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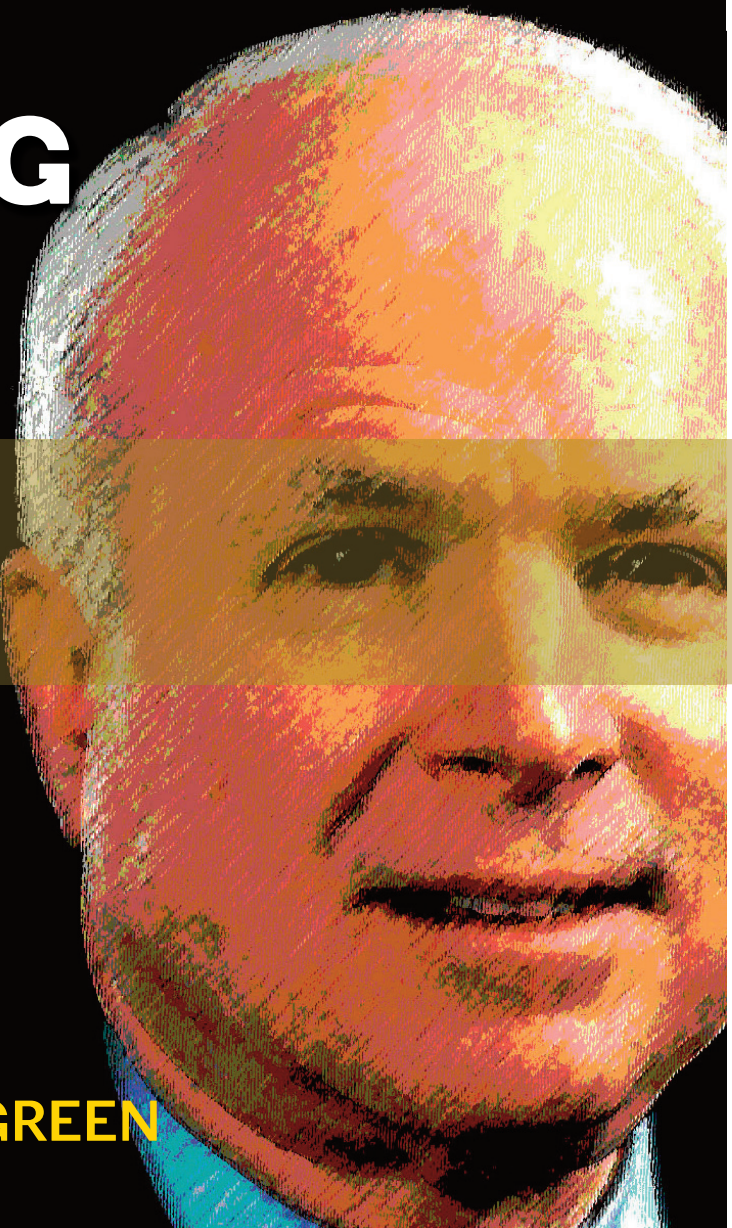
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**THE
MELTING
DOWN
OF**

**JOHN
McCAIN**

**(AND OTHER
THOUGHTS
ON THE
UPCOMING
ELECTION)**

DAVID MICHAEL GREEN





David Michael Green is a professor of political science at Hofstra University in New York. He is delighted to receive readers' reactions to his articles (<mailto:dmg@regressiveantidote.net>), but regrets that time constraints do not always allow him to respond.

More of Green's essays can be found at <http://coldtype.net/green.html> and at his website, <http://regressiveantidote.net>

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WRITING WORTH READING FROM AROUND THE WORLD
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THE MELTING DOWN OF JOHN McCAIN

I'm not exactly sure what (former?) chief economic advisor to the McCain campaign Phil Gramm would say nowadays about his pal John's current situation, but I wouldn't be surprised if it included the word 'whiney'. The only thing more egregious than the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune pummeling any Republican candidate for president in 2008 is the bunglingly inept campaign of a guy who's been in politics forever, and even run for president once before.

No small part of the campaign's ineptness is its predicate, either. McCain sold his soul eight years ago, when he let Rove bugger him like some mere Democrat, spreading rumors in South Carolina about the old man's sanity and about how his adopted daughter from Bangladesh is actually a love child from a liaison with a black woman. It was lame enough that McCain didn't just let loose and open a can of whoop-ass on Bush during the subsequent debate (which might have gotten him the nomination, given how much terrified GOP primary voters appreciate violent tendencies in their politicians), but then it just got worse, as the defeated war hero later traipsed around the country campaigning for the victorious war

McCain sold his soul eight years ago, when he let Rove bugger him like some mere Democrat, spreading rumors in South Carolina about the old man's sanity and about how his adopted daughter from Bangladesh is actually a love child from a liaison with a black woman

avoider. And then it got even worse yet at the convention in 2004, as McCain fawned all over Bush and ever since has gone to the wall supporting the Iraq debacle, transparently the worst foreign policy cock-up in American history, and somewhat less transparently its greatest crime.

Now we see McCain committing stupid mistake after stupid mistake in a campaign that already once experienced a near-death experience from precisely such ineptitude. All this, it's worth remembering, in a year in which any Republican running for president would need to be near perfect to have the slightest prayer of winning. Americans have hardly ever been more surly about their politics, nor despised an incumbent so much. They've never in polling history expressed so much conviction that the country is headed in the wrong direction. The country is fighting two endless and losing wars. Just about every economic barometer in existence is in record awful condition, ranging from national debt to personal debt, from the trade deficit to the value of the dollar, from inflation to unemployment, from the Dow to mortgage meltdowns. That alone should be plenty to sink the aspirations of any representative of the incumbent party faster than a gaping hole in a concrete barge.

Remember the question Ronald Reagan used so devastatingly against Jimmy Carter in 1980? “Are you better off than you were four years ago?” Like any good Republican campaign tactic, it was a lie, rooted in an appeal to the public’s most base attitudes. But, also like any good Republican campaign tactic, it worked great. It was a lie because conservatism was in fact the reason that people were less well off, and would be even more so after the thirty years of conservative policy ascendancy which would follow. And it was base because the question – especially from such a cardboard cowboy patriot like Reagan – should have been, “Is the country better off than it was four years ago?” In any case, I hope Obama has the smarts to use either variation, and never cease to remind voters, when he does, that this was Reagan’s question, in order to inoculate it from any plausible response from that (nauseatingly frequently) self-described “foot-soldier in the Reagan revolution”, John McCain. (Of course, McCain never mentions the part about how Ronnie and Nancy disowned him and wouldn’t talk to him, after McCain dumped his first wife, who happened to be their good friend. After that, he became the door mat in the Reagan revolution.)

Anyhow, combine all of that with the corruption, arrogance, bungling and lies, with Katrina and Guantánamo and Social Security, with torture and domestic spying and ruined reputation abroad – put all of this together and it would be a miracle if any Republican could possibly win this year. There just aren’t enough swiftboaters out there to put this Humpty-Dumpty back together. There just aren’t enough looking glasses to step through before this Republican disaster can be twisted suffi-

He’s a ripe old geezer who can’t tell a Facebook from the Internets, who can’t effectively deliver a speech to save his life, and he’s running against an opponent who regularly gets compared to Jack Kennedy, not to mention endorsed by Teddy

ciently into something that even vaguely resembles a desirable government. Even those greatest purveyors of those most absurd fairytales, evangelical preachers, don’t have the heart for it this year. And why would they? Having seen that they can influence politics, they are learning that it’s a two-way street, brother. George W. Bush is many things, but a recruiter for the religious right is not one of them. It doesn’t require a prophet to see that their (not so) little pious enterprises are going to go the same way as Republican members of Congress if they continue to be associated with the Boy Wonder.

So, this is the landscape for John McCain, on top of which, he’s a ripe old geezer who can’t tell a Facebook from the Internets, who can’t effectively deliver a speech to save his life, and he’s running against an opponent who regularly gets compared to Jack Kennedy, not to mention endorsed by Teddy. The guy, in short, steps out of the gate having to run an inspired campaign to even have a prayer under these conditions, and instead he clunks along from one ham-handed debacle to another. Is this what they mean by hoof-and-mouth disease

The Phil Gramm bit was priceless. There’s the GOP desperate to prove that they care about desperate middle class voters and here comes McCain’s top economic advisor to tell economically wounded Americans that they’re just making it all up, this nation of whiners. Brilliant! Though not quite as astute as McCain’s claim that Gramm doesn’t speak for him, on the very same day in which Gramm was doing precisely that, representing the boss before the Wall Street Journal editorial board (now there’s a pair to draw to!).

And let's just talk about whiners for just a sec, shall we? Remember all these last weeks as the hapless McCain, trying desperately to find something that would stick against the opponent his campaign has now come in frustration to refer to as "The One", ragged on and on about how Obama hadn't been to Iraq recently, and about how he hadn't made the obligatory pilgrimage to the tent of Deity Dave Petraeus? Yeah, well, Obama called his bluff and went rampaging around the Middle East with just about the entire American news establishment in tow (snide comments from the McCain camp referred to the few remaining reporters left to cover boring stuff like Republican presidents or would-be Republican presidents, as the "JV Squad"). All this press attention on Obama only gave McCain something new to whine about, as The One drowned out completely any hope of McCain getting any news traction during The Sojourn. First Obama's a jerk because he hasn't gone to Iraq, then he's a jerk because he did. Way to go, John. No doubt you'll be picking up votes in droves with that attitude.

Given the caliber of the campaign he's running, McCain's lack of press coverage might not be such a bad thing. The McCain team's idea of a cool press event is to run up to Kennebunkport and hang with Poppy Bush, the much-loved father of the much-loved president who brought us the much-loved war Obamster was off trying to figure out how to end. What in the world were they thinking? That the 84 year-old ex-prez was the only guy with his boots still above ground that their candidate could stand next to and actually look younger? That the Bush family endorsement will bring a 'surge' of voters to carry

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McCain over the finish-line this November? Wow, that's some strategic acumen, eh? Take good notes, children – you don't very often get to see pros in action at the top of their game like this. The only stuper public relations screw-up I've seen in American politics for a long time was when a Republican presidential candidate secured the nomination in the primaries and rushed off the very next day to be photographed at the White House with the despised current president from his same party. What was that idiot's name? Holy cow, Batman!, that was McCain too! Wham! Kapow! Thwack!

You can tell how deeply the handwriting has been jack-hammered into the wall when Obama goes to Iraq and gets an endorsement from the Prime Minister there for his troop withdrawal plan. Didn't any whisp of a *raison d'être* for the entire McCain campaign just evaporate into thin air at the moment the supposedly sovereign government of the country we invaded said we should get out, just as Obama wants, and just when Obama wants? The outrageousness McCain's response was matched only by its ho-hum coverage in the media. Maybe we've all just grown too comfortable with a Republican arrogance that could make Caesar blush, but when McCain pooh-poohed Maliki's polite but firm get-the-hell-out request by pulling rank and claiming "I know what Iraqis want", this country should have fallen off its collective chair. So, let me see if I have this straight: We went to Iraq to fight for freedom and democracy, but the democratically elected government of this sovereign state is less qualified than John McCain to decide when the occupying force which invaded their homeland should buzz off? He knows what the Iraqi people

want and need better than their own prime minister?

I guess it does make sense if we remember that McCain is the foreign policy expert in the race. He won't have a learning curve in the White House. He's the guy you can trust when that call comes in at 3:00... Oops, sorry, wrong political prostitute. Anyhow, you get the idea. One small problem, though. Every other time the guy opens his mouth he demonstrates one of two things, neither one of which exactly emerges from his campaign's playbook. Either he isn't quite the foreign policy guru we're supposed to believe he is, or he's, ahem, having some senior moments here and there. Which is not entirely unexpected given that he is, well, you know... senior. Either way, on some days he is running a better campaign against himself than is Obama.

Memo to McCain, the great foreign policy expert in the campaign: Czechoslovakia is not a country. Repeat, not a country. Hasn't been for about 15 years now. Stop using the term. Especially, don't use it three times in a row!

Memo #2: If you're gonna be a foreign-policy expert, get your freakin' Sunnis and Shiites straight, wouldya? In this particular decade, it matters. And, no, it won't do to have Joe Lieberman standing behind you holding your crib sheet. Unless, that is, you plan to have him in bed with you every night, just in case that call comes in at 3:00 AM. And, if you do, then you've got a different problem, and don't expect to be getting any votes from Republicans in November. Maybe Hillary would be available, but then Republican voters don't care much for adultery either. Oops, I mean adultery committed by Democrats

Memo #3: You'd probably be right, as

This guy has been stroking the press for decades, and they've been returning the favor in spades, with hardly ever an unfavorable article written about him or his flip-flops or his skanky associations, and hardly ever a report where his name is mentioned and the word "maverick" is not

you stated just the other day, about the urgency of securing the Iraq-Pakistan border. Under one condition, that is – that there was such a thing. There isn't in the real world, John, so it doesn't look real good when the guy, whose only remotely plausible rationale for winning the election is to continue scaring enough people about national security one more time, tells us all how important this is.

Memo #4: Vladimir Putin is not the president of Germany. In fact, if you want to get all technical about it, he's not the president of any country right now. But he was the president of this really big country called Russia (no, it's not the Soviet Union anymore – that went out along with Czechoslovakia), and you should probably know something about it and its government if you're going to be the go-to guy when that phone rings at...

Of course, the McCain campaign describes all the attention to these boners as unfair media coverage, to match the fawning treatment given to Mr. Senator The One. Apart from the fact that my dictionary defines such complaints as "pathetic whining", it beggars belief that John McCain, of all people on the planet, could complain about unfair media coverage. This guy has been stroking the press for decades, and they've been returning the favor in spades, with hardly ever an unfavorable article written about him or his flip-flops or his skanky associations, and hardly ever a report where his name is mentioned and the word "maverick" is not. This is no pot calling the kettle black. This is a concentration-of-matter-so-dense-that-its-gravitational-pull-actually-sucks-light-waves-into-its-complete-darkness black-hole calling the kettle black.

It's all going completely wrong for Mc-

Cain, ranging from every voter Bush alienates to every mistake McCain makes to every one Obama doesn't. And because it's falling apart so very badly, the desperation and ugliness is starting to set in – not coincidentally – with the new campaign staff drafted directly from Karl Rove Political Assassinations, Kneecappings and General Mayhem, Inc. McCain relentlessly hammers Obama for supposedly having gotten it wrong on the surge, and for continuing to refuse to admit that. Meanwhile – even assuming he is right about that, and it is not at all clear that this was the factor which brought down violence in Iraq – McCain is stupid to play that game. Okay, who was right on the whole friggin' war then, John, from the very beginning? Hint: it's not the guy in the same political party as George W. Bush. But the bigger question is, who cares? Does anyone think that voters are going to choose their president in 2008 on the basis of their Iraq policy? And even if they were to, would they pick the guy who wants to stay on the same path we've been on in Iraq? And even if they somehow want that, are they willing to choose someone because of that, despite his desire to continue the same economic policies that are currently crippling most voters?

McCain looks as pathetic as he truly is beating this dead horse relentlessly. But now it's gone farther than that even. This month McCain described Obama – who, by the way, never fails to honor and admire McCain before disagreeing with him on policy questions – as someone who “would rather lose a war in order to win a political campaign”. That sort of sleazy personal attack is way beyond the pale, especially when describing one of the few brave souls in American politics who op-

I felt bad for McCain when the Rove pigs savaged him in 2000. But now he has become them, and I am reminded of other pigs, those being observed at the end of Orwell's Animal Farm: “The creatures outside looked from Rove to McCain, and from McCain to Rove, and from Rove to McCain again; but already it was impossible to say which was which”

posed the war from the very beginning, back when doing so was a serious political liability, especially for anyone ever contemplating running for president. I felt bad for McCain when the Rove pigs savaged him in 2000. But now he has become them, and I am reminded of other pigs, those being observed at the end of Orwell's Animal Farm: “The creatures outside looked from Rove to McCain, and from McCain to Rove, and from Rove to McCain again; but already it was impossible to say which was which.”

Regressivism is a sickness, and it has infected John McCain, who now appears to be capable of saying or doing most anything to gain the presidency. Fortunately, however, there's just enough health left in the American body politic that the metastasizing cancer of the last thirty years is likely to be ingloriously expelled this November. And John McCain, its latest avatar, with it – just another political hack seeking personal affirmation through presidential ambition. Indeed, one so seized with the need to be president that he no longer recognizes the irony that he has become the personal embodiment of precisely the opposite of his self-description – a man who puts country ahead of self.

If that were the case, McCain would fire the Rovots he's staffed his campaign with, apologize for ever having been a Republican, beg forgiveness from the Iraqi people, and vote for Obama on November 4th. None of that will happen, of course, but very likely it won't matter anyhow.

As far as I can see, about the only thing which could possibly save John McCain right now, in the America of 2008, would be if he were running against, say, a black man, as the Democratic presidential nominee.

CT

BARACK IS DUKAKIS?

McCain slings from the sewer
while Obama says little

John McCain is a scumbag. I choose my words carefully, and in full recognition of past sacrifices and contributions he has made. But I am sick to death of seeing my country go down the toilet. And I am sick to death of my country wrecking other parts of the world. And I am sickest-at-heart of all that the people doing this represent the sleaziest side of American politics.

These are the Karl Rove acolytes, who learned their craft from the Lee Atwater team, who learned from the Nixon rat-fucker squad. From there it may go directly back to Satan, for all I know, possibly with a stopover at Joe McCarthy's desk.

There will always be people like this. Alleged humans who are willing to do anything to win at politics. Fine, we can't control that. But it says everything about any candidate when he or she puts people like this in charge of their campaign. And it says everything about us as a society that we would ever let those who do so win the highest offices in the land, let alone frequently.

Hence, my comment about McCain. It has now become transparently clear that this man will do anything to be president. Whatever scraps of decency and uniqueness and detachment from his own sick

It has now become transparently clear that this man will do anything to be president. Whatever scraps of decency and uniqueness and detachment from his own sick party he once had have now all been mortgaged against that goal

party he once had have now all been mortgaged against that goal. The McCain who once knew Bush's tax cuts were irresponsible now favors them, despite eight years of direct evidence turning informed speculation about potential consequences into historical fact. The McCain who once criticized the sex-obsessed theocrats running his party as "agents of intolerance" now seeks their endorsement. The McCain who once stood for a cleaner politics is now firmly ensconced in the sewer, from whence he is reaching down and hurling great gobs and handfuls of what flows all around him.

It was not enough that he mocked Obama for not going to Iraq, only then to whine about how Obama was grandstanding when he turned around and went, and everybody from General Petraeus to Prime Minister Maliki to the entire public of Germany made McCain look the fool. It's not enough that he's now desperately trying to turn the very fact of Obama's popularity against him by running ads comparing the Illinois senator to Britney Spears and Paris Hilton. And it's still not even enough that McCain is running ads – based on wholesale and proven lies – that Obama skipped out of meeting with wounded American troops in order to shoot some hoops.

No, what really proved that McCain is

a scumbag is the one line – now repeated multiple times – that Obama “would be willing to lose a war in order to win a campaign”. Even if they weren’t just finishing up living through the consequences of precisely such politics for eight years now, Americans should be apoplectic in anger that the same folks are back using the same tricks again. Mostly, though, they should be horrified and enraged that such language could be used in a presidential campaign. They should be precisely as willing to elect any person uttering such disgraceful epitaphs as they would a Holocaust denier, a Ku Klux Klan grand wizard, or a serial pedophile.

This is not a policy difference. This is not a disagreement over issues. This is not even a personal critique of an opponent’s professional or even character-related qualifications for office. This is an outrageous smear of the most vile kind. McCain has said – without a scrap of substantiating evidence to back his claim – that Obama is willing to sacrifice the lives of American soldiers and Iraqi citizens in order to advance his personal career ambitions. How serious an assertion is this? I would regard such alleged behavior as among the most heinous crimes that a person can commit, not different from hiring out a murder.

Except, that is, that we’re talking about probably a million murders. I have no doubt, and plenty of solid evidence, that that’s exactly what the Bush people did when they launched their Iraq war based on lies. I have little doubt, and some evidence, that Hillary Clinton and John Edwards and John Kerry committed exactly this crime in voting for the invasion. I think they are all deserving of the gravest punishments, not least including, to start with,

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a complete banishment from the corridors of power and prestige. These are war criminals, plain and simple. McCain has long been one of them, as one of the war’s most avid backers while surely fully cognizant of the lies forming the pretext for invasion. Now he has doubled down by politicizing yet again the gravest decision a country can ever make.

The weight of ironies here – on top of boundless disgust – are enough to keep a roaring Saturn V stuck on the launch pad. Start with his nauseating new campaign slogan, “Country First”. I’ve news for you, McCainiac. A candidate who really put country first wouldn’t employ Rove-trained scum-slingers to hurl baseless accusations against an opponent, all of which have the effect of massively cheapening America’s political process.

Many people alive today don’t remember that there actually was a time – before Rove, before Bush and his father, before Atwater, before Nixon – when this sort of campaign ploy was considered way beyond the pale of decency. There was a reason for that, and we need to return to that ethos for precisely that reason. Willingness to campaign in such a fashion is highly corrosive to the fabrics of decency, respect and trust that are the necessary foundations upon which democracy ultimately rests.

Take those away by legitimating and rewarding such vile tactics, and you’re ultimately left with a tattered democracy, if any at all. Country first? No, John – you’ve actually done just the opposite. When you claim that your opponent is sacrificing people’s lives and American national security to win a campaign without having any evidence for that claim, you’ve put your own desperation to be president well

ahead of the country you claim to love by undermining its democracy and by you, yourself, using the war to score political points.

This is all the more ironic because McCain knows better than anyone the consequences of politicizing war. He spent six-and-a-half years being tortured under the ugliest kinds of physical and mental duress. He has since become something of a student of the conflict in which he made these great sacrifices, the Vietnam War. If he were honest enough to allow himself to go there, he would admit the truths of that war which are undeniably supported by the documentary record, including the government's own secret history of Vietnam, the Pentagon Papers. What these reveal is that McCain – along with many other POWs and MIA, 58,000 Americans killed, tens of thousands more gravely wounded, and perhaps several million dead Vietnamese – was a victim of precisely the same sort of politicking of war that he and his president and his party have now brought to the lucky people of Iraq.

We know that governments from Truman to Nixon and every one in between lied to the American people about Vietnam, and not just small lies either. And we know that Lyndon Johnson, the man more responsible for the war than any other person, didn't even believe that it was a war that could be won, but fought it anyhow, in large part because he believed that commie-baiting Republicans would use the "loss" of Vietnam against him in elections if he didn't, just as they had earlier with China. Of all people in the world, John McCain should never indulge in this sort of gutter filth. He rotted away the better part of a decade of his own life,

Of all people in the world, John McCain should never indulge in this sort of gutter filth. He rotted away the better part of a decade of his own life, mangled and traumatized, in the Hanoi Hilton in order to help Johnson attain his personal prize of another term as president (or so Johnson thought)

mangled and traumatized, in the Hanoi Hilton in order to help Johnson attain his personal prize of another term as president (or so Johnson thought), and because Republicans had politicized national security, also to win elections. Is he okay with that? I'm sure not. I'm not okay for him, nor for any of the John McCains of this world. Short of genocide, what greater possible crime is there than launching a war in order to advance one man's career ambitions?

A third irony is that while he was bravely serving his country and having his patriotism exploited by political hacks like Johnson and the various mutant would-be humanoids of the GOP, the very people who would later bring us the most recent version of their sociopathic amorality were back then sitting by the sides of swimming pools, sipping margaritas, and making career plans to get rich by hook or crook. George Bush had his daddy get him a free pass. Dick Cheney took five draft deferments. John Ashcroft seven. And so on, and so on.

Quick: name one person on the Bush national security team in 2003 who actually showed up for combat when it was his turn. There was only one – Colin Powell – who, while hardly a sweetheart himself, was not coincidentally the only one of all of them to oppose invading Iraq. McCain has hitched his wagon to a whole barnyard full of chickenhawks and their despicable war.

The fact that Cheney literally said "I had better things to do in the 60s than fight in Vietnam" tells you something of what these guys must have thought about patriotic patsies like John McCain, who risked their lives in service to their country, just as David Kuo's insider revelations

about how Rove and company secretly mocked the religious right congregations they used as Republican shock troops tells you more of the same.

But it gets a lot worse yet. In irony number four, McCain would be savaged by these vicious thugs once again, and it was for the same mistake of having once served his country. When it looked like he was going to clobber Bush in the 2000 Republican primaries, the serious money made sure that that wouldn't happen, and that their reliable kleptocrat, Little George, would be ushered into the White House instead. The very same animals who are now mauling Barack Obama on behalf of John McCain were shredding the senator himself on behalf of Bush just eight years ago, falsely accusing McCain in South Carolina of fathering a love child with a black mistress, and of being off his rocker from his POW days.

Whatever happy news there is in the fact that a movement this evil will inevitably wind up eating its young, it remains a statement of the sad journey John McCain has taken that he would employ the very same hitmen to now do the same to someone else. Shame on you, John Mc-Shameless. Shame on you.

Fifth, it's both outrageous and outrageously ironic for McCain to level this charge against Obama, as opposed to, say, Clinton or Edwards or Kerry. Of the four of them (and many more), only Obama has always opposed the war. Only Obama had the guts to do so at the beginning, when the Bush people had made that an excruciatingly hard thing to do. True, he wasn't then in the US Senate, and he didn't actually have to cast a vote on the issue. Nevertheless, it was pretty widely understood at the time – not least by Rove and the

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three Democratic would-be presidents listed above – that going on record against the war was the kiss of death for any presidential ambitions. Obama not only took that risk, but he hit it just right, not opposing all wars (for there are rare ones for which the alternative is even worse), but opposing dumb wars, and labeling Iraq just such.

Lastly, the greatest irony of all is that nobody politicized this war more than Republicans did. Bush admitted to an interviewer in 1999 that he would use such a war for purposes of insuring his domestic political power.

Cheney literally had a formula of “Start a small war. Pick a country where there is justification you can jump on, go ahead and invade”. Moreover, if there had ever been any question of why Bush went to Congress for an Iraq war resolution just weeks before the congressional elections of 2002 – thus cynically pinning Democrats between the Scylla of a war they knew was based on lies and the Charybdis of the GOP using national security as a sledgehammer in this first post-9/11 election – it should have long prior been put to rest by Rove's congressional election briefing plan, which was accidentally leaked, indicating that the party would be using national security issues as its election strategy.

Add to all of that the commander-in-chief's little aircraft carrier landing stunt, the myriad times that the president wrapped himself in the mantle of American soldiers (live and dead), the plastic Thanksgiving turkey, the 2002 abomination against Max Cleland and the 2004 version against John Kerry, and all the rest, and you get a very, very politicized war. Not only should John McCain not be adding to the pile of such disgusting tac-

tics, he should be on his knees begging the country for forgiveness of his party.

But that country – the better country of my youth, frankly, for all its faults – no longer exists. It appears that little can tame the GOP’s taste for the jugular. And, in part, this is not entirely unexpected, since it always freakin’ works. Then again, so does genocide, but many of us have made the amazing moral leap to recognize that not every prize is worth the price paid to obtain it, even if you can manage to get other poor slobs to do the paying. And so we refrain from genocide. Or launching wars to advance our careers.

So, look, it’s now July. McCain has hired the known assassins, and they’ve already begun their work, a fact which became visibly obvious in the massively changed tenor of the McCain campaign this last week or two. So, Barack Baby, do I have to spell it out for you, my man? Can you not see the freight train that is headed your way? Must we have yet another example of Democratic roadkill, to join those of Dukakis, Gore, Cleland, Kerry and the rest, before one of you guys learns to throw a punch or two?

This is your swiftboat moment, dude. John Kerry waited three weeks to respond to the crap they threw at him, after which he might as well have gone off windsurfing and not bothered responding at all. Why are you not shredding McCain for lying about your Iraq trip and the canceled visit to wounded soldiers? (Even the media is pointing that out, despite the fact that they love McCain almost as much as they fear the GOP.) Why are you not disemboweling McCain every day of the week, every week of the month, for his outrageous allegation that you are sacrificing lives in order to win an election?

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And why aren’t you on the offensive? McCain has given you openings you should be able to drive a Mack truck through, and you need to be saturating the airwaves with these. Why isn’t every other television commercial a viewer sees one of yours, showing Phil Gramm calling Americans “whiners” for feeling economic pain, showing McCain saying “Gramm doesn’t speak for me”, then noting that Gramm in fact spoke on behalf of McCain to the Wall Street Journal on that very same day? Why aren’t you running ads turning McCain into George Bush’s long lost Siamese twin? Why aren’t you hammering McCain at his point of greatest strength, undercutting his so-called national security credentials by showing clips of all his errors, including before the war began when he said it would go easily, during the early parts when he said it was going fine, his absurdly bogus Baghdad market walk-through, and his myriad recent gaffes which suggest his brain clicked off sometime in the 1980s?

Despite the fact that the candidate has now issued a semi-strong rebuttal spot two weeks into this ugliness, I must say, I liked the Barack Obama of the primary season better than the current model. I liked his politics and his integrity more, but most of all I liked his fighting spirit, and his immediate response to scurrilous attacks.

Now that the attacks have gotten worse, I’m wondering what happened to that guy?

Hey Barrackis: One Dukakis is per lifetime is more than enough.

McCain and his Gang of Rove have more than transcended the threshold of decency these past weeks, and have done so repeatedly.

It’s time for you to take him down. **CT**

A GOVERNMENT OF PEOPLE, AFTER ALL

So, did you hear about the latest bipartisan commission report? Bet you can't guess who's on the thing! James Baker? Check. Warren Christopher? Check. Lee Hamilton? Check. Ed Meese? Check. Brent Scowcroft? Check.

(What, no Henry Kissinger? Guess he was busy fighting war crime extraditions.)

These guys should just go get a room and get it over with, already, eh? Anytime anyone in government needs some mind-numbingly anodyne cover story for the latest word in power consolidation, they bring in this crew – The Center-Right Dinosaur Club. Six words out of Warren Christopher's mouth alone is guaranteed to render comatose any formerly sentient being. The guy is a human anesthesia.

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In the wake of the imperial establishment's utter humbling in Mesopotamia, the latest commission project concerns the sticky old question of national war powers: Who's got 'em, who doesn't, and how to

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deal with that in a supposed to democracy. (Hint: The short version is this: The president does whatever he wants to, and all you other people should go sit in the corner and just shut up.)

This is nothing new. The Founders grappled with it in the same fashion they did most everything else. Their goal was to create a government with just enough power to govern effectively, and no more. So they split powers up as often as they could, and this case is no exception. Congress got the power to declare war and the president got to be commander-in-chief of the military. Not bad, except nobody bothers to declare war anymore. That concept sorta went out with the horse and buggy.

After the lengthy but undeclared war in Vietnam, Congress realized it was holding the short end of a very long stick, and attempted to reel in the imperial presidency's war-making powers with the War Powers Resolution of 1973. Nixon vetoed the thing, and Congress then mustered a rare and difficult veto override to make it into the law of the land. Well, kinda. You see, the problem is that every president since that time, Democratic or Republican, has rejected as unconstitutional its central provisions requiring the president to withdraw deployed forces within 60

days (90 days maximum), unless authorization for their continued presence has been obtained from Congress.

How can we ever know who is right — those presidents or Congress? To find out, it would require the rather unique situation of a president continuing to pursue a war in defiance of Congressional opposition. Sound familiar? Oh yeah, I guess I forgot one other necessary factor. In such a situation you'd also have to have a Congress with the stones to do something about such an imperious president and his unpopular war. They'd have to at least have the courage to bring a challenge in the federal courts, whereupon the constitutionality of the War Powers Act would then finally be resolved, one way or another. Call me crazy, but somehow I don't see this as being on Nancy Pelosi's or Harry Reid's agenda.

So, now, along comes this Baker-Christopher Commission to recommend legislative changes, supposedly to avoid another Iraq fiasco. They propose to repeal the War Powers Act (which they describe as unconstitutional) and replace it with "The War Powers Consultation Act of 2009", which would require the president to "consult" with Congress prior to deploying troops into a "significant armed conflict" (generally, combat operations likely to last more than a week), and would create a new Joint Congressional Consultation Committee comprised of leaders from both houses, and a permanent bipartisan staff with access to national security intelligence. The proposed legislation also calls on Congress to vote yes or no on 'significant conflicts' within 30 days. If such a resolution fails, Congress may then legislate against the war, which legislation the president may veto, and

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Congress may override. Or it may take other actions, such as defunding the war.

This is clearly a step backward. It's clearly a step in the direction in further empowering an out-of-control executive, at precisely the moment when conditions call for just the opposite tack. And it's clearly what you'd expect from James Baker and Warren Christopher. Ugh.

It's all well and good to force consultations, but they mean only as much as the participants want them to, which can range from the pro-forma ticking off of a box on the official Federal War Consultation Checklist Form to genuine negotiations in which assent by both sides is required by both sides in order to move forward. To get a very real and very proximate sense of just how toothless an idea this is, one need only ask oneself how the Bush administration would have conducted such negotiations over Iraq. You know, the very same people who withhold everything from Congress? The ones who refuse to even testify or provide any documentation in cases involving clear wrongdoing, including now the highest law-enforcement official in the land? Yeah, that's right, Congress is now thinking about holding Attorney General Michael Mukasy in contempt for refusing to turn over information about the politicization of the Justice Department. And he's the 'good guy' who was brought in to clean up after Alberto Gonzales (thanks a lot to 'liberal' New York senator Chuck Schumer for arranging that particular disaster).

Yeah, forcing consultations is a wonderful prescription, but no better than forcing a robust round of Kumbaya. Once it's done and the box checked, the president will proceed to war, laughing all the way down Pennsylvania Avenue as he returns

from the Capitol. Think of Warren Christopher, late at night, dentures soaking in the glass of water, gumming up some of the finest plain vanilla ice cream available, and you've got a pretty good image of the actual bite of this resolution.

Similarly, in what sense can this legislative formula be considered an improvement over the War Powers Act or the Constitution itself? Let's just take the most ambitious outcome possible under this scenario, where Congress fails to approve the war, then passes a resolution condemning it, which of course would be vetoed by the president, and then Congress musters enough votes for an override. First of all, what slightest change does that represent from the current scenario, other than to force Congress to vote on the war within 30 days? It already has the power to legislate its disapproval, the president already has the power to veto that bill, and Congress already has the power to override the president's veto. So what is gained here?

Second, what possible effect does this have on the current impasse over the War Powers Act? The next step which will follow a congressional override will always be the president flipping a finger in the direction of Congress, and I don't mean a big thumb's-up. Now Congress would find itself in precisely the same place it does today – quite literally, at the moment (sans the override part) – having to make hard choices in the face of presidential defiance, of which there are pretty much only three. One is to follow the Harry Reid / Nancy Pelosi approach to tough situations, which means to whimper and whine a lot while doing absolutely nothing. The second is to go to the Supreme Court to force the issue, whereupon the president will claim it as

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an unconstitutional infringement on his or her commander-in-chief powers, regardless of whether a previous president (or even the current one) had signed the legislation that Baker and Christopher propose. (By the way, chances are good that Congress would lose such a suit. If it was brought before the current court, chances are a whole lot better than good. Congress would be about as likely to prevail as would the opposition party in a North Korean election.) The third option is the one ultimately resorted to in the case of Vietnam, which would be to simply defund the war.

But if we want to take the full measure of how toothless Baker and Christopher seek to render Congress, we should consider their Trojan Horse in forcing Congress to take a position on the war during its first thirty days. That's a bit like trying to sell abstinence right in the middle of some rowdy good sex. Let's just say the incentives are all loaded in one direction. Remember how much bogus noise the right ginned up about 'supporting the troops' years after the Iraq invasion was launched, let alone weeks? There is hardly any time when politicians are less likely to oppose a war than the first thirty days after it's begun. Then what happens after Congress has taken its mandatory vote and, of course, approved some foreign adventure launched by an insane president? It will only have a much harder time, not easier, to shut it off later, when it comes to its senses, or at least when its senses tell it that it is now safe to oppose the war. The president will surely argue that Congress has no business opposing a war it once supported.

Is it possible that the Commission didn't realize all this? Sure. But it's also pos-

sible that Dick Cheney doesn't much care for money or power. Is it possible that James Baker – the guy who gave us the Bush Junior presidency by breaking all the rules of democracy in Florida and at the Supreme Court – would use the current desire to reign in a loose cannon presidency to present this plan as an improvement, knowing in fact that it would actually increase presidential power over war policy? Nah. Not Jimmy.

Clearly, this represents a step backward rather than a step forward when it comes to avoiding another Iraq scenario. Just replay the events of the last six years, with the same cast of characters – but this time under the plan proposed by the Baker-Christopher Commission – to see what would happen. The same members of Congress who voted for a bullshit war because they were afraid of the consequences to their careers if they didn't would be far more inclined to vote for the war three weeks after the invasion began. And they would then have had an even harder time later climbing down off the limb they'd perched themselves on than they already do now. Beautiful. That's just what we need.

In a very profound way, though, all of this is moot anyhow. So, okay, the president has the commander-in-chief power which is broadly supported (even in Congress), and unlikely to ever be even remotely diminished. This country fought brutal and massive wars in Korea for three years, Vietnam for a dozen, and Iraq will be for easily seven before the earliest we'd possibly get out – all without a declaration of war or any serious question of the presidential prerogative to deploy forces without one. Get the picture? Likewise, however, the one power that Congress

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possesses in an equally undiluted and uncontested form is the power of the purse. Congress can shut down any expensive war it wants whenever it wants by using that power, as it did finally in the case of Vietnam. All that's necessary is the will to do so. Purses can be used in many different ways, depending on one's commitment to doing what is right and one's courage to follow through on that path, even at the personal cost of career or likability amongst the Cro-Magnon set. Harry Reid's purse seems to have little use other than for transporting around a bit of eyeliner, some lipstick and maybe a few sanitary napkins. In better hands, it would be used it to flatten George W. Bush and end his Mesopotamian nightmare, pronto.

Which really brings us, ultimately to the heart of questions like these. You can spend an entire lifetime, and fill an entire library wing, with treatises and legal commentaries on these grand constitutional questions regarding the distribution of power in a government such as ours. (Most democracies use a parliamentary system, where the issue is moot. There are no checks and balances because there are no separate branches to check or to balance.) At the end of the day, though, you're ultimately left with words written on ink in parchment. It doesn't even require a single struck match to destroy their power (indeed, if they have such power, burning the documents will have zero effect). All that is necessary is for good people to do nothing, while monsters like Bush and Cheney drive freight trains through the edifices of Constitutional law constructed over centuries.

And that is precisely what has happened. There will always be Bushes and Cheneys, and history shows there always

has been. This was perhaps the single most profound insight the Founders brought to Philadelphia as they engaged in their experiment in political engineering. They sought to design a government that was powerful enough to hold together and to act when necessary – unlike the one provided for in the Articles of Confederation – yet also sufficiently limited so as to protect their liberties – unlike George III’s regime. The Constitution really is a pretty amazing achievement from that engineering perspective. In any case, this concern for finding the correct concentration of power is certainly the motivation for the otherwise fairly bizarre decision they made to divide the government and set the pieces of it against one another.

The Founders also sought to create a government of laws, not men. A great aspiration, to be sure, though inevitably flawed at the end of the day. (I wish, for starters that they had aspired to a government not of people – rather than not of men, but of course it would be 150 years before fully half the population began to get its legal rights.)

But their more critical flaw, for purposes of this particular discussion, is the belief that you can somehow take people out of government and leave only laws in their place to govern.

Unfortunately, people are not only the subjects of those laws, but also the keepers, promulgators and implementers. Laws, principles, rules, codes – these are all ultimately what people make of them, not what’s written on paper. If George W. Bush says that it is legal to waterboard detainees at Guantánamo and nobody stops him, that is what’s going to happen. If the majority on the Supreme Court abandon all their vociferously articulated prior prin-

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ciples of states’ rights, judicial restraint and hostility to equal protection claims in order to justify crowning Bush president – and, again, no one objects too strenuously – then off to the White House he goes. And if Congress is supposed to be an equal partner in war-making decisions but hasn’t got the guts to do its job, well then, welcome to Baghdad, soldier.

The whole matter was put rather succinctly by President Andrew Jackson once, when he was angered at a decision made by John Marshall’s Supreme Court holding that the state of Georgia could not impose its laws on Cherokee tribal lands. Jackson is quoted as saying “John Marshall has made his decision, now let him enforce it!”, thereby shredding the notion of a government of laws in a mere eleven-word sentence.

The truth is that there is no such thing as a government without people. There is no main-frame somewhere which can dispassionately compute matters of law and policy. It’s up to us, at the end of the day.

Either we stick to our principles – especially in moments of duress – or we don’t.

No oceans of ink applied to mountains of parchment, and certainly no new scheme concocted by James Baker and Warren Christopher, could ever save America’s Congress, or its press, or its opposition party, or its people, from the historical stain which has attached to them forever by virtue of their abdication of responsibility when it came to Iraq.

We had, in October of 2002, and in March of 2003, and today, and on every date in-between, a government of laws. The principles and codes and Constitution were all there.

It’s just the people who were missing. **CT**

**WRITING WORTH
READING FROM
AROUND THE WORLD**

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