

Free Ride - John McCain and the Media

Addendum - How the media has covered McCain since Free Ride went to press

John McCain is now the presumptive presidential nominee of his party, a position that is accompanied by increased scrutiny and skepticism from the nation's political press. Or at least that's what ordinarily happens. But as we know by now, the rules are different for John McCain. Just a few months ago, McCain had cratered in the polls, and few thought he could bounce back. Yet there was one group of people who had not only the desire but the ability to give McCain the boost he needed, just when he needed it.

The point that began McCain's resurgence came around the Iowa caucuses. As McCain seemed to be staging a comeback, Newsweek editor Jon Meacham declared it "good news for all of us, whatever our politics." Chris Matthews waxed poetic: "There's something genuine here, something selfless, even quietly grand in his campaign." Matthews predicted that McCain would win 18 percent in Iowa, making him "a big hero." Chuck Todd noticed the obvious: "The media does seem to be ready to will John McCain out of Iowa."

And so they did, despite the actual results. Many may have forgotten by now that the Iowa contest was actually won by Mike Huckabee, but the media proclaimed McCain -- who came in fourth place, with 13 percent of the vote -- the actual winner. "A fantastic night for John McCain," said the Politico's Mike Allen. Tim Russert immediately booked McCain, and not Huckabee (or second-place finisher Mitt Romney, or third-place finisher Fred Thompson), to be the guest on that Sunday's Meet the Press. Matthews seemed to sum up the media's thoughts about the senator in a January 28 interview: "Senator McCain, you know you're in my heart."

As we move toward the general election, the press proclivities we document in Free Ride remain unchanged. McCain is still referred to over and over as a "maverick" serving up "straight talk," with virtually no reporter asking whether he actually deserves these labels. Another key element of what we call the Myth of McCain -- the idea that, nearly alone among politicians, McCain makes decisions based solely on principle, without political considerations playing a part -- has also remained in force. So when McCain has flip-flopped for plainly political reasons, many in the news media have shaken their heads and denied the evidence before them.

Consider, for instance, the issue of immigration. Before the campaign for the Republican nomination began in earnest, McCain argued that border security would be ineffective "no matter how formidable the barriers" without the

establishment of a temporary worker program that McCain favored as part of comprehensive immigration reform. But McCain soon found out that the Republican base in 2008 was profoundly agitated about immigration -- and changed his position. Now, McCain says border security must be the first priority. And in a January 30 debate, McCain even said he wouldn't vote for his own comprehensive immigration reform bill.

Yet the media have assiduously avoided characterizing McCain's shift as a flip-flop, and some journalists have even claimed that McCain has never changed his position. In a cover story for the February 11 issue of Newsweek, Evan Thomas wrote that McCain's refusal to "soften his stances on immigration and Iraq" represented "a characteristically principled stand," disregarding McCain's change of heart. On the February 4 edition of MSNBC's Morning Joe, co-host Mika Brzezinski said that McCain's "views on immigration were unpopular, and he stood by them even at the peril of his campaign." In its February 4 endorsement of McCain, the New York Daily News similarly hailed McCain, saying he "he has held his ground against an anti-immigrant fervor that rivals ... have exploited."

When a candidate changes his position as a response to the politics of the moment and the press ignores it, he's lucky. When he changes his position and the press goes out of its way to say how principled he is for not changing his position, he's John McCain.

Another major theme of the media's coverage of McCain is that he is unlike other politicians -- that is, if he can even be called a politician at all (a New York Times headline once dubbed him an "anti-politician"). But far from being an anti-politician, McCain has been more than willing to engage in the kinds of hardball tactics other politicians engage in -- though it doesn't seem to trouble the commentators who regularly condemn that sort of behavior when it comes from less favored candidates.

Throughout the campaign, the media have repeatedly portrayed McCain as a critic of negative campaigning, all while ignoring McCain's use of negative ads against his opponents. Following the Iowa caucuses, McCain commented that "[t]he lesson of this election in Iowa is that, one, you can't buy an election in Iowa, and, two, negative campaigns don't work. They don't work there, and they don't work here in New Hampshire." Several media outlets -- including the Associated Press, the Los Angeles Times, The New York Times, the Politico, The Washington Post, and USA Today -- quoted or paraphrased that comment. However, none of those articles noted that McCain had run negative TV ads in New Hampshire against Mitt Romney. One such ad, titled "Consider," quotes a Concord Monitor editorial asserting, "If a candidate is a phony... we'll know it. Mitt Romney is such a candidate." Romney responded to the ad, saying: "It's an attack ad. It attacks me personally. It's nasty. It's mean spirited."

The media's double standard in favor of McCain also applies to how they report on the supporters of his campaign. During the February 26 Democratic presidential debate, moderator Tim Russert repeatedly questioned Barack Obama about statements by controversial minister Louis Farrakhan, who had praised Obama. Despite the fact that Obama didn't seek Farrakhan's support or endorsement and denounced Farrakhan's views, Russert repeatedly questioned Obama about Farrakhan. The following day, MSNBC mentioned the exchange at least nine different times.

Contrast that coverage with how the media has covered the endorsement of McCain by John Hagee, founder and senior pastor of Cornerstone Church in San Antonio, Texas. Hagee has made numerous controversial statements about homosexuality, Islam, the Catholic Church, anti-Semitism, and women, among other things. On the September 18, 2006, edition of NPR's Fresh Air, Hagee said of Hurricane Katrina, "I believe that New Orleans had a level of sin that was offensive to God, and they are -- were recipients of the judgment of God for that. The newspaper carried the story in our local area that was not carried nationally that there was to be a homosexual parade there on the Monday that the Katrina [sic] came. And the promise of that parade was that it was going to reach a level of sexuality never demonstrated before in any of the other Gay Pride parades. So I believe that the judgment of God is a very real thing." In his book *What Every Man Wants in a Woman* (Charisma House, 2005), Hagee wrote: "Do you know the difference between a woman with PMS and a snarling Doberman pinscher? The answer is lipstick. Do you know the difference between a terrorist and a woman with PMS? You can negotiate with a terrorist." And, asked on Fresh Air about his view that all Muslims have a mandate to kill Christians and Jews, Hagee responded, "Well, the Quran teaches that. Yes, it teaches that very clearly."

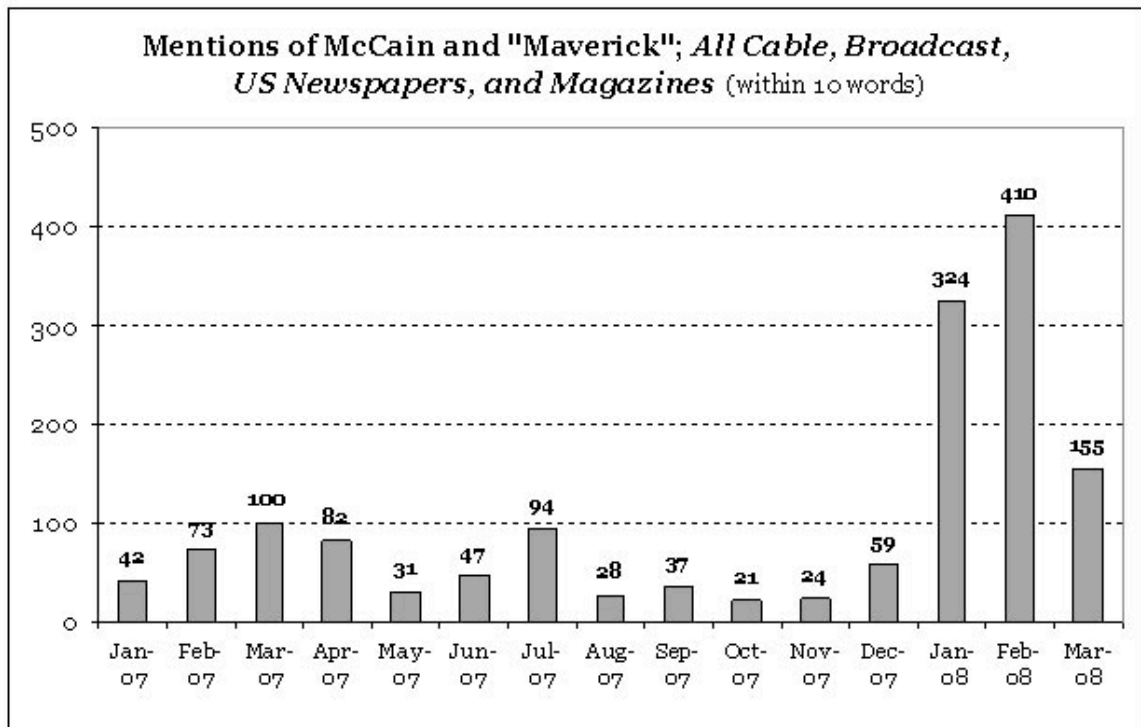
Despite such reprehensible views, McCain sought out Hagee's support and held a press conference touting his endorsement. "All I can tell you is I'm very proud to have pastor Hagee's support," McCain said. But few media outlets have questioned McCain about accepting Hagee's endorsement -- particularly when compared with the torrent of coverage of Barack Obama's former pastor, Jeremiah Wright.

Despite all this, Joe Scarborough could still say with a straight face on March 18 that McCain "has never attached himself to these people on the far right that say if you're gay, you're going to hell, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera," though McCain has done precisely that. He "attached himself" to Hagee, to controversial pastor Rod Parsley (who claims he can heal babies born without brains, and whom McCain called a "spiritual guide"), and to others like the late Jerry Falwell as well.

The song remains the same

A look at the coverage of John McCain since Free Ride was completed shows that what we call the Myth of McCain is still intact. All the elements of the Myth are repeated again and again in news stories and commentary, lest anyone forget that John McCain is a maverick, a straight talker, and the one politician who is too principled to even care about politics -- as a January 28 New York Times article by John M. Broder called him, "the maverick flyboy of the Republican Party."

Though it might not have seemed possible, the frequency with which John McCain is called a "maverick" has actually accelerated in recent months. Recall that for much of 2007, John McCain was far behind in polls of Republican primary voters and was in some ways eclipsed by Rudy Giuliani and Mitt Romney. For most of the year, one could find articles and broadcasts referring to McCain as a maverick "only" a few times a day. Once his campaign was revived, however, such mentions exploded.



Free Ride contains a chart showing the incidences of "maverick" within 10 words of McCain in American news media from 1999 through 2006, as indexed in the Nexis database. These reached their height in 2000, with 2,114; the figure for 2006 was 808. But we see here that even using a more restrictive set of sources,[1] we find 889 such incidences in the first three months of 2008 alone. (And it should be noted that restricting these searches only to those occasions in

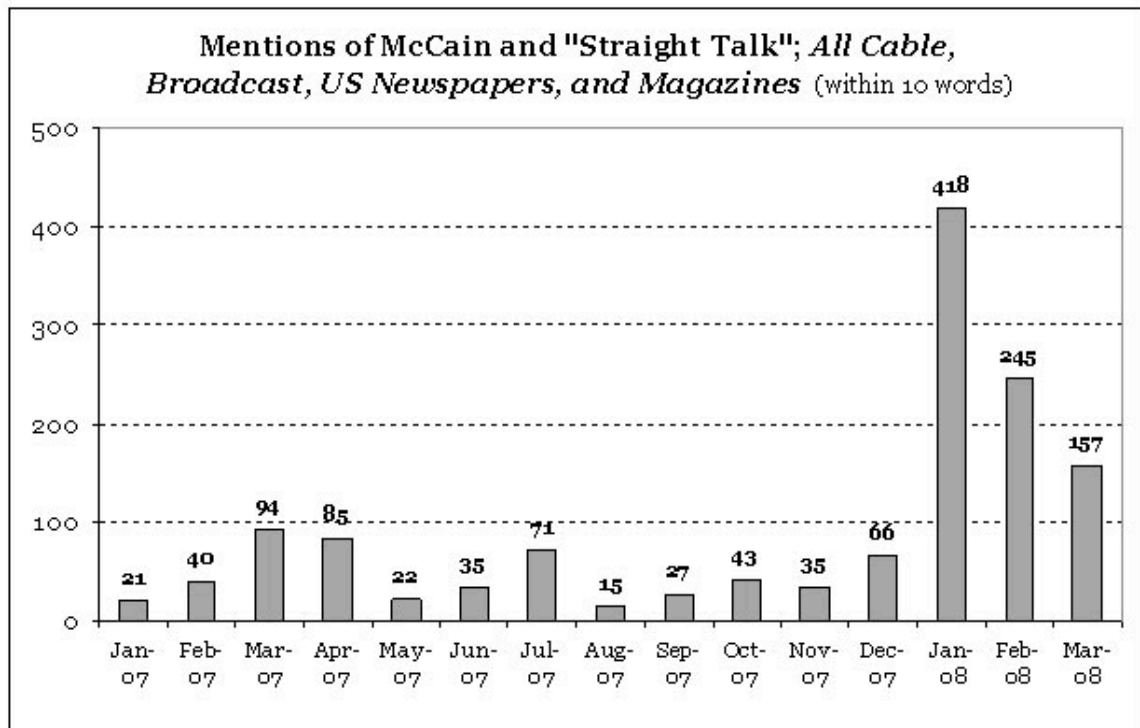
which the word appears close to McCain's name omits many instances in which McCain is referred to as a maverick.) On some days, McCain was referred to as a "maverick" in the media dozens of times.

As always, McCain's actual record -- for instance, according to Congressional Quarterly, he voted with the Bush administration 95 percent of the time in 2007, more than any other member of the Senate[2] -- rarely gets discussed. Instead, the word is simply repeated again and again, the image reinforced anew each day. Here are just a few examples from recent weeks:

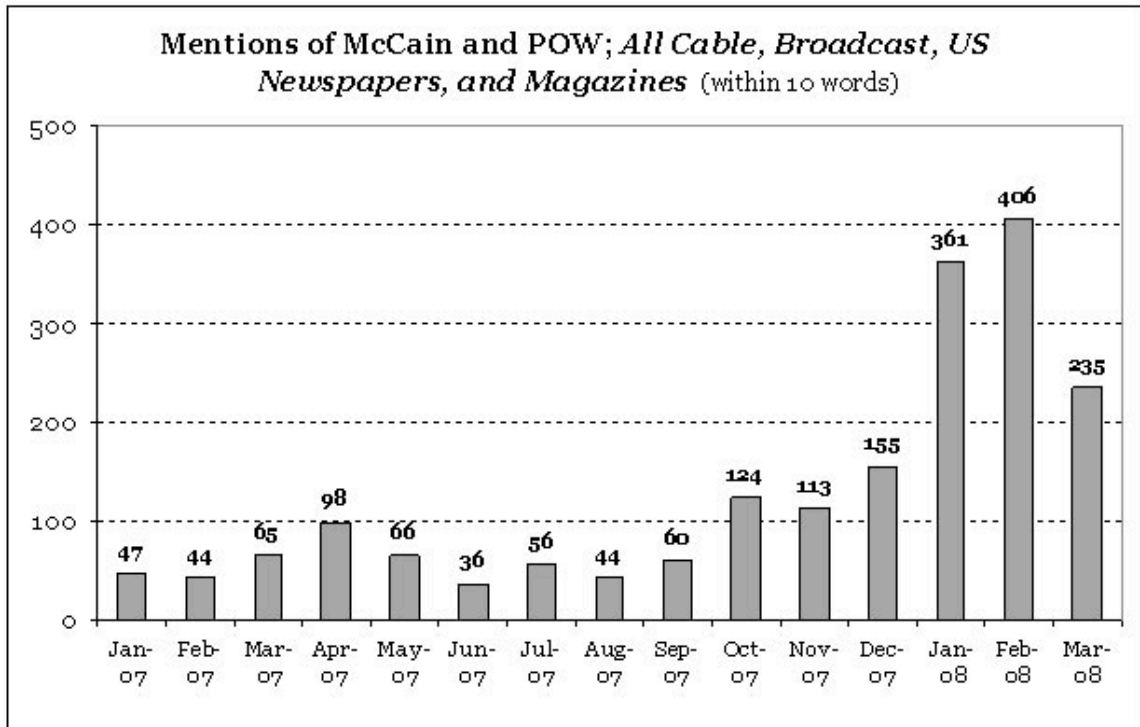
- "I think the key to John McCain's success throughout these primaries has not so much -- surprisingly to me -- been tied to his support for the war or his so-called conservatism. It's because people believe he's a maverick, that he tells the truth and they like that in politics." -- Gloria Borger, CNN, March 24
- "The perception right now of McCain is someone who's experienced, someone who they see not of the Republican brand or the Bush brand, but of the maverick brand." -- Tim Russert, MSNBC, April 10
- "Well, you only get one reputation in life, and he's got a good one. He's a military man who served his country, sacrificed for his country, carries the scars of battle. And also, he's a maverick. People think of him as a maverick. Now, even though he supports the war, people sense that he has -- he has a lot of inner strength. And even though they're against the war, they trust the man's battle courage." -- Chris Matthews, NBC, April 11
- "If you think it might be too facile for Republicans to try to paint Barack Obama as a liberal based on his voting record, do you think tying McCain to Bush will also be seen as a bridge too far? This guy's got a long record as a maverick who stood up to this Bush administration and stood up to George Bush." -- David Gregory, MSNBC, March 25
- "Just a glimpse of 96-year-old Roberta McCain, and you immediately understand where her son comes by his maverick, outspoken style." -- Claire Shipman, ABC, March 24

The same pattern was true of another of the classic McCain tropes, "straight talk" -- a steady stream of mentions, building to a tsunami as the contests began in January (the slight drop-off in March occurred because McCain wrapped up the Republican race, but the Democratic race remained unresolved, making the latter the focus of most of the press coverage). Reporters often ask McCain to deliver some straight talk, or describe even the most mundane of McCain's statements this way. When President Bush endorsed McCain, for example, Fox News' Carl

Cameron described McCain saying, "We are not in agreement on every issue" as "a bit of his patented straight talk." So when the McCain campaign was revived in January, "straight talk" showed up hundreds of times.



Then there is the tale of John McCain's undeniable trials as a prisoner of war in Vietnam, the text and subtext of every McCain campaign, and as far as many in the press are concerned, the answer to any question about McCain's character. When Howard Dean called McCain a "blatant opportunist who doesn't understand the economy and is promising to keep our troops in Iraq for 100 years," Fox News' Chris Wallace indignantly asked John Kerry, "Do you think John McCain was an opportunist when he refused to take early release from a North Vietnamese prison camp because he was the son of an admiral because he said he was going to stay there for years as well as all the other Americans did?", as though what McCain went through in Vietnam somehow renders him immune to criticism for anything else that he has done in the ensuing 35 years.



At more than 1,000 mentions of McCain's prisoner of war history within 10 words of his name in the first three months of the year -- again, a standard that understates the actual number of times it is mentioned -- 2008 should see even more discussion of McCain's POW story than 2000, when it was mentioned in more than 3,000 articles and broadcasts. And as he has since his first run for Congress in 1982, McCain has made the Hanoi Hilton the centerpiece of the story his campaign tells the voters.

Yet as always, reporters testify that McCain is reluctant to mention Vietnam, an assertion that grows no less absurd for its repetition. "One of McCain's claims to fame is his time as a prisoner of war in Vietnam, something he didn't like to discuss a lot before this campaign," wrote a CBS reporter on his blog. McCain, according to the Politico, "reluctantly allowed his campaign to spotlight his 5 1/2 years in the Hanoi Hilton." Howard Kurtz, media analyst for CNN and The Washington Post, wrote in an online chat in response to a reader who asked if McCain was discussing his POW history too often, "Unlike in 2000, he's now used it in some of his TV advertising." Yet as Media Matters for America observed, Kurtz himself wrote four separate articles in 2000 about the McCain campaign's use of his Vietnam story its television ads in that race.

Kurtz's short memory highlights the press' blind spot on this topic: No matter how often McCain brings up Vietnam, when he's speaking seriously or joking, when he's talking to reporters or voters, when he's discussing issues or hitting up donors (all of which we document in Free Ride), no matter how many television

ads and supporter emails and web videos featuring reminders of his POW experience his campaign creates, reporters will continue to claim that McCain just can't bear to speak of Vietnam, so full of modesty and integrity is he. A recent example: when asked why all Americans didn't deserve health as good as he has gotten from the government his whole life, McCain retorted, "I did have a period of time where I didn't have very good government health care. I had it from another government."

Right through to November?

As Free Ride was nearing its release, we began to hear an interesting argument from those skeptical of the case we make. "Look at that story in the New York Times suggesting that McCain might have had an affair with a lobbyist," some said. "Doesn't that prove the press isn't in the tank for McCain?" The truth, however, is that the Times story proves just the opposite.

The speculation about a possible McCain affair did not exactly set off a feeding frenzy among the press corps. Though one could argue ignoring such salacious rumors is exactly what the press should do, it is hard to imagine they would have been as restrained had it been a different candidate. Indeed, within hours, that aspect of the story simply disappeared from public discussion; instead, McCain and his press team managed to transform the controversy about him to a controversy about the New York Times.

And the most important part of the story -- the part that raised important questions about the kind of senator McCain has been and the kind of president he might be -- was not followed up by the press. There were no lengthy investigations of his relationship with Paxson Communications, nor was McCain pressed with probing questions. Yet what the Times showed was that McCain had engaged in behavior almost identical to what got him in such trouble in the Keating Five scandal. McCain received \$20,000 in contributions from Paxson Communications and its law firm, and was being flown around the country on Paxson's corporate jet. Then company chief Bud Paxson asked McCain to put pressure on the Federal Communications Commission over the sale of a Pittsburgh television station that Paxson hoped the FCC would approve. McCain wrote two letters to the FCC, imploring them to speed a decision on the sale. Although his campaign at first denied that McCain had met with Bud Paxson, it was quickly discovered that McCain himself had admitted as much in a 2002 deposition. Bud Paxson confirmed to reporters that he met with McCain to press him on the Pittsburgh sale.

So what, in sum, was the story of this case? McCain got tens of thousands of dollars in contributions from a corporation with interests before the committee he chaired; flew to his campaign events on its corporate jet; had a friendship with its

lobbyist; was personally implored to take action by the company's chief; and took that action on its behalf. One might argue that no laws were broken, or that it was a pretty typical case of Washington influence-peddling. But John McCain, we've been told so many times by the press, is better than all that. He's the special interests' foe, the lobbyists' enemy.

Perhaps that's why when McCain campaign manager Rick Davis told CBS' Harry Smith that McCain "is probably most feared by every lobbyist in this town of Washington," Smith didn't interrupt Davis to ask what he was talking about, much less burst out laughing. And who is Rick Davis, besides being McCain's campaign manager? One of Washington's most influential corporate lobbyists. But perhaps the "fear" to which he was referring among lobbyists was the fear of not getting a job with McCain, since so many of their colleagues had already taken the choice spots advising the Arizona senator. After all, the positions on the McCain campaign occupied by lobbyists include not only campaign manager, but also deputy campaign manager, chief political adviser, senior policy adviser, and three finance committee co-chairmen. In all, no fewer than 24 McCain campaign staffers and advisers are current or former lobbyists, as is the chief of staff of McCain's Senate office. Add in the major McCain fundraisers, and the number of lobbyists goes to 66.

But you won't find too many reporters describing McCain as the lobbyists' candidate. The John McCain they present is different -- and when the facts bump up against the image that has been constructed so carefully over the last decade, the facts are brushed aside. McCain's coverage thus becomes a parade of double standards. Journalists demanded that Hillary Clinton release her tax returns, but didn't bother to ask whether McCain had released his. When Clinton's tax returns were released, cable news talking heads wondered if the fact that the Clintons had made a good deal of money meant that she would have trouble connecting with ordinary voters in places like Pennsylvania. No one asks if the fact that McCain's wife is worth an estimated \$100 million, or that they have multiple homes valued in seven figures, means that he will have trouble connecting with the lunch-bucket set (nor whether his wife's wealth makes him less of a man, as was so often suggested about John Kerry).

When McCain went on a foreign trip whose itinerary included not just Iraq but a London fundraiser, towing his candidacy's two biggest Senate supporters (Lindsay Graham and Joe Lieberman) along with him -- and claimed with a straight face that the trip has nothing to do with the presidential campaign -- reporters didn't call him on the absurdity of his spin. Journalists mocked John Edwards for having a big house, but refer to McCain's luxurious vacation compound (complete with a guest house and third house for "living and entertainment space") as a "rustic cabin." McCain claimed at least three times that Iran is training Al Qaeda -- the Middle East equivalent of claiming that the

Yankees are training the Red Sox -- and reporters don't say it "raises questions" about whether he's prepared to be commander in chief, as they no doubt would were it a different candidate. Instead, they react with indignation at the very thought that anyone would question his foreign policy bona fides. "A blunder, to be sure," said Howard Kurtz, "but can the Democratic candidates really argue that they know more about foreign policy?" [3] Of course they could, but the very thought seemed absurd to Kurtz. George Will agreed, saying the gaffe was "[n]ot damaging at all, really, because people say it's a given that this man knows what he's talking about." As NBC's Chuck Todd said on Meet the Press on March 23, "He's got enough of that in the bank, at least with the media, that he can get away with it. I mean, the irony to this is had either Senator Clinton or Senator Obama misspoke like that, it'd have been on a running loop, and it would become a, a big problem for a couple of days for them."

No one can predict with certainty what will happen in the coming months. Perhaps reporters will look at McCain with new eyes, thinking less about the story they've been telling -- that he's a "maverick," that he's an ideological moderate, that he delivers "straight talk" -- and judge him by the same standards they use to judge all candidates. Perhaps they will examine his proposals carefully, treat his claims with skepticism, and explore a potential McCain presidency with care and detail, just as they should all presidential candidates. It would certainly be a departure from the often worshipful coverage McCain has gotten used to. But for the moment McCain continues to be what the New York Times quoted campaign manager Rick Davis calling him, using the political term of art for press coverage. McCain, Davis said, is "the best earned-media candidate in history." [4]

About the Authors:

David Brock is the author of four political books, including *The Republican Noise Machine: Right-Wing Media and How It Corrupts Democracy*. In his preceding book, *Blinded by the Right: The Conscience of an Ex-Conservative*, a 2002 New York Times bestselling political memoir, he chronicled his years as a conservative media insider. Brock currently lives in Washington, D.C.

Paul Waldman is the author or coauthor of three books on politics and media, including *The Press Effect: Politicians, Journalists, and the Stories That Shape the Political World*. His last book was *Being Right Is Not Enough: What Progressives Must Learn From Conservative Success*. Waldman is also a columnist for *The American Prospect* and lives in Washington, D.C.

Footnotes:

[1] Since we gathered the data included in *Free Ride*, Lexis-Nexis has widened its "All News" file to include blogs, press releases, and other sources not directly relevant to the mainstream news media we are critiquing here. Therefore, we chose to only examine newspapers, magazines, national broadcast television, and cable television.

[2] Clea Benson, "CQ Vote Studies - Presidential Support: The Power of No." *Congressional Quarterly Weekly*, January 13, 2008.

[3] Howard Kurtz, "Media Notes," washingtonpost.com, March 20, 2008.

[4] John Harwood, "A Present for McCain As the Other Side Fights," *New York Times*, March 24, 2008, p. A1.