

http://graphics.boston.com/news/politics/campaign2000/news/McCain_character_loyal_to_a_fault+.shtml

McCain character loyal to a fault

By Mary Leonard, Globe Staff, 3/4/2000

EMPE, Ariz. - Facing a threat that his homosexuality would be exposed by Christian conservatives at a city council meeting, Mayor Neil Giuliano did what he thought was nobody's business: He held a press conference and declared, "I happen to be gay."

The reaction of Arizona's senior senator, John McCain, was swift and angry.

"John was the first to tell the religious right, 'This doesn't make a damned bit of difference,'" Giuliano said, remembering how McCain went out of his way to call him a good mayor and a great friend. "Politically in Arizona, McCain should have done just the opposite. Instead, he came right to my defense. He's a loyal friend."

GOP presidential candidate John McCain has a pattern of putting his heart ahead of his head and even his political judgment. Peel off the pretense of a cocky fighter pilot and a prickly politician, those who know him well say, and what really shapes John McCain is his loyalty to family and friends and a fierce sense of duty to defend underdogs under attack.

Today McCain will be in Boston seeking support in Tuesday's GOP primary in Massachusetts. He has been in hot water this week for his highly personal lashing of Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell, who he said he believes have dishonored him with their negative attacks. McCain was forced to apologize after calling the two Christian conservative leaders "forces of evil," and then he faced new questions about his temperament to be president.

"I don't think it should be a source of worry," McCain said during a candidates debate Thursday night, "but anything is fair game, as I've found out during this campaign."

To admirers like Giuliano, McCain's sensitivity, generosity, and loyalty are the hallmarks of his character. To targets of his outrage, McCain's thin skin is his fatal flaw.

"His greatest strength is also his greatest weakness," said Mike Hellon of Tucson, a state GOP leader who has known McCain for two decades. "John is impatient with fools. Particularly if people are acting

improperly or in a self-serving fashion, he can be very difficult. He puts loyalty first, even when it is not in his best interest."

Lisa Graham Keegan, Arizona's superintendent of public instruction, was close to McCain until she publicly called for the resignation of Governor Fife Symington after he was indicted for bank fraud in 1996. McCain, who stood by his friend Symington, considered Keegan disloyal, told her so in no uncertain terms, and shut her out of his political circle.

"He was right: I was disloyal, and I meant to be," said Keegan, who is so sure McCain would be a good president that she recently arranged a meeting in which both apologized for the falling out.

Now, Keegan frequently travels with McCain's campaign and advises him on education policy. "He's never going to win the Miss Congeniality award or take you to lunch, but he is always looking to do the right thing," she said.

McCain had values drilled into him by a father and grandfather who were decorated Navy admirals and adhered to a rigid military code of honor, duty, and country. He's a proud graduate of the Naval Academy (though, McCain ruefully notes, he was a hell-raiser who barely squeaked through). And he had a profound lesson in allies and enemies as a tortured prisoner of war in Vietnam for 5 1/2 years.

Bruce Merrill, the pollster in McCain's first congressional campaign in 1982, said he respects and admires the senator's compelling history. But like others who have been in combat with McCain, Merrill has been awed by his ambition and alienated by his self-righteous "in your face, do it my way or you'll pay a hell of a penalty" style.

"He is a very forceful, dynamic person, and in 30 years of political consulting, I have never seen a candidate as driven as John McCain," said Merrill, a professor at Arizona State University in Tempe. "He is a crusader, and the mythology that has built up here - that he divides the world into his camp or the enemy camp - is consistent with a crusade."

McCain saw enemies challenging all his relationships - friends, family, fellow veterans - during the bitter, losing primary fight last month in South Carolina. There was Texas Governor George W. Bush, failing to renounce a supporter who accused McCain of disloyalty to veterans. There was Robertson, in a taped telephone message, calling McCain's friend, the former New Hampshire Senator Warren Rudman, "a vicious bigot." And there were strident voices all over the airwaves, spreading ugly stories about his wife and children.

Barreling down a South Carolina highway on the campaign bus, aides showed McCain a flier filled with personal smears that had been circulated at an event earlier in the day. McCain snatched the leaflet before his wife, Cindy, could read it.

"Why upset her unnecessarily?" McCain snapped. "Like most wives, she doesn't want to see those things said about her husband."

The McCains were deeply and personally offended by Bush's visit to Bob Jones University, which bans interracial dating, and by rumors about their "black child." On a relief mission to Bangladesh in 1991, Cindy McCain claimed an orphan who was so severely disfigured by a cleft lip and palate that she was unable to eat. She brought 2-month-old Bridget home to Phoenix, where the McCains adopted the baby and nursed her through a dozen operations.

"What people miss about John is that behind the tough, fighter facade is a deeply sensitive person, and things really hurt him," said Everett Alvarez Jr., who was a fellow POW in Vietnam.

Uncomfortable war hero

Orson Swindle, McCain's neighbor in the Hanoi Hilton, blinked back tears when he recalled McCain's reaction to winning the New Hampshire primary last month. "Amid all the electricity that night, John got incredibly solemn," Swindle said. "He came over and looked me straight in the eye, as if to say, 'My God, look how far we have come and what we have done.'"

McCain has never been comfortable as a war hero, honored and greeted with adulation, Swindle said, when so many other Vietnam combat veterans came home to no warm welcome at all. "That wound is still with a lot of us," said Swindle, adding that it probably fuels McCain's strong sense of injustice.

But McCain's loyalties have at times blurred his political judgment. At the request of Charles H. Keating Jr., a Phoenix developer and political benefactor, McCain met in 1987 with federal bank regulators who were closing in on Keating's shaky Lincoln Savings & Loan Association. After an investigation of McCain and four other senators, the Senate Ethics Committee reprimanded McCain, though concluded he did not act improperly. Still, it appeared McCain had catered to the kind of special interest he now decries.

Another strong and unlikely relationship was at work in 1992, when McCain supported a Senate bill allowing fetal-tissue research. His good friend and Democratic mentor, Representative Morris K. Udall, was suffering from Parkinson's disease, and Udall's family convinced McCain fetal tissue showed some promise as a cure. Antiabortion activists still are attacking McCain for his vote.

McCain and Jim Kolbe ran for the US House from separate Arizona districts in 1982, but only McCain won. Two years later, when Kolbe ran again, McCain ignored the political convention that you don't campaign against an incumbent and went door-to-door for his friend Kolbe until he was too exhausted to stand up straight. Kolbe won.

Kolbe called McCain first as he prepared in 1996 to disclose his homosexuality. "Before I got two words out, John said, 'I know what this is about, and it doesn't matter,'" Kolbe said. "He wasn't shocked or offended."

McCain stands out as having one of the most loyal and long-serving staffs on Capitol Hill. Aides say he doesn't micromanage, but he does solicit their views, inquire about their children, pummel them with smart-aleck insults, and work them to the bone, the same way the 63-year-old McCain works himself.

On the day of the South Carolina primary, McCain telephoned Deb Gullett, a longtime aide and his Arizona campaign manager, to tell her he was losing that hard-fought contest.

"He called to ask me how I was doing, to make sure we were fine, and I just wanted to cry," Gullett said. "He also said, 'By the way, get your dead asses back to work,' and that is a direct quote."

Mark Salter, McCain's chief of staff, said his boss isn't cozy with his Senate colleagues because he gores their sacred cows and "won't treat them like movie stars, with exaggerated courtesy." Salter, who has worked for McCain for 11 years and coauthored his best-selling biography, "Faith of My Fathers," attributed reports of the senator's hot temper to "legend-padding."

Family first

Senator John Kerry says he and McCain forged a bond as Vietnam veterans and he respects him as a loyal friend. "I enjoy his company, John's a funny guy," the Massachusetts Democrat said. "Most of the bad things you hear come from people he's put on the spot."

Kolbe said McCain got better at controlling his temper in the wake of three unnerving and very personal events. One was the Keating scandal, which he saw as an assault on his honor. A second was the discovery that his wife had been addicted to prescription painkillers from 1989 to 1992 and had stolen drugs from her family's charitable foundation. A third was a 1993 diagnosis of malignant melanoma, the most lethal type of skin cancer. McCain had the cancerous mole removed from his shoulder, and no melanoma has recurred, according to his medical records.

"Those things were pretty scary for him, and he really refocused his life and realized what a blessing his family was to him," Kolbe said.

McCain blames himself for the breakup of his first marriage. McCain wanted a fuller, faster life than he found back home with his first wife. Carol Shepp McCain, who lives in the Washington area, has spoken kindly of her former husband, says she supports his candidacy, and attributes their divorce to

"John turning 40 and wanting to be 25 again."

McCain did what he believed was honorable: He provided generously for Carol, who had been seriously injured in a car accident during his captivity, and their three children, including two adopted sons from her previous marriage. "If you can ever have an amicable divorce, this one was," said George "Bud" Day, a lawyer and POW friend who drew up the papers in 1980.

A month after the divorce, McCain married Cindy Hensley, 24, an heiress to a Phoenix beer-distribution fortune, and part of a politically well-connected family. They have four school-aged children who McCain dotes on and disciplines in a way his own father never did.

The grown children from his first marriage - Doug, Andy, and Sydney Ann - are campaigning for McCain, and Andy works for the Hensley family's company in Phoenix.

McCain sent leatherbound copies of his biography to Doug's children, autographing them "The Old Geezer." "The kindergarten teacher admonished my daughter to stop calling her grandfather that," said Doug, a former Navy flier who is now a commercial airline pilot in Virginia Beach, Va. "She said, 'but that's what he likes to be called.'"

For a geezer, McCain is as energized as a Boy Scout leader around his children, camping, hiking, fishing, swimming, and grilling the food at their weekend cabin near Sedona, Ariz. On the campaign bus, the youngsters are either fighting McCain for the last potato chip in the bag or giving him a hard time.

"Pork-barrel spender!" Jimmy McCain, 11, yells at Jack, his 13-year-old brother. Jimmy's not sure what the expression means, but it sounds funny and besides, he's heard his candidate-father bellow it hundreds of times.

Betsy Cuming, an old friend from Yuma, said the family lives in Phoenix, not Washington, because McCain thinks the children of elected officials get coddled, spoiled, and too often uprooted. Sharon Harper, the McCain's neighbor in Phoenix, said McCain wants to be president for a very personal reason: To restore honor to the military before all or some of his children are old enough to serve.

McCain gets emotional at the mention of military families needing food stamps or veterans lacking health care. The outrage comes from inside: McCain's severe war injuries prevent him from combing his hair, typing on a keyboard, or tying his shoes. Friends marvel at McCain's encyclopedic knowledge of sports. He's an avid fan - Ted Williams is his hero - but he can't raise his arm above his shoulder to throw a baseball.

After Vietnam, McCain had Ann Lawrence, a physical therapist, help him regain flexibility in his leg,

which had been frozen in an extended position by a shattered knee. It was the only way he could hope to resume his career as a Navy flier, but Lawrence said the treatment, taken twice a week for six months, was excruciatingly painful.

"He endured it, he wouldn't settle for less," said Lawrence, who rejoiced with McCain when he passed the Navy physical. "I have never seen such toughness and resolve."

McCain's determination was evident to Lawrence in another way. During the therapy, he insisted his "physical terrorist" was the perfect match for one of his POW buddies, William Lawrence. She resisted, McCain persisted, and the Lawrences were married months after McCain forced them to meet at his home over dinner.

McCain says his campaign is "a noble mission," and those close to him believe he has brought to it the same character traits - toughness, endurance, even risk-taking - that Ann Lawrence observed many years ago.

"He has a zest for life that sometimes can drive the rest of us nuts," said Cindy McCain, who reluctantly signed onto her husband's presidential express last fall, not really expecting it to become this runaway train. "When we're exhausted, John says, 'There's more to the day - let's go!'"