

From: Joe Monahan <jmonahan@ix.netcom.com>
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Wall Street Journal - Bush's Strategy May Hurt Rep. Wilson's Bid to Appear Independent (NM-01 Wilson)

By DAVID ROGERS

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. -- A Rhodes Scholar with a doctorate from Oxford, Rep. Heather Wilson has never faced doubts about her smarts. But proving her independence to the voters of New Mexico's First District gets harder with each passing day of the Iraq war.

Polls show the 45-year-old Republican running neck-and-neck with her Democratic challenger, Patricia Madrid, New Mexico's attorney general and a proven vote getter. As a member of the House Intelligence Committee, Ms. Wilson is feeling public anger over faulty prewar assumptions and the U.S.'s costs and casualties.

"The people understand: We want the troops home and the regime change here," says Terry Riley, a local activist for Veterans for Peace. "It is a good day to be on the street."

For President Bush, the election here poses a two-part test. First is public support for the war: "The eyes of the nation will be on this race," said Sen. John McCain (R., Ariz.), who flew in Saturday to help Ms. Wilson. Second is the administration's fall offensive on national security, with which the White House hopes to knock Democrats back on their heels. But unless Mr. Bush calibrates his demands for additional powers from Congress, he risks smothering endangered Republicans just when they need to show some independence.

Ms. Wilson isn't alone in this regard. Other Republicans, such as Connecticut Rep. Christopher Shays, are also paying a political price for supporting the president's Iraq policy. But Rep. Wilson's military background, past White House service under the president's father, and position on the Intelligence panel make her unique, and her race largely dominates this Southwest state.

"Sometimes the leaders of my party in Congress and in the White House don't agree with me, but I've always been willing to stand up and fight for things," Ms. Wilson says in a television ad. A Madrid ad counters: "Heather Wilson is on the Intelligence Committee but she never questioned George Bush on the war. That's not independence. Not by a long shot."

Ms. Wilson has begun to say more publicly that she had early doubts about prewar intelligence. But even as she tries to separate herself from the White House, this Air Force Academy graduate is being drawn into the fight over expanding the president's authority to conduct warrantless surveillance of electronic communications to and from the U.S.

Her legislation, introduced this summer, will be the starting point for House Republicans beginning committee markups today. The National Security Agency had input, Ms. Wilson says, noting that she didn't share the final proposal with the agency before the bill was filed.

"This is not an administration bill," Ms. Wilson says. But by subtly changing the definitions of electronic surveillance, the legislation, according to critics, gives the NSA license to intercept a broad range of international communications without a warrant. The political question -- for Congress and potentially Ms. Wilson -- is whether the administration will insist on even more flexibility than she has offered.

Her bill permits the president to go outside existing law to tap domestic calls for 60 days after a terrorist attack. But the Justice Department last week asked for similar authority before an attack.

"We think the president cannot and should not wait for thousands of Americans to die before initiating vital intelligence collection," Steve Bradbury, head of the department's office of legal counsel, told the House Judiciary Committee. Noting that Mr. Bush has operated until now without authorization from Congress, Ms. Wilson responds: "It is surprising that five years after 9/11 that the administration realizes it doesn't have the legal authority to keep us safe."

Asked if she felt pressure to avoid confrontation with the White House, Ms. Wilson said: "I can be educated, I can be persuaded. I negotiate, but pressure doesn't work with me. It never has."

Republicans have held this House seat for decades, but John Kerry carried the First District in the 2004 presidential elections, and the Hispanic vote has grown to more than 30%. In eight years, Ms. Wilson has survived tight elections, but this is her first against a woman and looks closer.

In 2004, the congresswoman led by six points in a similar poll by the Albuquerque Journal at this juncture. Now, her margin is half that -- 45% to 42% -- after hammering Ms. Madrid for weeks with ads alleging the attorney general is cozy with casino interests, and has turned a blind eye to corruption in state government.

Ms. Madrid says, "It's a diversionary tactic, and I don't think it's worked, because I'm still even in the polls after they've spent a tremendous amount of money trying to discredit me." Asked what she thinks the campaign is about, she answers: "The war in Iraq."

"I believed that from the day I announced," Ms. Madrid says. "People are very frustrated that 'Stay the course' really means paralysis....This race is beyond our particular personalities, Heather and I. I can feel the mood of the country in my district....There's a bit of the flavor of the '60s."

In her Stetson and bolero, the 59-year-old attorney is very much the picture of old New Mexico, a black-clad figure walking in the state-fair parade in Albuquerque.

Ms. Wilson, a native of New Hampshire in pink polo shirt and khakis, appears more the transplanted Anglo walking the same parade route. The parking lot where marchers gathered beforehand was a composite of New Mexico: Apache tribesmen, Hispanic high-school military-cadet bands and white evangelical Christians.

"It's definitely a very interesting place," says Philip Muller, a political consultant transplanted from the Bay Area in California. "Even though it's a Democratic state, the Native Americans and Hispanics are very patriotic. It's conservative, but they are Democrats."

Ms. Madrid has two brothers who served in the Vietnam War. "This Driver is a Vet" reads the sign on the truck pulling her float in the parade.

"I feel very comfortable and confident," Ms. Wilson says. But there is anecdotal evidence that her fabled

ground organization is having trouble this year, and state Republicans even sued county election officials, demanding changes in the locations of early-voting satellite sites.

The costly air war has Ms. Wilson tapping supporters in the oil industry for donations, including at a fundraiser in Houston this week. She has resisted Democratic efforts to pressure companies to pay higher royalties for energy extracted from federal lands. She is among the top recipients of oil money in the House this year -- a fact Democrats have sought to exploit amid voter concern about fuel prices.