April 27, 2004

Kerry Questions Bush Attendance in Guard in 70's

By ADAM NAGOURNEY and JODI WILGOREN

ULTON, Mo., April 26 — In a day of piercing and personal exchanges, John Kerry questioned on Monday whether President Bush skipped National Guard duty 30 years ago, while Vice President Dick Cheney disparaged Mr. Kerry as an opportunist unfit to lead the nation in wartime.

Mr. Kerry had previously declined to join other Democrats in raising questions about Mr. Bush's National Guard attendance record. But during a contentious interview on national television on Monday, when pressed on whether he threw away his Vietnam war medals in a protest in 1971, he defended himself and attacked the president.

"This is a controversy that the Republicans are pushing," Mr. Kerry said on "Good Morning America" on ABC. "The Republicans have spent $60 million in the last few weeks trying to attack me, and this comes from a president and a Republican Party that can't even answer whether or not he showed up for duty in the National Guard. I'm not going to stand for it."

Later in the day, Mr. Kerry challenged what he called attacks on his military record from Republicans who did not fight in Vietnam.

"I did obviously fight in Vietnam, and I was wounded there, and I served there and was very proud of my service," Mr. Kerry said. "To have these people, all of whom made a different choice, attack me for it is obviously disturbing."

Mr. Cheney came here to Westminster College, where Winston Churchill first used the term Iron Curtain to describe the imposition of Communist rule in Eastern Europe, to offer a sharply drawn comparison between Mr. Kerry and Mr. Bush. The vice president drew snickers from the heavily Republican invited audience as he read quotations from Mr. Kerry intended to portray the senator as equivocating on major issues of national security.

"The contrast between the candidates this November will be sharper than it has been in many years," Mr. Cheney said. "The senator from Massachusetts has given us ample grounds to doubt the judgment and the attitude he brings to bear on vital issues of national security."

The developments on Monday illustrated how the White House is planning to anchor Mr. Bush's re-election campaign to the war on terrorism and showed the imperative his aides see in trying to undercut Mr. Kerry's foreign policy credentials, including his decorated service in Vietnam. Democrats hope Mr. Kerry's résumé will help neutralize Mr. Bush's presumed advantage on these issues.

Mr. Cheney's appearance also signaled the extent to which the White House intends to press him into the vice president's traditional role of raising the sword against a challenger.
It was Mr. Cheney's third speech attacking Mr. Kerry. His words on Monday were so sharp that the president of Westminster College, Fletcher M. Lamkin, sent out a notice to students and faculty chastising Mr. Cheney for the tone he set and promising to extend a similar invitation to Mr. Kerry.

"Frankly, I must admit that I was surprised and disappointed that Mr. Cheney chose to step off the high ground and resort to Kerry-bashing for a large portion of his speech," Mr. Lamkin said. "The content and tone of his speech was not provided to us prior to the event; we had only been told the speech would be about foreign policy, including issues in Iraq."  
A spokesman for Mr. Bush, Nicolle Devenish, said Mr. Cheney had intended to "put the war on terror in its historical context" and address the "very different views held by President Bush and his opponent."  

"A robust debate on how best to protect our country from the threat of global terror is central to this election and it is unfortunate that the college experienced any surprise and we will work to maintain strong ties to Westminster College," she said.  

Back in Washington, Terry McAuliffe, the Democratic national chairman, jumped into the fray, attacking Mr. Cheney for attacking Mr. Kerry. He even came up with a new nickname for Mr. Cheney: The Bush Campaign's Attack Dog in Chief.  

Mr. McAuliffe also criticized the vice president for not serving in Vietnam. "When John Kerry was risking his life for his country in Vietnam," Mr. McAuliffe said, "Dick Cheney was getting deferments because, in his words, he had other priorities than military service. And he feels qualified to tell us that John Kerry won't do whatever it takes to defend America?"

While Mr. Kerry and Mr. Cheney went after each other with a vigor that made it hard to believe Election Day was still 27 weeks away, the president sought to sail above it all, a course that Mr. Bush's aides said they hoped he would take frequently, with Mr. Cheney's help. Mr. Bush headed to another swing state, Minnesota, to deliver a speech on technological innovation to an association of community colleges.

Mr. Bush did not mention Mr. Kerry's name once. Nor did he address Mr. Kerry's reference to the questions about whether Mr. Bush showed up for some of his National Guard duties in the 1970's. The White House tried to put the questions to rest in February by releasing hundreds of pages of President Bush's National Guard records. But a number of men who served in Mr. Bush's Alabama National Guard unit in 1972 have said they did not recall seeing him there.

Mr. Kerry began a three-day bus trip on Monday, starting in Pennsylvania and West Virginia, intending to focus on some of the most economically distressed swing states. The bus tour was intended to begin a more aggressive phase of Mr. Kerry's campaign against Mr. Bush.

He accused the Bush administration of failing to enforce the United States' trade agreements, saying, "What America really needs is a president who's going to be able to get our economy back in line with American values."

But for much of the day, instead, Mr. Kerry and his campaign struggled with questions about national security and his youthful role as an antiwar protester. The questions were driven in part by an orchestrated Republican effort that included a new series of Bush television advertisements highlighting votes by Mr. Kerry cutting military spending, as well as Mr. Cheney's speech on Monday.
Much of Mr. Kerry's energy, starting with his morning interview on ABC and continuing with interviews throughout the day, was spent trying to explain a 1971 television interview in which he said that he had thrown away his medals as part of a protest by Vietnam Veterans Against the War. In other interviews, Mr. Kerry said he had thrown away only the ribbons, and kept the medals. Republicans have seized on the issue to portray him as both inconsistent and unprincipled.

Mr. Kerry said there was no inconsistency in his statements because there was no real difference between the medals and the ribbons. But Mr. Kerry also said he would not now display his medals or ribbons to resolve questions about whether he discarded them after returning from Vietnam and joining the antiwar movement.

"When they start questioning what I did or didn't do 35 years ago, or said, on a personal level, I'm going to fight back," he told NBC News. "If George Bush wants to ask me questions about that through his surrogates, he owes America an explanation about whether or not he showed up for duty in the National Guard. Prove it."

But Mr. Kerry's aides asserted that the debate played to his advantage, noting that he had received three Purple Hearts, a Bronze Star and a Silver Star during his time commanding Navy Swift boats.

"Every time the Republicans force this debate, the only thing that comes across is that John Kerry is a war hero," said Stephanie Cutter, a senior Kerry aide. "And that is a stark comparison with George Bush, who still can't prove he showed up for National Guard duty."

Ms. Devenish, the Bush campaign spokeswoman, asserted that Mr. Bush had already released enough records to allay any doubt about his National Guard record.

"Attacking the president is not going to solve Senator Kerry's current problem of explaining inconsistent statements," she said.

Mr. Cheney sought throughout his speech to lampoon Mr. Kerry.

The vice president took note of an interview on "Meet the Press" on April 18 in which Mr. Kerry sought to respond to assertions by Republicans that he had, in an appearance in Florida, claimed to have international support for his presidential campaign. Mr. Kerry in that appearance had made a vague reference to "leaders" who had told him he had to win.

Mr. Cheney noted that in the interview, Mr. Kerry said, "I mean, you can go to New York City and you can be in a restaurant and you can meet a foreign leader."

Mr. Cheney paused.

"Maybe next time he'll narrow it down for us a little more," he said. "Maybe the name of the restaurant. The leader."

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