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WASHINGTON, Nov. 1 — Gov. George W. Bush's advisers, acknowledging that they had been caught off guard by how quickly Senator John McCain has risen in New Hampshire polls, say they are bracing for a hard-fought contest in the state that holds the first presidential primary.

Mr. Bush is still the indisputable front-runner for the Republican nomination, and his advisers do not seem especially panicky about Mr. McCain.

Even so, Mr. Bush's advisers said Mr. McCain's inroads underscored a new reality for the governor of Texas: He can no longer expect a blissful glide to the general election. They said that Mr. McCain, of Arizona, could complicate Mr. Bush's strategy for wrapping up the nomination quickly and that if Mr. McCain won in New Hampshire he could threaten the entire Bush juggernaut.

"I honestly didn't feel it was going to narrow this quickly," said Senator Judd Gregg of New Hampshire, Mr. Bush's most influential supporter in the state. "But as John gets more visibility, some of his warts are going to show."

Another person close to the Bush operation said: "I don't want to say there was a classic Texas arrogance, but their overall M.O. was not to directly engage and stay above the fray. That now becomes an untenable strategy because you're in a new world."

Indeed, Mr. Bush has embarked on an accelerated schedule in New Hampshire. Last week, he opened his television advertising drive (as did Mr. McCain), and today he arrived there for two days on the stump.

His first stop will be Dixville Notch, a northern hamlet that incorporated years ago just so it could cast the first ballots in presidential campaigns. Mr. Bush is the last of the major candidates this year to pay homage to the voters in this traditional campaign stop (Mr. McCain has already been there twice).

On Tuesday in New Hampshire, Mr. Bush will deliver his third major education address. His first two speeches were in New York and Los Angeles, with audiences that had a special connection to the content of the speeches. The choice of New Hampshire appeared more geared to Mr. Bush's need to shower attention on the state.

Mr. Bush's advisers also said they hoped to pick up support in New Hampshire by tailoring their television commercials to the local audience. The campaign has begun running a commercial on the governor's tax-cutting policies, which his advisers said was popular in focus groups of New Hampshire voters. The advisers said a Bush commercial about "armies of compassion" did not test as well in the state, but was still popular.

"He has multiple messages," said Fred Steeper, Mr. Bush's pollster. "And what the research does is test which of those multiple messages seem more relevant to the New Hampshire voters."

Also, after spurning two debates in New Hampshire — and finding himself under harsh attack by his opponents and local editorials — Mr. Bush has agreed to take part in a forum on Dec. 2. Only weeks ago, his campaign had said the governor would not debate until next year.

Mr. Bush's advisers say they are not overly concerned about Mr. McCain because the senator is concentrating his limited resources on only two states: New Hampshire and South Carolina. They also insisted that they had always intended to intensify their New Hampshire campaign schedule. But they also said they were moving more swiftly in the

state, not merely in reaction to Mr. McCain but to other realities of this campaign.

For one thing, the state has moved up its primary to Feb. 1, which put more pressure on Mr. Bush to get his campaign in gear faster. In addition, no one expected that so many major candidates would withdraw from the race so early, including Elizabeth Dole, former Vice President Dan Quayle and Patrick J. Buchanan, who won the New Hampshire primary in 1996 and is now seeking the Reform Party nomination. Mr. McCain and Mr. Bush have both picked up support from the narrowed field.

Mr. McCain is in a particularly enviable position because this state has a history of rewarding mavericks and of punishing front-runners. He has made the state a central focus of his campaign. He has virtually ignored Iowa, which is where the first caucuses are held but where he is far less popular, and he has stumped in New Hampshire far more than Mr. Bush, who has traveled to the state less than every other contender except Senator Orrin G. Hatch, Republican of Utah.

"I've been through some scares up there with President Bush," Mr. Steeper said. "New Hampshire can always have upsets because it's a small state and people react to retail campaigning. I take the polls seriously. They probably reflect the state of the current campaigns. There's a long way to go."

Mr. Judd said that people should not underestimate the harm from The Union Leader of Manchester, whose conservative editorials have attacked Mr. Bush for ignoring the state, among other things. "The Union Leader every day is pounding Bush," he said.

In numerous interviews in New Hampshire in the past several days, voters and strategists warned that Mr. Bush needed more of a presence in the state. Mr. McCain's trips to New Hampshire have been attract-

ing large and exuberant crowds.

"It's very possible that McCain could outwork Bush and pull an upset that would send shivers through the Republican establishment," said Dave Carney, a veteran Republican strategist here who is not affiliated with any campaign. "He's got the personality that would definitely appeal to New Hampshire voters. But George Bush is an excellent retail politician; he can talk to people in a warm and friendly way."

Mr. Bush could also run into trouble from Steve Forbes, the wealthy publisher who is well organized in New Hampshire and is expected to

A new reality in a state that likes to punish front-runners.

spend huge sums on television advertisements against Mr. Bush — commercials that could presumably help Mr. McCain as well. Thus far, Mr. Forbes lags behind both Mr. Bush and Mr. McCain in polls. But if he gains ground in the state, he could also eat into Mr. Bush's support from conservatives.

"McCain, Bush and Forbes right now are clearly in the first tier," said Steve Duprey, the state Republican chairman. "McCain has the advantage in that he is focusing on far fewer states. And Bush is truly campaigning nationally. They are very different strategies suited to different budgets." He said that although the Bush campaign was "taking some hits" for not appearing more frequently in the state, the campaign "was not unmindful of this."

Mike Dennehy, Mr. McCain's New England political director, said of the

Bush campaign: "All they care about is spending and staying on message. I think the people of New Hampshire are smart enough to understand the difference between that and straight talk."

But Tom Rath, a senior Bush adviser in New Hampshire, said: "We are the only campaign that remains the master of its own destiny. We're doing just fine."

Several recent polls in the Granite State show that while Mr. Bush has not lost significant support, Mr. McCain has gained as other contenders dropped out. Two polls, for example, found that he still trailed Mr. Bush, but that the gap had narrowed to 12 points from 35.

In a telephone survey taken by Research 2000 on Oct. 20 and 21, Mr. Bush was the choice of 39 percent of Republican voters, and Mr. McCain was the favorite of 27 percent. The poll was conducted statewide with 413 Republican primary voters. A poll in August found that Mr. Bush had 45 percent, and Mr. McCain, 10 percent. Both polls have a margin of error of plus or minus five percentage points. Another poll, by Quinnipiac College, also found Mr. McCain at 28 percent, within striking distance of Mr. Bush at 41 percent.

Mr. McCain also has more widespread appeal across party lines than Mr. Bush. Though a sizeable number of New Hampshire voters — 32 percent in one poll — still have no opinion of Mr. McCain, polls show that a majority of people who have an opinion like him. That is true not only for Republicans and Democrats, but also the crucial independent voters who can vote in either the Republican or Democratic primary in New Hampshire. Among those who have an opinion of Mr. Bush, polls show Republicans like him, Democrats do not like him and independents are evenly divided.

"Bush needs to start coming to New Hampshire a little more because New Hampshire does strange things in the primary," said Jim Sullivan, a Republican who is chairman of the town budget committee in Hooksett. "I don't think we like to be told who we have to vote for. We need to see the candidate. That's what makes New Hampshire unique."

Another Republican, Reed Paige Clarke 3rd, a retired consular affairs officer from Londonderry, N.H., warned Mr. Bush not to take New Hampshire for granted. New Hampshire voters, he said, were "more offended by his not showing up here than by his being the heir apparent."

Mr. Clarke said that besides Mr. Bush, Mr. McCain was the most viable contender. "He talks rather straight and right from the hip," he said. "He doesn't bother walking around the corner when he can go right straight through."

Warren Mason of Meredith, N.H., a professor at Plymouth State College who has followed the state's primaries for years, said that Mr. McCain was gaining steam because he was "an antidote to Clinton."

"I can't believe how many Democrats I've heard say they're going to vote for McCain," Mr. Mason said. "It's definitely a Clinton reaction."

He said that former President George Bush was not wildly popular in the state — particularly when he reneged on his no-new-taxes pledge — and that that could hurt his son.

"The old man always took a beating in this state," Mr. Mason said. "In this state, with the Bush family, they've not been liberal enough for the liberals and not conservative enough for the conservatives."

He added that Mr. McCain was so aggressive in New Hampshire "because he realizes if he doesn't do well here, he's done."



Stephen Crowley/The New York Times

Back in the Fold

Senator Robert C. Smith of New Hampshire, right, at a news conference with Senator Trent Lott, returned to the Republican Party yesterday after a 111-day career as an independent and a failed presidential bid.



Marilynn K. Yee/The New York Times

McCain on the Stump in Staten Island

Senator John McCain campaigned yesterday for the Republican presidential nomination at Labetti American Legion Post 2159 on Staten Island.