



Palin packs a punch in SW Florida

Republican vice presidential nominee stops in Southwest Florida for fund-raisers, public speech

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A raucous crowd of thousands welcomed Republican vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin to Southwest Florida as she visited the economically troubled region for the first time and continued her sharp criticism of Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama.

In a speech interrupted several times by protestors' jeers, Palin energized 9,000 supporters at Germain Arena by questioning Obama's support of the Iraq War, his tax policies and his political associations.

"This is about the truthfulness and judgment needed to become our next president," she said. "John McCain has it. Barack Obama doesn't have it."

The audience loved every moment with their candidate.

Nancy Wiley, 49, an Estero homemaker who home schools a son and daughter, said Palin would fight "oppressive taxation" to make life easier for middle-class citizens. Like many supporters, Wiley's enthusiasm for the Republican ticket arose only after Palin's selection.

"I was going to hold my nose and vote for McCain," she said. "When Palin went in there, I was all for it."

Palin's visit comes as the Southwest Florida economy is among the worst in the nation. Home foreclosures continue unabated, and unemployment rates outpace the national average by a considerable amount.

Palin said that while she was a mayor and a governor in Alaska, she slowed spending, cut taxes and removed certain business fees, the result of which was the creation of jobs. In her speech, she linked the economy with energy independence, citing Florida as an alternative-energy bonanza that could create more jobs.

"God has so richly blessed you here in Florida with all those alternative energy sources. It means alternative sources of energy like wind and solar, along with environmentally safe offshore production oil, if that's what a state wants." If they do, she said, "Drill here, drill now!"

Her speech, given nearly word-for-word at a fund-raiser earlier in the day, targeted Obama's character and judgment. Calling the Iraq War a success, Palin wondered why Obama has never "used the word 'victory'" in reference to the war. She mentioned her own son, Track, who recently deployed to Iraq.

When a protester made noise near the stage, Palin said, "My son is over in Iraq fighting for your right to protest right now."

The crowd leapt to its feet and erupted in cheer. The protester, a man, was escorted outside by security. Another group of protestors farther away from the stage were also lead outside.

Palin linked Obama to 1960s radical William Ayers. Ayers was a co-founder of the Weathermen, a radical group that targeted government buildings for bombing, including the Pentagon and the United States Capitol.

Citing a recent New York Times article, Palin said Obama "launched his political career in the living room" of Ayers, whom she called a "domestic terrorist." Ayers, now a college professor and a school reform advocate in Chicago, did host a gathering where Obama was introduced to several people as a candidate for the Illinois Senate. But the article said his home was one of many in the Chicago suburbs that held an event for Obama.

Palin said a left-wing agenda is being thrust upon the nation under the guise of mainstream values.

She also repeated a claim that many non-partisan sources say is untrue — that Obama voted to raise taxes on families making as little as \$42,000 a year. According to the nonpartisan Web site www.factcheck.org and The New York Times, Obama voted for a budget resolution that would have allowed the Bush tax cuts of 2001 and 2003 to expire. Without the tax cuts, a single person making \$42,000 a year or more would pay \$15 a year extra in taxes. A family would not be affected.

The cheers were loud and sustained throughout Palin's speech. Supporters filled seats to the top of the arena, and they stood around the square stage and behind rope lines set to the side.

They chanted her name when she first came on stage and when protesters interrupted her.

They shook red pom-poms and held signs aloft that read "Moms for Sarah" and "FGCU loves Sarah," among others.

And they rushed to the stage for autographs after she finished speaking. Palin slowly worked her way around the platform, signing posters, slips of paper and even a few hats.

Florida Gov. Charlie Crist introduced Palin. Sen. Mel Martinez was in attendance, and Lee County Sheriff Mike Scott also spoke, using Barack Obama's middle name, Hussein, stirring up a controversy that resulted in an apology from the McCain-Palin campaign.

The Germain Arena speech was Palin's final stop in a hurried afternoon that included two fund-raisers in Naples. She gave a speech at the Naples Beach Club Hotel and Golf Resort around 12:30 p.m., a \$1,000-a-plate event that garnered more than 100 attendees, all of whom stood against the stage and on top of chairs to get a closer look at the candidate.

She met a crowd outside the resort to shake hands and sign posters before being whisked to the Port Royal home of investment magnate John Donahue.

The fund-raiser, a \$10,000-a-plate event, was not accessible to the press.

Throughout the day, campaign staffers kept local and national press out of range of the vice president. The closest reporters got to the candidate was when she entered and exited her "Straight Talk Express" bus.

She arrived at Southwest Florida International Airport just after 11 p.m. and was driven to Naples in a police-guided motorcade that passed through intersections along the way. A few supporters watched and waved from the road. Near Germain Arena, home to the Everblades hockey team, one child waved a hockey stick as the hockey mom passed in the bus.

Charles and Phyllis Podolsky were among the first locals to spot their candidate. Both waited at the airport, outside a fence that marked the tarmac boundary.

Charles compared the Palin frenzy to the 1960 campaign of John F. Kennedy. Podolsky, 58, remembers painting his bicycle in support of Kennedy and riding up and down the Coney Island boardwalk. To be sure, Kennedy's politics differed from Palin's. But their appeal, Podolsky said, was the same.

"Here she is, a woman who's plain down to earth," he said. "She sees what the people see."

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