



McCain

Tim Dickinson's 2008 profile of then-presidential nominee John McCain offers a revealing portrait of the man who took on Obama.

"[John McCain] was a huge screw-off," recalls Phil Butler. "He was always on probation. The only reason he graduated was because of his father and his grandfather — they couldn't exactly get rid of him." Joey Foley/FilmMagic

By Tim Dickinson
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At Fort McNair, an army base located along the Potomac River in the nation's capital, a chance reunion takes place one day between two former POWs. It's the spring of 1974, and Navy commander John Sidney McCain III has returned home from the experience in Hanoi that, according to legend, transformed him from a callow and reckless youth into a serious man of patriotism and purpose. Walking along the grounds at Fort McNair, McCain runs into John Dramesi, an Air Force lieutenant colonel who was also imprisoned and tortured in Vietnam.

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McCain is studying at the National War College, a prestigious graduate program he had to pull strings with the Secretary of the Navy to get into. Dramesi is enrolled, on his own merit, at the Industrial College of the Armed Forces in the building next door.

There's a distance between the two men that belies their shared experience in North Vietnam — call it an honor gap. Like many American POWs, McCain broke down under torture and offered a "confession" to his North Vietnamese captors. Dramesi, in contrast, attempted two daring escapes. For the second he was brutalized for a month with daily torture sessions that nearly killed him. His partner in the escape, Lt. Col. Ed Atterberry, didn't survive the mistreatment. But Dramesi never said a disloyal word, and for his heroism was awarded two Air Force Crosses, one of the service's highest distinctions. McCain would later hail him as "one of the toughest guys I've ever met."

On the grounds between the two brick colleges, the chitchat between the scion of four-star admirals and the son of a prizefighter turns to their academic travels; both colleges sponsor a trip abroad for young officers to network with military and political leaders in a distant corner of the globe.

"I'm going to the Middle East," Dramesi says. "Turkey, Kuwait, Lebanon, Iran."

"Why are you going to the Middle East?" McCain asks, dismissively.

"It's a place we're probably going to have some problems," Dramesi says.

"Why? Where are you going to, John?"

"Oh, I'm going to Rio."

"What the hell are you going to Rio for?"

McCain, a married father of three, shrugs.

"I got a better chance of getting laid."

Dramesi, who went on to serve as chief war planner for U.S. Air Forces in Europe and commander of a wing of the Strategic Air Command, was not surprised. "McCain says his life changed while he was in Vietnam, and he is now a different man," Dramesi says today. "But he's still the undisciplined, spoiled brat that he was when he went in."

McCAIN FIRST

This is the story of the real John McCain, the one who has been hiding in plain sight. It is the story of a man who has consistently put his own advancement above all else, a man willing to say and do anything to achieve his ultimate ambition: to become commander in chief, ascending to the one position that would finally enable him to outrank his four-star father and grandfather.

In its broad strokes, McCain's life story is oddly similar to that of the current occupant of the White House. John Sidney McCain III and George Walker Bush both represent the third generation of American dynasties. Both were born into positions of privilege against which they rebelled into mediocrity. Both developed an uncanny social intelligence that allowed them to skate by with a minimum of mental exertion. Both struggled with booze and loutish behavior. At each step, with the aid of their fathers' powerful friends, both failed upward. And both shed their skins as Episcopalian members of the Washington elite to build political careers as self-styled, ranch-inhabiting Westerners who pray to Jesus in their wives' evangelical churches.

In one vital respect, however, the comparison is deeply unfair to the current president: George W. Bush was a much better pilot.

This, of course, is not the story McCain tells about himself. Few politicians have so actively, or successfully, crafted their own myth of greatness. In McCain's version of his life, he is a prodigal son who, steeled by his brutal internment in Vietnam, learned to put "country first." Remade by the Keating Five scandal that nearly wrecked his career, the story goes, McCain re-emerged as a "reformer" and a "maverick," righteously eschewing anything that "might even tangentially be construed as a less than proper use of my office."

It's a myth McCain has cultivated throughout his decades in Washington. But during the course of this year's campaign, the mask has slipped. "Let's face it," says Larry Wilkerson, a retired Army colonel who served as chief of staff to Secretary of State Colin Powell. "John McCain made his reputation on the fact that he doesn't bend his principles for politics. That's just not true."

We have now watched McCain run twice for president. The first time he positioned himself as a principled centrist and decried the politics of Karl Rove and the influence of the religious right, imploring voters to judge candidates "by the example we set, by the way we conduct our campaigns, by the way we personally practice politics." After he lost in 2000, he jagged hard to the left — breaking with the president over taxes, drilling, judicial appointments, even flirting with joining the Democratic Party.

In his current campaign, however, McCain has become the kind of politician he ran against in 2000. He has embraced those he once denounced as "agents of intolerance," promised more drilling and deeper tax cuts, even compromised his vaunted opposition to torture. Intent on winning the presidency at all costs, he has reassembled the very team that so viciously smeared him and his family eight years ago, selecting as his running mate a born-again moose hunter whose only qualification for office is her ability to electrify Rove's

base. And he has engaged in a "practice of politics" so deceptive that even Rove himself has denounced it, saying that the outright lies in McCain's campaign ads go "too far" and fail the "truth test."

The missing piece of this puzzle, says a former McCain confidant who has fallen out with the senator over his neoconservatism, is a third, never realized, campaign that McCain intended to run against Bush in 2004. "McCain wanted a rematch, based on ethics, campaign finance and Enron — the corrupt relationship between Bush's team and the corporate sector," says the former friend, a prominent conservative thinker with whom McCain shared his plans over the course of several dinners in 2001. "But when 9/11 happened, McCain saw his chance to challenge Bush again was robbed. He saw 9/11 gave Bush and his failed presidency a second life. He saw Bush and Cheney's ability to draw stark contrasts between black and white, villains and good guys. And that's why McCain changed." (The McCain campaign did not respond to numerous requests for comment from *Rolling Stone*.)

Indeed, many leading Republicans who once admired McCain see his recent contortions to appease the GOP base as the undoing of a maverick. "John McCain's ambition overrode his basic character," says Rita Hauser, who served on the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board from 2001 to 2004. But the truth of the matter is that ambition is John McCain's basic character. Seen in the sweep of his seven-decade personal history, his pandering to the right is consistent with the only constant in his life: doing what's best for himself. To put the matter squarely: John McCain is his own special interest.

"John has made a pact with the devil," says Lincoln Chafee, the former GOP senator, who has been appalled at his one-time colleague's readiness to sacrifice principle for power. Chafee and McCain were the only Republicans to vote against the Bush tax cuts. They locked arms in opposition to drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. And they worked together in the "Gang of 14," which blocked some of Bush's worst judges from the federal bench.

"On all three — sadly, sadly, sadly — McCain has flip-flopped," Chafee says. And forget all the "Country First" sloganeering, he adds. "McCain is putting himself first. He's putting himself first in blinking neon lights."

THE NAVY BRAT

John Sidney McCain III has spent most of his life trying to escape the shadow of greater men. His grandfather Adm. John Sidney "Slew" McCain earned his four stars commanding a U.S. carrier force in World War II. His deeply ambitious father, Adm. "Junior" McCain, reached the same rank, commanding America's forces in the Pacific during Vietnam.

The youngest McCain was not cut from the same cloth. Even as a toddler, McCain recalls in *Faith of My Fathers*, his volcanic temper was on display. "At the smallest provocation," he would hold his breath until he passed out: "I would go off in a mad frenzy, and then, suddenly, crash to the floor unconscious." His parents cured him of this habit in a way only a CIA interrogator could appreciate: by dropping their blue-faced boy in a bathtub of ice-cold water.

Trailing his hard-charging, hard-drinking father from post to post, McCain didn't play well with others. Indeed, he concedes, his runty physique inspired a Napoleon complex: "My small stature motivated me to . . . fight the first kid who provoked me."

McCain spent his formative years among the Washington elite. His father — himself deep in the throes of a daddy complex — had secured a political post as the Navy's chief liaison to the Senate, a job his son would later hold, and the McCain home on Southeast 1st Street was a high-powered pit stop in the Washington cocktail circuit. Growing up, McCain attended Episcopal High School, an all-white, all-boys boarding school across the Potomac in Virginia, where tuition today tops \$40,000 a year. There, McCain behaved with all the petulance his privilege allowed, earning the nicknames "Punk" and "McNasty." Even his friends seemed to dislike him, with one recalling him as "a mean little fucker."

McCain was not only a lousy student, he had his father's taste for drink and a darkly misogynistic streak. The summer after his sophomore year, cruising with a friend near Arlington, McCain tried to pick up a pair of young women. When they laughed at him, he cursed them so vilely that he was hauled into court on a profanity charge.

McCain's admittance to Annapolis was preordained by his bloodline. But martial discipline did not seem to have much of an impact on his character. By his own account, McCain was a lazy, incurious student; he squeaked by only by prevailing upon his buddies to help him cram for exams. He continued to get sauced and treat girls badly. Before meeting a girlfriend's parents for the first time, McCain got so shitfaced that he literally crashed through the screen door when he showed up in his white midshipman's uniform.

His grandfather's name and his father's forbearance brought McCain a charmed existence at Annapolis. On his first trip at sea — to Rio de Janeiro aboard the USS Hunt — the captain was a former student of his father. While McCain's classmates learned the ins and outs of the boiler room, McCain got to pilot the ship to South America and back. In Rio, he hobnobbed with admirals and the president of Brazil.

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Back on campus, McCain's short fuse was legend. "We'd hear this thunderous screaming and yelling between him and his roommate — doors slamming — and one of them would go running down the hall," recalls Phil Butler, who lived across the hall from McCain at the academy. "It was a regular occurrence."

When McCain was not shown the pampering to which he was accustomed, he grew petulant — even abusive. He repeatedly blew up in the face of his commanding officer. It was the kind of insubordination that would have gotten any other midshipman kicked out of Annapolis. But his classmates soon realized that McCain was untouchable. Midway through his final year, McCain faced expulsion, about to "bilge out" because of excessive demerits. After his mother intervened, however, the academy's commandant stepped in. Calling McCain "spoiled" to his face, he nonetheless issued a reprieve, scaling back the demerits. McCain dodged expulsion a second time by convincing another midshipman to take the fall after McCain was caught with contraband.

"He was a huge screw-off," recalls Butler. "He was always on probation. The only reason he graduated was because of his father and his grandfather — they couldn't exactly get rid of him."

McCain's self-described "four-year course of insubordination" ended with him graduating fifth from the bottom — 894th out of a class of 899. It was a record of mediocrity he would continue as a pilot.

BOTTOM GUN

In the cockpit, McCain was not a top gun, or even a middling gun. He took little interest in his flight manuals; he had other priorities.

"I enjoyed the off-duty life of a Navy flier more than I enjoyed the actual flying," McCain writes. "I drove a Corvette, dated a lot, spent all my free hours at bars and beach parties." McCain chased a lot of tail. He hit the dog track. Developed a taste for poker and dice. He picked up models when he could, screwed a stripper when he couldn't.

In the air, the hard-partying McCain had a knack for stalling out his planes in midflight. He was still in training, in Texas, when he crashed his first plane into Corpus Christi Bay during a routine practice landing. The plane stalled, and McCain was knocked cold on impact. When he came to, the plane was underwater, and he had to swim to the surface to be rescued. Some might take such a near-death experience as a wake-up call: McCain took some painkillers and a nap, and then went out carousing that night.

Off duty on his Mediterranean tours, McCain frequented the casinos of Monte Carlo, cultivating his taste for what he calls the "addictive" game of craps. McCain's thrill-seeking carried over into his day job. Flying over the south of Spain one day, he decided to deviate from his flight plan. Rocketing along mere feet above the ground, his plane sliced through a power line. His self-described "daredevil clowning" plunged much of the area into a blackout.

That should have been the end of McCain's flying career. "In the Navy, if you crashed one airplane, nine times out of 10 you would lose your wings," says Butler, who, like his former classmate, was shot down and taken prisoner in North Vietnam. Spark "a small international incident" like McCain had? Any other pilot would have "found themselves as the deck officer on a destroyer someplace in a hurry," says Butler.

"But, God, he had family pull. He was directly related to the CEO — you know?"

McCain was undeterred by the crashes. Nearly a decade out of the academy, his career adrift, he decided he wanted to fly combat in Vietnam. His motivation wasn't to contain communism or put his country first. It was the only way he could think of to earn the respect of the man he calls his "distant, inscrutable patriarch." He needed to secure a command post in the Navy — and to do that, his career needed the jump-start that only a creditable war record could provide.

As he would so many times in his career, McCain pulled strings to get ahead. After a game of tennis, McCain prevailed upon the undersecretary of the Navy that he was ready for Vietnam, despite his abysmal flight record. Sure enough, McCain was soon transferred to McCain Field — an air base in Meridian, Mississippi, named after his grandfather — to train for a post on the carrier USS Forrestal.

With a close friend at the base, an alcoholic Marine captain, McCain formed the "Key Fess Yacht Club," which quickly became infamous for hosting toga parties in the officers' quarters and bringing bands down from Memphis to attract loose women to the base. Showing his usual knack for promotion, McCain rose from "vice commodore" to "commodore" of the club.

In 1964, while still at the base, McCain began a serious romance with Carol Shepp, a vivacious former model who had just divorced one of his classmates from Annapolis. Commandeering a Navy plane, McCain spent most weekends flying from Meridian to Philadelphia for their dates. They married the following summer.

That December, McCain crashed again. Flying back from Philadelphia, where he had joined in the reverie of the Army-Navy football

game, McCain stalled while coming in for a refueling stop in Norfolk, Virginia. This time he managed to bail out at 1,000 feet. As his parachute deployed, his plane thundered into the trees below.

By now, however, McCain's flying privileges were virtually irrevocable — and he knew it. On one of his runs at McCain Field, when ground control put him in a holding pattern, the lieutenant commander once again pulled his family's rank. "Let me land," McCain demanded over his radio, "or I'll take my field and go home!"

TRIAL BY FIRE

Sometimes 3 a.m. moments occur at 10:52 in the morning.

It was July 29th, 1967, a hot, gusty morning in the Gulf of Tonkin atop the four-acre flight deck of the supercarrier USS Forrestal. Perched in the cockpit of his A-4 Skyhawk, Lt. Cmdr. John McCain ticked nervously through his preflight checklist.

Now 30 years old, McCain was trying to live up to his father's expectations, to finally be known as something other than the fuck-up grandson of one of the Navy's greatest admirals. That morning, preparing for his sixth bombing run over North Vietnam, the graying pilot's dreams of combat glory were beginning to seem within his reach.

Then, in an instant, the world around McCain erupted in flames. A six-foot-long Zuni rocket, inexplicably launched by an F-4 Phantom across the flight deck, ripped through the fuel tank of McCain's aircraft. Hundreds of gallons of fuel splashed onto the deck and came ablaze. Then: *Clank. Clank.* Two 1,000-pound bombs dropped from under the belly of McCain's stubby A-4, the Navy's "Tinkertoy Bomber," into the fire.

McCain, who knew more than most pilots about bailing out of a crippled aircraft, leapt forward out of the cockpit, swung himself down from the refueling probe protruding from the nose cone, rolled through the flames and ran to safety across the flight deck. Just then, one of his bombs "cooked off," blowing a crater in the deck and incinerating the sailors who had rushed past McCain with hoses and fire extinguishers. McCain was stung by tiny bits of shrapnel in his legs and chest, but the wounds weren't serious; his father would later report to friends that Johnny "came through without a scratch."

The damage to the Forrestal was far more grievous: The explosion set off a chain reaction of bombs, creating a devastating inferno that would kill 134 of the carrier's 5,000-man crew, injure 161 and threaten to sink the ship.

These are the moments that test men's mettle. Where leaders are born. Leaders like . . . Lt. Cmdr. Herb Hope, pilot of the A-4 three planes down from McCain's. Cornered by flames at the stern of the carrier, Hope hurled himself off the flight deck into a safety net and clambered into the hangar deck below, where the fire was spreading. According to an official Navy history of the fire, Hope then "gallantly took command of a firefighting team" that would help contain the conflagration and ultimately save the ship.

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McCain displayed little of Hope's valor. Although he would soon regale *The New York Times* with tales of the heroism of the brave enlisted men who "stayed to help the pilots fight the fire," McCain took no part in dousing the flames himself. After going belowdecks and briefly helping sailors who were frantically trying to unload bombs from an elevator to the flight deck, McCain retreated to the safety of the "ready room," where off-duty pilots spent their noncombat hours talking trash and playing poker. There, McCain watched the conflagration unfold on the room's closed-circuit television — bearing distant witness to the valiant self-sacrifice of others who died trying to save the ship, pushing jets into the sea to keep their bombs from exploding on deck.

As the ship burned, McCain took a moment to mourn his misfortune; his combat career appeared to be going up in smoke. "This distressed me considerably," he recalls in *Faith of My Fathers*. "I feared my ambitions were among the casualties in the calamity that had claimed the Forrestal."

The fire blazed late into the night. The following morning, while oxygen-masked rescue workers toiled to recover bodies from the lower decks, McCain was making fast friends with R.W. "Johnny" Apple of *The New York Times*, who had arrived by helicopter to cover the deadliest Naval calamity since the Second World War. The son of admiralty surviving a near-death experience certainly made for good copy, and McCain colorfully recounted how he had saved his skin. But when Apple and other reporters left the ship, the story took an even stranger turn: McCain left with them. As the heroic crew of the Forrester mourned its fallen brothers and the broken ship limped toward the Philippines for repairs, McCain zipped off to Saigon for what he recalls as "some welcome R&R."

VIOLATING THE CODE

Ensnared in Apple's villa in Saigon, McCain and the *Times* reporter forged a relationship that would prove critical to the ambitious pilot's career in the years ahead. Apple effectively became the charter member of McCain's media "base," an elite corps of admiring reporters who helped create his reputation for "straight talk."

Sipping scotch and reflecting on the fire aboard the Forrester, McCain sounded like the peaceniks he would pillory after his return from Hanoi. "Now that I've seen what the bombs and napalm did to the people on our ship," he told Apple, "I'm not so sure that I want to drop any more of that stuff on North Vietnam." Here, it seemed, was a frank-talking warrior, one willing to speak out against the military establishment in the name of truth.

But McCain's misgivings about the righteousness of the fight quickly took a back seat to his ambitions. Within days, eager to get his combat career back on track, he put in for a transfer to the carrier USS Oriskany. Two months after the Forrester fire — following a holiday on the French Riviera — McCain reported for duty in the Gulf of Tonkin.

McCain performed adequately on the Oriskany. On October 25th, 1967, he bombed a pair of Soviet MiGs parked on an airfield outside Hanoi. His record was now even. Enemy planes destroyed by McCain: two. American planes destroyed by McCain: two.

The next day, McCain embarked on his fateful 23rd mission, a bombing raid on a power plant in downtown Hanoi. McCain had cajoled his way onto the strike force — there were medals up for grabs. The plant had recently been rebuilt after a previous bombing run that had earned two of the lead pilots Navy Crosses, one of the force's top honors.

It was a dangerous mission — taking the planes into the teeth of North Vietnam's fiercest anti-aircraft defenses. As the planes entered Hanoi airspace, they were instantly enveloped in dark clouds of flak and surface-to-air missiles. Still cocky from the previous day's kills, McCain took the biggest gamble of his life. As he dived in on the target in his A-4, his surface-to-air missile warning system sounded: A SAM had a lock on him. "I knew I should roll out and fly evasive maneuvers," McCain writes. "The A-4 is a small, fast" aircraft that "can outmaneuver a tracking SAM."

But McCain didn't "jink." Instead, he stayed on target and let fly his bombs — just as the SAM blew his wing off.

To watch the Republican National Convention and listen to Fred Thompson's account of John McCain's internment in Vietnam, you would think that McCain never gave his captors anything beyond his name, rank, service number and, under duress, the names of the Green Bay Packers offensive line. His time in Hanoi, we're to understand, steeled the man — transforming him from a fighter jock who put himself first into a patriot who would henceforth selflessly serve the public good.

There is no question that McCain suffered hideously in North Vietnam. His ejection over a lake in downtown Hanoi broke his knee and both his arms. During his capture, he was bayoneted in the ankle and the groin, and had his shoulder smashed by a rifle butt. His tormentors dragged McCain's broken body to a cell and seemed content to let him expire from his injuries. For the next two years, there were few days that he was not in agony.

But the subsequent tale of McCain's mistreatment — and the transformation it is alleged to have produced — are both deeply flawed. The Code of Conduct that governed POWs was incredibly rigid; few soldiers lived up to its dictate that they "give no information . . . which might be harmful to my comrades." Under the code, POWs are bound to give only their name, rank, date of birth and service number — and to make no "statements disloyal to my country."

Soon after McCain hit the ground in Hanoi, the code went out the window. "I'll give you military information if you will take me to the hospital," he later admitted pleading with his captors. McCain now insists the offer was a bluff, designed to fool the enemy into giving him medical treatment. In fact, his wounds were attended to only after the North Vietnamese discovered that his father was a Navy admiral. What has never been disclosed is the manner in which they found out: McCain told them. According to Dramesi, one of the few POWs who remained silent under years of torture, McCain tried to justify his behavior while they were still prisoners. "I had to tell them," he insisted to Dramesi, "or I would have died in bed."

Dramesi says he has no desire to dishonor McCain's service, but he believes that celebrating the downed pilot's behavior as heroic — "he wasn't exceptional one way or the other" — has a corrosive effect on military discipline. "This business of my country before my life?" Dramesi says. "Well, he had that opportunity and failed miserably. If it really were country first, John McCain would probably be walking around without one or two arms or legs — or he'd be dead."

Once the Vietnamese realized they had captured the man they called the "crown prince," they had every motivation to keep McCain alive. His value as a propaganda tool and bargaining chip was far greater than any military intelligence he could provide, and McCain knew it. "It was hard not to see how pleased the Vietnamese were to have captured an admiral's son," he writes, "and I knew that my father's identity was directly related to my survival."

But during the course of his medical treatment, McCain followed through on his offer of military information. Only two weeks after his capture, the North Vietnamese press issued a report — picked up by *The New York Times* — in which McCain was quoted as saying that the war was "moving to the advantage of North Vietnam and the United States appears to be isolated." He also provided the name of his ship, the number of raids he had flown, his squadron number and the target of his final raid.

THE CONFESSION

In the company of his fellow POWs, and later in isolation, McCain slowly and miserably recovered from his wounds. In June 1968, after three months in solitary, he was offered what he calls early release. In the official McCain narrative, this was the ultimate test of mettle. He could have come home, but keeping faith with his fellow POWs, he chose to remain imprisoned in Hanoi.

What McCain glosses over is that accepting early release would have required him to make disloyal statements that would have violated the military's Code of Conduct. If he had done so, he could have risked court-martial and an ignominious end to his military career. "Many of us were given this offer," according to Butler, McCain's classmate who was also taken prisoner. "It meant speaking out against your country and lying about your treatment to the press. You had to 'admit' that the U.S. was criminal and that our treatment was 'lenient and humane.' So I, like numerous others, refused the offer."

"He makes it sound like it was a great thing to have accomplished," says Dramesi. "A great act of discipline or strength. That simply was not the case."

In fairness, it is difficult to judge McCain's experience as a POW; throughout most of his incarceration he was the only witness to his mistreatment. Parts of his memoir recounting his days in Hanoi read like a bad Ian Fleming novel, with his Vietnamese captors cast as nefarious Bond villains. On the Fourth of July 1968, when he rejected the offer of early release, an officer nicknamed "Cat" got so mad, according to McCain, that he snapped a pen he was holding, splattering ink across the room.

"They taught you too well, Mac Kane," Cat snarled, kicking over a chair. "They taught you too well."

The brutal interrogations that followed produced results. In August 1968, over the course of four days, McCain was tortured into signing a confession that he was a "black criminal" and an "air pirate."

"John allows the media to make him out to be *the* hero POW, which he knows is absolutely not true, to further his political goals," says Butler. "John was just one of about 600 guys. He was nothing unusual. He was just another POW."

McCain has also allowed the media to believe that his torture lasted for the entire time he was in Hanoi. At the Republican convention, Fred Thompson said of McCain's torture, "For five and a half years this went on." In fact, McCain's torture ended after two years, when the death of Ho Chi Minh in September 1969 caused the Vietnamese to change the way they treated POWs. "They decided it would be better to treat us better and keep us alive so they could trade us in for real estate," Butler recalls.

By that point, McCain had become the most valuable prisoner of all: His father was now directing the war effort as commander in chief of all U.S. forces in the Pacific. McCain spent the next three and a half years in Hanoi biding his time, trying to put on weight and regain his strength, as the bombing ordered by his father escalated. By the time he and other POWs were freed in March 1973 as a result of the Paris Peace Accords, McCain was able to leave the prison camp in Hanoi on his own feet.

Even those in the military who celebrate McCain's patriotism and sacrifice question why his POW experience has been elevated as his top qualification to be commander in chief. "It took guts to go through that and to come out reasonably intact and able to pick up the pieces of your life and move on," says Wilkerson, Colin Powell's former chief of staff, who has known McCain since the 1980s. "It is unquestionably a demonstration of the character of the man. But I don't think that it is a special qualification for being president of the United States. In some respects, I'm not sure that's the kind of character I want sitting in the Oval Office. I'm not sure that much time in a prisoner-of-war status doesn't do something to you. Doesn't do something to you psychologically, doesn't do something to you that might make you a little more volatile, a little less apt to listen to reason, a little more inclined to be volcanic in your temperament."

"A BELLICOSE HAWK"

The reckless, womanizing hotshot who leaned on family connections for advancement before his capture in Vietnam emerged a reckless, womanizing celebrity who continued to pull strings. The real difference between the McCain of 1967 and the McCain of 1973 was that the latter's ambition was now on overdrive. He wanted to study at the National War College — but military brass turned him down as underqualified. So McCain appealed the decision to the top: John Warner, the Secretary of the Navy and a friend of his father. Warner, who now serves in the Senate alongside McCain, overruled the brass and gave the POW a slot. McCain also got his wings back, even though his injuries prevented him from raising his hands above shoulder height to comb his own hair.

McCain was eager to make up for lost time — and the times were favorable to a high-profile veteran willing to speak out in favor of the war. With the Senate moving to cut off funds for the Nixon administration's illegal bombing of Cambodia, the president needed all the help he could get. Two months after his release, McCain related his harrowing story of survival in a 13-page narrative in *U.S. News & World Report*, at the end of which he launched into an energetic defense of Nixon's discredited foreign policy. "I admire President Nixon's courage," he wrote. "It is difficult for me to understand . . . why people are still criticizing his foreign policy — for example, the bombing in Cambodia."

In the years to come, McCain would continue to fight the war his father had lost. In his meetings with Nixon, Junior was known for chomping on an unlit cigar, complaining about the "goddamn gooks" and pushing to bomb enemy sanctuaries in Cambodia. His son was equally gung-ho. "John has always been a very bellicose hawk," says John H. Johns, a retired brigadier general who studied with McCain at the War College. "When he came back from Vietnam, he accused the liberal media of undermining national will, that we could have won in Vietnam if we had the national will."

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It was the kind of tough talk that made McCain a fast-rising star in far-right circles. Through Ross Perot, a friend of Ronald Reagan who had championed the cause of the POWs, McCain was invited to meet with the then-governor of California and his wife. Impressed, Reagan invited McCain to be the keynote speaker at his annual "prayer breakfast" in Sacramento.

Then, at the end of 1974, McCain finally achieved the goal he had been working toward for years. He was installed as the commanding officer of the largest air squadron in the Navy — the Replacement Air Group based in Jacksonville, Florida — training carrier pilots. It was a post for which McCain flatly admits, "I was not qualified." By now, however, he was unembarrassed by his own nepotism. At the ceremony commemorating his long-sought ascension to command, his father looking on with pride, McCain wept openly.

BOOZE AND PORK

If heroism is defined by physical suffering, Carol McCain is every bit her ex-husband's equal. Driving alone on Christmas Eve 1969, she skidded out on a patch of ice and crashed into a telephone pole. She would spend six months in the hospital and undergo 23 surgeries. The former model McCain bragged of to his buddies in the POW camp as his "long tall Sally" was now five inches shorter and walked with crutches.

By any standard, McCain treated her contemptibly. Whatever his dreams of getting laid in Rio, he got plenty of ass during his command post in Jacksonville. According to biographer Robert Timberg, McCain seduced his conquests on off-duty cross-country flights — even though adultery is a court-martial offense. He was also rumored to be romantically involved with a number of his subordinates.

In 1977, McCain was promoted to captain and became the Navy's liaison to the Senate — the same politically connected post once occupied by his father. He took advantage of the position to buddy up to young senators like Gary Hart, William Cohen and Joe Biden. He was also taken under the wing of another friend of his father: Sen. John Tower, the powerful Texas Republican who would become his political mentor. Despite the promotion, McCain continued his adolescent carousing: On a diplomatic trip to Saudi Arabia with Tower, he tried to get some tourists he disliked in trouble with the authorities by littering the room-service trays outside their door with empty bottles of alcohol.

As the Navy's top lobbyist, McCain was supposed to carry out the bidding of the secretary of the Navy. But in 1978 he went off the reservation. Vietnam was over, and the Carter administration, cutting costs, had decided against spending \$2 billion to replace the aging carrier Midway. The secretary agreed with the administration's decision. Readiness would not be affected. The only reason to replace the carrier — at a cost of nearly \$7 billion in today's dollars — was pork-barrel politics.

Although he now crusades against wasteful military spending, McCain had no qualms about secretly lobbying for a pork project that would pay for a dozen Bridges to Nowhere. "He did a lot of stuff behind the back of the secretary of the Navy," one lobbyist told Timberg. Working his Senate connections, McCain managed to include a replacement for the Midway in the defense authorization bill in 1978. Carter, standing firm, vetoed the entire spending bill to kill the carrier. When an attempt to override the veto fell through, however, McCain and his lobbyist friends didn't give up the fight. The following year, Congress once again approved funding for the carrier. This time, Carter — his pork-busting efforts undone by a turncoat Navy liaison — signed the bill.

In the spring of 1979, while conducting official business for the Navy, the still-married McCain encountered Cindy Lou Hensley, a willowy former cheerleader for USC. Mutually smitten, the two lied to each other about their ages. The 24-year-old Hensley became 27; the 42-year-old McCain became 38. For nearly a year the two carried on a cross-country romance while McCain was still living with Carol: Court documents filed with their divorce proceeding indicate that they "cohabitated as husband and wife" for the first nine months of the affair.

Although McCain stresses in his memoir that he married Cindy three months after divorcing Carol, he was still legally married to his first wife when he and Cindy were issued a marriage license from the state of Arizona. The divorce was finalized on April 2nd, 1980. McCain's second marriage — rung in at the Arizona Biltmore with Gary Hart as a groomsman — was consummated only six weeks later, on May 17th. The union gave McCain access to great wealth: Cindy, whose father was the exclusive distributor for Budweiser in the Phoenix area, is now worth an estimated \$100 million.

McCain's friends were blindsided by the divorce. The Reagans — with whom the couple had frequently dined and even accompanied on New Year's holidays — never forgave him. By the time McCain became a self-proclaimed "foot soldier in the Reagan Revolution"

two years later, he and the Gipper had little more than ideology to bind them. Nancy took Carol under her wing, giving her a job in the White House and treating McCain with a frosty formality that was evident even on the day last March when she endorsed his candidacy. "Ronnie and I always waited until everything was decided and then we endorsed," she said. "Well, obviously, this is the nominee of the party."

THE CARPETBAGGER

As his marriage unraveled, McCain's naval career was also stalling out. He had been passed over for a promotion. There was no sea command on the horizon, ensuring that he would never be able to join his four-star forefathers. For good measure, he crashed his third and final plane, this one a single-engine ultralight. McCain has never spoken of his last crash publicly, but his friend Gen. Jim Jones recalled in a 1999 interview that it left McCain with bandages on his face and one arm in a sling.

So McCain turned to politics. Receiving advance word that a GOP congressional seat was opening up outside Phoenix, he put the inside edge to good use. Within minutes of the incumbent's official retirement announcement, Cindy McCain bought her husband the house that would serve as his foothold in the district. In sharp contrast to the way he now markets himself, McCain's campaign ads billed him as an insider — a man "who knows how Washington works." Though the Reagans no longer respected him, McCain featured pictures of himself smiling with them.

"Thanks to my prisoner-of-war experience," McCain writes, "I had, as they say in politics, a good story to sell." And sell it he did. "Listen, pal," he told an opponent who challenged him during a candidate forum. "I wish I could have had the luxury, like you, of growing up and living and spending my entire life in a nice place like the first district of Arizona, but I was doing other things. As a matter of fact, when I think about it now, the place I lived the longest in my life was Hanoi."

To finance his campaign, McCain dipped into the Hensley family fortune. He secured an endorsement from his mentor, Sen. Tower, who tapped his vast donor network in Texas to give McCain a much-needed boost. And he began an unethical relationship with a high-flying and corrupt financier that would come to characterize his cozy dealings with major donors and lobbyists over the years.

Charlie Keating, the banker and anti-pornography crusader, would ultimately be convicted on 73 counts of fraud and racketeering for his role in the savings-and-loan scandal of the 1980s. That crisis, much like today's subprime-mortgage meltdown, resulted from misbegotten banking deregulation, and ultimately left taxpayers to pick up a tab of more than \$124 billion. Keating, who raised more than \$100,000 for McCain's race, lavished the first-term congressman with the kind of political favors that would make Jack Abramoff blush. McCain and his family took at least nine free trips at Keating's expense, and vacationed nearly every year at the mogul's estate in the Bahamas. There they would spend the days yachting and snorkeling and attending extravagant parties in a world McCain referred to as "Charlie Keating's Shangri-La." Keating also invited Cindy McCain and her father to invest in a real estate venture for which he promised a 26 percent return on investment. They plunked down more than \$350,000.

McCain still attributes the attention to nothing more than Keating's "great respect for military people" and the duo's "political and personal affinity." But Keating, for his part, made no bones about the purpose of his giving. When asked by reporters if the investments he made in politicians bought their loyalty and influence on his behalf, Keating replied, "I want to say in the most forceful way I can, I certainly hope so."

THE KEATING FIVE

In Congress, Rep. John McCain quickly positioned himself as a GOP hard-liner. He voted against honoring Martin Luther King Jr. with a national holiday in 1983 — a stance he held through 1989. He backed Reagan on tax cuts for the wealthy, abortion and support for the Nicaraguan contras. He sought to slash federal spending on social programs, and he voted twice against campaign-finance reform. He cites as his "biggest" legislative victory of that era a 1989 bill that abolished catastrophic health insurance for seniors, a move he still cheers as the first-ever repeal of a federal entitlement program.

McCain voted to confirm Robert Bork and Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court. In 1993, he was the keynote speaker at a fundraiser for a group that sponsored an anti-gay-rights ballot initiative in Oregon. His anti-government fervor was renewed in the Gingrich revolution of 1994, when he called for abolishing the departments of Education and Energy. The following year, he championed a sweeping measure that would have imposed a blanket moratorium on any increase of government oversight.

In this context, McCain's recent record — opposing the new GI Bill, voting to repeal the federal minimum wage, seeking to deprive 3.8 million kids of government health care — looks entirely consistent. "When jackasses like Rush Limbaugh say he's not conservative, that's just total nonsense," says former Sen. Gary Hart, who still counts McCain as a friend.

Although a hawkish Cold Warrior, McCain did show an independent streak when it came to the use of American military power. Because of his experience in Vietnam, he said, he didn't favor the deployment of U.S. forces unless there was a clear and attainable military objective. In 1983, McCain broke with Reagan to vote against the deployment of Marine peacekeepers to Lebanon. The unorthodox stance caught the attention of the media — including this very magazine, which praised McCain's "enormous courage." It was the beginning of a beautiful friendship. McCain recognized early on how the game was played: The Washington press corps "tend to notice acts of political independence from unexpected quarters," he later noted. "Now I was debating Lebanon on programs like *MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour* and in the pages of *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. I was gratified by the attention and eager for more."

When McCain became a senator in 1986, filling the seat of retiring Republican icon Barry Goldwater, he was finally in a position that a true maverick could use to battle the entrenched interests in Washington. Instead, McCain did the bidding of his major donor, Charlie Keating, whose financial empire was on the brink of collapse. Federal regulators were closing in on Keating, who had taken federally insured deposits from his Lincoln Savings and Loan and leveraged them to make wildly risky real estate ventures. If regulators restricted his investments, Keating knew, it would all be over.

In the year before his Senate run, McCain had championed legislation that would have delayed new regulations of savings and loans.

Grateful, Keating contributed \$54,000 to McCain's Senate campaign. Now, when Keating tried to stack the federal regulatory bank board with cronies, McCain made a phone call seeking to push them through. In 1987, in an unprecedented display of political intimidation, McCain also attended two meetings convened by Keating to pressure federal regulators to back off. The senators who participated in the effort would come to be known as the Keating Five.

"Senate historians were unable to find any instance in U.S. history that was comparable, in terms of five U.S. senators meeting with a regulator on behalf of one institution," says Bill Black, then deputy director of the Federal Savings and Loan Insurance Corporation, who attended the second meeting. "And it hasn't happened since."

Following the meetings with McCain and the other senators, the regulators backed off, stalling their investigation of Lincoln. By the time the S&L collapsed two years later, taxpayers were on the hook for \$3.4 billion, which stood as a record for the most expensive bank failure — until the current mortgage crisis. In addition, 20,000 investors who had bought junk bonds from Keating, thinking they were federally insured, had their savings wiped out.

"McCain saw the political pressure on the regulators," recalls Black. "He could have saved these widows from losing their life savings. But he did absolutely nothing."

McCain was ultimately given a slap on the wrist by the Senate Ethics Committee, which concluded only that he had exercised "poor judgment." The committee never investigated Cindy's investment with Keating.

The McCains soon found themselves entangled in more legal trouble. In 1989, in behavior the couple has blamed in part on the stress of the Keating scandal, Cindy became addicted to Vicodin and Percocet. She directed a doctor employed by her charity — which provided medical care to patients in developing countries — to supply the narcotics, which she then used to get high on trips to places like Bangladesh and El Salvador.

Tom Gosinski, a young Republican, kept a detailed journal while working as director of government affairs for the charity. "I am working for a very sad, lonely woman whose marriage of convenience to a U.S. senator has driven her to . . . cover feelings of despair with drugs," he wrote in 1992. When Cindy McCain suddenly fired Gosinski, he turned his journal over to the Drug Enforcement Administration, sparking a yearlong investigation. To avoid jail time, Cindy agreed to a hush-hush plea bargain and court-imposed rehab.

Ironically, her drug addiction became public only because she and her husband tried to cover it up. In an effort to silence Gosinski, who was seeking \$250,000 for wrongful termination, the attorney for the McCains demanded that Phoenix prosecutors investigate the former employee for extortion. The charge was baseless, and prosecutors dropped the investigation in 1994 — but not before publishing a report that included details of Cindy's drug use.

Notified that the report was being released, Sen. McCain leapt into action. He dispatched his top political consultant to round up a group of friendly reporters, for whom Cindy staged a seemingly selfless, Oprah-style confession of her past addiction. Her drug use became part of the couple's narrative of straight talk and bravery in the face of adversity. "If what I say can help just one person to face the problem," Cindy declared, "it's worthwhile."

FAVORS FOR DONORS

In the aftermath of the Keating Five, McCain realized that his career was in a "hell of a mess." He had made George H.W. Bush's shortlist for vice president in 1988, but the Keating scandal made him a political untouchable. McCain needed a high horse — so his long-standing opposition to campaign-finance reform went out the window. Working with Russ Feingold, a Democrat from Wisconsin, McCain authored a measure to ban unlimited "soft money" donations from politics.

The Keating affair also taught McCain a vital lesson about handling the media. When the scandal first broke, he went ballistic on reporters who questioned his wife's financial ties to Keating — calling them "liars" and "idiots." Predictably, the press coverage was merciless. So McCain dialed back the anger and turned up the charm. "I talked to the press constantly, ad infinitum, until their appetite for information from me was completely satisfied," he later wrote. "It is a public relations strategy that I have followed to this day." Mr. Straight Talk was born.

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Unfortunately, any lessons McCain learned from the Keating scandal didn't affect his unbridled enthusiasm for deregulating the finance industry. "He continues to follow policies that create the same kind of environment we see today, with recurrent financial crises and epidemics of fraud led by CEOs," says Black, the former S&L regulator. Indeed, if the current financial crisis has a villain, it is Phil Gramm, who remains close to McCain. As chair of the Senate Banking Committee in the late 1990s, Gramm ushered in — with McCain's fervent support — a massive wave of deregulation for insurance companies and brokerage houses and banks, the aftershocks of which are just now being felt in Wall Street's catastrophic collapse. McCain, who has admitted that "the issue of economics is not something I've understood as well as I should," relies on Gramm to guide him.

McCain also did his part to loosen regulations on big corporations. In 1997, McCain became chairman of the powerful Senate Commerce Committee, which oversees the insurance and telecommunications industries, as well as the CEO pay packages of those McCain now denounces as "fat cats." The special interests with business before the committee were big and well-heeled. All told, executives and fundraisers associated with these firms donated \$2.6 million to McCain when he served as the chairman or ranking member.

The money bought influence. In 1998, employees of BellSouth contributed more than \$16,000 to McCain. The senator returned the favor, asking the Federal Communications Commission to give "serious consideration" to the company's request to become a long-distance carrier. Days after legislation benefiting the satellite-TV carrier EchoStar cleared McCain's committee, the company's founder celebrated by hosting a major fundraiser for McCain's presidential bid.

Whatever McCain's romantic entanglements with the lobbyist Vicki Iseman, he was clearly in bed with her clients, who donated nearly \$85,000 to his campaigns. One of her clients, Bud Paxson, set up a meeting with McCain in 1999, frustrated by the FCC's delay of his proposed takeover of a television station in Pittsburgh. Paxson had treated McCain well, offering the then-presidential candidate use of his corporate jet to fly to campaign events and ponying up \$20,000 in campaign donations.

"You're the head of the commerce committee," Paxson told McCain, according to *The Washington Post*. "The FCC is not doing its job. I would love for you to write a letter."

Iseman helped draft the text, and McCain sent the letter. Several weeks later — the day after McCain used Paxson's jet to fly to Florida for a fundraiser — McCain wrote another letter. FCC chair William Kennard sent a sharp rebuke to McCain, calling the senator's meddling "highly unusual." Nonetheless, within a week of McCain's second letter, the FCC ruled three-to-two in favor of Paxson's deal.

Following his failed presidential bid in 2000, McCain needed a vehicle to keep his brand alive. He founded the Reform Institute, which he set up as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit — a tax status that barred it from explicit political activity. McCain proceeded to staff the institute with his campaign manager, Rick Davis, as well as the fundraising chief, legal counsel and communications chief from his 2000 campaign.

There is no small irony that the Reform Institute — founded to bolster McCain's crusade to rid politics of unregulated soft money — itself took in huge sums of unregulated soft money from companies with interests before McCain's committee. EchoStar got in on the ground floor with a donation of \$100,000. A charity funded by the CEO of Univision gave another \$100,000. Cablevision gave \$200,000 to the Reform Institute in 2003 and 2004 — just as its officials were testifying before the commerce committee. McCain urged approval of the cable company's proposed pricing plan. As Bradley Smith, the former chair of the Federal Election Commission, wrote at the time: "Appearance of corruption, anyone?"

"HE IS HOTHEADED"

Over the years, John McCain has demonstrated a streak of anger so nasty that even his former flacks make no effort to spin it away. "If I tried to convince you he does not have a temper, you should hang up on me and ridicule me in print," says Dan Schnur, who served as McCain's press man during the 2000 campaign. Even McCain admits to an "immature and unprofessional reaction to slights" that is "little changed from the reactions to such provocations I had as a schoolboy."

McCain is sensitive about his physical appearance, especially his height. The candidate is only five-feet-nine, making him the shortest party nominee since Michael Dukakis. On the night he was elected senator in 1986, McCain exploded after discovering that the stage setup for his victory speech was too low; television viewers saw his head bobbing at the bottom of the screen, his chin frequently cropped from view. Enraged, McCain tracked down the young Republican who had set up the podium, prodding the volunteer in the chest while screaming that he was an "incompetent little shit." Jon Hinz, the director of the Arizona GOP, separated the senator from the young man, promising to get him a milk crate to stand on for his next public appearance.

During his 1992 campaign, at the end of a long day, McCain's wife, Cindy, mussed his receding hair and needled him playfully that he was "getting a little thin up there." McCain reportedly blew his top, cutting his wife down with the kind of language that had gotten him hauled into court as a high schooler: "At least I don't plaster on the makeup like a trollop, you cunt." Even though the incident was witnessed by three reporters, the McCain campaign denies it took place.

In the Senate — where, according to former GOP Sen. Bob Smith, McCain has "very few friends" — his volcanic temper has repeatedly led to explosive altercations with colleagues and constituents alike. In 1992, McCain got into a heated exchange with Sen. Chuck Grassley over the fate of missing American servicemen in Vietnam. "Are you calling me stupid?" Grassley demanded. "No, I'm calling you a fucking jerk!" yelled McCain. Sen. Bob Kerrey later told reporters that he feared McCain was "going to head-butt Grassley and drive the cartilage in his nose into his brain." The two were separated before they came to blows. Several years later, during another

debate over servicemen missing in action, an elderly mother of an MIA soldier rolled up to McCain in her wheelchair to speak to him about her son's case. According to witnesses, McCain grew enraged, raising his hand as if to strike her before pushing her wheelchair away.

McCain has called Paul Weyrich, who helped steer the Republican Party to the right, a "pompous self-serving son of a bitch" who "possesses the attributes of a Dickensian villain." In 1999, he told Sen. Pete Domenici, the Republican chairman of the Senate Budget Committee, that "only an asshole would put together a budget like this."

Last year, after barging into a bipartisan meeting on immigration legislation and attempting to seize the reins, McCain was called out by fellow GOP Sen. John Cornyn of Texas. "Wait a second here," Cornyn said. "I've been sitting in here for all of these negotiations and you just parachute in here on the last day. You're out of line." McCain exploded: "Fuck you! I know more about this than anyone in the room." The incident foreshadowed McCain's 11th-hour theatrics in September, when he abruptly "suspended" his campaign and inserted himself into the Wall Street bailout debate at the last minute, just as congressional leaders were attempting to finalize a bipartisan agreement.

At least three of McCain's GOP colleagues have gone on record to say that they consider him temperamentally unsuited to be commander in chief. Smith, the former senator from New Hampshire, has said that McCain's "temper would place this country at risk in international affairs, and the world perhaps in danger. In my mind, it should disqualify him." Sen. Domenici of New Mexico has said he doesn't "want this guy anywhere near a trigger." And Sen. Thad Cochran of Mississippi weighed in that "the thought of his being president sends a cold chill down my spine. He is erratic. He is hotheaded."

McCain's frequently inappropriate humor has also led many to question his self-control. In 1998, the senator told a joke about President Clinton's teenage daughter at a GOP fundraiser. "Why is Chelsea Clinton so ugly?" McCain asked. "Because her father is Janet Reno!"

More recently, McCain's jokes have heightened tensions with Iran. The senator once cautioned that "the world's only superpower . . . should never make idle threats" — but that didn't stop him from rewriting the lyrics to a famous Beach Boys tune. In April 2007, when a voter at a town-hall session asked him about his policy toward Tehran, McCain responded by singing, "bomb bomb bomb" Iran. The loose talk was meant to incite the GOP base, but it also aggravated relations with Iran, whose foreign minister condemned McCain's "jokes about genocide" as a testament to his "disturbed state of mind" and "warmongering approach to foreign policy."

"NEXT UP, BAGHDAD!"

The myth of John McCain hinges on two transformations — from pampered flyboy to selfless patriot, and from Keating crony to incorruptible reformer — that simply never happened. But there is one serious conversion that has taken root in McCain: his transformation from a cautious realist on foreign policy into a reckless cheerleader of neoconservatism.

"He's going to be Bush on steroids," says Johns, the retired brigadier general who has known McCain since their days at the National War College. "His hawkish views now are very dangerous. He puts military at the top of foreign policy rather than diplomacy, just like George Bush does. He and other neoconservatives are dedicated to converting the world to democracy and free markets, and they want to do it through the barrel of a gun."

McCain used to believe passionately in the *limits* of American military power. In 1993, he railed against Clinton's involvement in Somalia, sponsoring an amendment to cut off funds for the troops. The following year he blasted the idealistic aims of sending U.S. troops to Haiti, taking to the Senate floor to propose an immediate withdrawal. He even started out a fierce opponent of NATO air strikes on Serbia during the war in the Balkans.

But such concerns went out the window when McCain began gearing up to run for president. In 1998, he formed a political alliance with William Kristol, editor of the neoconservative *Weekly Standard*, who became one of his closest advisers. Randy Scheunemann — a hard-right lobbyist who was promoting Iraqi exile Ahmad Chalabi — came aboard as McCain's top foreign-policy adviser. Before long, the senator who once cautioned against "trading American blood for Iraqi blood" had been reborn as a fire-breathing neoconservative who believes in using American military might to spread American ideals — a belief he describes as a "sacred duty to suffer hardship and risk danger to protect the values of our civilization and impart them to humanity." By 1999, McCain was championing what he called "rogue state rollback." First on the hit list: Iraq.

Privately, McCain brags that he was the "original neocon." And after 9/11, he took the lead in agitating for war with Iraq, outpacing even Dick Cheney in the dissemination of bogus intelligence about the threat posed by Saddam Hussein. "There's other organizations besides Mr. bin Laden who are bent on the destruction of the United States," he warned in an appearance on *Hardball* on September 12th. "It isn't just Afghanistan. We're talking about Syria, Iraq, Iran, perhaps North Korea, Libya and others." A few days later, he told Jay Leno's audience that "some other countries" — possibly Iraq, Iran and Syria — had aided bin Laden.

A month after 9/11, with the U.S. bombing Kabul and reeling from the anthrax scare, McCain assured David Letterman that "we'll do fine" in Afghanistan. He then added, unbidden, "The second phase is Iraq. Some of this anthrax may — and I emphasize may — have come from Iraq."

Later that month on Larry King, McCain raised the specter of Saddam's weapons of mass destruction before he peddled what became Dick Cheney's favorite lie: "The Czech government has revealed meetings, contacts between Iraqi intelligence and Mohamed Atta. The evidence is very clear. . . . So we will have to act." On *Nightline*, he again flogged the Czech story and cited Iraqi defectors to claim that "there is no doubt as to [Saddam's] avid pursuit of weapons of mass destruction and the means to deliver them. That, coupled with his relations with terrorist organizations, I think, is a case that the administration will be making as we move step by step down this road."

That December, just as U.S. forces were bearing down on Osama bin Laden in Tora Bora, McCain joined with five senators in an open letter to the White House. "In the interest of our own national security, Saddam Hussein must be removed from power," they insisted, claiming that there was "no doubt" that Hussein intended to use weapons of mass destruction "against the United States and its allies."

In January 2002, McCain made a fact-finding mission to the Middle East. While he was there, he dropped by a supercarrier stationed in the Arabian Sea that was dear to his heart: the USS Theodore Roosevelt, the giant floating pork project that he had driven through over President Carter's veto. On board the carrier, McCain called Iraq a "clear and present danger to the security of the United States of America." Standing on the flight bridge, he watched as fighter planes roared off, en route to Afghanistan — where Osama bin Laden had already slipped away. "Next up, Baghdad!" McCain whooped.

Over the next 15 months leading up to the invasion, McCain continued to lead the rush to war. In November 2002, Scheunemann set up a group called the Committee for the Liberation of Iraq at the same address as Chalabi's Iraqi National Congress. The groups worked in such close concert that at one point they got their Websites crossed. The CLI was established with explicit White House backing to sell the public on the war. The honorary co-chair of the committee: John Sidney McCain III.

In September 2002, McCain assured Americans that the war would be "fairly easy" with an "overwhelming victory in a very short period of time." On the eve of the invasion, *Hardball* host Chris Matthews asked McCain, "Are you one of those who holds up an optimistic view of the postwar scene? Do you believe that the people of Iraq, or at least a large number of them, will treat us as liberators?"

McCain was emphatic: "Absolutely. Absolutely."

Today, however, McCain insists that he predicted a protracted struggle from the outset. "The American people were led to believe this could be some kind of day at the beach," he said in August 2006, "which many of us fully understood from the beginning would be a very, very difficult undertaking." McCain also claims he urged Bush to dump Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld. "I'm the only one that said that Rumsfeld had to go," he said in a January primary debate. Except that he didn't. Not once. As late as May 2004, in fact, McCain praised Rumsfeld for doing "a fine job."

Indeed, McCain's neocon makeover is so extreme that Republican generals like Colin Powell and Brent Scowcroft have refused to endorse their party's nominee. "The fact of the matter is his judgment about what to do in Iraq was wrong," says Richard Clarke, who served as Bush's counterterrorism czar until 2003. "He hung out with people like Ahmad Chalabi. He said Iraq was going to be easy, and he said we were going to war because of terrorism. We should have been fighting in Afghanistan with more troops to go after Al Qaeda. Instead we're at risk because of the mistaken judgment of people like John McCain."

MR. FLIP-FLOP

In the end, the essential facts of John McCain's life and career — the pivotal experiences in which he demonstrated his true character — are important because of what they tell us about how he would govern as president. Far from the portrayal he presents of himself as an unflinching maverick with a consistent and reliable record, McCain has demonstrated an unwavering commitment to taking whatever position will advance his own career. He "is the classic opportunist," according to Ross Perot, who worked closely with McCain on POW issues. "He's always reaching for attention and glory."

McCain has worked hard to deny such charges. "They're drinking the Kool-Aid that somehow I have changed positions on the issues," he said of his critics at the end of August. The following month, when challenged on *The View*, McCain again defied those who accuse him of flip-flopping. "What specific area have I quote 'changed'?" he demanded. "Nobody can name it."

In fact, his own statements show that he has been on both sides of a host of vital issues: the Bush tax cuts, the estate tax, waterboarding, hunting down terrorists in Pakistan, kicking Russia out of the G-8, a surge of troops into Afghanistan, the GI Bill, storing nuclear waste at Yucca Mountain, teaching intelligent design, fully funding No Child Left Behind, offshore drilling, his own immigration policy and withdrawal timelines for Iraq.

In March, McCain insisted to *The Wall Street Journal* that he is "always for less regulation." In September, with the government forced to bail out the nation's largest insurance companies and brokerage houses, McCain declared that he would regulate the financial industry and end the "casino culture on Wall Street." He did a similar about-face on Bush's tax cuts, opposing them when he planned to run against Bush in 2001, then declaring that he wants to make them larger — and permanent — when he needed to win the support of anti-tax conservatives this year. "It's a big flip-flop," conceded tax abolitionist Grover Norquist. "But I'm happy he's flopped."

In June of this year, McCain reversed his decades-long opposition to coastal drilling — shortly before cashing \$28,500 from 13 donors linked to Hess Oil. And the senator, who only a decade ago tried to ban registered lobbyists from working on political campaigns, now deploys 170 lobbyists in key positions as fundraisers and advisers.

Then there's torture — the issue most related to McCain's own experience as a POW. In 2005, in a highly public fight, McCain battled the president to stop the torture of enemy combatants, winning a victory to require military personnel to abide by the Army Field Manual when interrogating prisoners. But barely a year later, as he prepared to launch his presidential campaign, McCain cut a deal with the White House that allows the Bush administration to imprison detainees indefinitely and to flout the Geneva Conventions' prohibitions against torture.

What his former allies in the anti-torture fight found most troubling was that McCain would not admit to his betrayal. Shortly after cutting the deal, McCain spoke to a group of retired military brass who had been working to ban torture. According to Wilkerson, Colin Powell's former deputy, McCain feigned outrage at Bush and Cheney, as though he too had had the rug pulled out from under him. "We all knew the opposite was the truth," recalls Wilkerson. "That's when I began to lose a little bit of my respect for the man and his bona fides as a straight shooter."

But perhaps the most revealing of McCain's flip-flops was his promise, made at the beginning of the year, that he would "raise the level of political dialogue in America." McCain pledged he would "treat my opponents with respect and demand that they treat me with respect." Instead, with Rove protégé Steve Schmidt at the helm, McCain has turned the campaign into a torrent of debasing negativity, misrepresenting Barack Obama's positions on everything from sex education for kindergarteners to middle-class taxes. In September, in one of his most blatant embraces of Rove-like tactics, McCain hired Tucker Eskew — one of Rove's campaign operatives who smeared the senator and his family during the 2000 campaign in South Carolina.

Throughout the campaign this year, McCain has tried to make the contest about honor and character. His own writing gives us the standard by which he should be judged. "Always telling the truth in a political campaign," he writes in *Worth the Fighting For*, "is a great test of character." He adds: "Patriotism that only serves and never risks one's self-interest isn't patriotism at all. It's selfishness. That's a lesson worth relearning from time to time." It's a lesson, it would appear, that the candidate himself could stand to relearn.

"I'm sure John McCain loves his country," says Richard Clarke, the former counterterrorism czar under Bush. "But loving your country and lying to the American people are apparently not inconsistent in his view."

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