

## Character, courage make McCain the GOP's best choice

*by Robert\_J\_Caldwell*

John McCain will emerge as the front-runner for the Republican presidential nomination if he follows his New Hampshire win with victories this week in Michigan and South Carolina. This will be more than merely the function of tactical politics and the calendar of primaries. McCain's unique qualifications to be a wartime commander in chief plus his straight-from-the-shoulder candor and character and a reformist agenda are making him the GOP's best choice for president in 2008.

His national security credentials would utterly eclipse the shaky claims of Hillary Clinton or Barack Obama to be suitable leaders for a nation at war - in Iraq, in Afghanistan and in the wider struggle against Islamic extremists and their chosen weapon, terrorism.

Sen. Clinton bills herself as the candidate of experience. Apart from her inflated claims as Bill Clinton's first lady in Little Rock and Washington, she's held elective office as New York's junior senator for seven years. Sen. Obama is barely more than three years removed from the Illinois state legislature.

McCain has a quarter-century of respected congressional service, first in the House of Representatives and then 21 years in the U.S. Senate. Add his 22 years as a naval officer and aviator, including combat in Vietnam and those five-and-a-half years of torture and solitary confinement as a prisoner of war in North Vietnam, and his service to country totals 47 years.

No major presidential contender in either party knows more about the U.S. armed forces and their proper use than John McCain. He's long been among the most influential members of the Senate Armed Services Committee. His military and foreign policy expertise have made him a policy player in every national security crisis for the last two decades.

Measured against these credentials, Clinton qualifies only as a neophyte understudy. Obama doesn't qualify at all.

Against either Clinton or Obama in the fall, McCain's steely, demonstrated resolve to see America and its allies prevail in Iraq, Afghanistan and against the global jihad would stand in stark, telling contrast.

For a year, Clinton and Obama have pandered shamelessly to their party's left wing and its "get out now" demand to concede defeat in Iraq. McCain, long a vocal critic of former Defense Secretary Don Rumsfeld's failed "light footprint" strategy, championed a troop surge instead. Now that the surge, coupled with a wholly new counterinsurgency strategy, is proving a dramatic success, McCain rightly claims vindication. Clinton, Obama and their party are silent, as if nothing has changed in Iraq.

Voters in November might still want the troops home but most don't want to see America defeated. McCain's brave stand would seem the more credible policy cast against a Clinton or Obama so heavily invested politically in seeing "Bush's war" end in failure.

McCain's unflinching independence, his reformist instincts and his bipartisan appeal would also play well with the decisive swing voters who want change in Washington. For change to be more than an empty slogan, Republicans and Democrats have to find some common ground and ways to work together on national priorities. That's been a McCain trademark; on campaign finance reform, comprehensive immigration reform, confirmation of judicial nominees and efforts to stop wasteful pork-barrel spending and end the corrupt practice of unaccountable, unexamined earmarked appropriations.

For Republican primary voters who might find McCain's bipartisanship apostasy, there is this: McCain's lifetime voting record in Congress is rated a solid 82 percent by the American Conservative Union. He's a fierce fiscal conservative, unwaveringly pro-life on abortion issues, staunchly free-market on trade and economic matters, favors making the Bush tax cuts permanent, supports nuclear power as a clean-energy alternative, champions school choice as the vital lever for education reform, advocates smaller and more accountable government, and, of course, is a lifelong proponent of a strong national defense and an assertive foreign policy.

What Clinton and Obama surely fear is that, for all this, John McCain's favorability rating among Democrats is currently a stunning 62 percent. No other Republican presidential aspirant comes close to this extraordinary combination - a principled, reform-minded conservative widely admired by independent voters (whose support will determine who wins in November) and viewed favorably by more than half of all Democrats.

Add McCain's obvious strengths as the premier national security candidate and the case for his selection by Republicans as their nominee for president is more than compelling.

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