



Photo by Jamie Peachey; McCain illustrations by
Kyle T. Webster

Postmodern John McCain: the presidential candidate some Arizonans know — and loathe

AMY SILVERMAN | AUGUST 7, 2008 | 4:00AM

I once stood in John McCain's kitchen and watched Cindy cook eggs for their kids.

It was still dark outside when I arrived at the McCains' north-central Phoenix house on a winter day in early 1994. I remember terra cotta tile and overstuffed plaid couches and wondering whether Mrs. McCain regularly got up before dawn to make breakfast.

I was following her husband around for the day, for a story I was working on about his role in Arizona Republican politics. I'd been gathering examples of McCain's strong-arming, and I needed some face-time with the senator, to ask about that and also to describe his personality. That day, we drove to Tucson so McCain could sit in as guest host on a local talk-radio show.

For three hours, with the same piece of gum in his mouth, McCain took calls from listeners. There was no set topic. I got the anecdote I needed for my story in the form of a call from "Rosemary," an obviously elderly woman who wanted to express her concern about nuclear proliferation.

"You make some excellent points, Rosemary, and I wish that everybody were as concerned about the issue as you are. And I appreciate the call," the senator told her. Then he announced a station break, took off his headphones, and leaned over to me (his BFF for the day) with a Grinch-like grin on his face.

"I believe that Rosemary has a bumper sticker that says 'Visualize World Peace,'" he said.

Vintage McCain.

A few months after that story was published, a good friend of mine who knows the senator well pointed out an error in my anecdote about John McCain and Rosemary.

In the story, I wrote:

Although his demeanor is even and cordial throughout the radio shift, his hands betray the storm that lurks beneath the surface. His hands wring constantly, as if every bit of nervous energy, every distraction, every unspoken slam, is channeled through them.

"Uh, he doesn't wring his hands because he's mad," my friend said. "He does it because he's in pain from the injuries he got as a prisoner of war. His hands hurt constantly, so he rubs them together."

It was a good lesson for a young reporter. Never assume anything. For years, I was embarrassed by the gaffe. But looking back, I've got to say that it's pretty darn likely that handwringing was the product of McCain's desire to control both pain *and* anger.

That's the thing about covering John McCain. Someone always wants you to give him the benefit of the doubt. And there's usually a pretty good case for why he deserves it, though that doesn't mean he should be let off the hook completely.

Even now that McCain's the one whining that Obama's getting all the good press in this presidential race, you still don't see a lot in the national media really damning the guy. It could be that in this postmodern political world, there's not much you can say anymore that will get the attention of the American people. Ever since Monica Lewinsky crawled under that desk in the Oval Office, it's been hard to shock this country.

Or it could be that, like me, no one really expected John McCain to make another run at the White House. The man is old, and there's no way his war injuries — far more extensive than cramped hands — don't age him further. I didn't think he'd be in the Senate in 2008, let alone on practically every television screen, front page, and magazine cover.

If nothing else, that cameo in *Wedding Crashers* should have signified the end of McCain's presidential aspirations.

And yet, here we are.

I've been a writer and editor at *New Times* for 15 years. For much of that time, I wrote about Arizona politics, which is to say that I wrote about John McCain. It's still odd to see the guy in the spotlight, because for quite a while, I was pretty much the only one covering him.

I never did fall for him in the way reporters fall for politicians, probably because he wasn't much to fall for back in the early 1990s. In those days, McCain was still rehabilitating the image he'd later sell to the national media. He was known then for cavorting in the Bahamas with Charlie Keating, rather than for fighting for campaign finance reform and limited government spending.

No one seems to remember Keating much, anymore. Amazing. McCain and his fellow Arizonan, Democrat Dennis DeConcini, were hauled before the Senate Ethics Committee along with three other senators to explain their actions on behalf of Keating's Lincoln Savings and Loan.

Keating gave the senators hefty campaign contributions, then called on them to meet with bank regulators to pressure them to go soft on an investigation of Lincoln. There were two infamous meetings. McCain attended both.

It's true that McCain was the first to back off when the appearance of impropriety became obvious, and the ethics committee was easier on him than most of the others, partly because some of McCain's actions on behalf of Keating took place while he was in the House, and therefore not under the purview of the Senate Ethics Committee.

More important, what often gets lost in the retelling is McCain's close personal relationship with Keating. McCain took trips with Keating, including to his retreat in the Bahamas, and reimbursed him only after the fact was made public.

It was also revealed that Keating had a business relationship with Cindy and her father, Jim Hensley, who ran a very lucrative Anheuser-Busch distributorship in Phoenix.

Most shocking, perhaps, given McCain's image today, is that McCain took more than \$100,000 in campaign contributions from Keating and his employees, between 1982 and 1988.

You may be surprised to know that in 1987 and 1988, McCain voted *against* federal legislation reforming the campaign finance system. It was only in 1990, in the aftermath of Keating and the shadow of an upcoming re-election campaign, that he started supporting reform. Ditto for his efforts to cut government spending.

And I've got to pause to say something about both of those efforts. In a word, they're a farce. McCain famously sponsored a law designed to control special interests' grip on Washington, but at the same time, he took money from those interests. Years ago, I analyzed McCain's contributions, compared with the favors he dealt as chairman of the Senate Commerce Committee ("[An Endowed Chair](#)," November 25, 1999).

On top of that, McCain's efforts haven't done much to reform the campaign finance system; shady independent expenditures to outside groups supporting candidates now rule the day, in a roundabout way. And millions are still spent on elections.

Efforts to stop pork-barreling are sadly cosmetic, as well. First off, the earmarks that groups like Taxpayers for Common Sense rail against account for only 1 percent of the federal budget. One percent.

And it's not all bridges to nowhere. McCain, who used to fight for projects like a regional airport for metropolitan Phoenix (like minds argued whether building another airport was even necessary; they wondered whether the airport idea was a ploy to antagonize certain Phoenix officials), now refuses to fund anything for the state. And his sheep. er, colleagues — Arizona congressmen John Shadegg and Jeff Flake — have followed suit. As a result, Arizona ranked dead last in earmark funding in the past fiscal year.

Currently, East Valley Congressman Harry Mitchell, a freshman Democrat, is pushing for funding to continue a program at a Scottsdale hospital that trains doctors, nurses, and other military medical personnel in trauma care; some have already used the training in Iraq and Afghanistan.

If that's pork, I'll take a BLT.

Arizona's political forefathers — Mo Udall, Barry Goldwater, Carl Hayden — pushed through one of the biggest pork barrel projects in the history of the United States Congress: the Central Arizona Project. If they hadn't, there wouldn't be much of a state to represent.

As a native Arizonan, those are the politicians I grew up learning about. McCain just doesn't compare.

Yeah, the guy has a sharp wit. He'd be fun to have beers with. But does that mean he should have his finger on the button?

I have my own share of war stories from covering McCain, like the time I stumbled across the news that Cindy was stealing prescription drugs from her own charity. A few months later, John McCain berated a close family member of mine, in one of his classic outbursts.

For months after I wrote about McCain's love affair with the national media, his chief of staff mailed me a copy every time another glowing piece about her boss came out in the press.

I learned the love lesson firsthand during the 2000 election, when — cajoled into doing an interview about McCain for a piece by TV newsmagazine *20/20* — I flew back and forth to Washington in a single day to be interviewed by Sam Donaldson, only to learn later from his producers that, whoops, Donaldson had decided he really liked McCain and didn't want to include anything negative in his profile.

On my way back to the airport that day, exhausted, I checked my voicemail from the back of a town car. Tucker Carlson, then a writer for now-defunct *Talk* magazine, had called, looking for quotes for a story. I called him back and left a message saying I couldn't help him. And since then, for the most part, I've stayed away from other reporters doing stories about John McCain.

They still call, from as far away as London. One guy, describing himself as a Phoenix freelancer (I'd never heard of him) wanted to know what it would take to get me to give him all my files of public documents on Cindy McCain. I tell them that the work my colleagues and I have done on McCain over the years speaks for itself.

And it does. Yet, something seems to be getting lost in translation.

Much has been made of what McCain learned during his time in Vietnam and his time in Washington. But there's also something to be said about what Arizona has learned about John McCain from his time in — or, at least, his time representing — this state.

Here's a story I've never seen told. In 1988, Arizona was already down and out, politically — and John McCain couldn't resist delivering a low blow.

When I was in the Phoenix Public Library just last month, looking for the old Congressional hearing testimony to confirm the story, I was surprised when the librarian knew just what I was talking about. People here remember.

First, some background.

In the spring of 1988, things were a mess. Governor Evan Mecham had just been impeached, and everyone was busy licking wounds.

There was no way of knowing then that Arizona's ugly days would turn into years — that the state stood to endure a political scandal that would send legislators to jail for taking bags of cash from undercover agents pretending to be lobbyists (AzScam); that its U.S. senators would become poster boys for corruption on the federal level (the Keating Five); or that its governor would leave office in disgrace over his personal financial dealings, narrowly avoiding a prison term (John McCain's pal J. Fife Symington III).

But before all that, there was Ev Mecham. From a public relations standpoint, Mecham probably did more damage to the state than anyone, which is really saying something. Mecham's the conservative used-car dealer who – against all odds and against the GOP candidate anointed by everyone in the party, from John McCain on down – won the 1986 gubernatorial election.

Looking back, you can argue about just how bad a governor Mecham was. Mostly he was an embarrassment. He's the one who used the term pickaninny and kept the state from recognizing the birthday of Martin Luther King Jr. as a national holiday, leaving Arizona's tourism industry for dead.

Even *Doonesbury* took note in a series of comic strips.

People were so set on getting Mecham out of office that they launched simultaneous efforts. To be on the safe side, in case the state Senate didn't impeach, the governor's detractors started a recall movement. The campaign was ready to go when Mecham was ousted.

But when it was clear that the recall wasn't necessary, some insisted on continuing it.

In Arizona, when a governor leaves office early, the secretary of state ascends. In this case, that was Rose Mofford, an old-school Democrat from the small mining town of Globe, a lady with a bright white beehive that *Arizona Republic* cartoonist Steve Benson once famously drew as a cone-full of Dairy Queen.

Mofford had served as secretary of state for decades. She'd never aspired to the state's top spot. But she accepted graciously and agreed to serve out the remaining 2 1/2 years of Mecham's term. She never showed interest in running for another term after that, although she was enormously popular.

As the story goes, John McCain and his friends wanted her out immediately. And, they figured, they had the mechanism in place to do it. Mecham was gone, but the recall effort was still in place. Why not shift gears and target Mofford instead?

The Democrats didn't like that one bit and asked the Arizona Supreme Court to consider the legality.

In mid-April 1988, Mofford and some staff flew to Washington for, as one former aide puts it, the "perfunctory wet kiss" meeting with the Arizona congressional delegation. Even in mean old D.C., there's such a thing as protocol, and the tour was expected to go along without incident.

At 10 in the morning on April 12, Mofford testified before the Senate Energy and Water Development Subcommittee on Appropriations on the topic of the Central Arizona Project.

Now, Mofford had been governor for only eight days. Before that, her main task had been running the state's elections department. This appearance (there was a similar one, later that day, before the House) had been billed as ceremonial. She was not familiar with the particulars of federal water law. Nor did her staff think she'd be expected to be – just then.

But, apparently, Senator James McClure, a Republican from Idaho, did. After a lot of looking, that librarian and I (actually, it took three librarians) tracked down the testimony from that day. McClure asked Mofford a series of questions that would leave any water expert's mouth dry. Her staff jumped in to try to answer, but even so, ultimately they had to file an addendum to the testimony.

Word spread quickly about what had happened.

Coincidentally, that very same day, Pat Murphy, then publisher of the *Arizona Republic*, was also in Washington to meet with the delegation. He and his wife had lunch plans with McCain, and as Murphy recalls, they went to the hearing room where Mofford was testifying, to meet up with him. Murphy had written glowingly of McCain and considered him a personal friend.

As Murphy recounted in an e-mail recently (he left the *Republic* many years ago, and now lives in Idaho), the incident crushed him. He says it was the beginning of the end of his respect for and friendship with McCain.

"We peeked in the room," wrote Murphy. "McCain saw us, excused himself, and we three went to the Senate dining room for lunch.

"During lunch, McCain said, almost with mischievous glee, that he had slipped some highly technical questions to [James McClure] to ask Mofford — questions she wouldn't be prepared to answer or expected to answer.

"Flabbergasted, I asked McCain why would he want to sabotage Mofford's testimony, when in fact the CAP was the nonpartisan pet of Republicans and Democrats — such as far-left Udall and far-right Goldwater — since its inception.

"His reply, as near as I remember, was, 'I'll embarrass a Democrat any time I get the chance.'

"The lunch continued in strained chit-chat. We then walked back to McCain's office, where a few reporters, all of them from Arizona papers, as I recall, were waiting. One said there was a rumor McCain had tried to sabotage Mofford's testimony, to which he said something like, 'I'd never do anything like that.'"

There was more. Another rumor, later reported in the *Republic*, held that McCain had brought in a private film crew to tape the proceedings, so that the tape could be used to embarrass Mofford in the recall election. At the time, Jay Smith, McCain's campaign media consultant, was quoted in the *Republic* as declining comment; he did not deny the rumor.

The next day, the *Republic* ran a story about Mofford's trip to Washington. There was another story that very same day about the Arizona Supreme Court's decision not to allow the recall election to go forward. John Rhodes, the former congressman who had been tapped to run against Mofford, sounded relieved. He and Mofford were old friends.

Mofford, who lives in Phoenix and is involved with local charities, is hesitant to say much negative.

"I've known Cindy since she was a little girl, and the Hensleys have always been very good to me," she says of McCain's wife and her family. "I don't hold grudges."

But, she adds, regarding the CAP hearing, "that hurt me more than anything . . . to be set up like that."

Others were upset, as well.

Karen Scates was on that trip and in that hearing room, as an executive assistant to Mofford. (A one-time Udall aide, she's worked in many capacities over the years, including for American Express and Kids Voting; she's now in the Napolitano administration.) Scates *does* hold a grudge.

"Senator McCain did the unthinkable," she says. "He orchestrated a partisan, mean-spirited, and utterly inexcusable hearing designed to embarrass Governor Mofford by unfairly pressing her, only a week into her new job, for minute details on the Central Arizona Project, which was the most sacrosanct of all issues critical to Arizona."

James McClure is now retired. It's been 20 years, but, when reached by phone, he remembered the incident immediately — though he wasn't sure of all the particulars. He says he recalls the hearing because it was unusual in that there was a strategy session beforehand.

"I know that there was such an effort," the former senator says of the decision to ask Mofford tough questions. "I know that there was quite a little conversation with my staff . . . I know we did ask [Mofford] a number of questions because somebody had told us that she was not well grounded in some of the issues, and it was designed to expose her lack of information."

As for McCain's specific involvement?

"I don't remember his involvement in it," McClure says. "I'm not saying he wasn't, but I just don't remember."

Pat Murphy recalls hearing that McCain later called Mofford to apologize. The former governor says no. She got a different kind of call from McCain.

"He said, 'I didn't have anything to do with that.' And I said, 'John, don't ever call me again.'"

Rose Mofford started off our phone conversation about John McCain by announcing: "He's certainly no Barry Goldwater or Mo Udall."

You hear that a lot around town these days, mainly because McCain tends to bring up Goldwater and Udall a lot on the campaign trail. It drives some people here nuts. Particularly those who know, or knew, all three men.

People who were around then say it was obvious that McCain moved to Arizona to run for office. There have been several instances of such carpetbagging by now (like Hillary Clinton in New York), but it wasn't as common in 1982. To his credit, McCain worked hard and won a hotly contested four-way race to represent the congressional district that covered Mesa, Tempe, and other parts of the eastern portion of metropolitan Phoenix.

Then he had some catching up to do.

He did a lot of it, in the early days, with Mo Udall, the congressman from Tucson. Udall liked to joke that he could hold meetings of the U.S. House Democrats from Arizona in his bathtub. That might be why he worked so well with Republicans. McCain took to him immediately and as Udall's top aide, Bob Neuman, recalls, Udall was happy to help.

Neuman, who worked for Udall for many years in the 1970s and again in the '80s, says McCain "clung to Mo," that he dropped by the office unannounced all the time. This became awkward during the 1986 Senate race, Neuman says, when Arizona Democratic Party operatives worried that McCain was using Udall as a campaign tool. They asked Neuman to put some distance between the two.

Udall's aide tried to be subtle, but McCain got the message. And Neuman felt his wrath. He refuses to repeat the expletives the then-congressman used when he called to bawl him out, but recalls thinking there was something really wrong with the guy.

Neuman says he thinks McCain did try, early on, to model himself after Udall, in terms of developing both a sense of humor and a concern for environmental issues.

In the end, though, McCain hasn't come out too Udall-esque on either front.

Udall's humor tended toward self-deprecation. During a rare break for a golf game during the 1976 presidential campaign, someone asked him about his handicap. "I'm a one-eyed Mormon Democrat from conservative Arizona," he joked. "You can't find a higher handicap than that."

Neuman, who co-authored Udall's book *Too Funny to Be President* and is now a consultant in Washington, concedes that Udall may not have found humor in McCain's own repertoire of jokes.

One of the senator's most famous:

Why is Chelsea Clinton so ugly?

Because Janet Reno is her father.

Think that one was funny? How about one from 1986, recounted in an entry last month on "The Huffington Post" blog. McCain's campaign denies it. Apparently there's no video, but a Tucson reporter who wrote about it at the time says it happened.

From Huffington:

In an appearance before the National League of Cities and Towns in Washington, D.C., McCain supposedly asked the crowd if they had heard "the one about the woman who is attacked on the street by a gorilla, beaten senseless, raped repeatedly, and left to die?"

The punch line: "When she finally regains consciousness and tries to speak, her doctor leans over to hear her sigh contently and to feebly ask, "Where is that marvelous ape?"

"John McCain is the Eddie Haskell of politics," Neuman says, admitting he's a little worried McCain won't find *that* comment funny at all. "You can attribute that to me, and he'll kill me for it."

McCain did vote with Udall on environmental issues – for a while. But Udall left Congress in 1991, and for years, McCain's earned dismal marks from environmental groups, including a zero in the League of Conservation Voters' most recent ratings.

Representatives of the local chapter of the Sierra Club haven't been able to get a meeting with him in at least the past year, if not two. The last time they did, he just complained that the group's positions were unrealistic, recalls Sandy Bahr, the chapter's director.

McCain tends to support big-picture issues that will play well with voters, but when it has come to protecting Arizona over the past 26 years – well, not so much.

In the 1980s, McCain made a name for himself, supporting the limitation of air flights over the Grand Canyon, but in recent years, backed off the effort when environmentalists wanted to expand the limits from small tour planes to commercial aviation. And he's taken a lot of heat recently for refusing to weigh in on efforts to mine uranium near the Grand Canyon.

In fact, despite a vague statement issued last week saying he might, at some point, support mining reform, McCain has failed for years to back proposed changes to the horribly outdated Mining Act of 1872 – and evidence of that is strewn all over Arizona in the form of large strip mines and environmental degradation.

When it comes to Arizona environmental issues, though, McCain's best known for an infamous U.S. Governmental Accountability Office report that details threats he made to the job of a forest service official who dared to disagree with him on the topic of the endangered Mount Graham red squirrel.

Not very Udall-esque.

Environmentalists were concerned that the University of Arizona's plan to build telescopes would jeopardize the squirrels' habitat. Government scientists agreed. McCain sided with the university.

And yet, the Udall comparison has stuck, mostly because McCain makes it whenever he can. Even *Newsweek*, in an April cover story, noted the phenomenon, writing of McCain:

"He traces his environmental awareness to the sainted Rep. Mo Udall, an Arizona Democrat who took McCain as a young congressman under his tutelage . . . To environmentalists, that's like saying you learned about civil rights by driving around Alabama with Martin Luther King Jr."

Arizona environmentalists don't have a lot of patience with McCain, although they do celebrate the crumbs he's handed them over the years.

Don Steuter, conservation chair for the Grand Canyon Chapter of the Sierra Club, is quick to recall that once, in the '90s, one of McCain's aides came out and toured several mining sites along Pinto Creek in rural Arizona, all points of contention for environmentalists who worry about such issues as where the mines will get ground water to operate and where they'll dump their waste.

"McCain was, I have to say, at the time, sympathetic with what we were trying to do. But he never came forward and offered any solutions," Steuter recalls.

It was Barry Goldwater, long out of public life and a couple of years from dying, who gave the Sierra Club a quote the group still uses in brochures: "Pinto Creek is worth the strongest protection possible."

McCain also has been mentioning Goldwater a lot these days.

It's true that the elder statesman chose McCain to run for his Senate seat, though some say McCain stepped over poor Bob Stump, the longtime Republican Arizona congressman who, via seniority, had the right of first refusal. (Stump died in 2003.)

Goldwater's endorsement letter is reprinted in a new book by his son, Barry Goldwater Jr., and John Dean. And it's not the only letter in *Pure Goldwater* about John McCain. The book reports that for a while after the 1986 senate race, the men got along, but that Goldwater's feelings toward McCain started to "cool" after the Keating scandal, and he "soon found he had to stop McCain from using his good name."

Things really got ugly, according to the book — and accompanying letters — when McCain decided to throw an event honoring Goldwater that was really meant as a fundraiser for McCain. Goldwater wrote to McCain, chastising him and telling him that he didn't wish to be honored. He also instructed McCain to donate half the proceeds to the Arizona Republican Party. The event wound up as a tribute to Ronald Reagan, instead. Goldwater did speak there, but was unhappy afterward, as he wrote to McCain:

"You will recall during my speech at the dinner for the president in Phoenix, I announced that you were going to give half of the funds you raised to the State Republican Party. I am told by the Party, that you still owe them \$35,000, and unless you pay all of it, or most of it, they cannot meet their payroll next Wednesday."

McCain continues to bring up both men. He does deserve credit for the time he spent with Udall during his final years. "There was no steadier visitor," Bob Neuman recalls of McCain's visits to his old boss' bedside during Udall's very long struggle with Parkinson's disease. And for that, Neuman says, McCain earned his "respect and admiration and affection."

Until McCain went public with it.

In 1997, Michael Lewis profiled McCain for the *New York Times Magazine*. Lewis' piece was well-written, and he did get great access to McCain. In fact, the senator even took the journalist to the veterans hospital in Washington, D.C., for one of his visits with Udall. According to Lewis, McCain tried in vain to wake Udall that day. (Udall died the following year.)

About the encounter, Neuman says, "That was devastating to me, that he brought in a reporter. I thought that was crossing the line, and it destroyed me."

I'm sure I would have accepted the offer to go the hospital, as well. I can't blame Lewis, but maybe the sight of the legendary Mo Udall in his final, sad days wasn't McCain's to share.

One morning this summer, my work phone rang.

"Hi, Amy, this is Tom Gosinski," a pleasant voice said.

"No way!"

Every other call I'd gotten about McCain, it seemed, had been from some reporter wanting to know where he or she could find Tom Gosinski, the guy who ultimately had led to the outing of Cindy McCain's drug addiction in 1993. I had told people honestly that I had no idea where Gosinski was; I hadn't spoken to him in many years.

"It's me!"

"Okay, prove it," I said. "Tell me something that only Tom Gosinski would know."

"I was wearing Pepe jeans the day I came to *New Times*, so you could interview me for the Cindy McCain story."

It was him. True, he could have read that detail in my story about him, but by then, I recognized the voice.

He'd been on my mind.

Tom Gosinski's is a story worth re-telling, since it's been parsed so much in the national press.

Sometime in the spring of 1994, I'd started hearing the rumors that Cindy McCain was addicted to prescription drugs. Bummer for her, but not a story – at least not one that I'd be able to get.

Then I learned something that turned Cindy McCain's personal tragedy into a real news story. Two unrelated sources told me about Tom Gosinski.

Gosinski was in his mid-30s, working two crappy part-time jobs to stay afloat. He'd been fired months earlier from his position as director of government and international affairs for the American Voluntary Medical Team, McCain's non-profit charity, which brought medical relief to poor countries all over the world.

Turns out, shortly after he was fired, Gosinski went to the Drug Enforcement Administration. He'd suspected Cindy McCain was addicted to prescription drugs and was getting a doctor who worked with AVMT to illegally prescribe them in her employees' names.

Later, in an interview with *New Times*, Gosinski said he was not trying to blackmail the McCains. He was worried about his own culpability, so he asked the DEA officials a rhetorical question: "If a person knows that prescriptions have been written in their name, and they never met with the doctor and they don't know the whereabouts of the drugs, what is their responsibility?" And I was told it was my responsibility to turn it in. So at that moment, I began to cooperate with the DEA."

Gosinski's suspicions were right. Dr. John Max Johnson, AVMT's medical director, had written two prescriptions for painkillers in Gosinski's name, at Cindy McCain's behest. He'd written more, too, in other people's names. Some prescriptions, the DEA found, were for as many as 500 pills at a time. Johnson told investigators that he never traveled with the drugs; Cindy McCain kept them in her personal luggage. (Johnson later surrendered his medical license.)

Gosinski didn't just go to the DEA. He also filed a wrongful-termination claim against AVMT, which led John McCain's attorney, John Dowd (well known for his over-the-top tactics on behalf of McCain and former Arizona Governor Fife Symington) to persuade then-Maricopa County Attorney Rick Romley to open an extortion investigation against Gosinski (it was eventually dropped).

If Dowd had stayed out of it, there's a good chance this story would never have gone public.

I heard that the U.S. Attorney's Office was investigating Cindy McCain, so I asked for the details. Turns out, public-records law protects the feds; there is no legal mandate to turn over materials related to an ongoing federal investigation.

But that law does not apply to Maricopa County. So I asked the County Attorney's Office for all materials related to the Gosinski extortion investigation, and hit the jackpot: Because Cindy's drug problem was the topic of Dowd's extortion case, the county attorney had received copies of all of the federal records related to the case. I made a public-records request.

I got notice that the records were ready. First, though, someone had told the McCains. And so before my piece was even written, I watched their carefully spun version splash across more than one front page and lead at least one morning news show. Cindy McCain talked openly about her drug addiction (although the details of just when John had learned about it and about when she'd gone through rehab remained unclear) and attributed it to the pain of two back surgeries and stress from the Keating Five scandal. The McCains claimed Gosinski was trying to blackmail them.

Later, we did our own story at *New Times* ("**Opiate for the Mrs.," September 8, 1994**). Gosinski went on the record, and I also got hold of the journal he'd kept during the time he worked at AVMT. Although he took a beating in the affair, the journal revealed how conflicted he was over her improprieties. For example:

"July 27, 1992: I have always wondered why John McCain has done nothing to fix the problem. He must either not see that a problem exists or does not choose to do anything about it. It would seem that it would be in everyone's best interest to come to terms with the situation. And do whatever is necessary to fix it. There is so much at risk: the welfare of the children; John's political career; the integrity of Hensley & Company; the welfare of Jim and Smitty Hensley; and the health and happiness of Cindy McCain.

"The aforementioned matters are of great concern to those directly involved, but my main concern is the ability of AVMT to survive a major shake-up. If the DEA were to ever conduct an audit of AVMT's inventory, I am afraid of what the results might be... It is because of CHM's willingness to jeopardize the credibility of those that work for her that I truly worry.

"During my short tenure at AVMT, I have been surrounded by what on the surface appears to be the ultimate all-American family. In reality, I am working for a very sad, lonely woman whose marriage of convenience to a U.S. Senator has driven her to: distance herself from friends; cover feelings of despair with drugs; and replace lonely moments with self-indulgences."

Ultimately, the U.S. Attorney did, in fact, investigate AVMT and Cindy McCain. In the end, she avoided criminal charges and entered a drug-diversion program. She also paid for the cost of the investigation. She was lucky; if she were not well connected, she could have faced much harsher penalties, including prison time.

When I spoke to him this past June, Tom Gosinski said he's doing well. He left Arizona many years ago and took up a profession that has nothing to do with his previous work. He doesn't want to talk about the McCains. (In fact, when I e-mailed him after our phone conversation, asking if he'd like to talk to me for this story, I never heard back.)

He called me because a private investigator had shown up on his mother's doorstep that morning, looking for him, and they were spooked. He wanted to know if I'd heard of the guy, who didn't identify his political camp. I hadn't.

With a couple of exceptions, McCain never spoke to me again after the Gosinski story. Word eventually trickled back (years later) that a few months after the story was published, he'd cornered a close relative of mine in the Senate Dining Room in Washington, asking why my family couldn't control me.

Given the treatment McCain has long received from the national media, it's easy to see why he gets frustrated by any negative coverage. At one point, an editor of mine had a brilliant idea: document the glowing coverage McCain was getting — even back then — from the national media. That resulted in ["The Pampered Politician" \(May 15, 1997\)](#).

For months after that story ran, Deb Gullett, one of McCain's top staff, sent me a copy of each additional positive national story, as it came out. I have to admit, that was pretty funny. Better than the habit McCain's Washington press staff had adopted when I'd call — promising to be right back, then leaving me on hold until I finally hung up.

Even as the 2000 race heated up, coverage of McCain remained positive. No one, it seemed, had a harsh word for the straight-talking war hero. So when national media called, I felt an obligation to help.

I spent a lot of time working with producers for *60 Minutes* to gather background research for a piece Mike Wallace was doing on McCain, only to have it deep-sixed when Wallace decided to do a positive story about the senator. Ditto for Sam Donaldson. I should have learned after Wallace that the press was willing to overlook political warts when it came to McCain, but since I'd had a long conversation with Donaldson's producers, in which I explained just what had happened with *60 Minutes*, I didn't expect the same to happen with *20/20*.

From what I know, McCain didn't insert himself into the mix at *60 Minutes* or *20/20*; Wallace and Donaldson simply liked him. But he has tried to do it elsewhere, particularly at his hometown daily, the *Arizona Republic*.

Back in the day, when McCain was first elected, he palled around with Duke Tully, the infamous *Republic* publisher who was ousted when it was revealed he'd fabricated his own military record.

Next, McCain and aforementioned publisher Pat Murphy were buddies; that relationship fizzled in the late 1980s.

As far as I know, McCain was never close with Chip Weil, who served as publisher, then CEO, at the *Republic* from 1991 to 2000.

Weil (officially, it's Louis "Chip" Weil III) is retired now. He serves on the board of the USO. In a phone conversation, he laughs, remembering his dealings with McCain, but it's easy to tell he took them seriously, too.

"He always had his own views of how a newspaper ought to be run, and he didn't like the way we ran it," Weil says of McCain. "It's a free world, so he's welcome to feel that way."

When poked, Weil admits the criticism wasn't always welcome or, in his view, appropriate. He confirmed the story going around locally that when McCain called, Weil's secretary would sometimes put the phone receiver down and let the senator rant.

"We used to sit in the outer office and listen to him," Weil says, laughing.

Becoming more serious, he continues, "The question was, 'Who [was] running the newspaper?'"

Weil says he didn't mind criticism but felt McCain was unreasonable in his requests. The senator called Weil after a trip abroad to complain that the story about his travels was on page 14, instead of the front page. This was a time when McCain didn't even have serious opposition.

"Others were much more discreet about it. For instance, Jon Kyl, if he had an issue, would call and discuss it, and it would be fine," he says of Arizona's junior senator. "But McCain always seemed upset."

During the 2000 presidential campaign, Weil says, McCain traveled around the country, complaining about the *Republic*.

"He'd tell editorial boards how awful his hometown paper was," Weil recalls. "So I'd hear from my colleagues around the country. That was always fun."

Wouldn't that be a badge of honor to good journalists?

"I don't know," he says. "He's a United States senator, and you ought to have respect for a United States senator."

On the first Tuesday in February, fortified with a cocktail or two, a few of us from *New Times* attended John McCain's victory party at the Arizona Biltmore.

We had no particular agenda, no immediate deadlines, though there was some talk about watching history being made. After all, Super Tuesday was going to put McCain over the top, making him the presumptive Republican nominee for president.

The huge ballroom was packed. It felt like every Republican in town was there. But not in a good way. I know people like to joke that Cindy McCain looks like a Stepford Wife, but really, she's got nothing on the group that night in the Biltmore's largest ballroom. Everywhere you looked, there were well-coiffed zombies, all dutifully mingling. And sneaking peeks at their watches.

A few of the people we chatted up — Congressman Jeff Flake, Tempe Mayor Hugh Hallman, former Maricopa County Attorney Rick Romley — did seem genuinely excited, but just about all the others were clearly there because they had to be.

Maybe everyone was tired from a long workday. But it seemed that, really, they were all profoundly bored and spending a lot of time looking around to make sure someone important from the McCain campaign noted their presence (just in case the Arizona senator wins, and a job opens up in D.C.).

From that night on, it has been difficult to find anyone who'll say an unkind word about McCain. Some did, obviously, for this story, but I know there are more.

Often, people wouldn't call back at all. Although he has plenty of harsh comments for McCain in his book, Barry Goldwater Jr. never could be reached for comment.

Some I tried to talk to were apologetic about not being able to spill. They work for ASU or the governor or a conservative think tank or a liberal think tank or they lobby Congress. Or, like John Hinz, the one-time executive director of the Arizona Republican Party, who recounted some tales of the senator's temper for the *Washington Post* this spring, they've gotten the message that it's not a good idea to say anything negative about McCain.

It's hard to keep track of the shifting alliances. Paul Johnson, former mayor of Phoenix, who spent much of the early 1990s publicly loathing the senator, is now a Democrat for McCain. But lobbyist Knox Kimberly, who once ran McCain's local congressional office, is a big Barack Obama supporter.

Grant Woods, McCain's first chief of staff, was very close friends with McCain, until a public falling out in the early '90s, when the senator shunned him for investigating his pal, Fife Symington.

Now Woods is back in the McCain camp. He was at the Biltmore on election night. I saw him from across the room. He didn't return my call for this story.

Nor did anybody representing McCain get back to me after I contacted his campaign for this article.

Maybe some of the dreariness of the Biltmore event could be blamed on the large area roped off for the national press — a group of sad-looking, credentialed folks who could clearly suck the life out of any room. Tucker Carlson stood watching the action, arms crossed, looking like he'd rather be anywhere else.

Postmodern McCain is just not as much fun as his predecessor, the straight-ahead, shit-talking bad guy.

Watching him up on the stage, struggling with the teleprompter, Cindy looking miserable next to him, I almost pitied the GOP's presumptive nominee. No more nasty jokes, no public outbursts. He's reduced to talking about climate change and accusing Obama of being the media's flavor of the day.

"Don't feel sorry for him," a friend said. "The guy might wind up president."

RELATED TOPICS: [NEWS](#) [LONGFORM](#)

Use of this website constitutes acceptance of our [terms of use](#), our [cookies policy](#), and our [privacy policy](#)
©2018 Phoenix New Times, LLC. All rights reserved.