

The Hurricane In Question Is Still Called Katrina

di Dan Balz

ST. PAUL, Minn., Aug. 31 - Three years after it battered New Orleans and the Gulf Coast, Hurricane Katrina upended this convention city Sunday.

For John McCain, struggling to separate himself from the worst of President Bush's record and to get out from under the weight of his unpopular party, this week was supposed to be about emerging as his own candidate. His selection of Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin as his running mate energized the Republican Party's conservative base and the candidate himself, setting up a convention week designed to discredit Democratic nominee Barack Obama and boost McCain as an independent-minded reformer ready to shake up Washington.

Now a storm called Gustav threatens to remind voters of perhaps the signal event that helped turn them against the GOP -- the Bush administration's botched response to the devastating 2005 storm. What neither McCain nor the party can tolerate now is anything that smacks of insensitivity or incompetence in the face of another potential natural disaster. As he told NBC anchor Brian Williams on Sunday, the opening of the convention "has got to be Americans helping Americans. America first."

Gustav has disrupted McCain's convention, but the storm also presents the candidate with an opportunity to show that he would be a different kind of president than Bush. His decisions to fly to Mississippi on Sunday for a pre-storm assessment and then to radically redraw the agenda for the convention's opening night until it is clear what might happen with the storm send a message that some top Republicans believe will serve him well in the campaign ahead against Obama.

"McCain has shown exactly the right values in putting America ahead of the Republican Party," said former House speaker Newt Gingrich. "This is a very dangerous situation for thousands of people and for the country, and it is vital that McCain keep focused on the country. So far he has done exactly the right things."

Bush and the Republicans have never recovered from Katrina. The president's approval ratings, already sinking under public dissatisfaction with the war in Iraq through the summer of 2005, plunged further after Katrina. His halting reaction -- and even worse, the woeful performance of federal disaster agencies and his widely ridiculed remark to then-FEMA Director Michael D. Brown, "Brownie, you're doing a heck of a job" -- left an indelible mark on his presidency and his party. The Republican brand is at its lowest point in years.

Everything here in St. Paul is now on hold until the storm hits and the damage is assessed. Normally, a political convention is the most scripted of events, a four-day infomercial for the nominee. No one has a script for what the Republicans are dealing with now. They announced Sunday that they would dramatically shorten the opening-day schedule, stripping out political speeches and doing essential business, but out of the glare of television's prime-time hours. Beyond that, it is anybody's guess what kind of show they will be able to present.

For now, Gustav has denied McCain and the Republicans the kind of platform that Obama and the Democrats enjoyed in Denver last week. "Gustav is making this a very different, even unique,

convention," said Ben Ginsberg, a Republican strategist and former party official. "It calls for something appropriate in this situation, which is not drama and spectacle."

Added GOP strategist Todd Harris: "Gustav is completely changing the calculus as far as the tone and tenor of the convention."

But what will it become? A week of private parties and public festivities has given way to calls for service, fundraising for victims of the storm, somber reflection and political uncertainty. In some ways, what this convention may turn out to be is less a week of hoopla and something more in keeping with McCain's long-stated message that politics should be about a cause greater than individual self-aggrandizement.

Some Republicans here argue privately that the storm has spared McCain the first uncomfortable moment of the week. The opening-night agenda was to include speeches by Bush and Vice President Cheney. Both of their appearances were canceled, and their roles the rest of the week are not known. If the public judges the administration's performance in responding to Gustav as a notable improvement on its Katrina efforts, Bush may be a more sympathetic figure by the end of the week than he is now.

That, of course, depends on how events play out.

McCain's week is far from lost. For years, there have been calls for the parties to shorten their nominating conventions to two or three days at most. That could be what Republicans end up with, and a storm-delayed convention might prove even more compelling than one built around a familiar and in many ways tired model.

Without all the drama over what Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton and her husband, former president Bill Clinton, would say last week, the Democrats might have struggled to keep the public interested in all four days of their convention. McCain would have been hard pressed to compete with Obama's final night, the extravaganza at Invesco Field, where more than 80,000 people turned out to hear the Democratic nominee give his acceptance speech. Now he won't have to try.

Beyond that, Republicans had a string of elected officials and party luminaries on the agenda, but few who could match the star power of the Clintons in Denver or even the program the GOP opened with in New York four years ago. That group included former New York mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani, then still the hero of Sept. 11, 2001, but this year a more diminished figure after his unsuccessful run for the presidency; McCain as Bush's most forceful defender on going to war in Iraq; and California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger.

What Republicans may lose is the opportunity to make their case against Obama, a job normally left to surrogates in the early days of the convention. With politics-as-usual wiped from the early schedule, that anti-Obama message will be far more muted than it ordinarily might have been.

Here in St. Paul, there were arguably only three key speeches on the four-day schedule. The first was Bush's, the second the acceptance speech by the little-known Palin and the third McCain's acceptance speech on the convention's final night.

Gustav will disrupt the Democrats as well. Obama and his running mate, Sen. Joseph R. Biden Jr. (Del.), will be forced to adjust their own campaign plans to account for the storm. McCain has moved quicker on that front, but the Democrats will certainly adapt.

For now, the presidential campaign will be frozen in place until Gustav has played itself out. Whom that helps can't be foretold. McCain's pick of Palin shifted focus from Obama to the GOP, but Gustav has robbed McCain of the limelight. Americans are now riveted on the storm in the Gulf Coast rather than the convention center here in St. Paul. As Tom Rath, a veteran Republican strategist from New Hampshire, put it: "A sure, sensitive and effective response is more important than staging or rhetoric."