

McCain blasts Obama's and Clinton's attacks on NAFTA

During a campaign stop in Texas, the GOP front-runner says he wants to assure Canada, Mexico and other trading partners that he would negotiate and conclude free trade agreements.

By Maeve Reston
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ROUND ROCK, TEXAS — Republican John McCain ramped up his criticism of his Democratic rivals' attacks on the North American Free Trade Agreement today -- arguing they are sending "the wrong message to the world" by pledging to renegotiate the treaty to protect American workers.

During a town hall meeting at the headquarters of Dell Computers in this suburb of Austin, McCain said criticism of NAFTA by New York Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton and Illinois Sen. Barack Obama could have "an adverse effect" on Canada's commitment to fighting alongside U.S. troops in Afghanistan.

"We need our Canadian friends and we need their continued support in Afghanistan," McCain said during the meeting with Dell employees. "So what do we do? The two Democratic candidates for president say that they're going to unilaterally . . . abrogate the North America Free Trade Agreement. . . . Now how do you think the Canadian people are going to react to that?"

McCain said he wanted to assure Canada, Mexico and other trading partners around the world that he would negotiate and conclude free trade agreements. "I will not, after entering into solemn agreements, go and say that I will abrogate those agreements," he said.

He argued his position on the trade agreement is evidence of his judgment and experience. "This is an important issue, and I think it has a lot to do with what you know about national security, and how all of these issues are interconnected with one another," he said at Dell.

Both Clinton and Obama have said they would renegotiate aspects of NAFTA, including environmental and labor standards, to improve conditions for American workers -- not overturn it. McCain acknowledged at a news conference that he may have exaggerated their position. But even if Clinton and Obama just want to "radically restructure" NAFTA, he said, Canadians "would view that as a betrayal of the long years of negotiations and agreement."

His supporter Phil Gramm, the former Texas senator, also accused Clinton and Obama of practicing protectionism.

"If we can't compete with Canada, who can we compete with?" Gramm said, after McCain handed him the microphone during the news conference. "Are these people proposing we go build a wall around America and hide under a rock somewhere? Are they saying we are totally and absolutely helpless in competing against a small country with the same environmental standards, the same labor standards we have?"

"It seems to me that they're trying to run away from the world and hide from the world," Gramm continued. "America's got to lead the world and I think this issue about abrogating NAFTA is an extraordinary issue -- and it shows that they don't have faith in our ability to even compete against Canada."

After the Dell event, McCain attended a fund-raiser and then flew home to Phoenix for the weekend. He has no additional public events today or Saturday.

His campaign is expected to announce the amount it raised in February later this afternoon. McCain could not provide the final figure earlier today, but he said "I can assure you it's not nearly the amount that has been raised by Sen. Obama and Sen. Clinton."

Both Democrats have reported raising record sums of more than \$35 million each. Said McCain: "We've got a ways to go to catch up."

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