

Once Upon a Principle

There was a time when John McCain had positions. Then he ran for president, and everything was suddenly up for grabs.

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Barack Obama morphed in the public mind from populist to elitist with one ill-wrought comment about guns and faith and the "bitter" working class. Hillary Clinton responded by improbably re-creating herself as the kind of woman who knows her way around a shot glass and a rifle. But neither Democrat can match the transformation of the Republican candidate, who is running for president by turning his back on much of what he once was.

What John McCain really stands for came up most recently in light of his position on abortion. Planned Parenthood commissioned a survey showing that more than half of those women polled don't know much about McCain's stance, and a quarter of those who are in favor of keeping abortion legal mistakenly think the senator agrees.

That confusion may be because McCain has sometimes seemed confused as well. In 1999, during a campaign swing through California, he challenged conservative orthodoxy and said he did not support overturning *Roe v. Wade*, the Supreme Court decision that found a constitutional right to abortion. He explained that a reversal could lead some women to undergo illegal and dangerous operations.

This is just the sort of nuanced position that has led to the widespread notion of McCain as maverick. But it didn't last long. After the right went nuts, McCain backtracked and said he *did* favor the repeal of *Roe*, adding, however, that it might lead to dangerous illegal abortions. A day later, his campaign issued a "clarification," and by that time McCain was saying that if elected president he would actually work to overturn the court's decision. Any concern over the effects of illegal abortions disappeared overnight in the cold clear light of must-win.

What's interesting about all this is not the flip-flopping. All pols flip-flop: if they're Republicans, they describe it as "evolving," and if they're Democrats, they get pounded for it. (If either Clinton or Obama had followed the trajectory described above on an important issue, it would be running on a continuous loop around the digital news wire in Times Square.) And McCain's voting record on abortion is clear. He has a zero lifetime rating from the Planned Parenthood Action Fund because of his opposition to, among other things, family-planning funding and sex education. When benighted friends used to suggest that McCain was a

stealth moderate, I urged them to look at his voting record, which was about as moderate as Strom Thurmond's.

But now even his record has become irrelevant, since to become the front runner McCain has jettisoned many of his past positions. The Bush tax cuts: McCain voted against them as a senator, but now says he would make them permanent as president. Immigration: he cosponsored a bill in 2005 to make it easier for those in the country illegally to become citizens, but now says that if his own bill—*his own bill!*—came to a vote on the Senate floor, he would vote against it. After Columbine, he called for more gun control; after Virginia Tech, he said more gun control was unnecessary.

Sen. James Webb has been trying to nail McCain down on a revamped GI Bill that would fund education for veterans. But the closest McCain has come to a position is to say he needs to examine it more closely. Both Obama and Clinton support the bill, and it's fair to assume that neither senator has any more leisure time than McCain. If the point is that the Republican candidate is incapable of multitasking, that's something he might want to lick before he becomes president, a job in which, to paraphrase the White Queen from "Alice in Wonderland," a person is often asked to tackle six impossible things before breakfast. Or maybe it's just safer not to take a position than to take one, to try to be all things to all people by being nothing at all.

This is completely at odds with the patented McCain persona, the alleged guy who speaks his mind without fear or favor. His notorious irascibility is often mistaken for principled candor, but experience teaches that McCain's principles remain consistent now only when they appear to lead to the West Wing. Sadly, no one understands better the personal cost of such pandering. In 2000 he was asked about the Confederate battle flag, which flew from the capitol dome in South Carolina. McCain first called it a "symbol of racism and slavery," then backed off with a "clarification" that described it as a "symbol of heritage." Later he admitted, "I feared that if I answered honestly, I could not win the South Carolina primary. So I chose to compromise my principles."

He has done that over and over during this race. The Straight Talk Express is all over the road. There are those optimists who like to believe that once elected, McCain would again emerge as a small-government progressive who would set his own course. But it is the greatest of illusions to believe that a man will masquerade to win, then revert to his authentic self—after all, there is always another election coming. "Important principles may, and must be, inflexible," said Abraham Lincoln. Or maybe this says it best: "I wanted them to think me still an honest man, who simply had to cut a corner a little here and there so that I could go on to be an honest president." That's from McCain's 2002 memoir, but perhaps there's been a "clarification" issued since.

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