

McCain Scolds Obama, Clinton Over NAFTA

By Glen Johnson
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ST. LOUIS — Sen. John McCain said Tuesday that proposals by Democrats Barack Obama and Hillary Rodham Clinton to use pressure tactics to renegotiate the North American Free Trade Agreement could undermine U.S. trade relationships with other nations.

"We've got to stop this protectionist, NAFTA-bashing," the Republican presidential nominee-in-waiting told a town hall meeting at Savvis Inc., an information technology company.

McCain said his potential Democratic opponents were wrong to threaten pulling out of NAFTA to force Canada and Mexico to negotiate more protections for workers and the environment in the agreement.

If that threat is made, McCain asked, "What are the other countries in the world going to think about the agreements we've negotiated with them?"

In a debate in Cleveland before the March 4 primary in Ohio, where NAFTA is blamed for the loss of industrial jobs, both Democratic presidential contenders endorsed threatening to pull out of NAFTA.

Clinton said her plan includes "telling Canada and Mexico that we will opt out unless we renegotiate the core labor and environmental standards." Obama agreed: "We should use the hammer of a potential opt-out as leverage to ensure that we actually get labor and environmental standards that are enforced."

Instead, McCain said, "We've got to do a lot better job of taking care of those workers who have been displaced."

He said the host for the meeting, Savvis, is providing the kind of jobs crucial to the transition from a Rust Belt industrial economy to an intellectual economy.

"We're in an informational-technological revolution," McCain said. "And they need trained and educated workers. That is vital to giving Americans another chance."

He said he intended to use junior colleges to lead the way in retraining displaced workers for new technology jobs. "As president, my highest priority will be to provide the educational and training programs so those who have lost their job can come and apply for a job here," McCain said.

"We know that Americans are hurting; we know that these are difficult times," McCain said citing rising home foreclosures and the loss of manufacturing jobs, particularly in the Midwest.

Protectionism and isolationism are not the answer, he said.

"The fundamentals of our economy are still strong" and the U.S. has gotten through similar economic difficulties in the past, he added.

In another difference with Clinton and Obama, McCain reiterated his support for making President Bush's tax cuts permanent. The Democratic contenders advocate letting the cuts lapse for taxpayers with high incomes.

"When you've got a bad economy, the worst thing you can do is increase people's tax burden," McCain said.