

No Retreat on Iraq Stance, McCain Insists

Senator John McCain of Arizona greeting supporters Saturday during a campaign trip through Iowa.



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By [ADAM NAGOURNEY](#)
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DAVENPORT, Iowa, Feb. 17 — Senator [John McCain](#) arrived in Iowa on Saturday to begin testing one of the biggest questions so far of his presidential campaign: Can he win as an all-out supporter of the war in Iraq?

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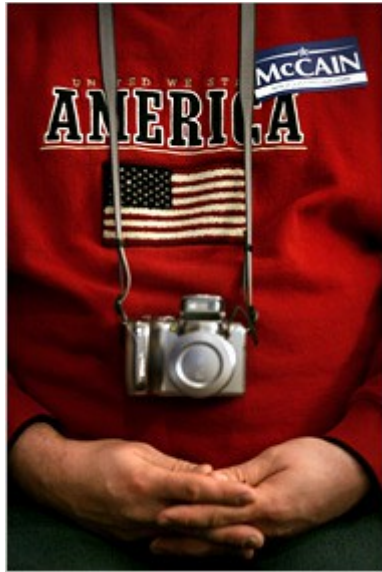
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Todd Heisler/The New York Times

A McCain fan at a question-and-answer session in Des Moines.

Almost from the moment he took the stage at his first campaign event in Iowa since forming his presidential exploratory committee, Mr. McCain made clear that he was not backing away from his support of the war. From Des Moines to Cedar Rapids to this eastern Iowa community, Mr. McCain aggressively identified his candidacy with the war. In the process, he signaled the political advantage his campaign sees in presenting Mr. McCain as an unapologetic Iraq war advocate to the conservative Republican activists who dominate the Iowa caucuses.

He attacked Senate Democrats for what he called “a political stunt” in trying to join the House in passing a nonbinding resolution opposing President Bush’s plan to send more troops to Baghdad. He warned of catastrophic consequences if the United States abandoned its effort in Iraq.

He belittled the White House for falsely raising hopes by asserting early successes in the war. In Des Moines, he spent nearly an hour fielding questions and challenges from an audience of Republicans, many of them clearly with Mr. McCain on the issue but others just as clearly

anguished over it. Some of them spoke of having sons and daughters who had served in Iraq.

“I know how tough it is for the American people, I know how frustrated Americans are, I understand your frustration,” Mr. McCain said. “But I also want to tell you that I believe if we fail, the consequences of failure are catastrophic.”

“If we leave Iraq, they are going to follow us home,” he said.

Mr. McCain skipped the debate in the Senate on a resolution condemning the war to be here. One of nine Republican senators who was not present for the debate, he dismissed it as political trickery that was “insulting to the public and our soldiers.” But the war was as much at the forefront in the Des Moines hotel ballroom where he began his day as it was on the Senate floor.

It brought to life what has become a central strategic gamble for the McCain campaign: that his support of the war in Iraq would help him among the select groups of Iowa Republicans who will caucus here next January.

It is a position that Republican leaders said is in line with the views of most caucus voters; his support of the White House’s central initiative also gives him an opportunity to reassure Republican activists here who have not forgotten or forgiven his frequent criticisms of the administration in the earlier years of Mr. Bush’s presidency.

That said, if the war could help Mr. McCain in winning his party’s nomination, his aides said they viewed with anxiety the prospect of Mr. McCain — or any pro-war Republican — trying to beat an antiwar Democrat if conditions in Iraq did not improve. Mr. McCain’s aides could barely contain their frustration, as he sailed off on this maiden voyage of his campaign, at the extent to

which perhaps the most important factor in determining the 2008 race was beyond their control.

In many ways, Mr. McCain finds himself in the opposite situation of Senator [Hillary Rodham Clinton](#) of New York. He has embraced a position that may lift him through the primaries, but that could complicate his prospects against an antiwar Democrat in the general election.

Mr. McCain's first stop Saturday suggested just how torn about the war Americans are, regardless of party. A questioner who introduced himself as a veteran of combat in Iraq and Afghanistan drew an ovation that lasted nearly 60 seconds. But moments later, Mr. McCain faced skeptical questioning from another audience member, Marty Baddeloo, a business coach who lives in West Des Moines and who said he had a son who served in Iraq, about how much money — and how many lives — would be needed to bring stability to Iraq.

"Assuming you are elected president," Mr. Baddeloo said, "if your plans are implemented, what is it going to cost in terms of time and dollars for us to be successful in Iraq?"

Mr. McCain, holding a wireless microphone and wearing a loose-fitting brown leather jacket, answered with a subdued tone. "I'd like to be able to give you an answer, sir," he said. "And you reflect the frustration that many Americans feel."

But in Cedar Rapids, the crowd broke into applause as a questioner mocked Democrats for pushing the war resolution and asked Mr. McCain how he would rally public support for the war.