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Would GOP nominate a woman?

Linda Feldmann, Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

MANCHESTER, N.H.— One year before New Hampshire voters cast their ballots in the nation's first presidential primary, Republicans are asking themselves the musical question: Is the GOP ready to put a woman on the ticket?

Elizabeth Dole's visit here this week, her first since leaving the helm of the American Red Cross last month, has pushed that issue to the fore. Even though her speech to the city's sellout Chamber of Commerce dinner was greeted only with measured applause - she stopped short of announcing a run for the presidency - she still created a buzz just by being here.

"I have friends who are ready to work for her, no matter what her stand on the issues," says Bea Francoeur, head of the just-formed New Hampshire Women's Forum.

If Mrs. Dole does run for president, as expected, her candidacy will represent the best chance ever for a major American political party to nominate a woman for president. She has proven fund-raising prowess, wide name recognition, and three decades of experience in high-profile public service.

Most polls of Republican voters show her second only to Texas Gov. George W. Bush (R), another undeclared candidate, in the early running for the GOP nomination.

All other candidates trail far behind. And here in New Hampshire, she even beat Governor Bush by one point - 31 percent to 30 percent - in a recent poll for WMUR-TV in Manchester.

State Republican activists maintain that New Hampshire voters are used to electing women, and that Dole's gender, in and of itself, doesn't present an obstacle in a state whose primary virtually determines who the nominee will be.

"This is a great testing state" for putting a woman on the ballot, says Steve Duprey, chairman of the New Hampshire Republican Party. "We have a woman governor, a woman Speaker of the House. We've had a woman senate president. We have more women state legislators than any other state in the country."

The day Dole announced her resignation from the Red Cross, the state GOP headquarters was flooded with calls from activists asking how they could reach her, Mr. Duprey says.

Still, political analysts say, some conservatives may hesitate to support her, not only because of her gender but also her politics. Dole is viewed more as a right-leaning moderate, like her husband, rather than a true-blue conservative.

And because she's never run for office before, she's never had to articulate a full political agenda, including a position on abortion.

In her address Monday night, she stuck mainly with generalities. "Whoever the next president is, he - or she - should see to it that your taxes are cut, our defenses rebuilt, drugs are reviled, and our schools are put

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back in the control of parents," she said, emphasizing the word "she" with a big grin.

Why conservatives may balk

If Dole does run, her biggest obstacle with conservatives may be her years of government service, which includes two Cabinet positions.

"Given her record, some Republicans might view her as a liberal," says Jack Pitney, a political analyst at Claremont McKenna College in California, who has worked for the national GOP.

When Dole worked in the Reagan White House, she supported equal pay for equal work of "comparable worth," a concept that conservatives believe would give federal regulators the ability to determine "proper pay" for every job, Mr. Pitney says. "That idea is anathema to supporters of limited government."

If she runs, Dole may have her biggest problems with the religious activists in her party. Despite her own evangelical beliefs, she is not identified with their issues, such as abortion and school prayer.

On the flip side, for the general election, she could have broad appeal, because she's not viewed as a captive of the religious right. "She's pretty well positioned to straddle the factions in the Republican Party," says James Shoch, an assistant professor of government at Dartmouth College in Hanover, N.H.

Republicans also note that, worldwide, it is usually conservatives who are first to break the gender barrier in elections. Speaking here on Saturday to a group of reporters, the Rev. Pat Robertson - founder of the Christian Coalition - told the Monitor he didn't think religious conservatives would have a problem with a woman president.

"Margaret Thatcher was always my favorite statesperson in the foreign field, she and Golda Meir," says Mr. Robertson, referring to former leaders of Britain and Israel. "They've shown us that we can have some very distinguished women leaders."

Still, the United States' winner-take-all political system has made it hard for women to win office. Of the 100 US senators, only nine are women, and only three of 50 governorships - the modern-day breeding ground for presidents - are held by females.

Nation may want a woman

But as the nation's year-long impeachment ordeal winds down, some voters may welcome female leadership, on the belief that women may be less prone to get involved in messy sexual situations.

Says GOP activist Bea Francoeur: "You know how men can be. Elizabeth Dole wouldn't put us through that."

Yesterday, Dole attended a breakfast with possible supporters to gauge her fund-raising potential. But New Hampshire Republicans assume that money won't be a problem for her.

As president of the Red Cross for eight years, she raised more than \$3 billion. She can also count on her husband to be a big asset as a fund raiser. He has become a bit of a GOP celebrity since being defeated by Bill Clinton in 1996.

To mount a credible campaign for president, analysts say, any candidate will have to raise \$20 million by the end of the year.

Because of her name recognition and political pedigree, Dole can wait longer than most to announce formation of an exploratory committee, as can Bush. But her aides say she will announce her decision soon.

*Contributing to this report were Monitor staffer Stacy A. Teicher and James Turner of the Monitor's electronic edition.

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