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Stories surface on senator's demeanor

By Kris Mayes and Charles Kelly

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It was election night 1986, and John McCain had just been elected to the U.S. Senate for the first time. Even so, he was not in a good mood.

McCain was yelling at the top of his lungs and poking the chest of a young Republican volunteer who had set up a lectern that was too tall for the 5-foot-9 politician to be seen to advantage, according to a witness to the outburst.

"Here this poor guy is thinking he has done a good job, and he gets a new butt ripped because McCain didn't look good on television," Jon Hinz told a reporter Thursday. At the time, Hinz was executive director of the Arizona Republican Party.

McCain's temper has been quietly discussed among political insiders in Arizona since he first ran for Congress in 1982. But with the recent national focus on his temperament, more people are going public with their McCain experiences.

Hinz said McCain's treatment of the young campaign worker in 1986 troubled him for years.

"There were an awful lot of people in the room," Hinz recalled. "You'd have to stick cotton in your ears not to hear it. He (McCain) was screaming at him, and he was red in the face.

"It wasn't right, and I was very upset at him."

A spokesman for McCain, Dan Schnur, said Thursday that the senator doesn't deny he "gets angry" but that most of his "passion" is expended on public policy issues.

Schnur suggested the stories surfacing recently about McCain smack of revenge against a rising candidate.

Schnur said, "When George Bush was young and irresponsible, John McCain was young and irascible."

"It sounds like there is a flourishing ax-grinding market in Arizona in political circles," Schnur added.

Still, Arizonans of McCain's own political party describe senatorial outbursts that had nothing to do with public policy.

Carl Kunasek, now a member of the Arizona Corporation Commission, was blasted by McCain in 1985, when Kunasek refused to endorse McCain during his first run for the U.S. Senate.

The incident "included him (McCain) standing on his feet and leaning over and telling me what would happen to me," Kunasek said Thursday.

Kunasek declined to say what McCain threatened, but added that the threat, political in nature, was never acted on.

The incident, Kunasek said, "was not pleasant, and I was surprised."

"But in light of subsequent actions," he added, "I think it is easier to understand. So many other people have joined the club."

McCain's anger club includes a number of members of Congress.

Washingtonian magazine, which dubbed him Senator Hothead in a 1997 article, detailed how he shouted down some members of Congress and once exchanged heated words and then engaged in a "scuffle" with Sen. Strom Thurmond, R-S.C., on the floor of the Senate. At the time, Thurmond was 92 years old.

According to Douglas Johnson, the legislative director of the

National Right to Life Committee, an anti-abortion lobbying group, McCain is reputed to be "the biggest bully in the Senate."

Johnson and McCain are known to be enemies. Johnson was one of the most vocal critics of McCain's campaign-finance reform bill, which died last month.

In 1996, McCain vented during a meeting attended by McCain, Johnson and Bill Pierce, president of the National Committee for Adoption. Johnson and Pierce had come to voice their concerns about a bill McCain was then sponsoring.

But, according to Johnson, "McCain didn't want to hear any of that."

"All he wanted to do is berate this man," Johnson said, referring to Pierce. "He stood there and told him he was completely wrongheaded, and the only thing he could imagine was that (Pierce) wanted things to be worse."

According to Schnur, Johnson's claims should be taken in light of his organization's opposition to McCain's campaign-finance reform proposals, which would ban soft money donations.

One longtime GOP activist in Arizona said McCain's temper is a non-issue that will prove fleeting in the campaign.

"I think it's eventually going to turn out to be a non-event," said Mike Hellon, who worked closely with McCain as Arizona GOP chairman and never saw McCain unduly angry.

But those who have felt McCain's temper aren't quite so accepting.

"When someone disagrees with him, he immediately attacks their motives," Douglas Johnson said. "(He thinks) anyone who disagrees with him is driven by selfish motives and perhaps even stupidity."

State Sen. Tom Smith, R-Phoenix, who years ago witnessed McCain's temper flare at a GOP event, said politicians and activists who have seen McCain's outbursts keep them to themselves.

"I think what happens is you're caught between a rock and a hard place," Smith said. "John McCain is a well-known person in Arizona. He's running for president. You hate to cast aspersions . . . and you don't know how he's going to take it."

Schnur said he had no response because Smith gave so few details.

One who is willing to describe McCain's cholera is former Phoenix City Councilwoman Kathy Dubs.

In 1993, Dubs, a Republican, was singled by McCain during a presentation about a proposed regional airport that was to be located between Phoenix and Tucson.

Phoenix wasn't happy about an airport that would compete with Sky Harbor International, recalled Dubs, then on the City Council.

"I was a newcomer in politics, and maybe not having as much finesse as the old-timers had, I said, "You know, the question that comes to my mind, that my constituents would ask me, is, 'How much property do your relatives own in Casa Grande?' " Dubs said.

That's when McCain grew angry.

"He slammed his fist to the table and stood up and said this meeting is over," she said. "Then he pointed his finger at me and started calling me names. His staff was pulling him back, trying to get him to sit down."

After McCain's outburst, Dubs said she left.

McCain later said he didn't recall the incident.

One Arizona political activist who has twice seen McCain explode nevertheless said asperity should not be a disqualifying factor in his presidential bid.

Sidney Hoff Hay, now an aide to GOP presidential candidate Alan Keyes, said McCain yelled at her during an early 1990s meeting of local activists at McCain's home.

The activists, who were pushing conservative reforms McCain didn't fully support, complained to McCain that his aides had failed to notify them of the meeting until late the day before.

"He just almost leaped out of his chair," Hoff Hay said. "He was like, 'How dare you say that?' He basically said I was lying."

Hoff Hay recalled that McCain later asked her forgiveness,

even offering to "get down on his knees if he could." He sent her flowers to apologize.

Hoff Hay said all politicians have flaws, but McCain can't say his temper isn't a problem.

"For him to say he never gets angry, and that he doesn't fly off the handle -- I mean, come on. You know (he does it) all the time. He's got a short fuse sometimes, and he fires it off."

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