no excuse — this thing has been planned for months, these candidates have known about it for months. It's just fundamentally wrong. Any of them who gives you that scheduling-conflict answer are disingenuous. That's baloney."

Former Republican National Committee chairman Ken Mehlman urged candidates to "reconsider this opportunity to lay out their vision and other opportunities in the future."

"Every one of these candidates I've talked to is sincerely committed

to offering real choices to African American and Hispanic voters, and in my opinion have records that will appeal to many of these voters," he added.

Mehlman, a longtime aide to President Bush, aggressively courted the minority vote as RNC chairman in 2005-06. He recruited black candidates to run for office as Republicans and condemned electoral tactics that showed hints of race-baiting.

Mehlman's successor at the RNC was Sen. Mel Martinez (Fla.), a backer of legislation that would allow illegal immigrants now in the country to stay and eventually become citizens.

Except for McCain, the top GOP candidates have distanced themselves from that proposal, which Kemp worries will become another strike against the GOP with Hispanics. Bush got 40 percent of the Latino vote in 2004, but the Republican base remains inflamed about illegal immigration, leading the candidates to focus on border-control propos-

als.

In passing on invitations to the Morgan State forum, the Republicans cited hectic schedules, noting in particular that September is a critical month for fundraising after a traditional summer slowdown. With candidates' fundraising closely scrutinized as a measure of their strength, all are eager to report a showing that reflects enthusiasm for their candidacies.

Democrats have been invited to so many debates and forums that the campaign of Sen. Barack Obama (Ill.) was moved last month to send out a memo saying he would begin declining invitations to them in the future. Republicans have confronted a somewhat more manageable schedule. Interest groups important to the party have hosted fewer forums, and the leading candidates have still felt they could skip some.

Several Republicans have so far declined to participate in a forum sponsored by the Web site YouTube that would be broadcast on CNN. Earlier this week, the top contend-



Tavis Smiley, who will host a debate in Baltimore, says GOP candidates have been ignoring minority voters.

ers skipped a "values voters" forum organized by conservative activists in Florida.

"We consider every debate invitation equally as they relate to the schedule," said Kevin Madden, a Romney spokesman. "Unfortunately, our schedule considerations for the month of September were such that we had to decline several debate invitations and candidate forums from different groups around the country, including Wharton Business School and CNN."

But while the GOP campaigns have generally offered no public rationale other than timing for missing the forums, an adviser to one suggested they had little to gain from attending an event such as Smiley's.

"What's the win?" said the adviser, who requested anonymity because of the sensitivity of the subject. "Why would [the candidates] go into a crowd where they're probably going to be booed?"

Giuliani, Romney and McCain also declined to appear at events sponsored by the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials and the National Urban League, which Smiley said suggests a pattern of ignoring minority voters. He said debate organizers will set up empty lecterns showing the names of the absent candidates.

"When you reject every black invitation and every brown invitation you receive, is that a scheduling issue or is it a pattern?" he asked. "I don't believe anybody should be elected president of the United States if they think along the way they can ignore people of color. That's just not the America we live in."

Democrats Drop Effort On Withdrawal Timeline

CONGRESS, From A3

the annual defense policy bill. Two Democratic amendments on Iraq have attracted Republican support.

One that Reid said is promising is from Sen. James Webb (D-Va.). It would extend home stays for troops for periods at least as long as their last combat tours before they can be redeployed. Webb's amendment fell four votes short of the needed 60 when offered in July.

Some Democrats view Webb's amendment as a way to skirt the deadline issue while still effectively limiting combat operations by making fewer troops available. Reid said he has insisted to Republicans that Democrats are simply seeking to protect troops and their families.

"I've tried to explain to them this is no backdoor way to focus on the war in Iraq," Reid said. "It's to replenish and restore — I keep using those words — our military."

Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates has raised objections to Webb's proposal, causing concern among some Republicans and leading one prominent GOP supporter, Sen. John W. Warner (Va.), to suggest that he may back away from it. But in recent days, Webb has consulted with Warner and has tweaked his proposal to address Gates's concerns.

A second amendment with bipartisan backing would endorse the partition of Iraq into three regions. It was offered by Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Joseph R. Biden Jr. (Del.), a Democratic presidential candidate.

Despite the lack of consensus in Congress, the war in Iraq remains deeply unpopular. A poll released yesterday by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press found that 54 percent believe U.S. forces should be brought home as soon as possible, a level unchanged since July.

Those views are affecting the perception of even veteran politicians in deeply Republican states. A poll released by the Lexington Herald-Leader yesterday found Kentucky voters split on the performance of Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.), with 47 percent approving and 44 percent disapproving. Fifty-five percent disapproved of McConnell's position on Iraq.

Senators from both parties met yesterday morning to try to coalesce around one of two bipartisan amendments to shift course in Iraq. One, deemed "weak tea" by Reid, would enact the recommendations of the Iraq Study Group, which was led by former secretary of state James A. Baker III, a Republican, and former congressman Lee H. Hamilton (D-Ind.).

Reid said yesterday that the Iraq Study Group's proposal would have to be strengthened to gain Democratic support.

The other bipartisan offer on the table, written by Sens. Ben Nelson (D-Neb.) and Susan Collins (R-Maine), would mandate an immediate shift of mission in Iraq away from combat toward border security, counterterrorism and the training of Iraqi security forces. Collins said a number of senators from both parties began exploring whether the two measures could be melded into one that could achieve at least 60 votes.

Those conversations are to continue today as senators try to find amendments to introduce next week. "That is the way forward," Collins said.

Staff writer Jonathan Weisman contributed to this report.

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VA Secretary Cites Backlog of Claims

By HOPE YEN
Associated Press

Outgoing Secretary Jim Nicholson acknowledged yesterday that the Department of Veterans Affairs is struggling to reduce backlogs in disability claims from Iraq war veterans.

Delays in processing disability payments reach up to 177 days, and Nicholson, in addressing Congress for a final time before stepping down Oct. 1, said the department has hired 1,100 new processors to cut that waiting time.

Even with the new staffing, Nicholson told the House Veterans Affairs Committee, VA can

hope to reduce delays only to about 145 to 150 days — assuming that the level of compensation and pension claims does not spike higher.

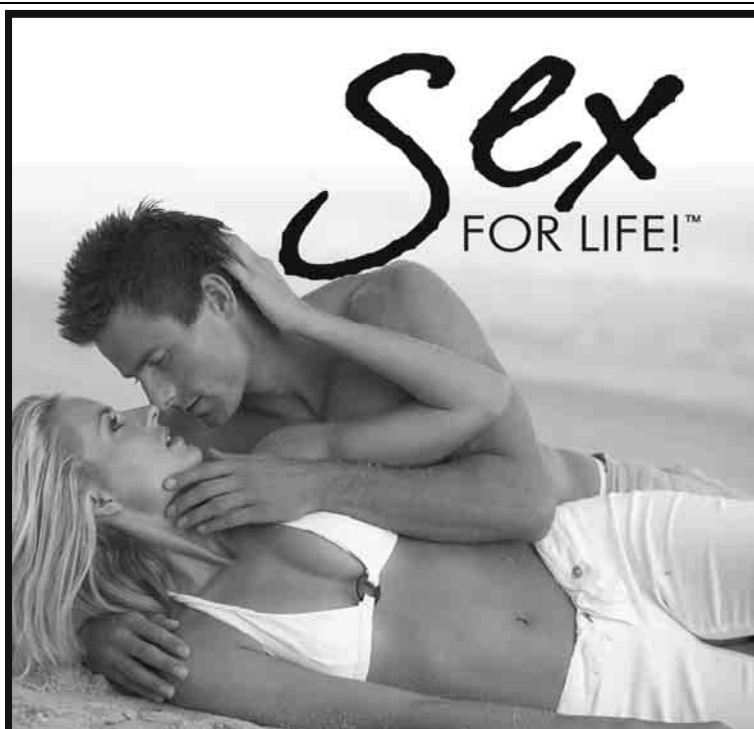
"The claims backlog is an issue that has bedeviled me and many that have come before me," Nicholson said. "In fact, VA can influence the output — claims decided — of its work product, but it cannot control the input — claims filed."

Nicholson, who took office in early 2005, also pointed to persistent problems between the Pentagon and his department in coordinating care for veterans and urged Congress to embrace proposals by

a presidential commission to fix gaps.

"They have some very good ideas in there," he said.

Nicholson yesterday expressed sympathy to injured veterans who might have unfairly suffered as a result of unnecessary red tape. "We have learned that, in many instances, we were not as sensitive to those needs as we could have been — and we have tried to adjust, while at the same time caring for veterans of different wars and different eras," he said in prepared remarks. "My heart has gone out to service members or veterans who seem to have slipped through the cracks."



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