

POLITICS

The Coddling Of John McCain

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A recent profile of the Arizona Republican exemplifies much of what is wrong with establishment political journalism



The profile is in the current issue of *Newsweek*, and it is a parade of Inside the Beltway reporting pathologies. Written by Howard Kurtz, the longtime Washington DC media reporter, its unifying conceit is that Senator John McCain was in a funk after he lost the 2008 election - and that the War in Libya has brought about his "renewed sense of engagement" in national politics. "The battle-scarred warrior who lost to Obama two and a half years ago is again finding his voice," Kurtz writes, "jolted into action by the revolutions catching fire across the Middle East."

Implicit here is the idea that it's John McCain's emotional state that ought to interest us. *What human drama! He was down and out, but now he's back!* This journalistic approach would be wrongheaded regardless - all along, McCain has been casting consequential votes, sitting on committees, making media appearances, and engaging in official travel. It isn't as if the power wielded by a US Senator matters any more when he is especially invested in his work and less if he's discontentedly watching the clock.

Even on its own terms, however, the article's conceit is highly questionable. So McCain lost his voice in 2008 and is just regaining it? Funny, I seem to remember a November 2010 Howard Kurtz piece that has McCain "pointing an angry finger" at *The New York Times* over Wikileaks, "ratcheting up" his rhetoric on North Korea, and "engaging in semantics" on Don't Ask, Don't Tell. The piece ended as follows: "John McCain may have lost his chance to command the U.S. military, but he's still practiced in the art of trench warfare." There's also the fact that during his supposedly voiceless period McCain managed to ward off a primary challenge and win a re-election campaign. Wasn't he jolted into action by J.D. Hayworth long before the conflict with Libya came along?

It doesn't help that passages meant to provide evidence for the article's thesis are borderline illogical. Says Kurtz:

McCain's renewed sense of engagement is a sharp contrast to the disappointment of 2008. Some friends say he slid into grumpy-old-man mode; others go further. "He was white-hot angry," says an associate who requested anonymity to candidly describe encounters with McCain. "At everybody-- himself, the media, the staff, the world." He now sounds philosophical...

But a grumpy old man, or someone consumed with white hot anger, can be extremely engaged - whereas a philosophical man might well withdraw from the world. (And does that anonymous quote really pass the Howard Kurtz test?)

Here's another weirdly constructed point:

Some in McCain's orbit believe he occasionally enjoys a bit of schadenfreude at the president's difficulties. But Mark Salter, McCain's longtime confidant, says, "More than anybody, he's responsible for normalizing relations with the North Vietnamese. If he had a grudge against anyone in the world, you'd have thought it was them."

It's written as if "McCain normalized relations with Vietnam" is a logical rebuttal to "when Obama has it tough McCain experiences schadenfreude." What a strange way to construct a dialogue!

The lead didn't really make sense to me either:

It was late ON a summer's night in 2009 when John McCain met Muammar Gaddafi, whose behavior bordered on the bizarre.

The Libyan leader, a map of Africa emblazoned on his shirt, was ensconced in a tent in Tripoli with horses exercising outside when he turned to the visiting senator and said, "If you had withdrawn all the troops from Iraq, you would have been elected president". McCain, concluding his host was crazy, countered: I can think of a lot of reasons I lost, but that wasn't one I had seriously considered.

Why is it "crazy" to think that if America would've withdrawn from Iraq prior to the 2008 election, taking a winning issue off the table for Obama, the contest would've turned out differently? As political analysis I think it's probably wrong. But crazy? The anecdote is confusing at best, unless it's a coy nod to McCain being surprisingly unreflective about the various factors that cost him the election. What these rhetorically shake passages all have in common is their ambivalence to substance. It's as if the article's primary purpose is to include as many juicy quotes as possible.

Insofar as there's *any* attempt to cover actual policy, it concerns Senator McCain's stance on Libya, and his approach to foreign interventions generally. Thus the failure to actually interrogate McCain's position with any kind of depth or sophistication is the article's most disappointing failure, and the aspect that most vexed me. So often, when I read a piece breathlessly reporting on the most banal aspects of a powerful politician's publicly constructed identity, I want to grab the journalist by the shoulders and scream, "Okay, I'll agree to be very impressed at the great access you're showing off in your piece - but only if you stop wasting it and ask some tough questions while hanging with the Senator!"

Instead Kurtz leaves us to make sense of bits like this one:

As McCain and his Senate wingman, Joe Lieberman, traveled on to Lebanon and then Jordan, they spent hours discussing whether to support U.S. military action against Gaddafi. Once they came out for a no-fly zone, McCain grew increasingly frustrated as, in his view, the administration dithered--a delay he blames on President Obama's "world view, and a belief we don't act unless it's with other countries." Twisting a Sharpie in his Senate office as he speaks in staccato bursts, McCain says, "I don't think he feels strongly about American exceptionalism."

It would have been nice for Kurtz to ask, "Didn't Obama authorize the CIA to put boots on the ground in Libya before international bodies approved the mission?" Seems relevant, right? Other questions I'd have posed: "How do you account for Obama's unilateral action elsewhere in the world: drone strikes in Pakistan, DEA agents in Columbia? Finally, Senator McCain, could you flesh out what you regard to be the conflict between American exceptionalism and the notion that the United States should assemble a coalition before acting abroad when there isn't an imminent threat to our safety?" Had Kurtz asked those questions, we might know more about McCain's opinions. As it stands, we know merely that he repeated a talking point about American exceptionalism. (Yawn.)

A bit later, Kurtz writes:

McCain is taking some serious shots: he says Gaddafi would be gone had Obama started the bombing sooner, and that the president should never have relinquished control of the mission to NATO. But he has broken with conservative elements in his own party in backing Obama--going further than many war-wary Democrats.

Okay, gold star for citing two specific critiques of our Libya policy. But it's misleading to frame the divide on Libya among Republicans as one of "conservative elements" versus others. It's just much more complicated than that. Next comes the part that made me want to grab Kurtz by the shoulders:

McCain, who insists on visiting Iraq and Afghanistan twice a year, often favors a muscular approach to projecting U.S. military power but is wary of entanglements with no exit strategy. The old aviator, who had both arms repeatedly broken in a Hanoi prison camp, says that experience has "also given me a sense of caution in light of our failure in Vietnam."

So Kurtz is trying to explain John McCain's foreign policy to his readers. He tells us he specifically favored military action against Libya - *and* that he is very wary of entanglements with no exit strategy. Is there perhaps some conflict in those statements? An obvious followup question for Senator McCain?

Nope, instead we get this:

While McCain opposed the U.S. military actions in Lebanon and Somalia, he is sympathetic to humanitarian missions--and would even consider sending troops

to the war-torn Ivory Coast if someone could "tell me how we stop what's going on."

Pressed on when the United States should intervene in other countries, McCain sketches an expansive doctrine that turns on practicality: American forces must be able to "beneficially affect the situation" and avoid "an outcome which would be offensive to our fundamental -principles--whether it's 1,000 people slaughtered or 8,000...If there's a massacre or ethnic cleansing and we are able to prevent it, I think the United States should act."

This much is certain: Kurtz has sketched a foreign policy approach that is rife with contradictions, vague on various points of importance, and useless to the average reader trying to figure out what McCain might do in some future situation. Why didn't he interrogate McCain to clear up these inconsistencies? Or if the Senator proved incapable of articulating a coherent worldview, why isn't the reader told as much? It's as if there's some strange convention of Beltway journalism at work here, where we're supposed to accept the coherence of statements obviously in conflict, because that's how things work: senators say things, and journalists write them down.

Perhaps Kurtz doesn't think it's his place to point out incoherence - the "I'm just reporting what he said" dodge is as good an explanation as any for the flaws in his piece. Of course, a journalist constrained by that mistaken convention might bring in one of McCain's critics to raise the obvious objections.

Kurtz bumbles that part too:

That philosophy, applied to Gaddafi, has drawn fire from J. D. Hayworth, the conservative ex-congressman who mounted a failed primary challenge to McCain last year.

"I thought his conversion to conservatism might last a little longer," says Hayworth, who believes McCain has embraced Libya's rebels without knowing much about them. "With reelection safely behind him, he will take what he calculates to be the most attention-getting posture."

This is just lazy.

Rather than taking the time to understand McCain's stated position - or to flesh out what's really motivating him by taking a closer look at his foreign policy record, or interviewing someone who has - we're given a hodge-podge of self-contradictory talking points that help us very little in understanding his foreign policy views, *and* a critic without any special knowledge, chosen because he once ran against McCain, and whose main objection is that McCain is insufficiently conservative and disingenuous. It's a caricature of the journalistic tendency to make everything about ideological and personal conflict.

In sum, we've got a profile of a U.S. Senator based on a highly questionable premise that is frivolous even if true. As it proceeds, it makes basic mistakes of logic, addresses only one issue of substantive policy, fails to clearly explain the stance of the article's subject, and cites as his main critic a man who sidesteps policy substance entirely, turning questions over Libya policy into a purely ideological soup. And this from someone given exceptional access to Senator McCain.

Perhaps there's a reason for that.

What a waste.

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