



Posted on Mon, Aug. 25, 2008

McCaskill's convention speech brings her home state into national spotlight

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WASHINGTON | Sen. Claire McCaskill was ready for prime time Monday.

She stayed on the evening's message of American Dream stories, including hers, her husband's and the Obama family's. She touched the "four more years of Bush" base. She uttered the words "Big Oil." She spoke of mothers and daughters and equal pay for equal work.

Nor was Harry Truman forgotten.

Her best lines were on the centrality, both geographically and politically, of her state.

"Missouri is in the middle of our great country.

"We have a nice view. From the middle, we see America."

Later, she tied the lines into a noose of criticism for Republican presidential candidate John McCain.

"John McCain has been in Washington for almost 30 years. Maybe that's why he has a campaign run by Washington lobbyists and recently said the 'fundamentals of our economy are strong.'

"In Missouri we have a ringside seat to the real America, and I can assure you it looks much different."

And so went McCaskill's coveted television slot at the opening night of the Democratic convention.

"A pretty big deal," said Democratic pollster Mark Mellman. "Look how many are getting those spots. Not many. Most were either candidates for president or vice president."

Before the speech, McCaskill said she was still pinching herself.

"I feel extraordinarily blessed by the opportunity, and I'm really nervous," she said. "This is probably the most pressure I've ever felt. I want to give a great speech and do Missouri proud."

The reason for her chance was simple. She endorsed Sen. Barack Obama early, right after Sen. Hillary Clinton had won the New Hampshire primary.

"It's always nice to be at the head of the line," said Jennifer Duffy, a Senate analyst for the *Cook Political Report*.

She not only endorsed him, but she became a national surrogate for him. Recently the campaign sent her out to go one on one with former Homeland Security Director Tom Ridge, an ally of McCain, on the issue of the Russian invasion of Georgia, despite her relative lack of foreign policy experience.

On Monday she was strictly domestic.

"Missouri is a place where our country comes together. We are not a red state or a blue state. We are proud to be part of the United States.

"Barack Obama knows that what unites us as Americans is a belief in the common dream that in America, anyone can accomplish anything. He believes in our stories. American stories.

"For eight years we have watched our government take care of the few, the powerful and the extremely wealthy. We have seen our dream put at risk by George Bush's Washington."

She was introduced by her three children. She mentioned them in her speech, as well as Obama's young daughters, praising Obama and hammering his opponent.

"I know this son of a single mom will stand up for the dreams of our daughters. And I know that John McCain won't."

Debbie Walsh, director of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University: "She can't be labeled. She has that sense of being a straight talker who really shoots from the hip."

The Star's Steve Kraske contributed to this report.