

A profile in courage, principle

by Robert_J_Caldwell

A lesser man than John McCain might be backing away from his previous support for the war-gone-bad in Iraq. What we're seeing instead is the very opposite of political expediency - a Churchillian call to endure and prevail in an admittedly unpopular war but still a fight that McCain believes America cannot afford to lose.

McCain's Virginia Military Institute speech April 11 stands as his most compelling case yet for persevering in Iraq. Moreover, McCain's steadfast demonstration of principle over polls shows more courage and character than any other presidential aspirant in either party.

McCain doesn't need any help reading the polls. He knows they show most Americans now regard the Iraq war as a mistake from the beginning. He disagrees, and said so again at VMI. The polls show most Americans oppose sending more troops. McCain supports Bush's troop surge, and argues that it is showing early promise. The polls show most Americans are looking for the exits from Iraq. McCain wants to win, thinks winning is still possible and believes that a premature withdrawal would have disastrous consequences.

Some will see in this a measure of political calculation. Despite pervasive public frustration and war weariness, most Republicans are sticking with Bush on Iraq. This is especially so among conservative Republicans, who tend to dominate in the GOP's presidential primaries. So McCain's staunch stand against conceding defeat in Iraq would presumably play well with Republican primary voters.

But this cynical reading sells McCain way, way short.

McCain has long since demonstrated the courage of his convictions. As a naval aviator prisoner of war in North Vietnam for five and a half years, McCain endured a hellish ordeal. Prolonged torture, the cruel denial of medical treatment, repeated beatings and long stretches shackled in solitary confinement were the price of resisting his captors and keeping faith with his fellow POWs. McCain paid it.

The North Vietnamese offered McCain early release as a propaganda gesture when they realized that the admiral commanding all U.S. forces in the Pacific was his father. McCain refused, saying he would go home when all the POWs were released and not before.

These are character bona fides that can't be faked.

Vietnam also gave McCain another attribute that most contemporary politicians and most members of

Congress today lack: A visceral feel for the bitter and tragic consequences of an American defeat.

Two million Vietnamese boat people, genocide in Cambodia, a demoralized American military, a hesitant foreign policy and national self-doubt were among the aftershocks of the American failure in Vietnam. They help explain McCain's fierce criticism of the Democrats' defeatism on Iraq.

McCain can claim, correctly, that his support for the Iraq war was always consistent with his advocacy of an offensive strategy against terrorist threats, yet never blind or unquestioning. As he noted at VMI, McCain was sharply and publicly critical of the Bush administration's many mistakes in Iraq, starting with the failure in 2003 to send enough troops after the fall of Baghdad to secure the country and quell a budding insurgency.

McCain also criticized, and rightly so, an initial U.S. military strategy focused more on killing insurgents than protecting Iraq's population. Those priorities have now been reversed in line with the new counterinsurgency doctrine long favored by McCain. An early critic of former Defense Secretary Don Rumsfeld, McCain condemned Bush's Pentagon chief for willful arrogance and said he should be replaced. McCain also broke publicly with the Bush administration on prohibiting alleged torture of captured terrorists.

This mix of support and dissent is testament to McCain's principled independence, even as he vigorously backed what he saw, and still sees, as a just war against a vile and dangerous enemy.

Four former secretaries of state have been sufficiently impressed to endorse McCain for president. Henry Kissinger, George Shultz, Lawrence Eagleburger and Alexander Haig served five Republican presidents. Their coveted endorsements signal a weighty vote of confidence in McCain's steadfastness on Iraq and the larger war against radical Islamic terrorists.

McCain would like to be president, of course. But it's a measure of the man that he puts principle and country before personal ambition. At VMI, the most telling political line in his speech was this: "For my part, I would rather lose a campaign than a war."

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