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Stevens faces toughest battle

Vic Vickers poses strong primary bid

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A maverick millionaire who took on President Bush in the Dubai Ports fight of 2006 is now aiming for another top Washington politician - Ted Stevens, the senior Republican in the U.S. Senate.

In any other year, Vic Vickers, who is challenging Mr. Stevens in the Aug. 26 Republican primary, would be a footnote and the 40-year incumbent would be assured of his eighth consecutive victory.



But this is not just another year: Mr. Stevens has become a symbol of pork-barrel spending and was indicted last month on federal charges of not reporting hundreds of thousands of dollars in gifts. As much as anything else, the election will be about how Alaskans see themselves and their needs in Washington.

"Alaska cannot move forward until Ted Stevens is removed from office," said Mr. Vickers. "Their U.S. senator is under indictment. I would hope they would be ready to make a change."

That Mr. Vickers and other challengers in the primary and general election have gained any traction at all is a sign of how much trouble there is for Mr. Stevens, who just eight years ago was named "Alaskan of the Century" and has been in office for three-fourths of the time that Alaska has been a state. He won his 2002 re-election bid with 78 percent of the vote.

But Democrats' 2006 "culture of corruption" campaign against congressional Republicans exposed a successful method of attack, and now even Republican challengers are using it. Mr. Vickers' charge is that Mr. Stevens has become too cozy with powerful interests, particularly oil companies, that dominate Alaska's politics.

"Big Oil would finance his campaigns, he'd be able to fly around on private jets, live the large life, eat the good food, be a powerful man in Washington and on the world stage, and in exchange they would finance his campaigns," Mr. Vickers said in a telephone interview. "They made obscene profits during that 40-year period."

He said the Alaska Permanent Fund, which invests state royalties from oil and gas exploration, is smaller than it should be, and he has promised to appoint an investigator from his Senate office to look into the matter. He said he would push for a windfall profits tax to make oil companies pay back any money he finds was earned in arrears.

Last week, the oil issue helped topple a Republican incumbent far away from Alaska. Rep. David Davis of Tennessee lost in a primary to challenger Phil Roe, who ran ads accusing the congressman of selling out to oil companies.

But Mr. Stevens has the added problem of a federal indictment, announced in July, on charges that he failed to report hundreds of thousands of dollars in gifts. Even before the indictment was handed up, polls showed Mr. Stevens was vulnerable to a challenge. Surveys now suggest he would lose a general election matchup, though he is still favored to win the split Republican primary.

Mr. Stevens is making the case that he is innocent of the charges and that his way of doing business is indispensable to Alaska.

"Alaska's certainly at a crossroads," said his campaign spokesman, Aaron Saunders, pointing to opportunities that have opened up because of the ongoing energy debate. "Senator Stevens believes it's his experience and his know-how that's going to get Alaska through this period. This is not the time to send a rookie to Washington."

Mr. Stevens, 84, is getting help from across the aisle. Sen. Daniel K. Inouye, Hawaii Democrat, campaigned earlier this month in Alaska with the presumptive Republican presidential nominee, Sen. John McCain of Arizona. He said Washington needed such friendships it is to keep working.

Mr. Stevens asked for a speedy trial to have his legal situation settled by the November election, and hopes to start his general election campaign with a strong victory in the Republican primary.

David Cuddy, a former state legislator, also is challenging Mr. Stevens in the Republican primary.

Mr. Stevens has the presumption of innocence throughout the race until his trial almost a month after the primary.

If Mr. Stevens survives the primary, he likely will face Anchorage Mayor Mark Begich, a Democrat. An Ivan Moore poll taken after the indictment gave Mr. Begich a 21-percentage-point lead, up from nine points two weeks earlier.

As of June 30, Mr. Stevens had raised \$2.9 million and had \$1.7 million cash on hand. Mr. Vickers did not file for candidacy until June but already had loaned his campaign \$190,609. Mr. Cuddy was also primarily self-financed, having loaned his campaign \$176,785.

Mr. Begich had raised \$1.3 million and had \$803,650 cash available, with a small debt.

The Anchorage Daily News reported Sunday that Mr. Stevens picked up \$100,000 at a single fundraiser recently, which suggests that major donors aren't fleeing.

Hampering Mr. Vickers' efforts are charges that he is a carpetbagger and an unsteady Republican. He moved back to Alaska at the beginning of this year after decades away from the state, and his political experience comes mainly from Florida, where he worked for politicians of both parties but had deep ties with Democrats.

His pitch to voters is pure maverick.

He is critical of Mr. Bush's decision to go to war in Iraq: "I mean, that's an impeachable offense, but the Democrats didn't have the guts to impeach him. Of course, the Republican Party didn't either."

He said U.S. troops should be pulled from both Iraq and Afghanistan because the federal budget can't handle the expense.

"I haven't heard any national leader say we've got to pull out of Afghanistan," he said, adding that increasing military forces in Afghanistan, as both major presidential candidates propose, is the wrong way to find a fugitive. "These foreign adventures have to stop. We're not the United Kingdom during the 18th century."

The election is not Mr. Vickers' first high-profile public fight, though last time he was behind the scenes.

As the owner of Eller and Co., Mr. Vickers had stakes in both the company that controlled the Port of Miami's operations and the biggest stevedoring company for the port. When he heard his partners were trying to see out to Dubai Ports, he balked.

"We started trying to light the fuse," he said. That meant stirring up press reports and getting some members of Congress to take up the cause. By the time the matter was finished, Mr. Bush had backed down in the face of a full-fledged revolt from his own party, which controlled Congress and was preparing to pass legislation overturning his decision.

"In that fight, I had the emir of Dubai and the president of the United States against me. In this fight two years later, I've got a senator who thinks he's emperor of Alaska and the entire political establishment against me, and Big Oil against me," he said. "I don't know which one is tougher."