

McCain to Obama: Lobbying partisan

WASHINGTON (AP) - Republican Sen. John McCain on Monday accused his Democratic colleague Barack Obama of "partisan posturing" on the issue of lobbying ethics reform — a charge Obama called puzzling and regrettable.

The exchange, made in letters between the pair, was the latest sign of trouble as the two parties try to come up with legislation governing relations with lobbyists.

Based on past Obama statements, "I concluded your professed concern for the institution and the public interest was genuine and admirable," McCain, R-Ariz., wrote in a letter to Obama, D-Ill., Monday. "Thank you for disabusing me of such notions."

Obama responded in a letter later Monday that he had "no idea what ...prompted" McCain to strike out like that.

"The fact that you have now questioned my sincerity ...is regrettable but does not in any way diminish my deep respect for you nor my willingness to find a bipartisan solution to this problem," Obama wrote.

McCain was responding to an earlier Obama letter in which the freshman Democrat last week thanked McCain for including him in bipartisan talks on lobbying reform but expressed some differences in approach to the issue spurred by recent lobbying scandals.

McCain, long a backer of legislation to reduce the influence of big money and special interests in lawmaking, is sponsoring a bill that would require lobbyists to disclose more information on their activities, including the gifts they give lawmakers, double to two years the waiting period before a lawmaker can take a job as a lobbyist and require members to pay charter rates when they travel on corporate jets.

Obama, in last week's letter, promoted a bill backed by House and Senate Democrats that would take similar action on members becoming lobbyists, disclosure and corporate jets. It also bans gifts, meals from lobbyists or organizations that employ lobbyists and creates a new office of public integrity in the House to monitor compliance of lobbying rules.

Obama also questioned the effectiveness of McCain's proposal to set up a task force to further study the lobbying ethics issue.

Aides to McCain confirmed that McCain saw Obama's first letter as partisan. "I'm embarrassed to admit that after all these years in politics I failed to interpret your previous assurances as typical rhetorical gloss routinely used in politics to make self-interested partisan posturing appear more noble," McCain wrote.

"During my short time in the U.S. Senate," Obama responded Monday, "one of the aspects about this institution that I have come to value most is the collegiality and the willingness to put aside partisan differences to work on issues that help the American people. It was in this spirit that I approached you to work on ethics reform, and it was in this spirit that I agreed to attend your bipartisan meeting last week."

The guilty plea by former lobbyist Jack Abramoff early this year to various felony charges involving his attempts to influence Congress touched off numerous efforts by Republicans and Democrats to move legislation tightening up restrictions on interactions with lobbyists.

But initial promises by the two parties to work together have been hard to keep, with Republicans irritated by Democratic attempts to link the lobbying issue to what they call a Republican "culture of corruption."

House Republican leadership efforts to craft a bill have also met resistance from some in the GOP rank and file who say a total ban on gifts and privately financed travel is an overreaction to the problem.



An agent from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms investigates the remains of the Morning Star Baptist Church on Tuesday near Boligee, Ala., after a fire destroyed the structure earlier that morning. Officials suspect arson.

Ala. church fires raise questions

BOLIGEE, Ala. (AP) - The front of the sanctuary was in flames, and smoke was pouring from the windows of Morning Star Baptist Church when Johnny Archibald arrived to a grimly familiar scene in Alabama.

As soon as he saw the fire, he immediately thought of the five other Baptist churches that had burned in the morning darkness four days earlier.

"I don't know what's going on," Archibald said Tuesday as he stood outside the ruins of his church. "It's just sickness."

Morning Star Baptist and three other rural Alabama churches were damaged or destroyed by fires Tuesday, bringing the number of suspicious church fires in the state to nine in less than a week. Authorities said they had no clear suspects but were inspecting tire tracks and footprints and searching for a dark-colored sport-utility vehicle.

"Obviously somebody or



Pleasant Sabine Baptist Church associate pastor Terry Bell, center, points to the damage to the church while talking with church members Wardell Harris, left, and Leon Tyner, right on Friday in Centerville, Ala. The church is one of five hit by suspected arson fires in Bibb County, Ala., overnight. The fires have put the Centerville community on edge.

somebody are interested in burning down churches. Whether it's hate against a race or religion in general, we don't know," said Ragan Ingram, a spokesman for the state insurance agency that oversees fire investigations.

Ingram said the first rash of fires early Friday — at four predominantly White

churches and one predominantly Black church — are believed to be linked.

The FBI was already looking into whether those fires were civil rights violations under laws covering attacks on religious property,

and the state and federal government had offered \$10,000 in rewards for information when the new fires were reported.

The four fires Tuesday — all at predominantly Black (See Fire, Page 18)

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