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McCain's Double Standard: Hawk In The Drug War, Yet His Wife Got No Penalty

by Stanton Peele

Much has been made of allegations of possible youthful use of illegal drugs by Republican presidential candidate George W. Bush. Meanwhile, his chief GOP opponent, Arizona Sen. John McCain, has admitted that his wife not only illegally used drugs but walked away from criminal charges. The McCains have worked to make Cindy McCain's addiction into a political asset--despite the fact that she stole the drugs from a charity she directed and used them while mothering four young children.

In 1994, Mrs. McCain admitted that she had solicited prescriptions for painkillers from physicians who worked for an international charity that she founded, the American Voluntary Medical Team. She then filled the prescriptions in the names of her staff.

There are two ways to react to this behavior. According to the Betty Ford model, people can sympathetically respond to the oppressed and ignored wife of a busy politician who has bravely come forward to admit her overpowering addiction. Mrs. McCain took this posture when she first tearfully confessed her addiction. She and her husband repeated this performance in October on the NBC program "Dateline."

The other possible public reaction is one of anger. Americans are prosecuted every day for such drug use. While most drug abusers purchase their drugs from street dealers, Mrs. McCain used her status as a charity director and senator's wife to cajole the drugs she wanted.

In fact, Mrs. McCain was investigated by the Drug Enforcement Administration after the agency was approached by a former staff member of her charity. The investigation resulted in no charges or prison time for her, and she entered a diversion program. While these records were not made public at the time, Mrs. McCain eventually confessed her drug use when she learned that a reporter was investigating the story.

Is Mrs. McCain to be judged as a pitiable victim or as a criminal felon? This debate is at the heart of the discussion of American drug policy. Should we deal with illicit drug users as victims or as criminals?

Let's examine Mrs. McCain's position in these terms. She was the privileged wife of a prominent family and spouse of an important politician, a person who had her own position of prestige and power. Should she not be held at least as accountable for her actions as an uneducated inner-city drug user? After all, she could enter drug treatment at any time she chose, unlike many drug users who find themselves in prison.

Moreover, Mrs. McCain was violating a position of trust by stealing from a charitable organization, using its money and medical expertise to fuel her drug use. Is this not morally more reprehensible than simply purchasing drugs illegally?

Finally, Mrs. McCain was the mother of four children at the time she admits to using drugs--between 1989 and 1992. Her children were born in 1984, 1986, 1988 and 1991. In other words, Cindy McCain was using drugs while raising small children, one of whom she adopted while she was an addict. In most states, family services will remove children from a woman who is known to be an active drug addict, and she would certainly not be allowed to adopt a child while addicted.

John McCain is a hawk in the drug war. He advocates stricter drug laws, penalties and enforcement against drug sellers. He has had nothing to say about redressing our punitive approach toward drug users. Of course. McCain also supports family values. Yet if John and Cindy McCain were not well-

off and influential, they might not have a family at all. McCain's lack of concern for street drug users contrasts sharply with the support and understanding his wife received. It's the old American double standard. For "straight-shooter" McCain, charity begins at home--and ends there.

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