Civil War Gaffe Undercuts Haley’s Message

**By Shannon Najmabadi and John McCormick**

Republican Nikki Haley, who until this past week had run disciplined and largely error-free presidential campaign, has been forced into an uncomfortable new chose: cleaning up blunder related to the Civil war and slavery.

The former South Carolina governor and united nations ambassador shifted to defense after she failed to mention slavery when an attendee at a New Hampshire campaign event asked her what has caused the Civil War. Her long-winded response avoided giving the answer to a basic question most learned in grade school, teeing up a barrage of criticism.

Republican rival Ro DeSantis, the governor of Florida said Haley isn’t ready for prime time, citing her “problems with some basic American history.” Democrats also heaped on scorn, saying her comments showed she can’t be trusted. Still, it wasn’t clear how much of an impression the incident made on voters.

The test now for Haley is whether she can get her message back on track with weeks to go until the first Republican nominating contests. Her initial remarks, which drew wide play on cable news and social media, were potentially damaging because they called into question several elements central to her claim that she is the most capable, principled and electable challenger to former President Donald Trump.

Haley tried to see her position straight Thursday, saying on a radio show, “I’m from the South. Of course, you it’s about slavery.” She has stuck with that message, while defending and repeating her contention that the lesson of the Civil War shows is about the importance of individual freedoms.

Speaking in a packed hotel ballroom in Dubuque on Friday, Haley addresses the controversy, focusing on usual subjects including China and Russia, while taking swipes at Trump’s record on deficit spending. She wasn’t asked about her Civil War comments.

Haley routinely tells GOP-voters she will deliver “hard truths,” and that she would bring a more drama-free approach to the White House than Trump, who has dominated the primary race.

Trump has become increasingly critical of Haley, especially in New Hampshire, where the second nominating contest will be held Jan. 23. He hasn’t personally weighed in on her gaffe. The super PAC backing him said the incident showed Haley is struggling.

David Oman, a past state GOP co-chairman in Iowa who has endorsed Haley, said he sees it as “ a one-or two-day story.” He added: “Not to minimize the topic, but a good person and a good candidate will clarify and move on. And I think she’s done that.”

More broadly, the stumble highlights how Republicans sometimes have struggled with issues regarding the Confederacy’s legacy and race relations, even as the party tries to expand its appeal to Black voters.

When questions of race arise, Haley often points to her role as governor in taking down the Confederate flag from the South Carolina Capitol grounds after the 2015 mass shooting at Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church. Before the shooting, Haley had shown some reluctance to remove the flag. When she first ran for governor in 2010, she defended the flag as an important part of her state’s tradition.