

Edwards eye civil rights

SAVANNAH, Ga. (AP) - Broadening his populist economic theme, Democratic presidential candidate John Edwards said Friday his background as a Southern politician gives him "an enormous personal responsibility" to be a leading advocate for civil rights.

Edwards, who was born in South Carolina and grew up in North Carolina, said the segregation he witnessed in the 1950s and 1960s converted him to a lifelong advocate for civil rights. The 50-year-old Edwards would have been a young child in the '50s.

"I believe those of us from the South carry a special responsibility when it comes to issues of equality, race and civil rights," he said. "That responsibility, by the way, is to lead, not follow, when it comes to issues of civil rights."

At the same time, Edwards renewed his call for more debates with front-running John Kerry. In a letter to the Kerry campaign, Edwards on Friday proposed a series of four campaign debates, including one California appearance that Edwards has already accepted.

The three additional debates would give voters a better chance at seeing the differences between the two

candidates, Edwards said in the letter. Ahead in most polls, Kerry is likely to be wary of debates that would give his challenger a high-profile forum. On Thursday, Edwards called for campaign debates in both New York and Georgia.

"My view is the people of this country deserve more than one debate," said Edwards, meeting with reporters. "We ought to have at least four debates."

In his latest campaign swing, Edwards targeted economic themes by arguing that U.S. trade policies have drained jobs and devastated the nation's manufacturing base. Georgia has lost 67,000 manufacturing jobs since President Bush took office, he said.

In building on his second-place showing in the Wisconsin primary, Edwards hopes the trade theme will resonate in key states with primaries March 2. In Georgia, he also courted the Black vote, an important constituency in a state he is targeting for special attention.

"I have, as many of you have, seen the ugliest face of segregation and discrimination, young African-American kids sent upstairs in movie theaters, white-only signs on restaurants and lunch counters," he said. "We have

such an enormous responsibility, I feel an enormous personal responsibility."

In Georgia, however, Kerry has snared one of the critical endorsements - the backing of nine-term Rep. John Lewis, who co-led the 1965 Bloody Sunday march in Selma, Ala., in the struggle for civil rights.

Edwards, who campaigned later in the day Friday at a community college in suburban Maryland just outside Washington, talked up his proposal to give venture capital to small businesses in economically distressed regions, a move he said would boost minority ownership of those businesses.

"We know that the greatest engine of this economy has been small businesses," he said. "They address the unique needs of the community. It will make sure that we provide diversity in small businesses."

Edwards is seeking to draw sharp distinctions with Kerry on trade issues, arguing that Kerry has backed agreements such as the North American Free Trade Agreement that have drained jobs and driven down wages. Edwards casts himself as a leading opponent of those deals, a stance that Kerry dis-

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Poverty

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programs that Johnson wanted to fund.

When Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated April 4, 1968, he was amidst his "Poor People's Campaign" that would have culminated in a march on Washington demanding passage of a \$12 billion Economic Bill of Rights guaranteeing employment to everyone able to work, incomes for those unable, and an end to housing discrimination," Span recalls.

"The assassination sparked protests - many violent - in at least 130 cities across the nation. As a result of that, the ranks of the country has turned very conservative and started marching in another direction that was more individualistically dominated."

But, he believes there is hope. The Indiana native, who is the first Black person to head the Community Action Partnership, is planning a "No Room for Poverty" rally for Sept. 4 on the Washington Ellipse, during which presidential candidates will have a chance to outline their anti-poverty measures.

Span says his staff is researching new anti-poverty policy options in anticipation of the rally.

The goal will be to impress upon the next president to hold a "White House Conference on American Poverty" with a goal of adequate funding to collapse poverty in the U. S., he says.

He describes several local and state programs that, if carried out at the federal level, could impact poverty across the U. S. They

include:

- Individual Development Accounts. Once a family saves a certain amount of money for two years, then the state and federal government matches the savings, which then can be used for down payment on a home, an automobile, day care or starting a business.

- Self-employment assistance programs. Individuals who are about to exhaust their unemployment insurance can participate in a 12 to 22-week entrepreneurial training program in which they write a business plan, consult with business attorneys, accountants, and bankers in preparation for business ownership.

- Community Development Financial Institution Program. Banks or other lending institutions specifically lend to poor and distressed communities in order to expand or create businesses.

- Tax breaks programs whereby businesses pay lower taxes if they hire distressed and low-income people.

Despite the highly charged politics of next fall, Span says he is hoping the Sept. 4 demonstration will be genuinely bi-partisan. Unlike the Johnson era, President Bush has been criticized for policies that are hurtful to the poor.

Hartman, the poverty researcher, says: "Bush comes from this incredibly privileged background whereas Johnson knew poverty in Texas and really was quite serious about civil rights and poverty and we've kind of lost that."

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