

## South Carolina: McCain's big Southern test



*By Ariel Sabar*  
Staff writer of *The Christian Science Monitor*

(AXcess News) Spartanburg, S.C. - For a very brief moment this week, the ghosts of the 2000 primary in this Bible Belt state looked as if they were back for Sen. John McCain.

A flier accused him of leaving POWs behind in Vietnam. Automated phone calls second-guessed his antiabortion record. A man at a campaign stop handed out papers accusing him of joining with "the enemies of South Carolina history & heritage" by supporting the removal of the Confederate flag from the State House dome.

Maybe Senator McCain has changed since the season of smear that scuttled his presidential bid in 2000. Or maybe South Carolina has. But the attacks this time don't seem to be sticking. When the Arizona senator defended himself at a campaign stop Wednesday against a shouting supporter of the Confederate flag, the crowd in this deeply conservative upstate city rose to its feet in applause.

McCain is not putting up with the mudslinging that helped dash his presidential bid eight years ago, when George W. Bush won South Carolina and the nomination. But perhaps more telling, the attacks so far have been relatively few, reflecting not just a smarter campaign but also changed times and a weaker field of opponents.

The stakes couldn't be higher: No Republican since 1980 has won the presidential nomination without first winning South Carolina.

For McCain, this year has offered no shortage of parallels to his last presidential run. As in 2000, he scored a come-from-behind victory in New Hampshire and is riding a wave of momentum in South Carolina, where GOP voters go to the polls Saturday. It is the final act of 2000 - the Palmetto State implosion - that McCain is determined to avoid this time.

"I'll win here in South Carolina, and that's all there is to it," McCain told reporters here Wednesday.

GOP activists and political experts here aren't quite as confident. But they say that McCain is on far surer footing than he was eight years ago. "He has definitely turned a corner," says C. Danielle Vinson, a political scientist at Furman University in Greenville.

Recent polls show him pulling ahead of Mike Huckabee, the Southern Baptist pastor and former Arkansas governor who had held a commanding lead here since

early December.

Two of the state's largest newspapers, The State and The Greenville News, praised McCain's leadership and national security credentials in endorsing him last weekend. Eight years ago, both papers backed Mr. Bush.

McCain has built his South Carolina campaign on the painful lessons of 2000. He forged early ties with evangelical Christian leaders he had snubbed eight years ago. He fought for the state's antigay marriage amendment in 2006, and his campaign assembled a faith advisory panel. He formed a "Truth Squad" to parry the kind of false rumors that dogged him the last time, including allegations in 2000 that an orphan whom he and his wife adopted in Bangladesh was his out-of-wedlock child.

And he has kept up a more positive tone, avoiding the acid-laced oaths that made the 2000 primary one of the dirtiest electoral bouts in recent memory. (He said that year that the Bush campaign had "unleashed the dogs of war.")

Oran Smith, president of the Palmetto Family Council, an influential conservative policy group in Columbia, says McCain began mending fences with a speech in 2006 to a panel of evangelical leaders in Greenville.

"He basically said, 'I came across as very defensive when I was attacked eight years ago, and perhaps I went too far in what I thought was defending my family and my record,' " Dr. Smith recalls. "I thought that laid a lot of groundwork."

Evangelical voters make up about a third of Republican primary voters here.

The differences between 2000 and 2008 go beyond McCain. The social issues that once galvanized conservatives have taken a back seat to national security, which has played to McCain's strengths as a decorated Vietnam veteran and backer of the troop "surge" that is credited with reducing violence in Iraq.

Though his support for a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants hurt him here over the summer, a new emphasis on border security in campaign speeches has mollified some critics.

Another difference, say analysts, is the lack of a rival like Bush, who united Evangelicals, fiscal conservatives, and establishment Republicans for an 11-percentage point victory over McCain here in 2000.

Endorsements this time are all over the map. Bob Jones III, chancellor of the evangelical Bob Jones University, is backing former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney. South Carolina Citizens for Life endorsed Fred Thompson, the former Tennessee senator. Five-term Rep. Bob Inglis, who represents religious upstate South Carolina, has thrown his support to Mr. Huckabee.

Many of the establishment political figures and campaign operatives behind Bush last time have swung behind McCain.

"The religious right is all over the place," says Ms. Vinson.

And they are a little less politically fervent. In 2000, South Carolina Citizens for Life denounced McCain for his support of fetal-tissue research and a campaign-finance measure that they felt limited their ability to advocate for candidates.

This time, the group is confining its criticism to former New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, the only abortion-rights supporter in the GOP field, who is polling in the single digits here. Asked why McCain was being spared this time, Holly Gatling, the group's executive director, said, "this is a completely different race, in a completely different era, with completely different candidates."