

New Hampshire primary small success for Bush



WASHINGTON (AP) — After a panicky scramble on New Hampshire primary day, White House political strategists settled Wednesday on the theme that an 18-point victory wasn't that bad after all. The White House kept up its happy face even as Bush's margin slipped to 16 points.

"Good, we still won," White House press secretary Marlin Fitzwater joked as official results late Wednesday showed President Bush with a victory margin of 53 percent to 37 percent. Earlier, unofficial tallies had put the spread at 58 percent to 40 percent.

Pointing at challenger Patrick Buchanan's numbers, Fitzwater said "He fell way below 40. He only got 37."

To avert another close call, Bush abandoned his hands-off approach with Buchanan. Breaking his silence about Buchanan, Bush complained that he had

been hammered by "Pat" and the Democrats.

"I'm not taking anything for granted," Bush said on a political trip to Tennessee. "I'm going to stay out here across this country — and I've been in tough fights before — roll up my sleeves and go after them."

Spurred by Buchanan's strong showing, Bush operatives charted an aggressive tour that will keep the president on the campaign trail on most days through the Super Tuesday array of primaries and caucuses on March 10.

White House officials were rattled Tuesday by fast-changing exit polls in New Hampshire that showed a much closer outcome than the eventual margin of 58 percent to 40 percent.

"I admit I was a little tense ... with a couple of reports I heard there," the president said.

Stunned by the numbers, the White

House groped for a response but was paralyzed for hours by indecision. Strategists debated whether to bring Bush before the press, or leave the job to campaign chairman Robert Teeter or press secretary Marlin Fitzwater.

In the end, they settled on a written statement by the president acknowledging that the race was "far closer than many had predicted."

A new message was firmed up by the time Bush stepped off Air Force One in Knoxville on Wednesday. "Some of these congressmen with me today said, 'Hey, since when is an 18-point victory been considered anything other than a landslide?'" Bush said.

Teeter, Republican National Committee Chairman Rich Bond and deputy campaign manager Mary Matalin took the same message to the morning shows on network television. "Only the pundits and the losers try to take a win and

make it a loss," Bond complained. Teeter called it "a very decisive win."

Bush had appeared dispirited Tuesday as reports of the exit polls circulated throughout the White House.

"The exit polls were wrong all day," Matalin said. "They had us at 50-50 all day."

David Carney, director of political affairs for Bush's campaign, said one exit poll showed Bush a point behind Buchanan, and that it was tied at 48 percent later.

One of Bush's advisers acknowledged that there was insufficient planning about how the White House would respond to Buchanan's showing. Moreover, the adviser, asking not to be quoted, said officials had underestimated the fury of attacks against the president by Buchanan and the Democrats in the final week of the campaign.

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