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Palin remains slow to warm to news media

BY DAVID GOLDSTEIN

Stop the presses.

Sarah Palin finally fielded some off-the-cuff questions from the media this week.

It was a long time coming -- 28 days and not a single news conference since John McCain plucked the first-term Alaska governor out of relative obscurity to be his running mate on the Republican presidential ticket.

But the good media news for Palin came along with the not so good. As the McCain campaign tries to talk up her résumé, the reviews from a variety of quarters of the latest of her three television interviews -- with Katie Couric of CBS -- were less than stellar.

In the CBS interview, Palin claimed that the U.S. had gained "victory" in Iraq.

Explaining her earlier comment that living close to Russia gave her foreign-policy experience, she said that when Prime Minister Vladimir Putin ``rears his head and comes into the airspace of the United States of America, where do they go? It's Alaska."

And after Couric asked repeatedly for examples of when McCain pushed for more regulation, not less, over the financial industry, Palin said, ``I'll try to find you some and I'll bring them to you."

Conservative columnist Kathleen Parker wrote, "No one hates saying this more than I do," but Palin's "clearly out of her league" and should ``bow out."

FLAWED STRATEGY?

The McCain campaign has kept Palin in a bubble and has been slamming the news media. It claims coverage has been unfair. The strategy plays well with the Republican base.

But with Election Day little more than a month away, a cultural war might not be the best political strategy when the economy is in meltdown and voters believe Democrat Barack Obama would handle it better.

Missouri Sen. Claire McCaskill, a prominent Obama ally, jumped to Palin's defense, blaming McCain for keeping her under wraps.

Suddenly belittling Palin was out. Empowering her was in.

"Why is it that every man who has ever run for president or vice president can go out and give speeches and talk to the press and handle themselves?" McCaskill said in an interview. ``I think the men have decided they have got to keep her under wraps. Well, how insulting to women. I think she's plenty capable of doing this."

`LET HER BE HER'

Janice Crouse, senior fellow at Concerned Women for American, a conservative public-policy group, dismissed the complaint as an "obvious" ploy.

'At first they thought, `Who is this yahoo from Alaska and religious right extremist?' " Crouse said. 'The backlash was so strong. Now, `These men around her won't let her go. She can handle herself. Let her be her.' It's

laughable."

However, Debbie Walsh, the director of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University, said, ``It's challenging Palin to be the maverick. It's very clever."

Lost in all this, perhaps, is Obama's running mate, Joe Biden. In the tradition of most running mates, the veteran Delaware senator draws few headlines, content to ply the political back roads in battleground states like Pennsylvania and Ohio.

Except, of course, when he makes news, as he does with his penchant for the occasional verbal blooper. Like when he said that Franklin Roosevelt was president when the stock market crashed in 1929. He meant Herbert Hoover.

WHERE'S JOE BIDEN?

If McCain's campaign in his more media-friendly days deserved the tag "Straight Talk Express," Biden's road show might be called the "Nonstop Talk Express." He's done nearly 90 interviews since he joined the Democratic ticket.

"It's hard for the press to . . . appear even-handed," said Jay Rosen, a media critic who is the author of the blog PressThink and teaches journalism at New York University. ``Biden is constantly available."