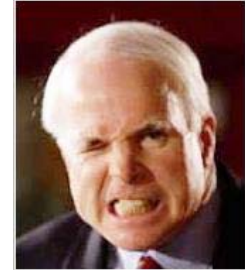


## John McCain: Unfit for Command

By Jon Perr  
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Over the past week, Democrat [Hillary Clinton](#) has proclaimed her potential Republican rival [John McCain](#) to be the gold standard of wartime presidents. But lost in Clinton's fierce barrage against Barack Obama's national security experience is the inescapable conclusion about John McCain's own suitability as Commander-in-Chief. McCain's mistake-filled record, questionable judgment, calamitous misreading of history, nonchalance about American casualties and notorious short fuse all combine to make him a dangerous choice to lead an America at war. Simply put, John McCain is unfit for command.



### Hoodwinked by Chalabi

John McCain was certainly not alone in his enthusiastic support for the invasion of Iraq, perhaps the greatest American strategic debacle since the end of World War II. But as [ThinkProgress](#) detailed, McCain was an early and vocal advocate beginning in the 1990's for Ahmed Chalabi, the charlatan and pitchman for the Iraqi National Congress:

*One of his key backers has been John McCain, who was one of the first patrons of Chalabi's grand-sounding International Committee for a Free Iraq when it was founded in 1991. McCain was Chalabi's favored candidate in the 2000 election since Chalabi knew that he would be able to free up the \$97 million in military aid plus millions pushed through in Congress and earmarked for Chalabi's exile group, the Iraqi National Congress, but held up by the Clinton State Department.*

*Indeed, McCain was a Chalabi backer long before President Bush took power. In 1997, he tried to pressure the Clinton administration into setting up an Iraqi government in exile.*

Despite [Chalabi's past sentencing in absentia](#) in Jordan to 22 years in prison for embezzlement and bank fraud, McCain declared in 2003, "He's a patriot who has the best interests of his country at heart." Still, don't expect to see Ahmed Chalabi at President McCain's [State of the Union](#) address in 2010.

No doubt, John McCain was hoodwinked by Chalabi, the charismatic frontman for a self-serving exile group out of touch with the people - and reality - on the ground in Iraq. But with [exile figures](#) and [dissident groups](#) - and their [questionable intelligence](#) - set to play a critical role in the [American approach to Iran](#), the United States can't afford any more of John McCain's judgment and experience.

### Failing History 101

To be sure, Americans cannot trust John McCain to safeguard the nation's future because he does not understand its past. Nowhere is McCain's confusion more on display than in his repeated (and misguided) comparisons of Iraq to South Korea and his commitment to keep American troops there for 100 years.

Here, McCain traveling down the well-trod path of [President Bush](#). Last June, then White House press secretary Tony Snow described Bush's "over the horizon support role" for the United States in Iraq as comparable to the American presence in Japan, Germany or South Korea:

*"The Korean model is one in which the United States provides a security presence, but you've had the development of a successful democracy in South Korea over a period of years, and, therefore, the United States is there as a force of stability."*

The analogy, of course, is laughable. Germany and Japan unconditionally surrendered to Allied forces in World War II and were occupied by U.S. troops after those nations' total devastation. Each subsequently became allies in the Cold War, and featured a large - and perpetual - American military presence as part of strategy to contain the Soviet Union. In South Korea as well, U.S. troops provide a guarantee against the external threat posed by the North. There, American troops serve as a trip-wire intended to trigger a massive U.S. response in the face of any aggression by Pyongyang.

In none of those places is the U.S. an occupying power, propping up a government against domestic threats or trying to limit a civil war. In Iraq, the United States is part referee trying to prevent the death spiral of sectarian conflict among Shiites, Sunnis and Kurds and part enabler, backing both the Shiite dominated Maliki in government in Baghdad and independent Sunni security councils opposed to it. While the fight against must Al Qaeda continue, the U.S. with its installations around the Persian Gulf does not need permanent, forward operating bases in Iraq.

And yet John McCain mimics the Bush administration's shockingly erroneous Korea model. [In June](#), McCain echoed the White House, proclaiming, "We have had troops in South Korea for 60 years and nobody minds." [By January 2008](#), McCain said "it would be fine" with him if the American forces remained in Iraq for "a hundred years:"

*Q: President Bush has talked about our staying in Iraq for 50 years - (cut off by McCain)*

*McCain: Make it a hundred.*

*Q: Is that... (cut off)*

*McCain: We've been in South Korea...we've been in Japan for 60 years. We've been in South Korea 50 years or so. That would be fine with me.*

As [David Corn](#) reported, McCain was only too happy to extend the American timeline in Iraq to "a thousand years" or "a million years." [One month later](#), McCain nonchalantly claimed, "The U.S. could have a military presence anywhere in the world for a long period of time." Facing criticism for those comments, [McCain on February 28th](#) just dug the hole deeper:

*"No American argues against our military presence in Korea or Japan or Germany or Kuwait or other places, or Turkey, because America is not receiving casualties...But the key to it is American casualties, America's most precious asset, and that is American blood."*

McCain's centuries-long commitment in Iraq is more than a little ironic. After all, in [January 2003](#), McCain confidently predicted of the American invasion, "I think the victory will be rapid, within about three weeks."

### **Casual with Casualties**

It's also ironic that John McCain would claim "the key to it is American casualties." McCain, after all, has repeatedly downplayed the dangers U.S. troops face, all in the name of helping sell the ongoing war in Iraq.

One of the more comic moments in McCain's cheerleading came on [April 1, 2007](#). (Literally April Fool's Day - you can't make this stuff up.) Wearing a bulletproof vest and guarded by "100 American soldiers, with three Blackhawk helicopters, and two Apache gunships overhead," McCain briefly toured a Baghdad market to demonstrate that the American people were "not getting the full picture." As [ThinkProgress](#) detailed:

*McCain recently claimed that there "are neighborhoods in Baghdad where you and I could walk through those neighborhoods, today." In a press conference after his Baghdad tour, McCain told a reporter that his visit to the market today was proof that you could indeed "walk freely" in some areas of Baghdad.*

And just this past weekend, Senator McCain returned to a tried and untrue Republican talking point: Iraq is no more dangerous than most major American cities. Speaking to an audience on Saturday, [McCain announced](#), "There's problems in America with safe neighborhoods as we well know." In this case, at least, even McCain realized his statement was non-sensical on its face and sounded the retreat. "I'm not making that comparison, because it's much more deadly in Iraq obviously," he said, adding, "But it's kind of the same theory."

### **Hothead with a Short Fuse**

No doubt, presidential temperament is a critical ingredient to a successful commander-in-chief. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, a calm, cool and collected John F. Kennedy walked the world back from the brink of nuclear conflagration while ending the Soviet nuclear threat just 90 miles away. Huddling with the diverse group of advisers making up his Executive Committee, Kennedy resisted the urge for the massive strike the Pentagon supported, ultimately buying time and winning the day with his Cuban blockade.

Alas, John McCain is no John Kennedy.

His explosive temper is the stuff of legend. An equal opportunity hothead, the Republican presidential nominee has a reputation for "raising McCain" with friend or foe alike.

Just ask Texas Republican Senator [John Cornyn](#). While Cornyn endorsed McCain for the White House last week, in March 2007 he was on the receiving end of a McCain tantrum.

Clashing over immigration policy, [McCain dropped the F-bomb](#), saying to Cornyn, " F\*\*k you! I know more about this than anyone else in the room."

Cornyn was not alone among Senate Republicans in feeling [the wrath of McCain](#). In 1999, McCain told the Finance Committee Chairman Pete Domenici (R-NM), "Only an a\*\*\*\*\* would put together a budget like this." On another occasion, he blasted the mild mannered Chuck Grassley (R-IA), " I'm calling you a f\*\*\*\*\* jerk."

That ticking time bomb that is John McCain worries many in American military and diplomatic leadership circles. As [Salon](#) noted just last week, many are terrified that President John McCain will be picking up that phone at 3:00 AM.

Major General Paul Eaton, who headed up training of Iraqi forces in 2003 and 2004 and now supports Hillary Clinton, made precisely that point.

*"I like McCain. I respect McCain. But I am a little worried by his knee-jerk response factor. I think it is a little scary. I think this guy's first reactions are not necessarily the best reactions. I believe that he acts on impulse."*

General Merrill McPeak, former chief of staff of the Air Force and former fighter pilot who flew 285 combat missions, is a former Republican who now supports Barack Obama. His conclusion: "McCain has got a reputation for being a little volatile."

And it's not just Democrats who are frightened by the prospect of John McCain his finger on the button. Freshman Tennessee Senator [Bob Corker](#) admitted he's "had his moments" with McCain and refused to answer the question whether he is "temperamentally suited to be President of the United States." Mississippi Republican [Thad Cochran](#), who nonetheless endorsed McCain, aired his concerns:

*"The thought of his being President sends a cold chill down my spine. He is erratic. He is hotheaded. He loses his temper, and he worries me."*

But it may have been [Lawrence Wilkerson](#), a retired army colonel and formerly Secretary of State Colin Powell's top aide, who perhaps best summed up the worries of McCain's GOP allies:

*"No dissent, no opinion to the contrary, however reasonable, will be entertained. Hardheaded is another way to say it. Arrogant is another way to say it. Hubristic is another way to say it. Too proud for his own good is another way to say it. It's a quality about him that disturbs me."*

## **More Cowboy Diplomacy and Frontier Justice**

If these defects of character and temperament sound familiar, they should. They make John McCain the natural heir to George W. Bush.

Bush, after all, brought his ersatz brand of cowboy machismo to the White House. Just after the 9/11 attacks, Bush talked tough about [his plans for Osama Bin Laden](#), declaring, "There's an old poster out west, as I recall, that said, 'Wanted: Dead or Alive.'" Later, as the nascent Iraqi insurgency began to take its horrible toll on American forces in 2004, Bush spit out, "Bring 'em on."

While [even George W. Bush](#) acknowledged "using bad language like, you know, 'bring them on' was a mistake," John McCain seems to have unlearned the lesson. In [April 2007](#), McCain answered a question about his policy towards Tehran by breaking into song. Singing to the tune of the Beach Boys "Barbara Ann," McCain sang, "Bomb bomb bomb, bomb bomb Iran."

And like Bush, John McCain wants to get biblical on Osama Bin Laden. As I detailed last month, McCain's standard formulation is to declare that he will follow Bin Laden to the "[gates of hell](#)." At one campaign stop, McCain even told workers at a small weapons plant in New Hampshire that he would use their guns to do it:

*"I will follow Osama Bin Laden to the gates of hell and I will shoot him with your products."*

Earlier today, the McCain campaign announced that its man would soon [travel to the Middle East and Europe](#). No doubt, the extended photo-op is designed to highlight John McCain's leadership skills and project an image of him as Commander-in-Chief.

But being a wartime President isn't about bravery and sacrifice in combat forty years ago. And Hillary Clinton's delusions notwithstanding, longevity in Washington is no certain qualification, either. America's commander-in-chief needs judgment more than experience, persuasiveness more than pure power, and calm confidence more than sheer force of conviction. When it comes to friends and foes alike, there is simply no substitute for understanding and level-headedness.

John McCain is alarmingly lacking in virtually all the qualities that matter most. His self-proclaimed greatest strength on national security is in reality a glaring weakness. A McCain presidency would make the American people less safe and the world a more dangerous place.

*Also available online at:*  
<http://www.perspectives.com/blog/archives/000972.htm>