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# The Pampered Politician

AMY SILVERMAN | MAY 15, 1997 | 4:00AM

Journalist Michael Lewis may be the supreme cynic in an age of press cynicism. His aloofness for political hoopla set the tone of his coverage of the 1996 presidential race in the New Republic. He waxed diffident about candidate Lamar Alexander's nervous tics, Bob Dole's vanity and his fellow journalists' eagerness to catch Pat Buchanan on tape. When an unfortunate aide for Phil Gramm roused him one morning at 7 for a chance to press flesh with the candidate, Lewis rolled over and went back to sleep, delighted to illustrate his casual disdain for and imperviousness to the charms of politicians.

Then he met John McCain; he fell hard.

Upon first encountering McCain, Lewis stopped to register his awe. "I am amazed that any reporter in this situation can bring himself to ask a difficult question," Lewis gushed in print. "Certainly I cannot."

That was the start of something big, and Lewis' ramblings seem now to have sparked similar reverence for Arizona's senior senator among others in the national press corps. But absent from their coverage has been the McCain familiar to his Arizona constituents as something of a crank and a scalawag, to be kind. Magically, all of McCain's political liabilities have evaporated, replaced in print by a brand-spanking-new treasury of virtues.

Is it outlandish to believe that sophisticated--gasp, liberal--Washington, D.C., reporters would ignore Republican Senator McCain's well-documented ignoble record in and out of office? The Arizona media have been cataloguing his meanderings for years, building a case that John McCain--despite his status as a war hero--is a meanspirited, hot-tempered, opportunistic, philandering, hypocritical political climber who married a comely beer heiress and used her daddy's money to get elected to Congress in a state he can hardly call home.

Still, the eastern media elite doesn't seem to care.

Sure, the occasional reporter will in conversation refer to McCain as the Manchurian candidate, but only one guy, Ted Sampley with the US Veteran Dispatch in North Carolina, still hammers away at him. His voice seems virtually drowned out by the chorus of cheers.

McCain has pulled off the impossible. He wooed and won the Grinchlike heart of Michael Lewis, and a legion of Lewis' cohorts. The implication is that McCain is seeking a national office--Cabinet secretary, vice president, or even president. He hasn't denied it. Indeed, now he's the national press corps' favorite for president in 2000. Few in Washington seem surprised, but questions abound in Arizona: How did he do it? Why has the East Coast media elite succumbed? And can he maintain the media love fest through his rumored run for the presidency?

It's March 1996, and Michael Lewis spots Arizona's senior senator from across the tarmac of a South Carolina airport. Having recently stepped over the cooling corpse of a presidential campaign by his friend Phil Gramm, McCain has slipped easily into the Dole cabal. Lewis, as usual, is bored. But somehow McCain stirs him from his patented torpor.

John McCain is unlike any pol Michael Lewis has ever met. Over the next few months, McCain makes frequent cameo appearances in Lewis' column--always the hero, the maverick.

Lewis gushes. He fawns. No doubt, his own starstruck musings coming from anybody else would make him throw up. But in this new interest, he finds the topic for a cover story in the May 13 edition of the New Republic. He strays from the campaign trail to write "Surrogates," a feature devoted to Bob Dole's campaign surrogate, Senator John McCain. It is the tale of McCain's relationship with David Ifshin, a former Vietnam War protester who should have been ex-prisoner of war McCain's enemy, but instead had become the senator's friend.

McCain had been an incorrigible media flirt for years, but this was the first time he'd succeeded in going all the way. "Surrogates" seems to have tripped an epiphany in the consciousness of the Beltway media.

By August, writers in the New York Times and Washington Post were raving about McCain. In October, it was The New Yorker--in December, the Baltimore Sun.

The National Journal and the Boston Globe checked in last month, but the real media coup was delivered in the April 21 issue of Time, which named McCain one of the 25 most influential people in America.

In the past year, the national media, which already had dismissed his Keating association, have raised John McCain's status from that of war hero to superhero.

The discrepancy is not lost on Arizonans who have followed McCain's emergence nationally and puzzled over the concurrent adulation by national journalists. Why do they love him? Because he planned it that way.

Political consultants, party officials, pollsters and journalists in Arizona and Washington interviewed for this story say John McCain knows exactly what he's doing. He's virtually turned his back on the testy media here in Arizona. Meanwhile, with charm, candor and accessibility, McCain has focused on seducing reporters and curing world-weary writers like Michael Lewis of their ennui.

In exchange, they've given him an entree into presidential politics.

John McCain's nominating speech for candidate Bob Dole was the best of the 1996 Republican convention, according to the pundits.

The discerning Maureen Dowd, David Broder and Mary McGrory all weighed in approvingly, and William Safire sent Americans racing for their dictionaries when he raved:

"Best speech by far of the convention was Senator John McCain's nomination of Bob Dole. This brief gem from a brave man--telling a dramatic story in simple words, building to a throat-catching climax--was delivered with quiet modesty and grace. Lesson: Great oratory need not be bombastic, nor splendid speechwriting festooned with anaphora or chiasmus."

In October, The New Yorker published "A Friendship That Ended the War," a feature by James Carroll, in which the author details the friendship that developed between McCain and Senator John Kerry--a Vietnam veteran who became a war protester--during their work to normalize U.S. relations with Vietnam.

Subsequently, the Boston Globe and Baltimore Sun have profiled McCain as a presidential contender. In an April 12 cover story, the National Journal called him "The Lone Ranger," and even noted, "McCain is direct, forthright and even blunt at times--traits that have not always played well with Capitol Hill colleagues but have won him favorable press coverage."

In February, Washingtonian magazine dubbed McCain "Senator Hothead," a misleading headline, since the piece celebrated his temper as a virtue.

"In a Senate that still tries to present itself as a polite debating club, McCain stands out for his willingness to take on 'distinguished colleagues,'" writes Harry Jaffe, one of Washingtonian's national editors.

The ultimate triumph, no doubt, came with Time's proclamation of McCain as one of the "25 Most Influential People in America." His picture appears just to the left of radio talk show host and Clinton nemesis Don Imus. "McCain," the magazine intones, "is the most conscientious of objectors to business as usual."

Boil it down, and there are five reasons the members of the national press, by their own admission, love John McCain: He's a war hero; he's a neopopulist; he reminds them of themselves; he's accessible; and, finally, they say, his image is genuine, not manufactured.

McCain's appeal begins with one simple, irrefutable fact: He's a hero. He survived five-and-a-half unimaginably grueling years in Vietnamese prisoner-of-war camps, enduring unspeakable torture.

Every journalist interviewed for this story mentions it right off the bat.

"You can't deny the fact that he is a bona fide, walkin', talkin' John Wayne character," says Washingtonian's Harry Jaffe. "That lays a foundation of respect."

Even the Democrats agree that McCain is impenetrable when it comes to his war record.

In an opposition research report prepared in 1991 by the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, the researcher notes:

"He [McCain] is not vulnerable on this issue, and it would be extremely difficult to appear more patriotic. If you try, the best an opponent could do is a draw, which probably would not convince voters to support you over McCain. It would be better to focus your efforts elsewhere."

Early in his career, McCain swore repeatedly he would never stoop to speak of that torture, wouldn't use his status as a POW to score political points. And, yet, it is clearly his war record--and the frequency with which he is able to work in a mention of it--that most accounts for his elevation to the status of national political figure.

He hasn't actively sought out all of the war-related attention. Baltimore Sun editor and Naval Academy graduate Robert Timberg resurrected McCain's status as a war hero in his 1995 book *The Nightingale's Song*, in which he profiled McCain and four other famous Annapolis graduates. Timberg admires McCain, but he does not ignore the uglier moments of the senator's life--including his poor school record, philandering and political opportunism. Timberg's hilarious description of McCain's brash power grab in his 1982 race for Congress in Arizona is a refreshing departure from the current beatification of McCain.

Despite his senior membership in the majority party in the nation's most exclusive club, the Senate, McCain has managed to paint himself as an outsider, a neopopulist willing to rear up against his colleagues. In 1994, McCain pushed legislation that would have eliminated free parking for U.S. senators and representatives at Washington's National Airport; he was defeated, but received a great deal of credit for his effort.

McCain is widely praised for his willingness to push campaign-reform legislation by sponsoring the McCain-Feingold bill.

McCain's "outsider" image, his willingness to make his colleagues mad, invites journalists to identify with him, says Paul Starobin of the *National Journal*.

"Who does the press like?" Starobin asks. "They like this guy who is sort of a maverick who doesn't get along with a lot of his own colleagues. So, in a way, he embodies some attributes--like iconoclasm and irreverence--that journalists themselves pride themselves on."

And McCain is very accommodating to journalists.

Washingtonian's Harry Jaffe: "He is good with the press. By that, he's accessible, he will talk to the press, he will get back to the press, he does not keep the press at bay. Reporters--again, we're human beings; we like that." A television news producer at the D.C. Fox affiliate says no other senator's office returns press calls as promptly as McCain's.

Above all, journalists like what appears to be McCain's candor. Michael Lewis says he was amazed the first few times he spoke to McCain.

"I was talking to someone who didn't use conversation as a tactic for political advancement, but just as a means for getting across what he thought," he says, bemused. "I was really floored, because I spent so much time in the presence of these serious political people who--everything that came out of their mouths was in some way implausible or strained or contrived--it was like another world to me. And I was so kind of grateful to find this guy in the middle of it all who wasn't like that."

Lewis says his own cynical nature is actually what drew him to McCain, and is what draws others to him.

"I think his rise is partly a response to how deeply cynical the people and the process has become, because he's managed to keep himself more or less honest and straight and decent, more or less functioning like an ordinary human being, rather than a politician. The distinction between him and everything else is growing. He benefits from the rise of the professional spin doctor and the rise of the modern campaign and all this stuff that makes politicians look like Martians."

But despite what reporters think, there remains another factor that explains their zeal for McCain: He has gulled them into loving him. Contrary to popular belief among Beltway journalists, John McCain is no wide-eyed neophyte, stumbling across great press coverage by randomly mouthing off.

Bruce Merrill, a professor at Arizona State University's Walter Cronkite School of Journalism, has worked on more than 100 political campaigns around the country, including McCain's first House race in 1982.

Merrill maintains that all of it--the war-hero status, the neopopulist stands, the accessibility, the candor--is carefully packaged and presented, with the goal of positive press.

Americans today, Merrill says, are "tired of political parties; they want someone who will stand up and tell it like it is. I think John McCain understands this. He understands the media, he understands the population, he presents himself extremely well and he has very good people around him that understand mass-public opinion and political communication, and they're very, very good at presenting him to the public."

One of McCain's "very good people," J. Brian "Jay" Smith, of the Washington political consulting firm Smith and Haroff, says he is aware of no strategy on McCain's part to woo the media.

McCain's relationship with reporters, says Smith, simply "reflects the high regard John McCain enjoys in Washington and the Senate."

To the casual observer, John McCain swept onto the national stage overnight. Actually, it has taken him years to rehabilitate his image.

In 1990, pundits agreed that McCain's political career was over. His public image was a wreck. As a member of the Keating Five--a group of senators who had finagled on behalf of the now-failed Lincoln Savings and Loan and its chief mogul Charles Keating--McCain was just another scum-sucking, bottom-feeding, scandal-ridden politician.

As McCain approached his 1992 reelection bid, pictures of Keating's Bahamian resort--where McCain vacationed more than once--were still fresh in Arizona voters' minds. His ratings in the polls were subterranean.

Then, in 1991, fortune smiled on him. Along came the Persian Gulf war, another foreign conflict to which he could hitch his fate--and his strategy for gilding his image. McCain soon was grabbing every media opportunity that came to him as a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, quickly becoming the body's self-anointed expert on foreign policy.

"John is very bright," says ASU's Bruce Merrill. "History gave him the opportunity with the war. He made himself available. I mean, John would drive from here to Kingman to be on the radio for five minutes, because he understands that's how important the media is--that if you have access to the media, and the media in a positive light, you can rebuild."

Thanks to Saddam Hussein, a full war chest, a weak opponent and his own perseverance, McCain was reelected to the Senate in 1992.

Rising in local polls and confident of his position in Arizona, McCain began to focus almost exclusively on national issues. When Jon Kyl was elected to the Senate in 1994, McCain reportedly told Arizona's new junior senator that he would now be responsible for the lion's share of constituent service work; McCain would be too busy working on his global image.

The strategy worked. McCain press coverage tends to point out his role on the Senate Commerce Committee (he took the helm of the powerful committee this spring) far more often than his role in the Keating Five, or other past indiscretions.

The omissions leave Arizona Democrats and even a few Republicans shaking their heads.

At least one Washington journalist has taken note.

Ben Scheffner, a reporter for the weekly Roll Call newspaper, covers Congress. Noting the quantity of favorable press the senator has garnered over the last year, he is baffled.

"The interesting thing to me is that he doesn't seem to carry any taint of the Keating Five," Scheffner says. "In all of these sort of glowing profiles you read of him and stories which mention him as a serious contender for 2000, it's rarely mentioned--and even when it is, it's glossed over."

Someday, some enterprising Capitol reporter is going to come to Arizona--or, for that matter, plug McCain's name into a database like Lexis/Nexis--and strike it rich, discovering the "secret" life of John McCain. Amply detailed in his home-state newspapers, including this one, is a trail of McCain embarrassments that range from nasty to downright sleazy.

Today, Keating warrants just a sentence or two from the typical McCain media biographer. McCain has carefully cast himself as the scapegoat, the lone Republican who quickly extricated himself from Keating when possible wrongdoing was exposed.

In reality, many of McCain's untoward activities with Keating took place during his years in the House of Representatives, and therefore had escaped Senate scrutiny. Because he was no longer a congressman at the time of the controversy, and the U.S. House never investigated his ties to Keating, McCain's indiscretions have been forgotten or ignored in the press.

And although McCain was among the first to cut ties to Keating, his connections to the banker arguably ran deeper than those of any other member of the Keating Five.

In the mid-1980s, Keating took McCain on at least nine trips--often with McCain's wife, daughter and baby sitter--including three jaunts to Keating's retreat in the Bahamas.

McCain later reimbursed Keating for the trips, but only after the controversy was revealed in the press.

In 1986, Cindy McCain and her father, Jim Hensley, invested more than \$350,000 in a Keating-owned shopping center reported to be a tax shelter.

Between 1982 and 1988, McCain received more than \$100,000 in campaign contributions from Keating, for whom he went to bat in the Senate. McCain returned the money, but back then it appeared he would be forever tainted, with regard to campaign-finance issues.

McCain voted against campaign-finance-reform legislation in 1987 and 1988, but in 1990 began to support it.

Today, of course, campaign-finance reform is McCain's *raison d'etre*. Journalists never fail to mention that, but what they seldom note is that it's highly unlikely that such legislation will pass in John McCain's political lifetime.

Roll Call's Scheffner says, "The amount of attention that his campaign-finance-reform bill has gotten is probably greatly out of proportion in terms of its actual chances of passage."

Last Saturday, McCain held what has widely been hailed as Arizona's most successful political fund raiser--ever. With an estimated net haul of more than \$500,000, McCain demonstrated, ironically, that his proposed legislation wouldn't hurt a powerhouse like himself from raising boatloads of cash.

The fund raiser conformed to the rules of McCain-Feingold, one McCain insider reports; only a limited amount--less than 30 percent--could come from political action committees.

The event took place outside McCain's north central Phoenix manse, and risked being canceled because of a dust storm. But McCain weathered another Desert Storm. The rain and dust stopped just in time for dinner and a keynote speech by Tennessee Republican Senator Fred Thompson, who had flown in just for the event.

Thompson, usually a vocal supporter of McCain's campaign-finance-reform efforts, spoke hardly a word of such matters to those assembled, who had paid \$1,000 each for tickets to the event.

Besides the ironies of the Keating affair and McCain's jaded efforts at campaign-finance reform, a plethora of other indiscretions has gone virtually unacknowledged or has been given short shrift by the national press.

McCain is constantly praised for his quest to reduce pork-barreling. But no one has bothered to investigate his actions with regard to a bill that no doubt benefited not merely his state, but himself and his family.

In 1991, at a time when McCain and his wife owned more than \$1 million worth of stock in Hensley and Company, her father's Anheuser-Busch distributorship, the Senate Commerce Committee continually refused to consider beverage-container recycling legislation, according to the legislation's sponsor, Senator Mark Hatfield, Republican of Oregon. The legislation was strongly opposed by the beverage industry, including Anheuser-Busch.

Outside Arizona, no publication has bothered to detail McCain's duplicitous nature with regard to environmental policy. The League of Conservation Voters has consistently ranked McCain at the bottom of its list of environmentally friendly lawmakers. In 1996, he voted antienvironment on issues ranging from endangered species to nuclear waste storage to funding environmental programs. Yet McCain had the audacity to write--and the New York Times op-ed page the lack of judgment to print--an op-ed piece decrying antienvironmentalism.

For years McCain consistently opposed gay rights, and even spoke at a fund raiser in Oregon held in support of that state's antigay-rights initiative. When he was named honorary dinner co-chair at Arizona's Community AIDS Council Second Annual AIDS Recognition Awards Dinner in 1994, local U Report columnist David Van Virden ranted against the hypocrisy of McCain's sudden change of heart: ". . . people behave consistently. John McCain is a political opportunist. He's used every situation to his advantage as long as we've known him. Everything since his incarceration as a POW has been used to further his career. . . ." Outside the state, nobody picked up on the story.

While Washington, D.C., journalists find McCain's anger endearing, some Arizonans aren't as forgiving.

Sandra Dowling, Maricopa County superintendent of public schools, recently told New Times she's still smarting over her encounter with McCain at the 1994 state Republican convention. When she made the mistake of catching the senator's eye, she had recalled for New Times ("Statesman or Henchman," March 23, 1994), he lashed out at her for her support of Barbara Barrett, who had announced that she would challenge McCain ally Governor J. Fife Symington III that fall.

McCain himself admitted to New Times that he threatened Barrett over the same topic. "I told her [Barrett] there are consequences associated with causing other candidates to be defeated," he said in a March 1994 interview.



Then there's the matter of Cindy McCain's barbiturate addiction. In August 1994, Cindy admitted to local reporters that she was addicted, and had been stealing Percocet and Vicodin from her own nonprofit Third World relief agency, American Voluntary Medical Team. It was front-page news for days in Arizona, but it was barely noticed by the national media.

When the Washington Post reported Cindy's addiction, it was in the paper's Style section, in a column titled "Names and Faces," sandwiched between items about Princess Diana's domestic disputes and the discovery of a lost Orson Welles movie.

More than just a sordid tale of an unhappy woman's addiction, the Cindy McCain story serves up a parable about the way John McCain handles his affairs. When the McCains learned that New Times was to receive documents from the Maricopa County Attorney's Office detailing Cindy's alleged crimes and indiscretions, they retained political consultant Jay Smith to represent Cindy. Smith wisely set up interviews with three particularly sympathetic local journalists, who dutifully reported Cindy's side of the story--complete with tearful photographs and video footage--before New Times could publish its own story.

But, eventually, it was revealed that Cindy and Smith had lied to reporters about her status with federal prosecutors, and about the dates she had received treatment ("Opiate for the Mrs.," September 1, 1994). The senator's claims that he never knew about the addiction--even though Cindy said she had sought treatment at an inpatient facility in Wickenburg--did not ring true. It was reported that one of Cindy's employees, Tom Gosinski, was fired when she suspected he knew of her addiction.

Cindy was allowed to escape a prison sentence by entering a federal diversion program. Just days after Cindy's addiction--and plan to enter such a program--was revealed, McCain voted against crime legislation that would have provided \$1 billion in funding for such diversion programs.

The Arizona Republic--which was not among the media outlets given semiexclusive access to Cindy--took to the story with uncharacteristic zeal, reporting that her lawyer, John Dowd, had tried to convince County Attorney Rick Romley to investigate the whistle-blowing Gosinski for extortion. The Republic lampooned Cindy's plight in a particularly nasty cartoon.

John McCain didn't speak to the Arizona Republic, the state's major daily and newspaper of record, for many months.

Almost three years later, the senator still doesn't return calls from New Times. His office did not respond to a request for an interview for this story.

No one on the national scene took note when John McCain successfully threatened, coaxed and cajoled Arizona Republicans--Governor Symington, party chair Dodie Londen and most of the state's congressional delegation--to endorse Phil Gramm for president. The plan was to give Gramm a much-needed boost in the Arizona primary.

When McCain's scheme backfired--Gramm pulled out before the Arizona primary, but if he hadn't, would have suffered abysmal defeat--the local press reported it. Arizona Republic political columnist Keven Willey pointed out in print how embarrassing the situation was for McCain, and how he better pray--real hard--that Bob Dole would forgive him.

Amazingly, McCain needn't have worried. He hopped from Gramm's campaign chairmanship to the top echelons of the Dole campaign, and within months his name was floated as a vice presidential candidate.

And possibly most puzzling, since the troubles of Arizona's chief executive have received wide press outside the state, the national media have ignored McCain's friendship and close political alliance with Governor Fife Symington, who this week went to trial on 22 felony counts.

Longtime Arizona Democratic political consultant Bob Grossfeld, with no small amount of envy, says, "The rehabilitation of John McCain's public image is one of the greatest public relations feats since the rehabilitation of Tylenol and the comeback of Coke."

McCain wins the press-club popularity contest, but fawning features in austere periodicals like the New Republic and The New Yorker won't get him the name identification of a Jack Kemp or a George W. Bush. Indeed, when McCain's name shows up at all on national polls, it's in the low single digits. So, what exactly does his friendly press get him? It ensures McCain's role as a contender. For the record, Bill Clinton ranked about the same in 1989.

ASU professor of journalism Bruce Merrill explains, "The goal of any serious presidential candidate now, for the next several months, leading up to about a year before the election . . . will be to position themselves to be considered a player by the press. You must have the press convinced you are a player before you can be a player. So, in a way, the press is the gatekeeper. If the press decides you're not a player, no one's ever going to see your name."

In 1995, the Columbia Journalism Review published an article about cynicism in journalism by National Journal writer Paul Starobin.

Starobin describes a 1992 New Republic slam of Dan Quayle by Michael Lewis, titled "The Boy in the Bubble."

"Lewis certainly managed to avoid the trap of a journalist becoming too cozy with the subject," writes Starobin, who criticizes modern journalism for being too cynical.

Reached at his Washington office, and asked if he was taken aback by Lewis' kind coverage of McCain, Starobin is, surprisingly, defensive of both men.

"You just writing about how the Washington media is in bed with John McCain? Worships the ground he walks on?" he asks.

Starobin maintains that Lewis remains a cynic, but was obviously impressed by McCain's "compelling story."

McCain is honest, a likable person who doesn't "take a lot of bullshit from his colleagues," and that appeals to journalists, Starobin says.

"Michael Lewis is okay. It's a bit of a shtick with him. He's probably not as cynical as he says he is," he adds. "I wouldn't say he's not a serious journalist, but I would say he's marketing a certain style and approach and take on politics that tends to be pretty unvarying."

Lewis says his coverage is not unvarying; when asked about his coverage of McCain, he immediately points to a number of other campaign players--Pat Buchanan, Alan Keyes, Ralph Nader--whom he describes favorably.

But none as favorably as McCain, whom Lewis readily describes as his "beacon."

When Lewis met McCain last March in South Carolina, he says, "I kind of vaguely knew who he was. I think I thought of him as one of the Keating Five. And I just found him to be this really refreshing exception to the usual political personality. I mean, he was straight. Everything he said checked out."

Lewis has never heard of J. Brian Smith, McCain's campaign consultant. (Smith says he's not on the payroll presently, but has been tapped to work on McCain's 1998 Senate race.)

"His press person will just send me whatever I want, including all the nasty stuff about him. It's like having a research assistant," says a shockingly ingenuous Lewis.

Yes, Lewis admits, "there is a cynical take on it all. The cynical take is, 'Well, look, this is a very good way to get ahead. Honesty is a clever and cynical tactic.' But I don't quite--to me, that's the way to despair. If you start saying honesty is cynical, what's left?"

How could Lewis say anything else, given this New Republic passage, from Election Day:

Until now in the campaign Dole usually has been surrounded by bigwigs; everywhere he goes he is accompanied by governors and senators. But today, the final day of the campaign, the day Dole will discover that he never will be president, the governors and the senators seem to have vanished. There is no one but his wife and daughter at his side in the church. Then I notice John McCain, standing off to one side in aviator sunglasses and a baseball cap pulled down low over his brow. A few weeks ago in Phoenix I watched McCain rearrange his schedule over the protest of his staff so that he could be with Dole on Election Day. The staffers thought the senator should be back in Arizona celebrating probable victory with Republican freshman J.D. Hayworth. McCain thought he should be on the road coping with probable defeat with Dole. "I would think the time he might need a friend would be that night," he said at the time. And so here he is, in Russell, Kansas, lecturing a reporter who would rather hear about the despair in the front of the plane than Bob Dole's place in American history. "I predict to you," I can hear him saying, "that Bob Dole's picture, win or lose, will one day hang in the lobby of the U.S. Senate."

Usually I am not allowed to say in print what I think about McCain because I tend to go on a bit. But perhaps today I will be granted an exception. He is unlike most people who do what he does for a living in his taste for a losing or unpopular cause. Obviously this benefits him at some level; obviously he cannot push his courage too far; nevertheless, there is something extraordinary about the way he seeks out trouble to avoid violating his sense of who he must be. And it never fails to allay somewhat my general misgivings about democracy as currently practiced.

Lewis has recently finished a long piece about McCain, which is scheduled to appear in the *New York Times Magazine* at the end of this month.

National Journal's Paul Starobin doesn't have a lot of regard for the thesis of the article you are now reading.

Aah, he says, "the postmodern take on John McCain."

McCain is no Boy Scout, Starobin concedes. But "is he a crook and a sleaze ball and a scum bucket? I don't think so."

Of course, Starobin works for a publication that just last month celebrated McCain's "independent spirit and taste for confrontation" in a cover story.

In any event, Starobin advises, don't read too much into McCain's meteoric rise in the national press. "There's also nothing going on here [in Washington]. . . . You know, this budget thing, but, on the whole, it's not a great season for political coverage, so maybe McCain is just the flavor of the month and two months from now it'll be a different flavor."

McCain's flavor is sure to sour if the senator really does run for president, says Tony Fabrizio, a Republican pollster who worked on the Dole presidential campaign.

Right now, the Washington press is focused on McCain's national agenda issues. If McCain becomes a serious contender for president -- or even vice president -- that could change overnight.

"I will tell you the first rule of national politics," Fabrizio says. "They will love you until the day you announce. Anything that is in your past, be prepared to see in print. Anything."

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