

From Maverick to Prostitute: The Untold Story of John McCain

By Jon Perr
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As much as anything else, presidential campaigns are won and lost by the media narratives that rightly or wrongly come to define a candidate. In the case of Republican nominee John McCain, the seemingly unshakable narrative of the political "[maverick](#)" could not be further off the mark. At almost every turn, McCain in his eternal quest for the White House has reversed long-held positions, compromised core principles and swallowed his pride in order to curry favor with both the leading lights of the conservative movement and right-wing Republican primary voters. *The untold story of campaign 2008 is simply that of John McCain's transformation from maverick to prostitute.*



As the record shows, the selling of John McCain encompasses virtually the entire gamut of issues, foreign and domestic:

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1. Embracing "Crazy Base World"

No development symbolically reflects McCain's descent into political whoredom more than his born-again embrace of Christian conservative leaders such as Pastor John Hagee and Reverend Rod Parsley.

In his failed 2000 primary run against George W. Bush, McCain famously branded the likes of Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson as "agents of intolerance." During the decisive South Carolina primary, he paid a steep price for it.

So by early 2006, candidate McCain began his journey to what [Jon Stewart](#) termed "crazy base world." In May of that year, McCain delivered the commencement address at Falwell's Liberty University, where the late minister praised his former foe, "the ilk of John McCain is very scarce, very small." Confronted by [Tim Russert](#) weeks before as to whether he still viewed Falwell as an agent of intolerance, McCain grudgingly owned up to [his flip-flop](#), "no, I don't."

In the fall of 2007, McCain's rhetorical outreach to the GOP's evangelical base assumed comic proportions. In September, he said, "The most important thing is that I am a Christian." [One month later](#) in October, the [Episcopalian-turned-Baptist](#) McCain declared, "I would probably have to say yes, that the Constitution established the United States of America as a Christian nation." (Facing a backlash from the Anti-Defamation League and others, McCain relented and acknowledged, "Yes, I believe a Muslim could be president.")

Still, the distance from Falwell's Lynchburg campus to the stages shared with [John Hagee](#) and [Rod Parsley](#) was a short one. In February, McCain declared himself "very proud" and "very honored" to have [Hagee's endorsement](#). The End-Times Texas pastor and head of Christian United for Israel (CUFI) isn't merely an anti-Catholic bigot (he called the church "the great whore" and a "false cult system"), but an advocate of accelerating Armageddon by promoting a nuclear showdown with Iran. As for Parsley, whom McCain deemed his "spiritual guide, the gay-bashing Ohio minister said of Islam that "America was founded, in part, with the intention of seeing this false religion destroyed."

Yet McCain appears to be enjoying a [free ride](#) from his past principles into the arms of evangelical voters. While the Jeremiah Wright controversy has been portrayed by many (myself included) as challenging [Barack Obama's own narrative](#) of a united, post-racial America transcending group cleavages and identity politics, John McCain remains unscathed after selling his soul.

2. Closing Borders - and Minds - to Immigration

McCain's craven surrender to political expediency even extends to issues where he has taken a high-profile leadership role. Nowhere is his cowardice in the face of conservative GOP primary voters more pronounced than on immigration reform.

Throughout 2005 and 2006, John McCain along with Ted Kennedy (D-MA) led the Senate fight for comprehensive immigration reform combining a guest worker program, new paths to naturalization for current illegal aliens and improved border security. But despite its [general popularity](#) with Americans overall, the legislation was torpedoed by [McCain's own party](#) in Congress. (That might explain Mr. Straight Talk's March 2007 tirade against his GOP colleague from Texas, [John Cornyn](#): "F**k you! I know more about this than anyone else in the room.")

It wasn't that defeat, but the [overwhelming xenophobia](#) of the [Republicans' primary electorate](#) that led McCain to abandon his leadership role - and principles - on immigration. As the [Washington Times](#) and [Meet the Press](#) detailed, McCain underwent a conversion on the road to the Republican National Convention in Minneapolis. As the ultra-right Times noted on January 14, 2008:

The Arizona Republican now says that, in the wake of last summer's defeat of "comprehensive immigration reform," he has "gotten the message" that the border must be secured before the status of illegals already in the United States can be dealt with.

The chilly reception McCain's immigration record received among Republican primary voters might just have something to do with his now-perpetual pledge to "secure the borders first." In January, a [crowd in Michigan booed](#) McCain as he spoke about his past views on illegal immigration. It's no wonder he grew testy the previous week when Russert dredged up [McCain's 2003 assessment](#) that "I think we can set up a program where amnesty is

extended to a certain number of people who are eligible." With illegal immigration at or near the top of the list of most important issues for GOP voters in [Iowa](#), [South Carolina](#) and [Nevada](#), neutralizing his exposure was a priority for McCain.

3. Campaign Finance Fraud

If immigration reform is one of John McCain's signature issues, campaign finance is surely the other. And there, too, McCain decided not to practice what he preached when the politics of push came to shove.

As the [Boston Globe](#) reported on Monday, the McCain campaign violated the very laws Mr. Straight Talk was instrumental in setting up:

John McCain has officially broken the limits imposed by the presidential public financing system, according to spending reports filed last week by the campaign.

The senator from Arizona has spent \$58.4 million on his Republican primary effort. Those who have committed to public financing can spend no more than \$54 million on their primary bid.

For its part, the McCain camp claims that their man is no longer subject to the spending cap, despite his desperate campaign having used the prospect of federal matching funds as collateral to [secure a highly questionable loan](#) back in 2007. The Federal Election Commission has yet to grant the public financing withdrawal request submitted by the McCain team.

Given the Democrats' massive fundraising lead and that violation of the law entails the "risk of stiff fines and up to five years in prison", John McCain better hope the FEC sides with him.

4. Going Over to the Supply Side on Taxes

John McCain's gymnastic flip-flop on the Bush tax cuts ranks among his greatest acts of political contortion. What he once opposed as fiscal recklessness and a massive giveaway to the wealthiest Americans, McCain now backs as the price of admission to the Republican presidential nomination.

As McCain took his Straight Talk Express to the [Florida primary](#), he faced the dual prospects of jitters on the economy and a desperate Rudy Giuliani making what could be his final stand in the Sunshine State. And that meant fidelity to George W. Bush's tax cuts would be paramount. Sure enough, [Giuliani](#) threw down the gauntlet, "John voted against the Bush tax cuts, I think on both occasions, and sided with the Democrats."

McCain's response is typical of his Republican primary tightrope walk. The Bush tax cuts he once labeled unfair to the middle class and fiscally irresponsible should now be made permanent.

As the laissez-faire fanatics at the [Club for Growth](#) detail, McCain is proof that evolution is reversing when it comes to the Bush tax gambit. In June 2001, McCain proclaimed his opposition to Round 1 of President Bush's treasury-financed redistribution of wealth:

"I cannot in good conscience support a tax cut in which so many of the benefits go to the most fortunate among us at the expense of middle-class Americans who need tax relief."

By December 2007, however, that message sounded more like John Edwards than Ronald Reagan, so candidate John McCain needed a [different rationale](#). As by the National Review's Rich Lowry on Fox News if he thought it had been a mistake to vote against the Bush tax cuts in 2001 and 2003, McCain claimed in the name of fiscal discipline he would [do it all again](#):

"No, because I had significant tax cuts, and there was restraint of spending included in my proposal. I saw no restraint in spending. We presided over the greatest increase in the size of government since the Great Society. Spending went completely out of control. It's still out of control. Wasteful earmark spending is a disgrace, and it caused us to alienate our Republican base."

Of course, the spending cuts never came from the Bush White House or the Republican Congress. But with a presidential bid in the offing, McCain decided the third time was a charm. As [Tim Russert](#) noted on January 6th, McCain not only voted for the budget busting tax cuts the third time around, but now believes they should be made permanent:

SEN. McCAIN: ...unless we cut spending then, then we are going to end up in a - the serious situation we're in today. I will cut spending. And I will continue to support making the tax cuts permanent, which I've voted already twice.

MR. RUSSERT: But you voted the third time for the tax cuts, but there weren't spending cuts.

SEN. McCAIN: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. No, but I thought that we ought to keep the tax cuts permanent because if we had increased taxes, which that would have had the effect of, if I had voted in the other way...

In his book, [The Big Con](#), Jonathan Chait summarized John McCain's conversion from supply-side apostate to tax-cutting zealot. In 2000, Jack Kemp proclaimed of McCain's 2001 opposition to the Bush tax cuts, "John McCain, who's a friend of mine, has done a â€" has made a huge mistake." By 2006, McCain had drunk the Koolade and signed on supply-side godfather Arthur Laffer to his economic team. By 2007, he mouthed the party line, "tax cuts, starting with Kennedy, as we all know, increase revenues."

5. Attention: Deficit Disorder

Of course, the corollary to McCain's kowtowing to the Bush tax cuts is accepting the massive federal budget deficits they produce.

In the run-up to the 2004 election, [President Bush pompously promised](#) to slash the deficit by half by 2009. But his sleight of hand trick, which depended both on a wildly inflated baseline deficit figure and ignoring the impact making his tax cuts permanent in 2010, collapsed last month. The faltering economy and the costs of the stimulus package are now forecast to produce \$400 billion in red ink this year.

As [ThinkProgress](#) meticulously detailed, John McCain's proposed economic package would be "worse than Bush." The same John McCain who warned Tim Russert about "serious situation we're in today" has thrown budgetary caution to the winds in a proposal that even his [top economic adviser](#) admitted " will make deficits expand up front: "

Our analysis suggests that the McCain plan shares five key characteristics of Bush policies. First, it is enormously expensive, costing more than \$2 trillion over the next decade and essentially doubling the Bush tax cuts. Second, the McCain plan would predominantly benefit the most fortunate taxpayers, offering two new massive tax cuts for corporations and delivering 58 percent of its benefits to the top 1 percent of taxpayers. The Bush tax cuts provide 31 percent of their benefits to the top 1 percent of taxpayers.

Third, the McCain tax plan continues the shift of the tax burden from investment income onto earned income. Fourth, the plan not only fails to address current tax shelter problems in the tax code but in fact will lead to increased sheltering. Fifth, McCain cannot pay for his tax cuts without massive reductions in Social Security, Medicare, or other key programs that benefit the vast majority of Americans.

Of course, that message brings a smile to the face of far-right anti-tax crusader [Grover Norquist](#), who famously said of the federal government that his goal was "to get it down to the size where we can drown it in the bathtub." Norquist, who once called McCain "that nut-job from Arizona," [now praises McCain](#) for adopting "the Americans for Tax Reform's entire agenda."

Given that McCain's fuzzy math makes George W. Bush's look like differential calculus, it should come as no surprise that the Republican nominee [admitted in 2005](#):

"I'm going to be honest: I know a lot less about economics than I do about military and foreign policy issues. I still need to be educated."

And with the [dual crises](#) in the housing market and financial system, it's all the more frightening that John McCain recently pointed to [Alan Greenspan](#) as his mentor:

"The issue of economics is not something I've understood as well as I should. I've got Greenspan's book."

6 Let's Overturn Roe v. Wade After All

McCain's courtship of the religious right did not end with fawning embrace of demagogues he once denounced. The reliably pro-life McCain just as predictably stepped up his anti-abortion rhetoric to please his new Christian conservative masters.

As [ThinkProgress documented in November 2006](#), McCain in the run-up to his '08 presidential bid reversed course on the issue of overturning *Roe v. Wade*. In 1999, the supposed maverick was supposedly concerned about the health and safety of American women:

"I'd love to see a point where it is irrelevant, and could be repealed because abortion is no longer necessary. But certainly in the short term, or even the long term, I

would not support repeal of Roe v. Wade, which would then force X number of women in America to [undergo] illegal and dangerous operations."

But by 2006 with his knee-bending to Falwell and others now well underway, McCain announced he not only wanted to see *Roe* overturned, but supported a constitutional amendment banning abortion as well:

STEPHANOPOULOS: Let me ask one question about abortion. Then I want to turn to Iraq. You're for a constitutional amendment banning abortion, with some exceptions for life and rape and incest.

MCCAIN: Rape, incest and the life of the mother. Yes.

STEPHANOPOULOS: So is President Bush, yet that hasn't advanced in the six years he's been in office. What are you going to do to advance a constitutional amendment that President Bush hasn't done?

MCCAIN: I don't think a constitutional amendment is probably going to take place, but I do believe that it's very likely or possible that the Supreme Court should - could overturn Roe v. Wade, which would then return these decisions to the states, which I support.

STEPHANOPOULOS: And you'd be for that?

MCCAIN: Yes, because I'm a federalist. Just as I believe that the issue of gay marriage should be decided by the states, so do I believe that we would be better off by having Roe v. Wade return to the states. And I don't believe the Supreme Court should be legislating in the way that they did on Roe v. Wade.

7. Supreme Courtship of the Right

John McCain's hard right turn extends well beyond *Roe* and reproductive rights. Throughout the 2008 campaign, he has gone to great lengths to reassure conservatives that President McCain would put their kind of people on the Supreme Court.

During the 2005 "[up or down vote](#)" controversy over Bush judicial nominations, McCain earned the wrath of conservatives for his membership in the so-called [Gang of 14](#). McCain, after all, was one of the leaders of the bipartisan group of 14 Senators seeking a middle ground between the Democrats' filibuster threats and Majority Leader Bill Frist's nuclear option.

(It is worth noting that some on the right, such as the [National Review's](#) Adam White and Kevin White, now laud McCain precisely because he protected the ability of Republicans to filibuster future Democratic judicial nominations. "When that moment arrives," they wrote, "conservatives will call on the Republican minority to utilize every tool in the Senate minority playbook to thwart those nominations--especially the filibuster.")

Still, McCain's greater act of apostasy came on the types of judges he himself would support on the Supreme Court bench. Earlier this year, McCain faced a firestorm of right-wing criticism when [John Fund](#), writing in the Wall Street Journal, claimed McCain was opposed to the nomination of a hardline conservative [like Justice Samuel Alito](#):

More recently, Mr. McCain has told conservatives he would be happy to appoint the likes of Chief Justice John Roberts to the Supreme Court. But he indicated he might draw the line on a Samuel Alito, because "he wore his conservatism on his sleeve."

In a fiery January 2008 column titled, "Is McCain a Conservative?" [Robert Novak](#) backed up Fund's account:

"Wouldn't it be great if you get a chance to name somebody like Roberts and Alito?" one lawyer commented. McCain replied, "Well, certainly Roberts." Jaws were described as dropping. My sources cannot remember exactly what McCain said next, but their recollection is that he described Alito as too conservative.

Aware of the consequences with the conservative movement, McCain was quick to proclaim his fealty to their far-right judicial ideals. As he told the National Review's [Byron York](#):

"Let me just look you in the eye," McCain told me. "I've said a thousand times on this campaign trail, I've said as often as I can, that I want to find clones of Alito and Roberts. I worked as hard as anybody to get them confirmed. I look you in the eye and tell you I've said a thousand times that I wanted Alito and Roberts. I have told anybody who will listen. I flat-out tell you I will have people as close to Roberts and Alito [as possible], and I am proud of my record of working to get them confirmed, and people who worked to get them confirmed will tell you how hard I worked."

8. France-Basher to Alliance Builder

On foreign policy as well as domestic issues, John McCain has dumped past postures as part of his presidential quest. His amnesia regarding his past belittling of key American allies is just one case in point.

In [Paris last weekend](#), McCain adopted what the New York Times called "soothing tones" in a "love-fest" with French President Nicolas Sarkozy. And in what his campaign billed as a [major foreign policy address](#) today, John McCain declared, "We need to listen to the views and respect the collective will of our democratic allies."

Sadly, the [John McCain of 2008](#) seems unacquainted with the John McCain model of 2003. With his [vitriolic France-bashing](#) in the run-up to the war in Iraq, John McCain stood shoulder to shoulder with the Paris-hating purveyors of "freedom fries" and "old Europe."

As President Bush prepared to pull the trigger on the Iraq war in February 2003, John McCain was at the forefront of those browbeating the Chirac government for France's refusal to back the U.S. at the United Nations. On [February 11, 2003](#), McCain co-sponsored a Senate resolution praising 18 European nations backing U.S. enforcement of UN demands for Saddam's disarmament and echoed Defense Secretary [Donald Rumsfeld](#) in thundering at the France and Germany of "old Europe:"

"The majority of Europe's democracies have spoken, and their message could not be clearer: France and Germany do not speak for Europe...most European governments behave like allies that are willing to meet their responsibilities to uphold international peace and security in defense of our common values. We thank this European majority for standing with us."

McCain's venom towards the French was on full display two days later [during a speech](#) at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. On [February 13, 2003](#), McCain warned of "new threats to civilization [which] again defy our imagination in scale and potency" portrayed Iraq as "threat of the first order." He proclaimed that "the United States does not have reliable allies to implement a policy to contain Iraq" and pointed the finger squarely at France:

"Compare our great power allies in the Cold War with those with whom we act today in dealing with Iraq. France has unashamedly pursued a concerted policy to dismantle the UN sanctions regime, placing its commercial interests above international law, world peace and the political ideals of Western civilization. Remember them? Liberte, egalite, fraternite."

Just days later on [February 18, 2003](#), the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's Lateline program showed a furious McCain foaming at the mouth over France:

"They remind me of an aging movie actress in the 1940's who is still trying to dine out on her looks but doesn't have the face for it."

That the American media seem to have overlooked McCain's turnabout comes as no surprise. They have yet to hold John McCain to account for a [five-year reign of error on Iraq](#) in which he had everything - Saddam's WMD, the needed U.S. troop strength, Americans being greeted as liberators, the safety of Baghdad streets and so much else - completely wrong.

9. A Tortured Position on Torture

As a prisoner himself tortured during his Vietnam captivity in the Hanoi Hilton, John McCain has been an outspoken opponent of torture by the United States during the global war on terror. But when that position put him at odds with both the Republican leadership and GOP primary voters, McCain turned his tail and fled.

With his ["no" vote](#) in February on the Senate bill to [ban waterboarding](#) by the CIA, John McCain caved in the face of yet another betrayal by George W. Bush. President Bush, after all, stabbed McCain in the back with a [2005 signing statement](#) that defanged the Detainee Treatment Act the now-presumptive GOP presidential nominee championed in the Senate. But in his never-ending quest to appease his party's conservative base, McCain revealed that no humiliation at the hands of George Bush is too great.

Predictably, John McCain kowtowed to the White House in just his latest affirmation of a de facto Bush third term. As the [Washington Post](#) noted:

But McCain sided with the Bush administration yesterday on the waterboarding ban passed by the Senate, saying in a statement that the measure goes too far by applying military standards to intelligence agencies. He also said current laws already forbid waterboarding, and he urged the administration to declare it illegal.

"Staging a mock execution by inducing the misperception of drowning is a clear violation" of laws and treaties, McCain said.

Not according to George W. Bush. After all, it was President Bush's [December 30, 2005 signing statement](#) on McCain's amendment to the Detainee Treatment Act that made waterboarding and other acts of torture the continuing policy of the United States.

With his signing statement, Bush himself sought to create a legal basis for his administration's past and future criminality. In a nutshell, Bush signed into law a bill he had every intention of [continuing to violate](#).

Bush, of course, had opposed John McCain's torture bill throughout the fall of 2005. But when the House and Senate passed McCain's amendment to the defense authorization bill by [veto proof margins](#), Bush held a December 15 [press conference with McCain](#), announcing his support for the language explicitly saying that that the cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment of detainees in US custody is illegal regardless of where they are held.

As the [Boston Globe](#) reported, that supposed compromise lasted just as long as it took for President Bush to issue his signing statement two weeks later on [December 30](#). When it comes to what constitutes "cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment of detainees," the President proclaimed that he indeed would be the decider.

And despite today's [protestations to the contrary](#) ("We can't torture or treat inhumanely suspected terrorists we have captured"), John McCain has just gone along with it.

10. A Hate-Love Relationship with George W. Bush

Of course, nothing about John McCain's pining for the White House is more emblematic than his newfound love of George W. Bush.

[In early March](#), McCain accepted Bush's endorsement at a Rose Garden press conference, describing the President as "a man who I have a great admiration, respect and affection" for. But while John McCain now is only too eager for Bush's embrace, eight years ago John McCain told him to "take your hands off me."

McCain's past hatred for George W. Bush is the stuff of legend. As [Time](#) reported in March 2000, McCain showed a visceral disgust towards Bush and his scorched earth campaign:

But many close McCain advisers think the personal rift between the two men is too wide to bridge, at least in the near term. After all, the last time Bush tried to smooth things over-at a South Carolina debate in early February-the result was less than promising. During a commercial break, Bush grasped McCain's hands and made a sugary plea for less acrimony in their campaign. When McCain pointed out that Bush's allies were savaging him in direct-mail and phone campaigns, Bush played the innocent. "Don't give me that shit," McCain growled, pulling away. "And take your hands off me."

John McCain could certainly be forgiven for his anger, given the painful memories of character assassination, smears and lies the Bush camp dished out during the 2000 campaign. After McCain's upset win in the New Hampshire primary, [Bush operatives](#) during the critical South Carolina contest phoned voters with push polls implying McCain was anti-Catholic, his wife Cindy a drug addict, and that he had fathered an illegitimate black child with a prostitute. (In reality, the McCains had adopted a baby from an orphanage in Bangladesh.) McCain even received an early version of the Swift Boat treatment, with

allegations that his Vietnam War captivity in Hanoi left him mentally unstable. All of these slurs came as candidate [Bush chastised McCain](#) that he couldn't "take the high horse and then claim the low road." It's no wonder he angrily rejected Bush's feigned attempt in 2000 to bury the hatchet.

But by 2004, John McCain was looking towards his next White House run - and life after Bush. McCain's presidential ambitions let him forgive sins past in order to rebuild relations with Bush and the Republican establishment. McCain's long road back began during election 2004. McCain not only stumped for George W. Bush, but [joined the chorus](#) of the Swift Boat hacks by stating that "what John Kerry did after the war is very legitimate political discussion." (Only the previous month, McCain himself called the attacks on Kerry "dishonest and dishonorable.") Dana Perino was exaggerating only slightly when she claimed that "in 2000 and 2004, Senator McCain went on to work his tail off to help this president."

From there, the selling of John McCain's soul proceeded quickly and his Faustian bargain began to pay dividends. At the [Southern Leadership Conference](#) in March 2006, McCain used the venue to offer a full-throated support of President Bush and his Iraq policy, proclaiming "We elected him, we need him, he needs to do well and the country needs him." McCain turned his vitriol towards the President's critics, claiming that anyone who said Bush lied about WMD in Iraq "was lying." By mid-2006, McCain had secured the backing of much of the [Bush financial machine](#).

Conclusion: The Maverick's Free Ride

And so it goes. On issue after issue, John McCain has changed gears, abandoned past positions and discarded his principles in order to garner his party's nomination for President. No disgrace is too profound, no indignity too great and no compromise too painful for John McCain to endure in his unquenchable thirst for the White House.

And to date, McCain has paid little price for selling his soul to George W. Bush and the Republican right. The media perpetuates the McCain as maverick narrative even in the face of his betrayal of American voters - and himself. While some voices, such as Kevin Drum ("[McCain's Cred](#)"), Neal Gabler ("[The Maverick and the Media](#)") and authors David Brock and Paul Waldman ([Free Ride: John McCain and the Media](#)), are now shining a spotlight on McCain's duplicitous transformation, a [fawning mainstream media continues](#) to sing McCain's praises.

We can only hope that, ultimately, McCain's chickens will come home to roost. Hopefully, as the New Republic's [Michael Crowley](#) suggested last August, John McCain will soon learn "you can't un-sell out."

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