

PRESIDENTIAL CONTENDER:

Issue for Dole isn't courage, but convictions

By KATHARINE Q. SEELYE

N.Y. Times News Service

WASHINGTON — What catches the eye in Bob Dole's otherwise generic presidential campaign headquarters here is a huge black-and-white photograph of the candidate as a fresh-faced GI, his visored dress hat set at a jaunty 1940s "can-do" angle.

At first, the picture seems a throwback to an era that the campaign might prefer to ignore, a poignant reminder that Dole, at 72, whom Kansans have been sending to Washington since 1961, is now old enough to be the father of some of his rivals, and that his campaign is the last presidential outing for the generation of World War II.

But in the idealized world of campaign packaging, as the Dole team tries to find a new way to present a man all too familiar after three national campaigns, the Bob Dole in this half-century-old portrait is precisely the Bob Dole whom the campaign wants to project — energetic and indomitable, his character and determination already forged by the mean poverty of his youth and about to be burnished again through years of rehabilitation after near-death on a battlefield in Italy.

Dole's gripping life story will form the heart of his campaign. The youthful soldier he once was will be portrayed, not as a relic, but as the foundation of the man who has led the Republicans in the Senate for almost 11 years, longer than anyone else. He will be depicted as a decisive, experienced man of action who, as he often says, can get things done. The image is meant to contrast sharply with that of the baby boomer in the White House, who was not born until 1946, a year after Dole had earned two Bronze Stars, and who served in his own generation's war. The message will be, as Dole likes to put it, "It's time for adult leadership."

But before the campaign can play out these broad themes against President Clinton, one hurdle remains: getting the nomination.

Leader of the pack

By almost any measure, Dole is far and away the leading Republican in the year since the campaign began to take shape behind the scenes, none of his multiple challenges has shown any serious traction against him. With more than \$24 million in the till, 20 of the nation's 31 Republican governors working their states for him and a deeper organization than he fielded in his two prior, and failed, efforts for the presidential nomination, Dole's candidacy carries that enviable aura of inevitability.

"We're in control of our own fate," said William B. Lacy, deputy campaign manager. "Short of some huge external force, which I can't even conceive of, coming into play, if we run the right kind of campaign in the next several weeks, we will be the nominee."

Still, the campaign is mindful that not a single vote has been cast, and that Dole did run into trouble before, losing in the early primaries in 1980 to Ronald Reagan and in 1988 to George Bush. Appearing to have a lock on the nomination, while not actually having it, has left the Dole campaign in an odd state of suspension.

Moreover, strategists for rival

■ BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF BOB DOLE ■

ROBERT JOSEPH DOLE	1945. Awarded two Bronze Stars.
CURRENT JOB: Senator and majority leader	MARRIED: Mary Elizabeth Hanford since 1975.
BORN: July 22, 1923, Russell, Kan.	CHILDREN: Daughter, Robin, 40, from previous marriage.
EDUCATION: University of Kansas, 1941-43; University of Arizona, 1948-49; Washburn University, B.A. and LL.B., 1952.	MAJOR POSITIONS: Kansas House of Representatives, 1951-53; Russell County attorney, 1953-60; U.S. House of Representatives, 1961-68; U.S. Senate since 1969; Republican National Committee chairman, 1971-1973; Senate majority leader, 1984-86; minority leader, 1987-94; elected majority leader, Dec 1994.
RELIGION: Methodist	
MILITARY SERVICE: Entered Army in 1943 as second lieutenant, released as captain in 1948. Served as combat platoon leader with 10th Mountain Division in Italy. Wounded	

campaigns are hardly ready to concede. They say that while Dole has kept his lead in the polls, his support is soft, his favorability ratings are deteriorating and he is unelectable in November. He is criticized as too old, too much the Washington insider, too interested in brokering deals rather than fighting for principle, and too short on a rationale for why he should be president. Moreover, the perception is that in the early going he has been pandering to the right at the expense of the more moderate voters he must count on next November.

"The single biggest question voters have of Dole is whether he has convictions," said Linda DiVall, a pollster working for a rival, Sen. Phil Gramm of Texas. She said the current budget stalemate between the Republicans on Capitol Hill and Democrats in the White House was hurting Dole because he appeared to be the Republican most eager to compromise.

"He wants to play 'Let's Make a Deal' so that he can go out and claim the nomination," she said, adding that this made him look craven next to Speaker Newt Gingrich, who is standing with the Republican freshmen for the principles that conservatives care most about.

James Carville, the Democratic strategist who helped engineer Clinton's 1992 race and will advise the president again, said the Dole campaign was torn between the task of nailing down the nomination by winning support from conservatives in the party, and the urge to start appealing to the broader, more moderate electorate whose votes he will need in November.

"They feel the ball in their mitt and want to throw it to first, but are scared that if they pull it out too fast, they'll drop it," he said.

Carville said he believed Dole was already trying to move to the center with his recent statements on abortion and the ban on assault weapons, both of which the public at large supports but most conservatives oppose.

Conservative opposition

Dole said recently on the NBC News program "Meet the Press" that at "one time" he had supported a constitutional amendment to ban all abortion unconditionally. He added, "I would not do it again," saying he supported a ban that included exceptions for rape, incest and to save the life of the mother. While his remarks were interpreted as a softening on an unconditional ban, his aides said he had not changed his position, pointing to a 1992 interview on the same program when he said he supported exceptions for rape and incest.

But a few days after the "Meet the Press" appearance, Dole refused to sign a pledge to support the strict anti-abortion language in his party's national platform, saying his record spoke louder than any pledge.

On assault weapons, Dole had written to the National Rifle Association earlier this year to say that repealing the 1994 ban "is one of my legislative priorities." But in an interview last week with The Boston Globe, he declined to say whether he would vote to lift the ban. "This isn't a 'yes' or 'no' issue," he said.

Carville, aware that Dole has raised more money from special interest groups than any other senator, takes about two seconds to conjure up a potential strategy against Dole.

"Is the country really looking for a 72-year legislative mechanic who has a good record delivering for his contributors?" he said. "Someone who in 14 hours has three different positions on abortion — and they're running against us on waffling?"

If the general election were held today, according to the latest CNN/USA Today/Gallup poll, Clinton would beat Dole, 52 percent to 43 percent. But Lacy predicted that once Dole became the nominee, he could start to define Clinton as someone who has failed to keep his promises. "Right now, voters are judging Clinton in a vacuum," he said.

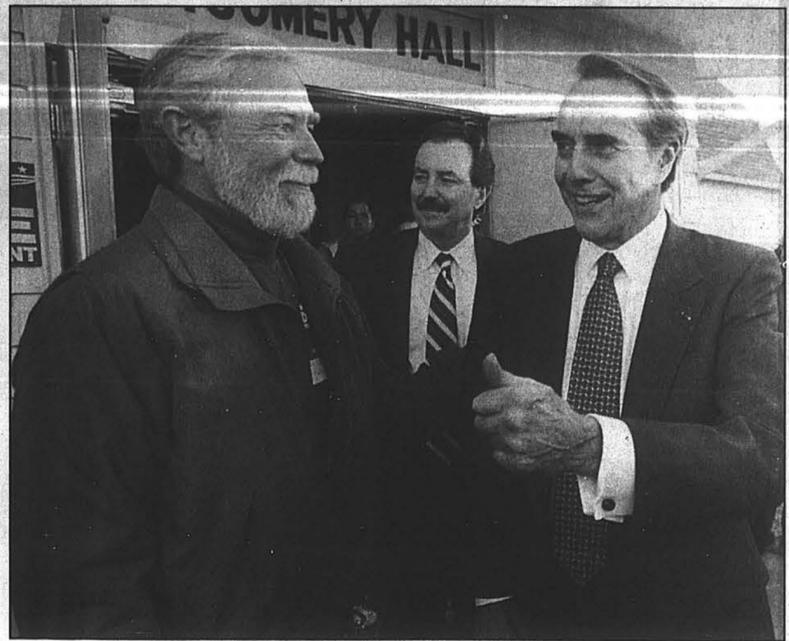
Bosnia hits close to home

This weekend, a new Dole commercial in New Hampshire tries to fill that vacuum by fleshing out the story of his life, including the hard times of his youth, when the family lived in their basement in Russell, Kan., and rented out the upstairs of their home for income.

The commercial, meant to convey Dole's grit and determination, focuses on his long climb back toward wholeness after his 1945 combat injuries, when his vertebrae were damaged by enemy fire as he tried to rescue a man in his platoon who, it turned out, was already dead.

"Bob was paralyzed for a year," his wife, Elizabeth, says on a longer videotape from which the commercial is taken. "He went away to war a star athlete, 190 pounds of muscle, and came back at 120 pounds, and some said he'd never get out of bed. But they, the experts, didn't know what a man like Bob Dole was made of."

After three operations, time in a body cast and years of rehabilitation working out on a home-rigged pulley system, Dole regained most of his functions, except for his right arm, which remains immobile, and his left arm, which is only slightly better. A



Republican presidential contender U.S. Sen. Bob Dole, R-Kan., talks with Iowa City councilman Dean Thornberry Wednesday at the Johnson County 4-H Fairgrounds in Iowa City, Iowa. Dole made stops in three Iowa cities during a campaign swing.

narrator describes the former second lieutenant as "ready to lead like few men in our nation's history."

If the old war footage conjures up questions about Dole's age and stamina, he has an answer.

"I tell people to follow me around," the tanned and fit-looking senator growled in his deep baritone the other day as he sat by a flickering fire in his Senate office.

"I'm in good health," he added, despite surgery in 1991 for prostate cancer. "If I felt my chronological age, that would be one thing. But everybody is living longer."

Mention Bosnia and that war becomes all wars and he the universal soldier. He melds his experience in Italy with the Balkans, Vietnam and the Persian Gulf, and he is suddenly recalling an incident he says he nearly forgot. When he toured the Gulf in 1991 with President Bush, a soldier stuck \$50 in his hand and asked him to buy roses for his wife on their anniversary.

"Some guy gave me 50 bucks," Dole said, seemingly still amazed. "I came back. We got the roses. I called her on the anniversary date." He paused. "He gave me 50 bucks," he repeated, grinning, apparently feeling solidarity across the decades with the Gulf soldier and his romantic impulse.

Dole, who at one point during the interview reached with his left arm across his lap to pick up his useless right arm and lay it on the armrest of his chair, demonstrated his identification with soldiers again during the recent debate over Bosnia, when he played a central role in winning over a reluctant Senate to support the peacekeeping mission.

In an emotional speech in the Senate, his voice cracked as he spoke about the Balkan-bound troops.

"This is not about a Democratic president and a Republican majority in the U.S. Senate," he said. "This is about a lot of frightened young Americans."

The Bosnian mission is unpopular in Congress and with the public, and Dole points to his role as evidence that he has convictions and puts

principle before politics. This underscores the tag line of his commercials: "Bob Dole: The character and courage to lead America."

Republican doubt

But some Republicans doubt this is enough to win the presidency.

"Dole's greatest risk is that people think he is Bush in '92 all over again — an older, establishment Republican without any vision," said William Kristol, a Republican commentator and editor of a new conservative magazine, The Weekly Standard.

"The Dole people think he can just beat Clinton on character and maturity, but Bush tried that and lost. In '94, the Republicans beat him on ideology. Dole needs to sharpen the contrast between where he would lead the country and where Clinton would lead it."

Kristol, who was Vice President Dan Quayle's chief of staff, added: "Primary voters want to continue the revolution of '94. Dole needs to convey that a Dole presidency would be the best thing he can do in the next few weeks is defend Newt vigorously."

Dole is already complaining that his record is being distorted by those unfamiliar with it. But it seems odd that after four decades and 12,000 votes in Washington, two runs for the presidency and a failed bid as the vice presidential nominee with Gerald Ford in 1976, the public still seems uncertain of what Dole stands for.

One Dole adviser says this is because voters do not focus on someone until he has won the nomination. But skeptics say voters formed their impressions of Dole long ago — first as President Richard M. Nixon's "hatchet man," then as a split-the-difference compromiser in Congress. The picture was further obscured this year when Dole made several gestures to conservatives.

In 1988, he refused to sign a pledge that he would not raise taxes; this year, he signed that same pledge. Earlier this year, his campaign returned a contribution to a group of gay Republicans — a contribution

that the campaign had initially sought. Several weeks later, Dole said he had been wrong to return the money because he opposes discrimination.

Even some who think Dole has shown conviction have their doubts. "I'll always have a lot of respect for what he did in '86 when he led the Senate to adopt a spending freeze budget, with no tax increases," said David Keating, executive vice president of the National Taxpayers Union. "It was a masterful job of leadership by Dole."

But then Keating added, "Dole's not afraid to do what needs to be done, but certainly you always wonder about what Dole wants to get done."

In the interview in his office, Dole described himself as "conservative forever, not right wing, not extreme, but conservative, mainstream."

He added: "My view is, on any of those things people say I've moved to the right on, I've either made floor statements years ago or voted years ago." For example, he said he had spoken out against violence in Hollywood long before he did in May. "So I don't see any change," he said.

Unenthusiastic public

Another hurdle, and perhaps his biggest, is that while Dole has generated significant institutional support, he has not inspired much enthusiasm among the public.

Dole said he had been thinking about this, and took some comfort in going back and reading newspaper articles of Sen. Robert F. Kennedy's 1968 presidential campaign, which, as he described them, said "no enthusiasm, most people would like another candidate."

"My view, all that disappears when you have a nominee," he added. "I find a lot of enthusiasm out there. And Elizabeth finds a lot of enthusiasm."

"People aren't jumping out the window, but that wouldn't be enthusiasm, that would be stupid. So we try to keep them within bounds and keep them from getting too excited."