

CNN/WMUR/Union Leader to host first presidential debates

The Situation Room

Aired January 12, 2007 - 16:00 ET

THIS IS A RUSH TRANSCRIPT. THIS COPY MAY NOT BE IN ITS FINAL FORM AND MAY BE UPDATED.

CNN's Wolf Blitzer interviews Scott Spradling, political director of WMUR Television and Joe McQuaid, the publisher of "The New Hampshire Union Leader."

We have more now on today's major 2008 presidential campaign announcement. CNN is a partner in the first debates of the primary season to be held in the leadoff primary state of New Hampshire. WMUR Television and "The New Hampshire Union Leader" are joining us in sponsoring face-offs among the Democratic candidates and the Republican contenders on April 4 and April 5 of this year. I will be moderating the debates.

Joining us now, Scott Spradling. He is one of political director of WMUR Television and also -- and he will also be one the debate questioners -- questioners. And Joe McQuaid, he is the publisher of "The New Hampshire Union Leader."

Guys, thanks very much, not only for coming in, for co-sponsoring this early presidential debate.

Joe, let me start with you.

They seem to be happening earlier and earlier. New Hampshire, we know, is the first primary in the nation.

What was your thinking? Why is it good to start off as early as it is, in April?

JOSEPH MCQUAID, PUBLISHER, "THE NEW HAMPSHIRE UNION LEADER": Well, you're right. Everything is getting earlier and earlier.

And it looks like the whole nomination process may be wrapped up a year from April. And we thought it was a good idea to let people in New Hampshire see the candidates and how they stack up.

I don't know that this precludes other candidates from getting into the mix, Wolf, but I do think this is going to be a very important, if not the most important, president election we have ever had.

BLITZER: It's wide open, Scott, as you well know. And I assume almost all of the candidates have, if not all of them, are -- are making frequent visits to New Hampshire already.

SCOTT SPRADLING, POLITICAL DIRECTOR, WMUR TELEVISION: Oh, you bet, Wolf.

We're still waiting for Hillary Clinton, but Barack Obama was here in -- in December, drawing some big crowds -- John Edwards, after his announcement, the same thing. On the Republican side, Mitt Romney is a regular. We're waiting for John McCain to return, but he has been a regular. And we are definitely seeing these faces.

We see this debate as an opportunity for maybe a first real reintroduction of sorts, a chance to ask some direct questions and get some direct answers. It's what the people of New Hampshire expect.

BLITZER: They have expected in the past, Joe -- and I have been there on many of these occasions -- people in New Hampshire, they really want to get to know these candidates on a personal level. And,

certainly, a kickoff debate like this can help.

MCQUAID: Oh, I think that's so.

New Hampshire people are really attuned to this. They are very proud of their voting record in regard to the presidential primary. And they ask the toughest questions. I hope, as part of this, Wolf, that we get some audience participation.

BLITZER: Well, describe a little bit how we're planning on doing that, Joe, because we will have audience, a large audience, there. And they will be allowed to ask questions of these Democratic and Republican candidates.

MCQUAID: This happened so fast this week, that I'm not sure of those details.

I think it will be tough to keep out the very partisan audience of the various campaigns. But Channel 9 and Scott usually have a pretty good handle on it. We...

(CROSSTALK)

BLITZER: Well, let me bring Scott in on that, because, Scott, we have had extensive conversations on how we want the audience to participate.

SPRADLING: Well, we're still working on the details, Wolf. But suffice it to say, what we are hoping to be able to do is combine some of the questions directly from a media panel, such as myself, and "The Union Leader"'s John DiStaso, and bring in the audience for a chance, with a little bit of guidance from folks that are going to be running this debate, like yourself, to be able to get some questions directly from the people.

It's sort of the nature of New Hampshire politics up here. It brings that grassroots element that we have come to expect up here.

BLITZER: How excited are people in New Hampshire at this early stage? What, it's still a year to go.

SPRADLING: They're very excited, Wolf. There is no question.

When you see some of the crowds -- I mean, we're a small state, Wolf, but, when you see some of the crowds turning out for Barack Obama, like I said, and John Edwards, the anticipation for an arrival of Hillary Clinton, the fact that people still want to get as close as they can to John McCain, there is a huge air of expectation.

And, as you have been pointing out just on today's show, even, these are critically important times. Decisions about the future of our country, the future of Iraq, they are being made right now. What better time to have the first-in-the-nation debate than in the first- in-the-nation primary state?

BLITZER: Joe, give us a little perspective, because, as you and I know, you have been around doing these presidential primaries in New Hampshire for a long time, and your newspaper so important in -- in the state of New Hampshire.

How big is this contest, compared to years past, given the fact that it's the first wide-open race for the presidency in both parties?

MCQUAID: Well, I think it's very big. And I think it's very wide open. Wolf, I'm glad you mentioned that, because some of the pundits are already saying that, on the Republican side, it's only McCain, Romney, and possibly Giuliani.

I don't buy that at all. And, on the Democratic side, even though Obama has certainly excited people up here, I think that's more rock-star status than anything else.

There are a lot of candidate. I think the people in New Hampshire are going to want to hear what these candidates have to say about Iraq, in particular, and the Mideast, and terrorism in general. And that is why I think this debate will be a good starting point for that.

BLITZER: Joe McQuaid is the publisher of "The New Hampshire Union Leader." And Scott Spradling is the political director of WMUR- TV.

They are our co-part -- our partners in sponsoring these first presidential debates. We're proud to do it with both of you guys.

Thanks very much.

SPRADLING: Thank you.

MCQUAID: You're welcome.

BLITZER: Thank you.

April 4 and April 5, we will all be in New Hampshire getting ready for these two presidential debates.

###